

U.S. Is Cool to Churkin's Idea of UN Mideast Trip

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UNITED NATIONS — The U.S. envoy to the United Nations responded coolly on Wednesday to a Russian proposal for the UN Security Council to visit the Middle East at a time when peace talks are stalled and Egypt is in crisis.

Russian UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin proposed to the 15-nation council on Tuesday that members make their first visit to the region in more than three decades to help restart stalled peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice did not hide her lack of enthusiasm for the proposal when reporters asked her about it.

"A number of delegations, including our own, asked a series of important questions, such as what is this meant to achieve, why now, why this itinerary, and would it in fact have the stated intention of contributing to promoting greater peace and stability in the region at this quite fragile time," she said.

British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant said he was in favor of such a visit "in principle" but echoed Rice by saying there were questions about the timing and purpose of the visit.

In addition to Israel and the Palestinian territories, Churkin said the council would visit Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

Rice did not rule out U.S. participation, but council diplomats have told Reuters privately that the United States did not like the Russian proposal.

Lebanon is a non-permanent member of the Security Council and was also skeptical about the Russian proposal, diplomats said. The Lebanese have made clear that they would not want to visit Israel, given that the two neighbors are officially in a state of war.

Churkin said the visit would ideally take place soon, given a weekend statement from the Quartet of Middle East peace negotiators — the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations — that reiterated support for concluding Israeli-Palestinian negotiations by September.

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