



## **Syria Dominates Kerry's First Trip Abroad as Secretary of State**

By: Scott Stearns – February 21, 2013

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry leaves Sunday for Europe and the Middle East - his first trip abroad as America's top diplomat. The conflict in Syria tops Kerry's agenda.

With Syria's civil war rocking Damascus suburbs, Kerry's schedule in Europe and the Middle East includes meetings with opponents of embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said, "He is characterizing this first trip more broadly as a listening tour, but I think he will look forward to hearing from the Syrian Opposition Coalition what more they think we can do, and also to hear from counterparts who are deeply involved in supporting the opposition."

Those European counterparts are extending their arms embargo while providing more non-lethal support for civilians.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said, "It will allow us now to supply a greater range of equipment to help to protect civilian life in Syria and will also enable us to give assistance and advice that we have been restricted in giving them before."

Kerry is no stranger to Syria. He recalled during his confirmation hearing how President Assad once asked for his help.

"He wanted to try to find some way to reach out to the West and see if there was some kind of accommodation. History caught up to us," Kerry said. "That never happened, and it is now moot because he has made a set of judgments that are inexcusable."

Long-time Assad ally Russia is now pushing for talks with the opposition. Kerry is scheduled to meet in Berlin with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who says the priority in Syria is dialogue.

Lavrov said the situation is changing, and it is important that the readiness of the Syrian opposition for dialogue is met by a confirmation from the government that they are also ready.

Cato Institute analyst Malou Innocent said Russia's apparent shift is bad news for President Assad. "They have recognized that the rebel movements might emerge victorious at the end of this. I think that is a stunning about-face from the Russians," he said.

Nuland said Kerry is ready to work with Lavrov to encourage all Syrians to begin a political transition. She said, "The Russians have certain kinds of influence. We have certain kinds of influence. It's really going to be up to the Syrians where they want to do this, whether they think Moscow's offer can be helpful."

Johns Hopkins University Professor Ruth Wedgwood said the civil war's pace shows Russia that President Assad can no longer keep Syria together as his father did.

"It is such a delicate balance," he said. "It is a bouillabaisse of nationalities, which was always the trump card of Assad and the Alawites, that they were the one, seemingly honest at the time, now dishonest, broker who could keep the stew from boiling over."

Kerry will meet with government officials in London, Paris, Berlin, Riyadh, Ankara, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Doha as well as with Syrian opposition leaders in Rome.

State Department officials said earlier plans to include Jerusalem and Ramallah on this trip were dropped because of ongoing talks among Israeli politicians about forming a governing coalition.