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Russian Moderator Hopes for 'Sensible' Syria Talks in Moscow

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Militant Islamist fighters take part in a military parade along the streets of northern Raqqa province in this Jun. 30, 2014 file photo.

A Russian moderator for next week's talks between the Syrian government and a group of opposition figures set out modest goals for the Moscow meeting, saying he would consider it a success if the sides work together and agree to meet again.

Vitaly Naumkin was speaking ahead of the Jan. 26-29 talks which have been clouded by the refusal of several prominent Syrian opposition figures to take part.

Two rounds of peace talks in Geneva a year ago failed to halt the conflict which has killed 200,000 people and there is little sign that the Russian initiative will fare any better.

"If you are a Syrian patriot why would you not want to use even the slightest possibility to come and talk... even if you are critical of Russia's position?" he told a news conference.

The Western-backed National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as

well as prominent opposition figure Mouaz Al Khatib have refused to take part in a process that does not envisage the departure of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

They also distrust Moscow, which has been a key ally of the Syrian president throughout the conflict.

The limited opposition presence has overshadowed preparations for the Moscow talks, a diplomatic initiative by Russia at a time when its ties with the West have hit new lows over the conflict in Ukraine.

Naumkin, an academic who speaks Arabic, said Moscow initially invited 20 representatives of "various opposition and civil society groups." It was now expecting more attendees, although the final list of participants will only be clear after an opposition meeting planned later this week in Cairo.

He said one person invited was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group outlawed in Russia as a "terrorist organization," but that radical Islamists "who cut off heads" were not on the list.

"The idea is that sensible people should make arrangements together," Naumkin said. "No one has too high expectations."

Asked what he would see as success of the talks, he said: "Firstly, if people who do not accept one another sit down to talks and discuss matters... rather than fight over the table. Secondly, if this process is continued, if they agree to continue such consultations."

Naumkin said no Russian government official would be present during the talks but that UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura or his deputy could take part as monitors if they so agree with the Russian Foreign Ministry.

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