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United States to press Russia on Syria's Assad

By [Lesley Wroughton](#) and [John Irish](#)

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[1/4] Syria's President Bashar al-Assad stands next to his wife Asma, as he addresses injured soldiers and their mothers during a celebration marking Syrian Mother's Day in Damascus, in this handout picture provided by SANA on March 21, 2016. REUTERS/SANA/Handout via Reuters [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)

MOSCOW/GENEVA (Reuters) - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is expected to press President Vladimir Putin over a political transition for Syria on Thursday, after Europe's foreign policy chief turned up unexpectedly in Geneva to try to reinvigorate peace talks.

With a fragile truce in place and Europe pressing the warring sides to keep going with negotiations, a state department official said Kerry wants to "get down to brass tacks" on the question of President Bashar al-Assad's future.

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The head of Syria's delegation in Geneva sounded positive after meeting European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, a rare encounter with a senior Western figure.

"For the first time, I can tell you that we were able to break the impasse, maybe in the form and a little bit in substance," he said, adding that the government would attend the next round of talks after legislative elections in government-held areas on April 13.

He did not give any details and Mogherini said the EU had not changed its position on the need to start a political transition in Damascus. The Saudi-backed opposition, whose chief delegate also met Mogherini, has said there are no points of convergence.

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The negotiations have been bogged down on a series of issues and one delegate said it was up to Kerry and Putin to create a breakthrough.

"We're waiting for a U.S.-Russian accord to solve the (key) issue once and for all. Until they resolve it this process will drag on," Randa Kassis, who heads up a Moscow-backed opposition group, said.

While the United States want Assad to step aside, Russia says only the Syrian people can decide his fate at the ballot box and has bristled at any talk of regime change.

Kerry is holding talks with Putin at the Kremlin on Thursday, in a meeting arranged after the Russian leader's surprise announcement on March 14 that he was partially withdrawing his forces from Syria.

"The Secretary would like to now really hear where President Putin is in his thinking ... on a political transition" in Syria, the official said as Kerry arrived in Moscow.

"Obviously what we are looking for, and what we have been looking for, is how we are going to transition Syria away from Assad's leadership," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

UNILATERAL THREAT

After five years of conflict that has killed over 250,000 people and caused the world's worst refugee crisis, Washington and Moscow reached a deal three weeks ago for a cessation of hostilities and delivery of humanitarian aid to besieged areas.

The State Department official said meetings with Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would evaluate the status of the ceasefire and try to "get on the same page" about ending violations and increasing humanitarian assistance.

Russia this week threatened to act unilaterally against those who violate the ceasefire unless it reached a deal with the United States on ways to detect and prevent truce breaches.

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The Syrian opposition has accused government forces of renewing sieges and stepping