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Russia Doubts Mid-November Date for Syria Peace Talks

By The Moscow Times

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A group of Free Syrian Army fighters carrying their weapons as they climb into a truck in the Aleppo district. **Molhem Barakat**

Russia expressed doubt Tuesday that Western nations could persuade Syrian opposition representatives to take part in an international peace conference in time for it to take place in mid-November.

The doubts of Damascus' most important ally followed remarks in which the international envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, said the target date of mid-November was "not 100 percent certain" and cited disunity among rebel forces.

"Until recently we hoped our Western partners who undertook to bring the opposition to the conference could do it quite quickly, but they were unable to do it quickly, and I don't know whether they will be able to do so by mid-November," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

A pledge by the Syrian government to abandon chemical arms has increased prospects for the peace conference, proposed by Russia and the U.S. in May, to go ahead.

United Nations Security Council powers hope it can be held in mid-November. Lavrov said it must be organized soon since "radicals and jihadi are strengthening their positions" in Syria.

"The task is to not lose any more time, and to bring to the negotiating table with the government those opposition groups that ... think not about creating a caliphate in Syria or just seizing power and using it at their will, but about the fate of their country," Lavrov said after meeting Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Lavrov also called into question the thoroughness of a UN chemical weapons mission after suggesting that it had not examined a site outside of Aleppo where Russia and the Syrian government say rebel forces likely used chemical weapons.

"The commission recently returned [to Syria] and already announced that it finished its work and is returning to New York," Lavrov said.

"As far as I understand, they examined several more places where there are claims chemical weapons were used near Damascus. And as before, the commission did not travel to the outskirts of Aleppo, where a serious incident of the use of chemical weapons occurred March 19."

Syrian rebels blame Assad's government for that attack.

Russian experts visited the location earlier this year and took samples of material from the site that were later analyzed at a Russian laboratory certified by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Russia's UN envoy said previously.

The site was one of the places covered in the UN committee's mandate. "And so we want to understand whether the mission's report will be complete or incomplete, considering that this mission was not able to visit all the locations named in its initial mandate," Lavrov said.

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