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Lavrov: Russia hopes no one in US trying to shield terrorists in Syria

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The US is stalling on its promise to separate moderate rebel groups in Syria from terrorists, who are not subject to a shaky ceasefire and are a legitimate target for Russia and Damascus, the Russian foreign minister said.

Under the peace deal signed by the US and Russia last week, the Americans must *“separate the opposition groups that cooperate with them from Jabhat al-Nusra [Al-Nusra Front] and the likes of them,”* Sergey Lavrov said in an interview with Sputnik radio in Kyrgyzstan on Friday.

The top Russian diplomat said US progress in delivering on the promise is slow. He expressed hope that *“this delay is not caused by someone in Washington trying to shield terrorists from being targeted.”*

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Al-Nusra Front is an Al-Qaeda offshoot, which is recognized by the US as a terrorist group on par with Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL). Russia says many armed groups in Syria, which Washington insists on not labeling terrorists, have allied with Al-Nusra Front or Islamic State on numerous occasions and do not differ from them ideologically.

*“Not long ago, the Americans at last sent us a list of organizations which they consider to be part of the ceasefire and which should not be targeted. In one of the first positions there is Ahrar al-Sham,”* Lavrov said.

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The group he referred to is reputed to be among the strongest warring factions in Syria, partially thanks to Qatari support, and has reportedly committed various war crimes.

It refused to support the ongoing Syrian truce, and is among those which Russia believes should be defeated, along with Al-Nusra Front, with which it is allied. Most of the violations of the ceasefire in Syria reported by the Russian military were committed by Ahrar al-Sham.

*"It seems the Americans are listing a part of a terrorist structure, which is recognized as such by the UN, as an organization loyal to them,"* Lavrov remarked.

The issue was discussed by the Russian diplomat in a phone call with US Secretary of State John Kerry on Friday, the foreign ministry said.

Despite the setbacks, the truce in Syria is slowly progressing, the Kremlin said on Friday, reiterating that it is putting pressure on the Syrian government to continue observing it despite violations.

The Russian military, however, is more skeptical, saying that the outcome of the US-Russia plan is still up in the air.

*"So far all attempts by our American partners to demonstrate that 'their' opposition groups in Syria are controllable have been futile,"* remarked Major General Igor Konashenkov, spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry.

He added that, according to Russian intelligence, only the Syrian government has abided by the conditions of the deal so far.