

Russia, U.S. and UN to Hold Talks on Syria on Monday

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Syrian rebel fighters holding their weapons as they walk down a street in Aleppo's Salaheddine neighborhood. **Hosam Katan**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and United Nations envoy Lakhdar Brahimi were to hold joint talks on Monday in the run-up to the Geneva 2 conference on Syria, Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

The international peace talks on Syria are scheduled to start on Jan. 22 in Switzerland but questions linger over the Syrian opposition representation make-up and what role, if any, Iran could play in the meeting.

"On Jan. 13 there will be a meeting with Kerry and a three-party one with Kerry and Brahimi," an unnamed source at the Russian Foreign Ministry said of Lavrov's discussions in Paris to prepare for Geneva 2, Interfax reported

Lavrov may also meet in Paris the Syrian National Coalition's top representatives, President Ahmad al-Jarba and Secretary General Badr Jamous.

Russia has long criticized the National Coalition, Syria's Western-backed opposition in exile, for what Moscow says is a failure to express willingness to attend Geneva 2 without preconditions. It has repeatedly demanded that Syrian President Bashar Assad step down.

More than 100,000 people have been killed and millions forced to flee by Syria's civil war, which began as an uprising against Assad's government in March 2011.

Speaking in Russian, Jamous told Reuters on Friday that the National Coalition would seek to learn from the Lavrov meeting whether it can get any guarantees from the peace conference.

"We do not need Geneva 2 if Russia thinks Assad is going to remain in power," he added.

Russia is a long-standing arms supplier to Damascus and has been at odds with the West over the conflict in Syria.

But Lavrov and Kerry forged an agreement in September over the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles, helping to avert threatened U.S. strikes on Syria.

Moscow and Washington are still at odds, however, on Iran's role, with Russia insisting Tehran should be a formal participant in Geneva 2, an idea Washington opposes.

That issue will only be discussed when Lavrov and Kerry meet face to face in Paris, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said on Friday, Interfax reported.

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