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The Latest: Syrian group 'optimistic' about Geneva talks

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

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BEIRUT (AP) — The latest developments in ongoing Syria peace talks (all times local in Beirut):

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11:15 p.m.



Syrian chief negotiator Bashar al-Jaafari, Ambassador of the Permanent Representative Mission of the Syria to UN New York, briefs the media after a round of negotiations between the Syrian government and UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura at the European headquarters of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, Wednesday, March 16, 2016. (Martial Trezzini/Keystone via AP)

A leader of an expatriate Syrian group is praising Russia's will to support peace talks and expressing hopes they will be successful before the U.S. presidential election this fall.

Randa Kassis spoke to reporters Wednesday after a loosely affiliated, self-described opposition organization known as the Cairo, Moscow and Astana Groups met with the U.N. special envoy in Geneva.

She said she was optimistic for the talks and noted that "President Obama himself wants the success of these negotiations."

The group is seen as less antagonistic to President Bashar Assad's government than the Western- and Saudi-backed opposition, known as the High Negotiations Committee, that is actively in talks with U.N. special envoy Staffan de Mistura.

The Cairo and Astana groups presented a seven-point platform that largely supports U.N. Security Council resolutions and other international agreements that have paved

the way for the talks and laid out long-term objectives for Syria.

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9:30 p.m.

The United States is opposed to any unilateral declarations of autonomous federal zones in Syria but would not be against federalism if the Syrian people chose it as part of a negotiated political settlement.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner spelled out Washington's position after the main Syrian Kurdish party said it would soon declare a federal region in the country's north.

The party said the region's Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen would all be represented, calling it a model for the rest of the country.

Both Turkey and the Syrian government are opposed to such a declaration, fearing that it could lead to the country's partition.

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3:40 p.m.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says U.S. and Russian weapons are ending up in the hands of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which his country considers a terrorist organization.

He also rejected the idea of any form of Kurdish self-rule in Turkey in an address in Ankara.

Erdogan said weapons confiscated from the PKK, the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its armed wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), came from Russia and the West, including the U.S.

Washington also considers the PKK a terrorist group, but the U.S. has strong tactical ties with the YPG, which Ankara views as a PKK affiliate. Washington has provided air support to the YPG, which is among the most effective ground forces battling the Islamic State group in Syria.

On Wednesday, a powerful Syrian Kurdish political party said it planned to declare a federal region in northern Syria, across the border from Turkey.

3 p.m.

The head of Syria's government delegation at peace talks in Geneva is refusing to take part in direct talks with the opposition's top negotiator, calling him a "terrorist."

Bashar Ja'afari, Syria's U.N. ambassador, did not mention Mohammed Alloush by name, though Alloush represents the powerful Army of Islam group and is the chief negotiator for the Saudi-backed opposition, known as the High Negotiations Committee.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday after a meeting with the U.N. envoy for Syria, Ja'afari accused Alloush of membership in a terrorist group that "bombed embassies" and "killed engineering school students" and other people. He did not elaborate.

Ja'afari said he would not take part in direct talks "unless that personality apologizes for the statement he made previously and withdraws it," without specifying.

U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura has been hosting separate meetings with government and opposition delegates — including Alloush — since the "proximity talks" resumed Monday.

2:40 p.m.

A Turkish foreign ministry official says his country rejects any moves that would compromise Syria's national unity and considers the territorial integrity of Syria as "essential."

The official says it's up to the Syrian people to "decide on the executive and administrative structure of Syria in line with the new constitution which will be formulated through the political transition process."

The official told the Associated Press that "unilateral moves carry no validity."

Wednesday's statement effectively rejected a Syrian Kurdish political party's stated intention to declare a federal region in northern Syria.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with government practice.

—Dominique Soguel in Istanbul

1:30 p.m.

Syria's U.N. ambassador has dismissed plans by Syria's Kurds to declare a federal region in northern Syria.

