
RUSSIA, TURKEY HAIL SYRIA CEASE-FIRE DEAL, PEACE TALKS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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30.12.2016

NBC, 29 Dec 2016

Russia and the Syrian army said Thursday that a nation-wide cease-fire agreement has been reached with opposition rebels, forging a path towards peace talks.

Vladimir Putin said the truce, which excludes extremist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra, is set to begin at midnight (5 p.m. ET) and will be guaranteed by Russia and Turkey.

He said peace talks between Syrian President Bashar Assad and the opposition would be held in Kazakhstan, without specifying a date.

Syria's military said the cease-fire followed the "successes achieved by the armed forces," an apparent reference to the capture of rebel-held neighborhoods of Aleppo earlier this month.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that that President-elect Donald Trump's administration will be welcome to join the Syrian peace process once he takes office.

Russia is a key ally of Assad, while Turkey is one of the main backers of the opposition. Several previous attempts to halt the civil war have failed but the recent warming of ties between Turkey and Russia may prove to be a game changer this time.

It comes on the heels of the Syrian army's retaking control of Aleppo, Syria's largest city, ending the opposition's four-year hold over parts of the city.

Putin said he ordered the Russian military to scale down its presence in Syria, where it has provided crucial support to Assad's forces, but will maintain a presence at both an air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia and the naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus.

Earlier Thursday, Turkey called on Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters from Syria. The group, which has sent thousands of fighters to support Assad, has been playing an instrumental role in Syria's civil war since 2013, mostly in areas near the border with Lebanon, the suburbs of the capital Damascus and the northern city of Aleppo. The group is not likely to withdraw from Syria in the near future as its leader repeatedly said that their presence there is mostly to prevent attacks by extremists deep inside Lebanon.

Foreign fighters from around the world have joined both sides of the Syrian conflict that has so far killed more than a quarter a million people, displaced half the country's population and produced more than four millions refugees.

Kaynak/Source: