

Reflections on the Occasion of the 400th Anniversary of the Dutch Consulate in Aleppo Ambassador Nikolaos van Dam

*The following is the text of a lecture delivered by Ambassador Nikolaos van Dam in Aleppo on October 31, 2007 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the establishment of a Dutch consulate in Aleppo. Ambassador Van Dam is currently ambassador of the Netherlands in Indonesia. In addition to his diplomatic service, he has had a distinguished career as an academic. He is best known as author of the seminal *The struggle for power in Syria: Sectarianism, regionalism, and tribalism in politics, 1961-1978* 2nd ed. (1979). The Syrian Studies Association thanks Dr. van Dam for sharing this lecture with us.*

Aleppo severed from its hinterland

Some 400 years ago, when the first consul of the Netherlands was officially appointed to Aleppo, we Syrian and Dutch started the long bilateral relationship that we celebrate today.

The journey from Amsterdam to Aleppo cannot have been an easy one at the time, if only because of the more limited means of transportation, the prevailing dangers, and the risky circumstances. But, on the more positive side, within the Ottoman Empire fewer political and state boundaries had to be crossed than obstruct our movements today. Although geographically the same, the socio-economic location of the city of Aleppo has changed since then. Aleppo had not yet been cut off from its natural hinterland as it is today, due to the boundaries set after the First World War and under the subsequent French and British Mandates.

In Arab nationalist literature, Syria is described as a country which has been severed from her hinterland, and thereby has become a limbless trunk. Aleppo is a clear example of this phenomenon. It is self evident to whomever looks at the political map of Syria of today that there are intensive contacts between Aleppo and Damascus, both socially and in the field of trade or economics. But when looking at older maps, it turns out that trade routes ran quite differently and that, as a result, contacts between

Aleppo and Mosul were even more intensive than those between Aleppo and Damascus. Towns like Mardin, 'Ayntab and Harran, let alone Iskenderun—all now within Turkey—were still part of the natural Aleppan network.



Detail of an 18th-century Dutch map (in Italian) showing Aleppo. From EL-Mudarris and Salmon, *Les relations entre les Pays-Pas et la Syrie* (see review on the facing page).

State boundaries and ethnic boundaries

My first journey to Syria over land from Amsterdam to Aleppo in 1964 was certainly much shorter and more comfortable than that of the first Dutch consuls and tradesmen more than four centuries ago. I traveled by train from Amsterdam to Istanbul with what used to be called the *Orient Express*, and from there I continued with a Turkish bus to Iskenderun.

In this Mediterranean harbor city I was confronted with the fact that state boundaries do not always coincide with ethnic boundaries. I was pleasantly surprised when hearing people speaking Arabic for the first time. I noted with some excitement that this occurred before I had even crossed the international Turkish-Syrian border at Bab al-Hawa.

Although the Arabic speaking people I met in Iskenderun officially resided in the Republic of Turkey, I considered them to be Arabs because of their mother tongue. But in Turkey they were, according to the Kemalist tradition, officially categorized as “Turks”, as any reference to ethnicity was rejected at the time. Only more recently has it become acceptable in Turkey to refer to, for instance, “Turks of Arab ethnic origin”, “Turks of Kurdish ethnic origin”, “Turks of Armenian ethnic origin”, and so on.

Syrians who have been brought up with an Arab nationalist education, which means almost all Syrians, may be surprised to find out that members of today’s Arabic-speaking minority in Iskenderun, consider themselves to be “Turks” of Arab

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ethnic origin and feel much more attracted to Turkey and Europe than to Syria or the Arab world.

