

Damascus Open to Fresh Start With Obama

Author: [IWPR](#)

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A Syrian official has said the American school and cultural centre in Damascus may be allowed to reopen as his government moves towards a new relationship with president-elect Barack Obama.

The school and the separate cultural centre closed their doors last week on the orders of the Syrian government, which was responding to a US air strike on a village near the country's border with Iraq.

Damascus said eight civilians died when the settlement of Abu Kamal came under attack on October 26, while US government sources said the attack targeted al-Qaeda figures operating close to the long and porous border that is used as a crossing-point by insurgents entering Iraq,

"The government had to take a stand to express its rejection of the assault that had taken place," said a senior official at the ministry of higher education, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"In spite of this, the Syrian government has left the door open for the crisis to be solved through diplomacy, especially now that it has placed its hopes in president-elect Obama. And the fact that he was elected is reassuring for Syria. I think that the next three weeks will see matters clarified to a greater extent, such that the closure of the two American institutions can be resolved."

Official statements coming out of Damascus following the November 4 US election have been positive.

President Bashar al-Assad sent Obama a congratulatory telegram expressing "hope that dialogue will prevail so as to overcome the difficulties that have hindered real progress toward peace, stability and prosperity in the Middle East".

The telegram was a signal pointing towards "a future relaxation in Syrian-US relations", according to Ahmed Khlaif, a lawyer and human rights activist currently doing a doctorate in international law at the University of Damascus.

"The closure of the cultural centre and American school will not go on for a long time beyond Obama's entry to office within the next few months, something that will mark a fresh start between the two countries," said Khlaif.

The ministry official noted that not all the teachers at the American-run Damascus Community School had been asked to leave.

"This implies a message that the school closure will not last long," he said.

In the meantime, the Syrian authorities have transferred the 450 pupils to French and Pakistani schools in

Damascus.

According to a Syrian who works at the US embassy, where the cultural centre is located, said the facility was “not totally closed, since its employees go to work regularly. But the centre’s activities, such as its internet room and library, have stopped for a while.”

Suha Hassan, a 33-year-old housewife whose children go to the school, said they are anxious to return.

“It is true that [children] have no right to intervene in politics, but they do have the right to choose their school, their peers and the curriculum they are used to, and the right not to be forced to go to other schools,” she said. “The re-opening of the school will bring the smiles back to my children’s faces.”

Both the school and cultural centre are among the oldest western institutions in the Middle East. The Damascus Community was established in 1958 and is now run by Kifah Haddad, a Syrian national. The American Cultural Centre has operated since the 1950s, offering educational services and free film showings, lectures and books.

The closure of the American centre has increased the number of visitors to the British equivalent. Ahmed Swan who works in the café there and says business has gone up since last week.

Meanwhile, some Syrians continue to back a robust response to the raid. Sara al-Minqar, a dental student at the University of Damascus, said she thinks American institutions should be closed.

“We don’t need American culture, which is based on violence and disrespect for others’ rights,” she said. “Unfortunately, these measures have been in vain since they haven’t resulted in any apology from the Americans.”

(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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