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## **SYRIAN OPPOSITION REJECTS RUSSIA TALKS AS WEST FRETS OVER INFLUENCE**

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Russias efforts to broker a Syrian peace deal outside the UNs Geneva process stumbled on Wednesday after the official Syrian opposition said it would not attend talks planned for later this month.

Turkey also said it opposed an invitation to Syrian Kurds to attend Moscows congress of Syrian national dialogue, which aims to bring together 33 delegations in the Russian city of Sochi on 18 November. Moscow has said any groups that do not attend the conference will suffer as a consequence.

The initiative, at which discussion about a future constitution for Syria is on the agenda, appears to be a clear attempt to bypass the UN-brokered peace talks due to recommence in Geneva 10 days later.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, met Irans leaders in Tehran on Wednesday to push his Syrian plan.

The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, has accepted the process, believing the new constitution, likely to be based on an existing Russian draft, will entrench him in power ahead of any elections.

The Geneva process has been bogged down for over a year, largely over whether Assads departure should be a precondition for any talks on a political transition.

The military might of Moscow and Tehran in Syria has helped prop up Assads forces and turn the protracted conflict in his favour with a string of key battlefield victories.

Mohammad Alloush, a member of the Syrian oppositions high negotiations committee (HNC), dismissed the Sochi conference as a meeting between the regime and the regime.

The HNC was surprised it had been mentioned in a list of groups invited to the Sochi and would issue a statement with other parties setting out the general position rejecting this conference, he said.

The Turkey-based Syrian National Coalition, which is linked to the HNC, also said the Russian initiative was an attempt to circumvent the international desire for political transition in Syria.

The coalition will not participate in any negotiations with the regime outside Geneva or without UN sponsorship, an SNC spokesman said.

Vladimir Putin, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev in Tehran on Wednesday.

In a further sign of Russian attempts to marginalise the role of the United Nations in Syria, there were reports that Moscow would block the renewal of a UN resolution permitting cross-border aid to enter Syria, arguing all aid must be administered from Damascus.

Cross-border aid is seen as a lifeline for tens of thousands of people still trapped and starving inside Syria. The resolution needs to be renewed by the end of the year.

Western diplomats argue they have one last card left to play to prevent total Russian, or indeed Iranian control, over Syria's future, and that is the cost of the country's reconstruction.

There are no spoils of victory in Syria, only rubble, said one diplomat. The IMF has put the cost of rebuilding Syria at \$200bn (£150bn) but no one knows who will fund reconstruction on this scale and on what terms.

The EU is due to stage a second Syria reconstruction conference early next year in Brussels, and still hopes to mesh western aid into the UN talks.

Increasingly marginalised in the civil war by Russia, Iran and Turkey, the EU's offer of cash at least gives western governments some much needed leverage since they do not believe either Russia

or Iran will cover the cost of reconstruction.

Britain and the US are the two countries most confident that dangling dollars can force the Syrian regime to make concessions they have so far refused to make on the battle field.

HR McMaster, Donald Trumps national security adviser, said last month that not a dollar goes to reconstruct anything that is under the control of this brutal regime.

Britains outgoing special envoy for Syria, Gareth Bayley, wrote earlier this month that the west needed to hold firm to the position that it will only help with Syrias reconstruction when comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly under way.

Much of the battered Syrian opposition feels the same, and has been lobbying Brussels not to offer aid without taking into account the fate of political detainees and a transition away from Assad.

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Kaynak/Source: