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New Rebuff to Russia's Plan for Syria Peace Talks in Moscow

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A rebel fighter stands inside a damaged room near the frontline against forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in Aleppo, Jan. 8, 2015.

AMMAN — Prominent Syrian opposition figure Mouaz Al Khatib said on Friday he had turned down an invitation to a Moscow meeting with Syrian government officials, in a further blow to Russian efforts to find a solution to the Syrian conflict.

"We decided to decline ... this is because the conditions we think are necessary to ensure the success of the meeting are not available," the moderate Islamist said in an online post.

When he headed the Western-backed Syrian political opposition in 2012, Khatib called for negotiations with President Bashar Assad to pave the way for a handover of power.

Russia, one of Assad's top allies, had extended invitations to senior opposition figures within Syria and outside to meet Syrian government representatives in late January.

The main Turkish-based National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

has already shunned the meeting and said any of its members who attended would be expelled.

The role of Assad in Syria's future is a major stumbling block to any settlement in a war that has killed around 200,000 people and displaced millions since 2011.

The rise of hardline jihadist groups like Islamic State, at the expense of Western-backed rebel fighters, has complicated matters further.

Most of Syria's opposition considers Russia and Iran enemies without whose help Assad would not have survived the insurgency.

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