

By GEORGE BAGHDADI / CBS NEWS / February 8, 2009, 3:05 PM

Obama's OK Of Plane Deal Signals Thaw With Syria

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President Barack Obama has pioneered a route towards Syria that is distinctive from that of his predecessor President Bush, dispatching congressional delegations and signaling a rare authorization to sell Damascus plane parts for repairing two aging Boeing 747s.

The overture comes as this Mediterranean country **recently signed a memorandum to purchase 50 passenger jets from Airbus** (a deal purportedly worth billions), despite Washington's trade sanctions begun in 2004 over Syria's alleged aid to militants in Iraq and destabilization of Lebanon.

Mr. Obama's moves are being greeted with vast relief.

"Two days ago, we received from the U.S. Trade Department the approval needed for rehabilitating two Boeing 747s which were not in use," Transport Minister Ya'rob Badr told reporters.

"We regard this initiation from the new U.S. administration as a positive indication," the minister added, revealing the state-owned airline carrier has signed a memorandum with Airbus to take delivery of the first 14 Airbus airliners between 2010 to 2018, with a further 36 planes to be delivered by 2028.

Syrianair, set up in 1946, has only five operating single-aisle Airbus A320s, one aging jumbo Boeing 747, two planes for local flights, and more than 5,000 employees.

Initial negotiations with the French government were held in Paris in July during a visit by Syria's deputy prime minister for economic affairs Abdullah al Dardari, a week after the presidents of the two countries, Bashar Al-Assad and Nicolas Sarkozy, met for the first time there.

Dardari, a key figure in the Syrian administration, has a reputation as a reformist, who is trying to shift Syria's economy from socialist-style government control to a freer market system. He has argued that the trade sanctions posed a risk to the

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traveling public by undermining the planes' safety standards.

U.S. diplomats based in Damascus were not available to comment, but President Assad made it clear on several occasions that "dialogue with Washington has started in a serious manner through personalities who are close to the administration and who were dispatched by the administration."

Two weeks ago, President Obama dispatched a congressional delegation to the Syrian capital, headed by Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wa., a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, to discuss with leaders here the best way to further ties between the two countries.

A visit to the Syrian capital on February 17 by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman, D-Calif., was also a clear sign of a thaw in relations.

By CBS News' George Baghdadi in Damascus

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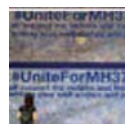
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