

Russia and Arab League See Chance for Start to Syria Dialogue

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russia and the Arab League see signs of hope that the rival sides in the Syrian civil war are willing to start talks to end nearly two years of conflict.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and visiting Arab League head Nabil Elaraby said in Moscow on Wednesday that they were encouraged that both the Syrian government and the opposition had voiced readiness for dialogue.

"There have been signs of a positive tendency to start dialogue and both the government representatives and the opposition have begun speaking about this," Lavrov told a joint news conference with Elaraby.

"For now both sides still come up with preconditions but, according to our common view, once there is the key common readiness to start dialogue, then agreeing parameters for this process is just a matter of diplomatic art," he said.

Russia, a long-standing ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad and Syria's main arms supplier, has vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions that would put pressure on the Syrian government to cease violence in which some 70,000 people have been killed.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem is due in Moscow next Monday and Lavrov said the head of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, Moaz Alkhatib, would likely visit in March.

Alkhatib has said he is willing to negotiate with a deputy of Assad but the aim of such talks would be to find a way to allow the president safe passage into exile and set up a transitional government.

"We welcome the initiative by ... Alkhatib, who proposed to start a dialogue with the government, and I think we will be able to reach this goal," Elaraby said after talks that also included foreign ministers from Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and Egypt.

The Cairo-based Arab League in November welcomed the creation of the Syrian National Coalition, but stopped short of giving it full recognition as the representative of the Syrian people.

"Russia has very good relations with the government in Damascus and we hope it will use that to convince them that this conflict can only be solved in a peaceful way," Elaraby added.

Russia, accused by the West and some Arab states of shielding Assad in the conflict, says calls for his departure should not be a precondition for peace talks and that Syrians should decide their own fate without foreign interference.

"It is very important that opposition leaders' readiness for dialogue is met with confirmation by the government that they are ready for dialogue too," Lavrov said.

"Now it's time for words to be confirmed by deeds."

In the course of the conflict, the Arab League has also called on Moscow to halt arms sales to Damascus.

But Russia's export agency said earlier this month that it would continue delivering weapons to the government army.

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