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Russia in Talks to Open Top University Branch in Syria

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The Moscow State University branch in Damascus will likely specialize in natural sciences and mathematics. **Dustin Taylor / MT**

Moscow State University is in discussions with Syria to open a branch in Damascus, the state-run TASS news agency reported Sunday, citing the university's rector.

Viktor Sadovnichy's remarks confirm reports last week that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has allocated land in the Syrian capital to build a Russian university. As Syrian government forces reclaimed the upper hand in the country's almost nine-year civil war, Russia has unveiled a series of commercial and relief projects to solidify its foothold there.

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Sadovnichy said a "high-level Syrian delegation" had asked him several months ago to open a Russian educational facility after the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011 shuttered a Russian school for gifted children.

“Preliminary discussions to continue this tradition are happening,” Sadovnichy was quoted as saying.

He noted that the MSU branch in Damascus will likely specialize in natural sciences and mathematics. “There is a good mathematical tradition in the country,” TASS quoted Sadovnichy as saying.

The MSU rector did not specify when the sides are expected to finalize discussions or when construction is slated to begin.

MSU regularly tops Russia’s national academic ratings but underperforms in international rankings despite President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to improve Russian universities’ global standing. In 2012, Putin ordered that at least five Russian universities enter the world's top rankings by 2020.

The Syrian Education Ministry added Russian as an optional second foreign language in schools after English or French in 2014. More than 24,000 youngsters are now learning Russian in Syria, the ministry’s Russian-language coordinator told Reuters last week.

Shunned by Western powers, Assad has looked to allies Russia and Iran to play a role in rebuilding after they helped Syria's army reclaim most of the country. Russia began waging an air campaign in support of Assad in 2015.

Meanwhile, Putin has suggested that Assad invite U.S. President Donald Trump to visit Damascus, according to footage published Sunday.

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