

Dutch unifying colonialism

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Nikolaos van Dam, Ponorogo, East Java

My frequent journeys through the Middle East have made me very much aware of the similarities between its inhabitants, but also of the boundaries dividing them.

France and Great Britain, as well as other former colonial powers, are generally blamed for the present division of the Arab world into separate states.

But not all colonial powers are accused of having wanted to divide and split their colonies. The Dutch are perhaps an exception in this respect.

In the mid-1990s I had a public discussion with a Syrian politician who suggested Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, or the "Netherlands Indies" as it was called at the time, might have been a positive type of "unifying colonialism", which contrasted with the kind of "divisive colonialism" which had apparently been applied by the colonial powers in the Arab world.

The Syrian politician noted correctly Indonesia is a huge archipelago composed of thousands of islands, which are inhabited by a highly diverse population.

The country's population speaks a multitude of languages, is Muslim by large majority, but also has many adherents of other religions.

Once Indonesia won its independence, he concluded, it was not torn into a large number of states, as happened in the Arab world, but it transformed into a unified state of great importance.

Was this, he asked rhetorically, because the Indonesians revolted against being torn up? Or did the Dutch have a kind unifying colonialism, which the Arabs did not have "the luck" -- as he called it -- to get acquainted with?

Because, he concluded, each of the colonial powers dominating the Arab world might after all also have left behind its respective colonial share as a unified entity, instead of transforming it into separate states.

As a matter of fact, the Dutch did, indeed, apply a type of colonialism which ultimately led to the unification of that huge area, which today constitutes the Republic of Indonesia.

The holding-together of the large colonial territory by the Dutch, however, also gave rise to the suppression of separatist movements, which, as in the case of Aceh, led to a bloody war of about 30 years.

Without this war, Aceh would now probably not have been part of modern Indonesia.

In the final stage of its colonial period, however, the Netherlands tried to introduce a more loose federal system, in an attempt to preserve shreds of control in this huge archipelago.

But this policy clearly failed, because the idea of a fully independent and united Republic of Indonesia covering the whole of the archipelago, completely independent from the Dutch, turned out to be widely supported by a large majority of Indonesians all over the country.

As a result, the former colonial boundaries became the official and final borders of the Republic of Indonesia. Not an inch more (as a result of which East Timor was not included, because it had not been colonized by the Dutch but by the Portuguese) and not an inch less (as a result of which Papua was incorporated after all in 1962).

One can conclude that states generally accept colonial boundaries when it suits them well, but tend to oppose them when there is a possibility of claiming a larger territory, irrespective of whether this would be based on facts of history or not.

When dealing with international boundaries, every inch of territory acquires an almost holy importance, because national sovereignty is at stake.

And loss of any inch of territory can lead to further claims, political instability, tensions in international relations, and sometimes to further wars. Because of this, former colonial borders are generally respected, however-much their coming into existence may have been disliked.

This is part of a lecture delivered (in Arabic) by Dr. Nikolaos van Dam, Ambassador of the Netherlands, at the Darussalam Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren) on Nov. 12, 2007.