

Russia says West Exploiting Syria Deal to Threaten Force

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russia accused the West on Sunday of trying to exploit a chemical weapons deal with Syria to push through a UN resolution threatening force against Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Assad's government has handed over information about its chemical arsenal to a UN-backed weapons watchdog, meeting the first deadline of the ambitious U.S.-Russia accord which the UN Security Council is due to endorse in the coming days.

But major powers on the council, who have disagreed throughout a conflict that has killed 100,000 people, remain divided over how to ensure compliance with the accord.

The U.S., France and Britain want a council resolution issued under Chapter 7 of the UN charter, that could authorize sanctions or military intervention if Damascus reneges on its commitments.

Russia, which along with China has blocked three draft resolutions on Syria since the 2011 uprising against Assad erupted, opposes Western threats of force against an ally that Moscow has continued to arm and support during the civil war.

"They see in the U.S.-Russian deal not a chance to save the planet from significant quantities of chemical weapons in Syria but as a chance to do what Russia and China will not allow, namely to push through a resolution involving [the threat of] force against the regime and shielding the opposition," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

Lavrov also said Russia was ready to send troops to Syria to ensure the safety of UN chemical weapons inspectors.

"An international presence is needed on the perimeters of the areas where the experts will work," he said. "We are willing to send our troops and military police to participate.

"I do not think that there is a need for a major contingent. I think military observers will be sufficient."

Assad agreed to destroy Syria's chemical weapons after a sarin gas strike in Damascus suburbs last month, the world's deadliest chemical attack in 25 years.

Washington accused Assad's forces of carrying out the attack, which it said killed more than 1,400 people. It said a report by U.N. chemical weapons experts last week supported its view, an assertion that Moscow disputes.

Assad blamed rebels for the attack, saying it made no sense for his forces to use chemical weapons when they were gaining the upper hand and while UN chemical inspectors were staying in central Damascus.

Hopes for Peace Talks

While the chemical deal paves the way to the destruction of 1,000 tons of mustard gas, VX and sarin, which security experts believe Syria possesses, the rare instance of U.S.-Russian cooperation has also raised hopes of a revived international push for a political solution to the wider Syrian conflict.

A letter from the head of the Syrian Coalition, Ahmad Jarba, to the UN Security Council revealed he had committed his group for the first time to attend a proposed Geneva peace conference on condition that it aims to establish a transitional government with full powers.

The coalition had resisted pressure to go to Geneva, especially after the Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack.

Jarba's letter said the coalition "reaffirmed its willingness to engage in a future Geneva Conference" on condition that the conference would aim for "the establishment of a transitional government with full executive powers," as set out in the first international accord on Syria in Geneva a year ago.

His comments mean that both Assad's government and the main political opposition have agreed in principle to attend the peace talks. However their conditions for participation still

appear far from reconcilable.

Rebels and the Syrian political opposition insist that Assad can play no role in a transitional authority, while the government has ruled out conceding power to its opponents.

Jarba's coalition also has very limited influence over the fighters inside Syria, particularly the increasingly powerful Islamist brigades and al Qaida-linked groups.

The rebels, fighting to end 40 years of Assad family rule, were angered by the U.S.-Russian accord to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, saying it has distracted the world while Assad deploys a large conventional arsenal to crush his foes.

They had hoped that the U.S. would launch air strikes against Assad that they could use as a platform to retake territory from Assad's forces after they were forced on the defensive on several fronts in recent months.

In central Damascus, a mortar shell struck the Russian Embassy compound Sunday, wounding three employees, the Foreign Ministry in Moscow said. None of the injuries were serious, it said in a statement.

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