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Lavrov and Kerry Find Common Ground on Syria and Adoptees

By The Moscow Times

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Russia called on the United States to press the Syrian opposition to hold direct talks with Damascus, saying President Bashar Assad's opponents must appoint negotiators.

The crisis in Syria made up "the bulk of the conversation" between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry at talks in Berlin late Tuesday, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

After talks that she characterized as "really serious and hardworking," Moscow and Washington sounded a rare note of accord over efforts to launch talks to end the nearly two-year-old conflict, in which 70,000 people have been killed.

Lavrov, who called the talks "constructive," also seemed to find common ground with Kerry on Russian concerns over alleged ill treatment of Russian children adopted by U.S. parents, concerns that Kerry promised to address.

“John Kerry admitted that these problems are not fictional, that they are real, and gave assurances that he will personally take all the necessary measures to achieve full transparency and accountability in that field,” Lavrov said in comments carried by Interfax.

Russian officials have accused the U.S. of being indifferent to the death of 3-year-old Maxim Kuzmin, who was adopted by a Texas family from a Pskov region orphanage last year. An investigation into the boy’s death is under way.

On Syria, Lavrov said that the new U.S. top diplomat seemed to grasp the gravity of the crisis and that they had agreed to do everything in their power “to create the best conditions to facilitate the soonest possible start of a dialogue between the government and the opposition.”

He said Russia wanted to see the Syrian opposition name its representatives for talks with the government at a meeting in Rome this week between the Syrian opposition and Western and regional powers favorable to their cause.

Moscow and Washington have been at loggerheads over whether the Syrian opposition’s calls for Assad to step down should be a precondition for talks. Russia has been one of Assad’s staunchest allies, while the U.S. has sided with the Syrian opposition in seeking Assad’s ouster.

Lavrov also addressed a recent media report that had predicted a deal on U.S. plans for a European missile defense shield, saying the account was false.

Kommersant reported Tuesday that the two sides may exchange presidential declarations stating their intention to work together on such a system to eliminate Moscow’s suspicions that it is aimed at Russian missiles.

“Declarations alone would not suffice,” Lavrov said, Interfax reported. “We have stated our position. We have adopted plenty of declarations, both within the framework of the OSCE and the NATO-Russia Council. It was declared at the top level that we [should] all work toward achieving nonfragmented security to avoid building one’s own security at others’ expense,” Lavrov said.

Instead of discussing declarations, Lavrov suggested, the sides should discuss specific “guarantees that could be verified by real military and technical criteria, guarantees that the system would not be used against Russia’s nuclear potential.”

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