Syrians take a gamble with country's first casino in decades - Sify
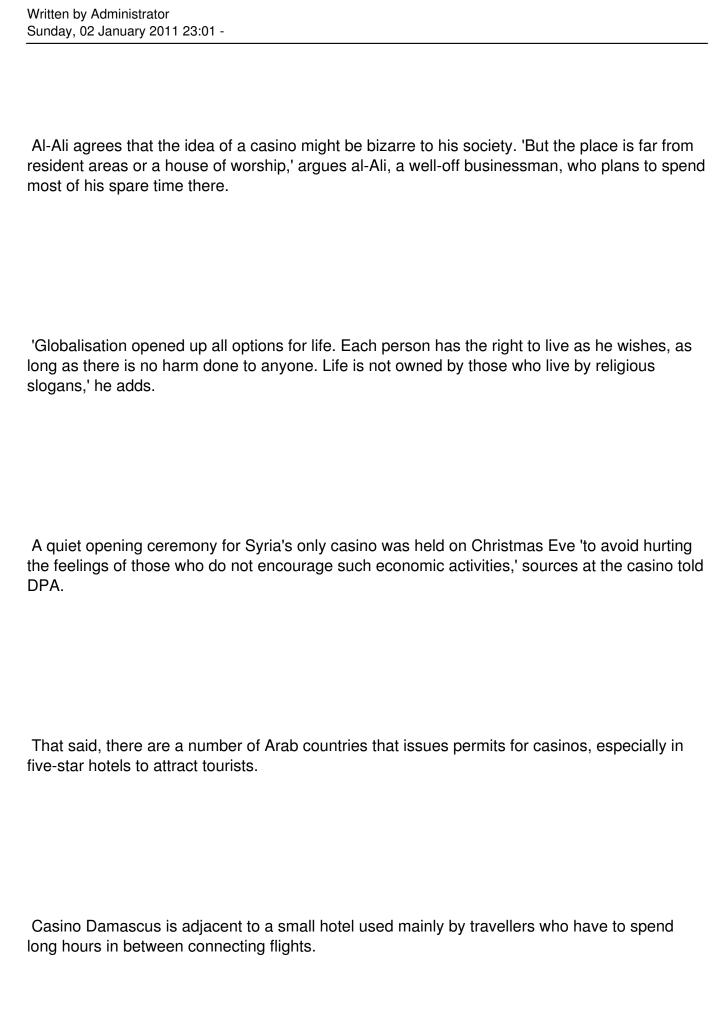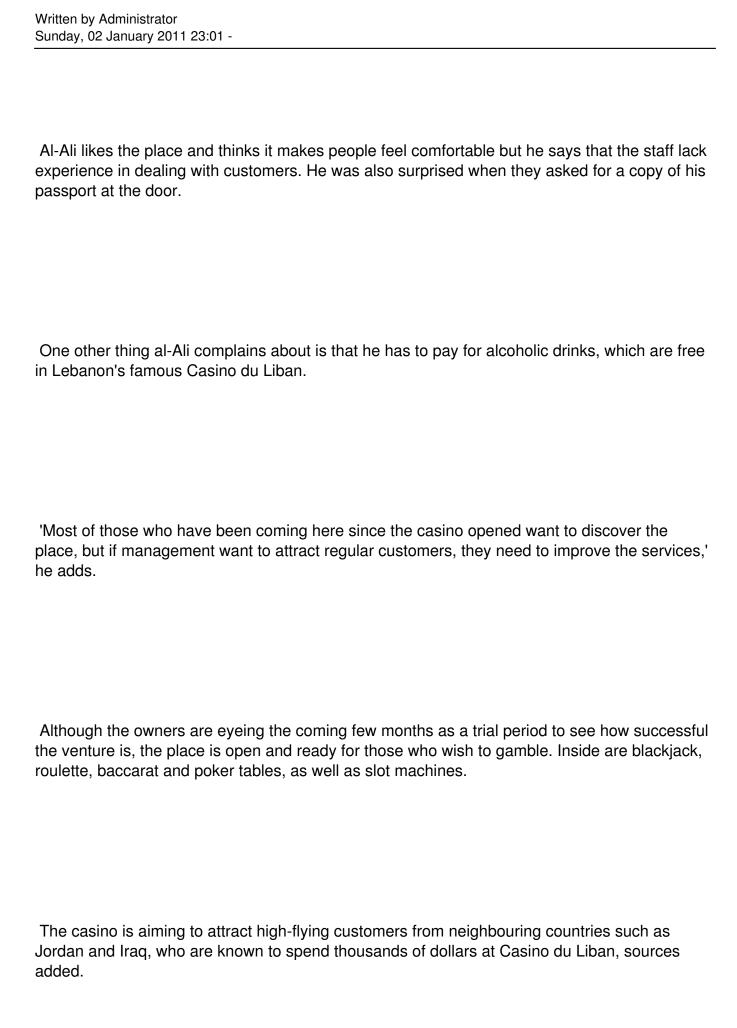
Written by Administrator
Sunday, 02 January 2011 23:01 -