Bashar Ja'afari, who also heads the Syrian government team at the U.N. brokered talks underway in Geneva, says the negotiations in Switzerland are meant to discuss the unity of Syria and how to preserve its territorial integrity.

The diplomat says that "betting on creating any kind of divisions among the Syrians will be a total failure." he said.

Ja'afari spoke to reporters in Geneva on Wednesday, responding to a question about Kurdish plans to declare a federal region in northern Syria. He says he will not comment on "unilateral statements coming from here and there."

Ja'afari ignored a reporter's question on whether President Bashar Assad could be replaced.

12:50 p.m.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman says Moscow is satisfied with the joint work with Washington on coordinating Syria peace efforts.

Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday the Syrian peace process is the main focus now for Moscow and Washington.

He hailed Washington's "readiness to coordinate those efforts."

The remarks come two days after Putin announced the withdrawal of most of Russian warplanes from Syria, voicing hope it should help Syria peace talks underway in Geneva.

Meanwhile, the Russian Defense Ministry said two more groups of Russian warplanes took off from Russian Hemeimeem air base in Syria on Wednesday.

Putin has said Russia will keep some troops at Hemeimeem and a naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartous. Peskov wouldn't say if Russia could turn them into permanent military bases.

12:10 p.m.

A spokesman for a powerful Syrian Kurdish political party says his faction is planning to declare a federal region in northern Syria.

Nawaf Khalil of the Democratic Union Party told The Associated Press that his party is not lobbying for an only-Kurdish region but wants to see the "model of federalism applied to all of Syria."

Khalil, in a phone interview, says the area envisioned for northern Syria would include representation for Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds.

The declaration is expected to be made at the end of a Kurdish conference that is being held Wednesday in the town of Rmeilan in northern Syria.

11:30 a.m.

A Syrian government delegation is meeting with the U.N. special envoy for Syria for the second time since indirect peace talks resumed this week in Geneva.

Syria's U.N. ambassador Bashar Ja'afari was meeting with Staffan de Mistura on the third day of revolving-door diplomacy.

The talks are known as proximity talks, in which the U.N. envoy meets separately with Syrian government representatives and envoys of the so-called moderate opposition.

Wednesdays' meetings are expected to move onto more substantive matters, after procedural steps and an outlining of goals from the two sides were covered in the two previous days.

On Tuesday, de Mistura met with the Saudi- and Western-backed opposition group known as the High Negotiations Committee.

10:50 a.m.

NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has welcomed Russia's decision to withdraw most of its fighting forces from Syria.

Stoltenberg told The Associated Press on Wednesday that it's a contribution to efforts to reduce military tensions and find a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict.

Stoltenberg says the consequences of the withdrawal are yet to be seen but that he "would welcome any action that reduces the military tensions in Syria."

The remarks were Stoltenberg's first since President Vladimir Putin's surprise decision earlier this week. The NATO chief spoke during a visit to the Afghan capital of Kabul.

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9:30 a.m.

Russia's defense ministry says another group of its aircraft has left the Russian air base in Syria and is returning home.

Wednesday's announcement comes two days after President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian military to withdraw most of its fighting forces from Syria, signaling an end to Russia's five-and-a-half month air campaign.

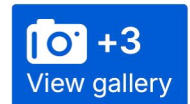
The pullout from the Hemeimeen base coincides with the resumption of U.N.-brokered peace talks in Geneva between the Syrian government and the representatives of the moderate, Western-Backed opposition.

On the ground, a cease-fire has been in effect since late February. Extremist factions — such as the Islamic State group or the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front — are not part of the truce.

Russia didn't indicate when the next group of planes will leave or how many will be pulled out.



Syrian chief negotiator Bashar al-Jaafari, Ambassador of the Permanent Representative Mission of the Syria to UN New York, arrives for a media briefing after a round of negotiations between the Syrian government and UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura at the European headquarters of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, Wednesday, March 16, 2016. (Martial Trezzini/Keystone via AP)



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