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France ^{More} hails Syria council, develops contacts

By Reuters

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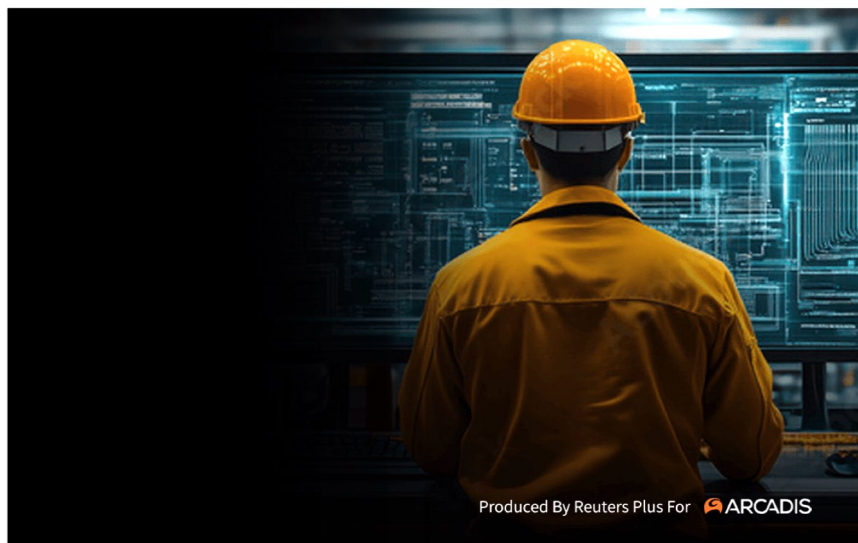


By John Irish

PARIS (Reuters) - France welcomed the formation of a Syrian National Council by activists working to bring down President Bashar al Assad, the foreign ministry said on Friday, noting French officials met this week in Paris with Syrian opposition members.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero said that Paris, which was instrumental in getting the West's backing for Libya's rebel uprising, was "developing its contacts" with the Syrian opposition as it ramps up pressure on Assad's government.

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international waters

Separately, a secular Syrian opposition movement is holding a conference in Paris on Saturday and Sunday with activists, academics and writers to discuss the uprising.

Paris is pushing for a U.N. Security Council resolution laying out sanctions against Syria and condemning the use of violence against civilians, with some 2,600 people estimated to have died in one of the most violent crackdowns of the "Arab Spring" protests sweeping the Middle East and North Africa.

On Thursday, Syrian opposition activists meeting in Istanbul announced the formation of a unified Syrian National Council to provide support for the uprising and a basis for discussions with the international community.

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"France welcomes the formation in Istanbul of a National Syrian Council (NSC)," Valero told reporters. "Every initiative to unify the opposition and pave the way for a democratic Syria that respects its citizens is positive."

He declined to identify the opposition members that had met with French officials this week, citing security reasons.

The international community has condemned the Syrian government's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests yet has bemoaned the lack of a unified opposition it could talk to.

With members drawn from Syria's various political, religious and ethnic groups, the NSC aims to fill that gap.

France was the first foreign power to formally recognize the interim council set up by Libyan rebels, but Valero said it was too early to do the same for the Syrians. He said Paris was "listening" to what they had to say.



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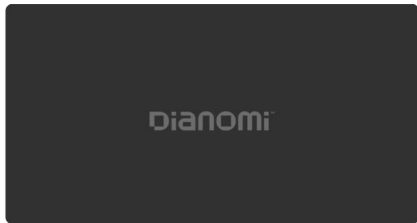
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Members of the NSC will be at this weekend's Paris meeting of the Coalition of Secular and Democratic Syrians, which will discuss issues such as the risk of the rise of Islamic fundamentalist groups in a transitional Syria.

"We're not against the council, but we have our own proposals of what should happen in Syria," Randa Kassis, one of the organizers of the two-day conference told Reuters.

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