

World

U.S. diplomats in Beirut burn classified material as anti-American protests continue

Protests were sparked across the Muslim World by an Anti-Islam U.S.-made film.

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US embassy in Awkar, Lebanon on the outskirts of Beirut.

WASHINGTON — Diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut have started to destroy classified material as a security precaution amid anti-American protests in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa.

A State Department status report obtained Monday by The Associated Press said the Beirut embassy had "reviewed its emergency procedures and is beginning to destroy classified holdings." It also said that local Lebanese employees were sent home early due to protests by the militant Shiite group Hezbollah over an anti-Muslim film produced in the U.S.

In Washington, a State Department official said there was no imminent threat to the heavily fortified Beirut embassy, which is about an hour away from where the nearest demonstration is planned.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss security procedures, said the decision to "reduce classified holdings" was routine and made by embassy staff.

Protesters have breached the walls or compounds of several U.S. diplomatic missions, including the consulate in Benghazi, Libya where the ambassador and three other Americans were killed, Cairo and Tunis since last Tuesday.



Supporters of Hezbollah shout slogans during a mass rally to denounce an anti-Islam US-made film, at southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, 17 September 2012.

After Tuesday's incidents, the State Department ordered all U.S. embassies and consulates around the world to review their security postures. As a result, a number of missions decided to destroy classified material, the official said. It was not immediately clear which other missions besides the one in Beirut had taken that step.

The official stressed it was normal under circumstances such as those of last week for embassies to reduce the amount of classified material that they hold. Classified documents are also routinely culled as part of normal embassy operations.

Earlier Monday, the State Department renewed its warning to U.S. citizens to "avoid all travel to Lebanon because of current safety and security concerns. " It said U.S. citizens "living and working in Lebanon should understand that they accept risks in remaining and should carefully consider those risks."

The new alert, which superseded a May 8 warning, said the potential for a "spontaneous upsurge in violence remains" in Lebanon and that Lebanese authorities are not able to guarantee protection if violence erupts quickly.

The warning also noted that the Fulbright and the English Language Fellow programs that gave grants to American scholars to live and work in Lebanon during the academic year have been suspended "because of the deteriorating security situation and the increased possibility of attacks against U.S. citizens in Lebanon."

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