

Thus begins a night of gambling, drinking and mingling at the newly opened Casino Damascus - the first to open in Syria in nearly four decades.

The glittering casino showcases Syria's gradual shedding of its socialist past in favor of the free market. At a time when economic discontent is shaking Tunisia and

[Egypt](#), President Bashar Assad is gambling that gradual change can insulate his country from such tumult.

But for this country's secular regime, Casino Damascus may be too much for devout Muslims to swallow.

"Gambling is a grave sin," said Mohammed Habash, member of parliament and director of the Islamic Studies Center, who puts it on a par with drug abuse. "We must use all legal means to prevent gambling from entering our lives."

The casino is hardly as glamorous as those in neighboring [Lebanon](#) or Turkey, but officials hope it will help shed Syria's image as a rigid, closed country and attract tourists from oil-rich Arab countries.

"Syria has opened up, and this is one of the signs," said Jihad Yazigi, editor-in-chief of The Syria Report, a Paris-based online weekly founded the year after Assad succeeded his father, Hafez Assad, as president.

Casinos are rare in Arab countries; many use Islamic law, which forbids gambling. On a recent night, however, the smoke-filled Casino Damascus was operating at full capacity. Coins jingled in slot machines, and smartly dressed men and women placed bets at baccarat, blackjack and roulette tables.

"It's a good economic move, but a bad one for society," said Marwan, a 70-year-old Syrian. "I see a lot of young people getting into trouble. This is not a good hobby," he said.

With new casino, Syria bets on openness to world - Washington Post

Written by Administrator

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Still, it didn't stop this twice-weekly customer from taking his seat at the blackjack table, although he and other gamblers declined to be fully identified, reflecting the stigma that still surrounds gambling in Syria.

That stigma apparently explains why the casino is near the airport, some 30 kilometers (20 miles) from downtown, and was inaugurated without fanfare on Christmas Eve.

There are no signs advertising its existence, and it is one of the few public places that does not feature a portrait of Assad - a sign the president does not want to be associated with it publicly, even though the casino could not have without his approval.

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