

Kerry Set to Test Russia on Syria Weapons

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A protester taking up position across from the U.S. Embassy on Thursday. **Vladimir Filonov**

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and his team opened two days of meetings with their Russian counterparts on Thursday, hoping to emerge with the outlines of a plan for the complex task of safely securing and destroying vast stockpiles of Syrian chemical weapons in the midst of a brutal and unpredictable conflict.

The meetings came as the United Nations announced it had received a document from Syria that is a first step toward joining the chemical weapons treaty.

UN associate spokesman Farhan Haq said Thursday — two days after Syria announced its intention to sign the international treaty it has long rejected — that the letter was currently being translated.

The Chemical Weapons Convention bans the development, production, stockpiling and use of

chemical weapons. The convention requires all parties to the treaty to declare and destroy whatever chemical weapons they may possess.

President Barack Obama, opening a meeting of his Cabinet in Washington, said he was hopeful that the talks with Russia would produce "a concrete result," adding that Kerry "is going to be working very hard over the next several days to see what possibilities are there."

President Vladimir Putin, for his part, held out the effort as "a new opportunity to avoid military action" by the U.S. against Syria.

"The U.S., Russia and all members of the international community must take advantage of the Syrian government's willingness to place its chemical arsenal under international control for subsequent destruction," Putin wrote in an opinion piece published in the New York Times.

Kerry will be testing the seriousness of the Russian proposal and looking for rapid agreement on principles for how to proceed with the Russians, including a demand for a speedy Syrian accounting of their stockpiles, according to officials with the secretary of state.

Kerry, accompanied by American chemical weapons experts, was meeting first with Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN.-Arab League envoy for Syria and later with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Russian technical experts were joining Lavrov in the meetings.

One official said the U.S. hoped to know in a relatively short time if the Russians were trying to stall. Another described the ideas that the Russians had presented so far as an opening position that needed a lot of work and input from technical experts.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the focus as largely on "technical issues," avoiding any expression of suspicion about U.S. intention.

"Undoubtedly, it's necessary to make sure that Syria joins the convention on prohibition of chemical weapons, which would envisage Syria declaring the locations of its chemical weapons depots, its chemical weapons program," said Lavrov, who spoke at a briefing in Astana, Kazakhstan before heading to Geneva. "On that basis, the experts will determine what specific measures need to be taken to safeguard those depots and arsenals."

Lavrov added that he and Kerry should also discuss issues related to organizing a peace conference, the so-called Geneva-2. He added that specific preparations for the conference could start now if the West works to persuade the Syrian opposition to join them.

The U.S. is hoping that an acceptable agreement with the Russians on Syria's chemical weapons can be part of a binding new UN Security Council resolution being negotiated that demands that Syria's chemical weapons be put under international control and be dismantled and condemns the Aug. 21 attack. Russia, however, has long opposed UN action on Syria, vetoed three earlier resolutions, blocked numerous, less severe condemnations and has not indicated it is willing to go along with one now.

The hastily arranged meetings in Geneva came as word surfaced that the CIA had been delivering light machine guns and other small arms to Syrian rebels for several weeks, following President Barack Obama's statement in June that he would provide lethal aid to the rebels.

The CIA also has arranged for the Syrian opposition to receive anti-tank weaponry, such as rocket-propelled grenades, through a third party, presumably one of the Gulf countries that has been arming the rebels, a senior U.S. intelligence official and two former intelligence officials said Thursday. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the classified program publicly. The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal first reported the lethal aid.

National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said the administration could not "detail every single type of support that we are providing to the opposition or discuss timelines for delivery, but it's important to note that both the political and the military opposition are and will be receiving this assistance."

Loay al-Mikdad, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army said they had not received any weapons from the U.S. although they expect that in the near future.

"We are cooperating with the American administration and have been receiving some logistical and technical assistance, and there are commitments by the administration to arm us but until now we have not received any weapons," al-Mikdad said by telephone.

The officials said the aid had been arriving for more than a month, much of it delivered through a third party.

The U.S. team includes officials who worked on inspection and removal of unconventional weapons from Libya after 2003 and in Iraq after the first Gulf War.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the sensitive negotiations, said the teams that eventually go into Syria to do the work would have to have an international mix, as would their security.

The meetings are taking place in the same hotel where former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009 gave Lavrov a symbolic "reset button," as a goodwill gesture and a reminder of the Obama administration's efforts to improve U.S.-Russian relations.

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