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U.S. and Russia to Organize Syria Conference

By Alexander Winning

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry speaking on his cell phone on Red Square ahead of his meeting with Putin. **Mladen Antonov**

Signaling a possible end to a stalemate over Syria, the U.S. and Russia have agreed to try to arrange an international conference to end the two-year civil war in the Middle Eastern country.

The development, announced late Tuesday night, came as John Kerry made his first visit as U.S. secretary of state and declared the start of "a good, new relationship" with Russia.

Kerry, flanked by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, announced the international conference after a long day of talks that included a delayed meeting with President Vladimir Putin. The news conference was called at the late hour after Putin kept Kerry waiting three hours, Reuters reported.

Kerry said he and Lavrov had agreed to organize the international conference, perhaps as soon as this month, to seek a breakthrough for Syria based on a communique reached at a Geneva conference last June. The new conference would bring together representatives of the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad and this opponents.

“The specific work of this next conference will be to bring representatives of the government and the opposition together to determine how we can fully implement the means of the communique, understanding that the communique’s language specifically says that the government of Syria and the opposition have to put together, by mutual consent, the parties that will then become the transitional government itself,” Kerry said, according to a transcript released by the State Department.

Neither he nor Lavrov said where the conference might take place.

The U.S. has long sought Russia's support in ousting Assad amid the turmoil that has claimed more than 70,000 lives. But Moscow, which has large defense contracts with Damascus and bristles at the notion of foreign governments intervening in what it calls a country's sovereign matters, has shielded Assad from UN Security Council sanctions.

Lavrov appeared to distance himself from Assad on Tuesday, saying Moscow was not worried about what might happen to “certain” individuals. "The task now is to convince the government and all the opposition groups ... to sit at the negotiating table," he said.

It was unclear whether the warring Syrian sides would agree to sit down for talks.

But Kerry stressed that Washington and Moscow had a common interest in finding a solution.

“The alternative is that there’s even more violence,” he said. “The alternative is that Syria heads closer to an abyss, if not over the abyss, and into chaos. The alternative is that the humanitarian crisis will grow, and the alternative is that there may be even a breakup in Syria or ethnic attacks and ethnic cleansing and other results which threaten the stability of the region and challenge the conscience of good people everywhere in the world. That’s the alternative.”

Earlier Kerry told Putin at the start of their meeting that both Russia and the U.S. were interested in maintaining stability in the Middle East and combating the threat posed by extremists in the region. "The United States believes that we share some very significant common interests with respect to Syria — stability in the region, not having extremists creating problems," Kerry said.

Kerry's high-profile visit came days after Israel — a key U.S. ally — launched a series of air strikes in southern Syria, prompting a harsh response from Russia's Foreign Ministry, which condemned the attacks as a threat to regional stability.

Putin discussed the Syrian crisis with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a telephone conversation Monday, although the Kremlin did not clarify whether the strikes were discussed.

In discussions over Syria, a sticking point between the U.S. and Russia remains the question of arming the rebels locked in fighting with troops loyal to Assad. Washington has so far only

supplied the rebels with non-military equipment but has refused to rule out sending arms. Moscow — a major supplier of weapons to Assad's government — strongly opposes such a move.

Another bone of contention is the use of chemical weapons, an issue the Russian Foreign Ministry has accused the West of politicizing as a means of paving the way for military intervention.

U.S.-Russian relations have become noticeably strained over the past year, with both sides trading barbs over a perceived crackdown on civil society groups in Russia, U.S. sanctions against Russian officials implicated in human rights abuses and Russian legislation banning U.S. adoptions.

Last month, however, U.S. President Barack Obama sent a confidential letter to Putin seeking to ease tensions, and Putin said Tuesday that he would respond in the near future, according to a Kremlin transcript of the meeting.

Putin and Obama are expected to meet at a G8 summit in Northern Ireland in June and again at a G20 meeting in St. Petersburg in September. Kerry said Obama was anxious to meet Putin next month and exchange views on the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs as well as ways to boost U.S.-Russian trade.

Kerry kicked off his two-day visit on Tuesday by laying a wreath by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier ahead of Victory Day celebrations later this week. On Wednesday, Kerry was to hold a meeting with civil society representatives.

Contacted by phone, Andrei Kortunov, president of the New Eurasia Foundation, a think tank, was optimistic that U.S.-Russian relations would warm under Kerry, whom he called "an experienced foreign policy expert."

"Kerry has always been viewed as a balanced thinker in Moscow," Kortunov said. "His visit is a sign that dialogue between the two sides is entering a new stage, but it's too early to talk about a breakthrough in ties."

In comments to reporters, Kerry made no explicit mention of U.S. plans to install a European missile shield, to which Russia is angrily opposed, but thanked Russian specialists for helping with the inquiry into the Boston Marathon bombing.

The two men suspected of carrying out the bombing, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, are ethnic Chechens who emigrated from Russia to the U.S. around 2002. Three were killed and more than 260 injured in the twin blasts in Boston on April 15.

FBI director Robert Mueller held talks Monday in Moscow on the bombings investigation and security cooperation between the U.S. and Russia, the U.S. Embassy said, without elaborating.

Lavrov said he had raised another thorny issue with Kerry: the U.S. imprisonment of Russians Viktor Bout and Konstantin Yaroshenko. The U.S. says the two Russians are criminals, while Moscow sees their cases as a human rights issue. Lavrov said that if both men exhausted their U.S. court appeals, the Russian government would seek their return to Russia under Council of Europe conventions that allow prisoners to serve out their sentences in their homeland.

At the end of the Tuesday night news conference, Lavrov asked reporters who had won the evening match between the Russia and U.S. teams at the ice hockey world championships in Helsinki. Learning that Russia scored two late goals to defeat the U.S. 5-3, he turned to Kerry and said, “Then let's go celebrate,” according to Interfax.

Kerry replied: “This is the start of a good, new relationship.”

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