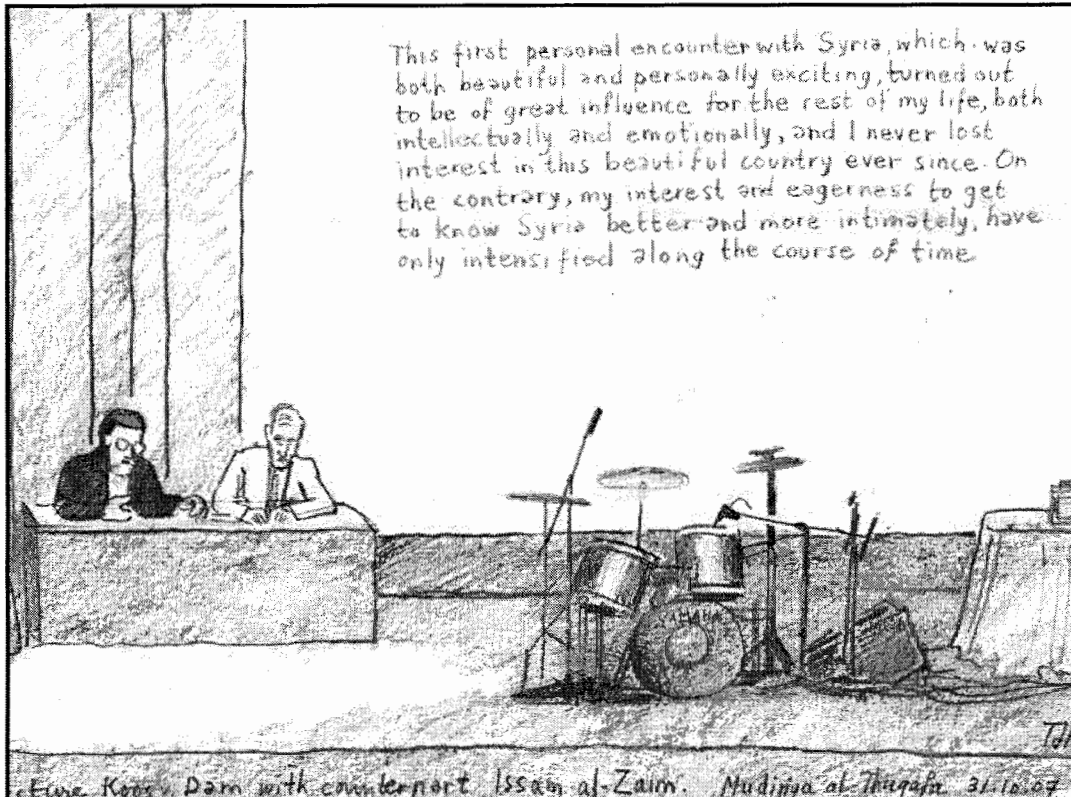
Turkish state loyalties have gradually replaced ethnic loyalties, and a Turk of Arab ethnic origin may today be just as proud of his being a "Turk" (which means his orientation towards the Turkish state), as Turks without any identifiable ethnic origin. Much of all this is the result of Turkish national education. The links between Arabs from Syria and Turkey, where they still exist, are bound to become even weaker as a result of the present borders. In southern Turkey, the town of Harran with its typically Syrian traditional beehive mud-brick houses, inhabited by the same Arab farmer families as in Syria, has now become a Turkish tourist attraction. In Mardin the children generally no longer speak the Arab language of their parents but Turkish, the language of instruction.

The Syrian Arab Republic covers parts of Bilad al-Sham and Bilad al-Rafidayn

Having arrived in Iskenderun I had, at least according to the stamps in my passport, not yet left the Turkish Republic, but in some way I had already entered "Syria". That is to say not the Syrian Arab Republic, although I am fully aware that Syria in the past traditionally used to consider the territory of Iskenderun as "al-Liwa' al-Mughtasab" which was

taken away from it as a result of French colonial policies. But I had entered that bigger geographic entity which is often called Bilad al-Sham, or "Greater Syria", which encompasses a much greater area than today's Syrian Arab Republic.

But what exactly is the territory of Bilad al-Sham? It can be defined as *the territory of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine which were geographically, culturally and historically a*



Dr. van Dam seated to the left of Dr. Issam al-Zaim during Dr. van Dam's lecture in Aleppo last October as depicted in a drawing. Dr. al-Zaim passed away in December. See page four for an obituary.

united entity that was separated by the colonial powers. This is the way in which it was described in an introduction to the Conference of Bilad al-Sham in the Ottoman Era, which was held in Damascus in 2005. But is this correct? I think that Bilad al-Sham is a clearly identifiable Arab region with certain geographic, social and linguistic specifics. In cities of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine certain types of "Syrian Arabic" are spoken with common characteristics

that cannot be found outside Bilad al-Sham. But certain areas of north eastern Syria, are not, in my opinion, really part of Bilad al-Sham because they constitute a natural part of Mesopotamia, or Bilad al-Rafidayn, the land between Euphrates and Tigris, which is just as identifiable as an Arab region with its own specific characteristics.

The dividing line between Bilad al-Sham and Bilad al-Rafidayn, both part of the Fertile Crescent region or "al-Hilal al-Khasib", could be located at the eastern end of Badiyat al-Sham near the Euphrates River. This means that today's Syrian Arab Republic covers an area which is, on the one hand, smaller than Bilad al-Sham because it does not include Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and parts which

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now fall within the Republic of Turkey. On the other hand, it also covers areas which fall outside Bilad al-Sham, notably some north-eastern parts of the Syrian Arab Republic. This line of reasoning is not another Western justification for the division of Bilad al-Sham into even more parts. It is merely a personal observation stemming from my travels in the early 1970s by car from Aleppo to Mosul. When descending into the Euphrates valley eastwards, after having passed al-Raqqah, I had the sudden impression of entering an area which reminded me very much of Iraq.

