The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Syrian Opposition Coalition 'Not Ready' to Join Russia Peace Talks – Leader

January 06, 2015



Khaled Khoja, then-member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), attends the Syrian Business Forum in Doha in this Jun. 6, 2012 file photo.

ISTANBUL — The new head of Syria's Western-backed political opposition cast doubt on Monday on whether members of his group would attend talks in Russia this month aimed at finding a solution to the nearly four-year Syrian conflict.

Moscow, one of President Bashar al-Assad's top allies, wants to gather Syrian government and opposition figures on Jan. 26-29 to try to revive peace diplomacy. If members of the main opposition body shun them entirely it will undermine the effort, even if the organization has lost influence on the ground.

"I don't think anybody in the coalition is ready to go to Russia. All of the coalition is committed to the Syrian people and not to Russia," said Khaled Khoja, president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which is based in Turkey.

The sides are polarized over the role of Assad in Syria's future, a major stumbling block to any

settlement in a war that has killed around 200,000 people and displaced millions since 2011.

Assad has dismissed calls to step down by opposition groups and their Western and Arab allies, while the rise of hardline jihadist groups like Islamic State, at the expense of Western-backed rebel fighters, has complicated matters further.

Khoja, who was elected late on Sunday, told journalists that Moscow had not invited the Coalition as a group but had sent out invitations to some members, who in turn said there was no agenda or format for the meeting.

Describing Russia as "one of the enemies of the Syrian revolution," he said it was impossible for the Coalition to go to the talks unless the aim was to build a transitional administration with full governing powers.

Two rounds of peace talks early last year in Geneva failed to find a solution to the crisis, which started with civilian street protests and has since spiraled into a civil war that has convulsed the wider region.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said the Moscow meeting would be a "warming-up" process before a potential third round of Geneva talks and Assad's government has said it was willing to participate.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which tracks the conflict, said on Monday that 6,553 civilians had died as a result of Syrian air force strikes in Syria in 2014, with the northern province of Aleppo the worst hit.

Syria's government says it is fighting a war against militants funded by foreign countries.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/01/06/syrian-opposition-coalition-not-ready-to-join-russia-peace-talks-leader-a42685