

Lavrov: Russia 'Optimistic' on Syria Peace Talks Early Next Year

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The  **Moscow Times**

Russia is optimistic at the prospect of renewed talks between opposition figures and the Syrian government early next year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday.

Moscow, an ally of the Syrian government, has pushed to restart talks that collapsed in Geneva in February, inviting Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to visit Moscow after a similar visit by a former Syrian opposition chief in November.

"So far from what we hear from the majority of our interlocutors, both in the opposition and the government of Syria, we can be optimistic that this process [of talks] could at least be tried early next year," Lavrov told France-24 television.

Lavrov said he wanted Syrian opposition groups to agree among themselves on a common approach before setting up direct talks with the Damascus government. He did not specify which opposition groups should take part.

In a separate initiative, the UN mediator for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has proposed

an "action plan" to implement local cease-fires in some regions torn apart by Syria's civil war, with the country's second city Aleppo as a possible starting point.

Syrian President Bashar Assad said in November that the proposal was "worth studying."

"We would be supportive of his efforts," Lavrov said, referring to the De Mistura proposal.

Russia has long backed Assad, including with arms supplies for Syria, but he has become a more important ally for Moscow since the 2011 Arab Spring protests toppled several autocrats in the Middle East, some of whom had close ties with Moscow.

The Syrian conflict began with street protests against longtime Assad family rule and mushroomed into a bloody uprising and civil war, with Islamist insurgents predominant, after state authorities tried to crush the unrest by force.

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