

Syrian Opposition Hopes Russia Will Pressure Assad

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov **Maxim Stulov**

Syrian opposition members say they have sensed a shift in Russia's stance on the conflict in their homeland and voiced hope Tuesday that Moscow will crank up pressure on Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime.

On a visit to Moscow, Haytham Manna, spokesman for the Arab Commission for Human Rights, said Russia has voiced support for democratic changes in Syria and believes that the Syrians themselves should determine the country's future.

"The representatives of the Russian government aren't inclined to support the idea of preservation of the dictatorial regime," Manna told a news conference. "They are talking about the need for continuing democratic changes, and it's very important for us."

Abdul-Aziz al-Kheir, a spokesman for the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria, said Russia's position has been changing over the past two months and "particularly fast over the past two weeks."

Members of the Syrian opposition said they hoped Russia will apply its power to persuade Assad to observe United Nations and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan's cease-fire plan to end 13 months of violence in Syria.

"Russia has all the necessary levers to apply pressure on Assad's government and help Annan's mission," Manna said.

Hassan Abdul-Azim, the head of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change who is leading the delegation, said Moscow's support is essential for the success of Annan's mission.

"That is the last chance to end the fratricidal massacre and create preconditions for the transfer to a democratic form of government," he said.

Manna said that while the opposition was encouraged by the talks in Moscow, differences remain. Russia continues to be strongly critical of Assad's opponents using force, Manna said, while the opposition views it as a legitimate response to the violence on the part of the regime.

He said the opposition delegation also sought to assuage Russia's concerns about the rise of Islamism in Syria and prospects of continuing violence in the country in case of regime change.

The opposition delegation is expected to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later Tuesday.

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