

## **Bush Visit Won't Affect Syria**

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Syrian analysts and activists say President George Bush's recent visit to the Middle East will not have a significant impact on their country, arguing that the United States leader enjoys little credibility in the region.

Bush made a few public comments on Syria during his five-day trip to the region, which ended on May 18.

Maintaining his administration's tough stance towards Damascus, Bush urged Arab nations to reject both the Syrian and Iranian governments, saying he envisioned a democratic future Middle East that did not include the current Syrian regime.

The pro-government press in Syria carried several articles attacking Bush's visit and his Middle East policies generally.

Fuad Aliko, a former member of parliament and secretary of the Syrian Kurdish Yakiti party, said he did not believe the remarks represented a major threat to the government.

"I don't think that the American administration has any intention of overthrowing the Syrian regime," he said.

Aliko predicted that the US would not change its policies, which include putting pressure on Syria to institute democratic reforms and to cut links with Tehran and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah.

An activist in Syria's anti-globalisation movement described Bush's regional trip as "a waste of time."

"Bush has lost his credibility in American public opinion," he said. "So what is his credibility in a region like the Middle East, to which he has brought agony and war? His crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan have made him a man of war rather than peace.

"The American president has damaged the image of the American people in the eyes of people in the Middle East, Arabs in particular."

Bush's credibility may have plummeted since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but Aliko argues that the US retains some authority in both Syria and the rest of the region. Damascus has, for example, repeatedly demanded that Washington sponsor peace negotiations with Israel, and some regional states like Egypt and Jordan have strong ties with the US.

While the activist maintained that it was better that Bush did not visit Syria, others said his decision not to engage with the country during this trip was unimportant.

“It isn’t necessary for the American president to visit in order for the two countries to communicate,” said one political activist.

He noted that the speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited Syria over a year ago and met President Bashar al-Assad. Many members of Congress and former US president Jimmy Carter have also visited Syria.

Although these visits were heavily criticised by the Bush administration, the political activist suggested that “perhaps these visits are being used to convey messages to the Syrian leadership”.

A student at Damascus University’s department of information said Bush did not lay much emphasis on Syria during his visit because his administration does not have a clear policy on how to deal with the country.

He expressed concerned, however, that Bush might consider launching another war against Syria, Iran or the Lebanese Hezbollah.

“The tragedies of the American war in Iraq are the most obvious proof that the decision to launch a war against Iraq was a mistake,” he said. Despite this, he said, “Bush might make another similar decision before departing.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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