

Syria Peace Conference Tentatively Scheduled for Mid-June

By [The Moscow Times](#)

May 16, 2013

The  Moscow Times

An international peace conference aimed at ending the Syrian civil war will "likely" take place the second week of June, a diplomatic official in New York said Thursday, while Moscow and Washington have said they are trying to mobilize support for the negotiations from Syria's government and opposition.

"June 10-12 is the working date for the conference, but it's impossible to give a precise date right now. A large number of participants still have to agree on it," the unnamed diplomatic official told Interfax on Thursday.

The conference was first proposed by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during Kerry's visit to Moscow last week.

Earlier hopes for a late-May date for the conference were dashed, likely due to the difficulty of coordinating with participating countries and groups.

Kerry and Lavrov said on Wednesday that they believed they could pull off the peace talks on Syria, where their nations back opposing sides in a war that may have cost 120,000 lives.

Differences between Russia, a main ally of President Bashar Assad, and the United States, which supports those trying to topple him, have long obstructed UN action on the turmoil that has convulsed Syria for more than two years.

"Both of us are ... very, very hopeful that within a short period of time, pieces will come together so that the world, hopefully, will be given an alternative to the violence and destruction that is taking place in Syria at this moment," Kerry said at a news conference after meeting Lavrov in Kiruna, Sweden.

"I would very much share the assessments just presented by John," Lavrov said.

Kerry said the peace drive was based on a deal that has stayed a dead letter since it was announced in Geneva last June for the creation of a transitional government in Syria "with full executive authority by mutual consent" — ambiguous wording that deliberately left Assad's future role unclear.

Syrian revolutionaries have previously demanded Assad's removal before any talks on the country's future. The main Western-backed opposition coalition is due to meet in Istanbul to consider whether to attend the new Geneva talks.

The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group, said on Tuesday that at least 94,000 people had been killed in the Syrian conflict, but that the real death toll was likely to be as high as 120,000.

Kerry and Lavrov, who met for an hour on Tuesday night on the sidelines of a meeting of the eight-nation Arctic Council, emphasized they were working in tandem on the Syria plan.

Among Russia's concerns in the conflict is the presence of some of its citizens fighting with the anti-Assad rebels who could eventually conduct attacks on Russian soil.

In Bishkek on Wednesday, the head of Russia's Federal Security Service said the FSB estimated that about 200 Russian citizens are fighting alongside Syrian rebels.

The Russian government has sold arms to Assad and offered him crucial diplomatic support during the conflict, but militants from the North Caucasus are fighting on the other side.

Once the war in Syria is over, foreign fighters returning home "will naturally pose a particular threat to their native countries," FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov said.

He was speaking Wednesday at a meeting of security agencies of former Soviet republics in Kyrgyzstan's capital.

Bortnikov said that, in addition to the Syrian conflict, the war in Afghanistan and plans for the withdrawal of most foreign combat troops from there by the end of 2014 were a draw for militants.

Several citizens of Kyrgyzstan have joined the rebels in Syria, the head of the Kyrgyz security

service, Beishenbai Zhunusov, told reporters. He declined to elaborate.

Material from The Moscow Times is included in this report.

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