Damascus, Jan 3 (DPA) People in Syria can now roll the dice at the country's only casino, which recently opened its doors in a gamble of its own - to test the limits in this largely conservative society. Casino Damascus, which opened around 30 km outside the capital,near Damascus airport, is seen as a step in Syria's cautious plan to transform itself into a more open-market
economy

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There has not been a casino in Syria since the 1963 coup, when the Baath party took power. The party, with its strong socialist roots, opposed gambling and what it saw as the influence of 'Western imperialism'.

'I've always wanted a casino to open in Syria, so I was very glad when I came here,' said Samer al-Ali shortly after he entered the casino with his friends.

While the move to open a casino once again suggests Syria is slowly softening its domestic policies, the place lacks the flashy signs and lights associated with many casinos elsewhere in the world. In fact, there are no signs outside this casino, which is run by a number of unnamed influential local businessmen.

Its low-key exterior and desolate location are a sop to ensure that the place does not offend Syria's Muslims, as Islam prohibits gambling.

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Al-Ali agrees that the idea of a casino might be bizarre to his society. 'But the place is far from resident areas or a house of worship,' argues al-Ali, a well-off businessman, who plans to spend most of his spare time there.

'Globalisation opened up all options for life. Each person has the right to live as he wishes, as long as there is no harm done to anyone. Life is not owned by those who live by religious slogans,' he adds.

A quiet opening ceremony for Syria's only casino was held on Christmas Eve 'to avoid hurting the feelings of those who do not encourage such economic activities,' sources at the casino told DPA.

That said, there are a number of Arab countries that issues permits for casinos, especially in five-star hotels to attract tourists.

Casino Damascus is adjacent to a small hotel used mainly by travellers who have to spend long hours in between connecting flights.

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Al-Ali likes the place and thinks it makes people feel comfortable but he says that the staff lack experience in dealing with customers. He was also surprised when they asked for a copy of his passport at the door.

One other thing al-Ali complains about is that he has to pay for alcoholic drinks, which are free in Lebanon's famous Casino du Liban.

'Most of those who have been coming here since the casino opened want to discover the place, but if management want to attract regular customers, they need to improve the services,' he adds.

Although the owners are eyeing the coming few months as a trial period to see how successful the venture is, the place is open and ready for those who wish to gamble. Inside are blackjack, roulette, baccarat and poker tables, as well as slot machines.

The casino is aiming to attract high-flying customers from neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Iraq, who are known to spend thousands of dollars at Casino du Liban, sources added.

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Casino Damascus is not as big as Casino du Liban, which was inaugurated in December 1959 and enjoys a monopoly on all gambling activities in the country. Though it was closed during the war in Lebanon, the Beirut casino was re-opened in 1996 after a $50 million reconstruction and refurbishment programme.

Nour, a young waitress at the casino, feels the only thing missing from the casino is a doctor's office. 'Sometimes a huge loss is shocking for customers, we need to take precautions.'

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