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In New Blow, Syrian Opposition Shuns Russia Peace Initiative

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Syrians fleeing their homes after clashes between opposition fighters and Assad-loyal forces near Damascus.

A Russian initiative to host peace talks this month between the Syrian government and its opponents appears to be unraveling as prominent Syrian opposition figures shun the prospective negotiations amid deep distrust of Moscow and concerns the talks hold no chance of success.

The faltering effort suggests that even after four years and at least 220,000 people killed, the antagonists in Syria's civil war are far from burning themselves out and will likely keep fighting for a more decisive battlefield advantage before any real talks can take place.

The planned meetings in Moscow, scheduled to start Jan. 26, would be the first on Syria since a United Nations-sponsored conference in Geneva collapsed early last year after making no headway.

But the Syrian tableau has changed dramatically since then.

President Bashar Assad faces growing resentment among his supporters in the wake of bloody defeats, while his main patrons, Russia and Iran, are feeling the pinch from the global plunge in oil prices. Syria's mainstream opposition — political and armed — teeters on the brink of irrelevance, and the extremist Islamic State group has seized control of large chunk of northeastern Syria and neighboring Iraq.

The United States also has joined the fray, carrying out airstrikes with its allies against Islamic State militants while leaving Assad's forces untouched.

Washington has been conspicuously absent from the diplomatic shuffle toward Moscow, unwilling to spend its political capital to cajole the main Western-backed opposition group, the Syrian National Coalition, to attend peace talks that have limited hopes of success.

United Nations envoy Staffan de Mistura is working a parallel peace track, trying to slow the carnage in Syria through a plan that calls for "freezing the conflict" in the northern city of Aleppo as a building block for a wider solution to the war. That plan faces its own hurdles, and has yet to gain much traction.

On Saturday evening, the leader of a Damascus-based political bloc of about a dozen left-wing groups said they will go to Moscow to attend the talks, adding that Russia had initially invited four officials from the coalition but later raised the number. He did not elaborate.

"The Russians have invited us and we accepted the invitation," said Hassan Abdul-Azim who heads the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria, or NCB, after a several-hour meeting in Damascus on Saturday. "We have decided to go to Moscow."

So far, the Moscow conference has only a short list of attendees. Assad's government, which has relied on Russia for economic and diplomatic support as well as military hardware during the conflict, has said it is prepared to participate. A few small, government-tolerated opposition groups also have said they will attend.

But Assad himself appeared to lower already dour expectations, saying in an interview this week that one must be "realistic" about the Moscow talks.

The list of those who have declined — or are leaning that way — contains the bulk of the anti-Assad factions.

Mouaz al-Khatib, a former Coalition president and a longtime proponent of peace talks, turned down his invitation, as did members of the Damascus-based opposition party known as Building the Syrian State. That party's leader has been jailed since November on charges that include weakening national sentiment and weakening the morale of the nation.

The biggest question hangs over the Coalition, which sat across the table from Syrian government representatives at last year's Geneva talks. The group is backed by Western and Arab Gulf powers, but has little credibility with any armed opposition groups inside Syria.

Its newly elected chief, Khaled Khoja, has said the group will not attend the talks. Other members say the SNC has yet to make a final decision, although the sentiment is decidedly against going to Moscow because the talks there do not aim to create a transitional government in Syria with full executive powers — and no Assad.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday that he expects the talks to be a success, dismissing the refusal of some in the opposition to attend as "tactical maneuvering" ahead of the negotiations.

Distrust of Russia runs deep in the anti-Assad camp. It only deepened when Moscow opted to send invitations to individuals in the opposition instead of groups, feeding suspicions that the Kremlin is trying to further fracture Assad's already-divided opponents.

"We know Russia is a very important country and has a big role in Syria, but our question is whether Russia is ready to play a positive role in the political solution or are they still saying something and doing something else on the ground," senior opposition figure Abdulbaset Sieda said.

The opposition also accuses Russia of being more interested in legitimizing Assad as a partner with the international community in a fight against Islamic extremists than in finding a political settlement to the conflict.

The U.S., meanwhile, has stayed on the sidelines as Moscow has stolen the diplomatic limelight.

This week, Secretary of State John Kerry said he hoped the Russian proposal "could be helpful," reinforcing Washington's public position of welcoming any initiative that makes "genuine" progress toward a peaceful resolution in Syria.

Privately, however, U.S. officials say they don't see the Moscow talks as having that objective.

U.S. officials say they have no indication the Russians believe Assad should step down as part of a political transition. The Russians are sticking to their position that the UN-led Geneva process of 2013-14 means dialogue — but not necessarily that a new Syrian leader must emerge.

Washington has not pressured the opposition to attend the talks, American officials say. But U.S. officials have told the opposition that one option would be to use the public platform in Moscow to present its position.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to journalists.

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