

Russian Foreign Minister Hosts Syria's Main Opposition Group for Talks

August 13, 2015



President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC) Khaled Khoja (L) talks to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov before a meeting in Moscow, Aug. 13.

Russia's foreign minister on Thursday hosted a delegation of the main Syrian opposition group, part of the Kremlin's new push for a mediation role in the Syrian conflict.

Sergei Lavrov told the leaders of the Syrian National Coalition that Moscow was willing to "help all Syrians unite over the core task of preserving their country, ensuring stability and preventing it from becoming a hotbed of terrorism and other threats."

President Vladimir Putin launched Russia's new mediation effort in June when he met with Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman in St. Petersburg. Lavrov has said that the Russian plan proposes that all forces opposing Islamic State extremists — including the Syrian opposition, the Syrian army, the Iraqi army and the Kurds — pool their efforts.

Moscow has been a key backer of Syria's President Bashar Assad, shielding it from the United

Nations sanctions and continuing to provide it with weapons throughout a civil war that has dragged on for more than four years, leaving at least 250,000 dead and turning more than 4 million people into refugees.

Earlier this week, Lavrov met with his Saudi counterpart for Syria-focused talks that highlighted continuing sharp differences about Assad's fate. While Lavrov called for including the Syrian government troops in a coalition fighting IS, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir rejected any role for Assad.

Earlier this year, Moscow hosted some members of the Syrian opposition for consultations, but the National Coalition has until now refused to visit Russia.

Speaking before Thursday's talks with Lavrov, coalition president Khaled Khoja told the Interfax news agency that Assad shouldn't be part of any future transitional government.

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