

Russia Invites Main Syrian Opposition Group for Talks

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russia has invited the main Syrian opposition group to visit Moscow, a move that comes amid a new Kremlin diplomatic push to mediate in the Syrian conflict.

The Interfax news agency quoted the Russian Foreign Ministry as saying Wednesday that a delegation of the Syrian National Coalition opposition group has been invited to visit Moscow next week.

Coalition leader Badr Jamus told the Russian state news agency Sputnik that it welcomed the invitation and will work out specifics of the visit shortly.

The coalition has previously refused to visit Russia, a key backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Moscow has shielded Assad's regime from UN sanctions and continued to provide it

with weapons during a civil war that has dragged on for more than four years, leaving at least 250,000 killed and turning more than 4 million people into refugees.

Since the year's start, Russia has hosted two rounds of talks between the Syrian government and various opposition groups which have failed to score any visible progress.

Moscow's move follows Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's meeting in Qatar with the coalition's ex-leader, Moaz Al-Khatib. Lavrov also met in Doha with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir for talks focusing on the situation in Syria and efforts to combat the Islamic State group.

Speaking after the talks, Lavrov dismissed allegations that Russia could be preparing to shift its support for Assad as he called for dialogue between opposition groups and Assad's government.

He also warned the U.S. against launching air raids on Syrian government forces to support U.S.-trained opposition groups, saying it could make it more difficult to fight terrorism.

Lavrov again met with Kerry on Wednesday in Kuala Lumpur, where both attended a meeting of members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Lavrov said earlier this week that Russian diplomatic efforts to help end the Syrian conflict stem from President Vladimir Putin's diplomatic initiative he put forward during a meeting with Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman in St. Petersburg in June. The prince is King Salman's youngest son, who has quickly risen to become one of the most powerful men in the kingdom.

Lavrov said Putin's initiative offers to "form a joint anti-terror front that would unite efforts of all forces fighting terrorism on the ground, as well as countries that could help that struggle."

"All recognize that airstrikes aren't enough, and it's necessary to form a coalition that would include those confronting the terror threat with arms in hands, meaning the Syrian army, the Iraqi army and the Kurds," he said.

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