Present-day Syria is an artificial creation, a product of Western colonialism, just as its different shapes in the past were creations of other powers, whether these could be described as "colonial" or not. Some of these previous entities, containing Aleppo and Damascus, were also artificial creations, depending on their geographical composition and on which party or dynasty held power at the time and where.

Bilad al-Sham does constitute a *geographic and cultural entity*. It is also true that the Western colonial powers separated it on purpose into different pieces for various reasons. But, to argue that Bilad al-Sham was a *historically united entity* beforehand is unrealistic. It is as though one wants to say, "if the colonial powers had not split up the Arab Fertile Crescent as they did, this area would now be a united unit."

This does not in any way mean that the countries of Bilad al-Sham should not be a fully integrated entity. Just as the political and economic integration of the European Union countries has brought them economic prosperity and stability, a similar effort would be desirable for the Arab countries in the Middle East.

But, is it a prerequisite for Arab countries or regions to have been united in earlier history in order to be able to unite or integrate in the future? I do not think so.

Stability and prosperity in the Arab region would be advantageous to the rest of the world. But, taking the European Union as a point of departure, it also presupposes that the Arab states, who would like to join, would be required to have political systems similar enough to one another to be able to intensively cooperate, and that people would decide upon it out of their own free will. Kingdoms and republics can go very well together, as the European case shows.

Just imagine that Bilad al-Sham had a system similar to that of the European Union. It would mean that its citizens would all be able to travel freely within this greater area, using the same currency, having free access to its whole internal market, and without having to show one's passport at its internal borders.

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 terri-

tory, irrespective of whether this would be based on the facts of history or not. After such a long existence, the Syrian Arab Republic, seems to have lost most, if not all, of the artificiality which may have been perceived at an earlier stage.

"Unifying colonialism" and "divisive colonialism": a choice between "divide and rule" or "unite and rule"?

My frequent journeys through Bilad al-Sham 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 being 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 up 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 that 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 that Indonesia is a huge archipelago composed of thousands of islands, which are being inhabited by a highly diverse population, which speaks a multitude of languages, has a majority Muslim population, but also has many adherents of other religions. Once Indonesia got its independence, he concluded, it was not torn up into a large number of states, as happened in the Arab world, but was 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 experience? In fact, the Dutch did apply a type of colonialism which ultimately led to the unification of the 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. The irony of history is that, without this war, Aceh would now most likely not be 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 some control over 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. As a result, the former colonial boundaries became the official and final borders of the

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Republic of Indonesia. Not an inch more, as East Timor was not included because it had been colonized by the Portuguese and not an inch less as Papua was finally incorporated in the 1960s.

When dealing with international boundaries, every inch of territory acquires an almost holy importance, because national sovereignty is at stake. Loss of any inch of territory can lead to further claims, political instability, tensions in international relations and, sometimes, to war. Because of this, former colonial borders are generally respected, however much their coming into existence may have been disliked.

Is Arabism dying and being replaced by Islamic fundamentalism?

Thinking of Syria makes me think almost automatically of the issue of Arab nationalism. In my opinion, the strength of Arabism is underestimated these days. President 'Abd al-Nasir's statement that "Damascus is the throbbing heart of Arabism" (*qalb al-'urubah al-nabid*) was made so long ago that it may have lost its earlier value or meaning. Besides, today's political circumstances are completely different.

At present there seems to be a strong current of fundamentalism in various parts of the world, both Islamic, Christian and Jewish. But this does not mean that Arabism or Arab nationalism is dying or dead, as is the fashion among those who are fixated with Islamic fundamentalism. Certainly, several Arab forms of *wataniyah*-style state nationalism have become much more acceptable in the Arab world and are no longer pushed aside by *qawmiyah*-styles of pan-Arab nationalism. This does not mean that Arabism has disappeared as a political force. It depends on the political issues which are at stake and the context. Arabism has developed into new varieties, as a result of which inter-Arab cooperation has the potential to develop with even greater strength than in the past. Diversity is no longer a hindrance to Arab unity and cooperation. One can now be proud of being an Iraqi or Syrian without being accused of regionalism. The time of forced or artificial homogeneity is apparently over. □