

The (Ir)Relevance of Academic Research to Foreign Policymaking¹

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The Kingdom of the Netherlands with the Largest Number of Muslim Citizens in the World

Who can still remember today that the Kingdom of the Netherlands once upon a time had the largest number of Muslim citizens in the world, because of its colonies in what today is the Republic of Indonesia? And who remembers that the Consulate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Jeddah was one of the most important consulates in the world because of the fact that the largest annual contingent of *Hajj* pilgrims was that from the Dutch Indies, who had to pass through the Dutch Consulate on their way to Mecca? With this background it was only logical that Islam was seriously studied by Dutch scholars; and that many of their Islamic studies were related to the situation in the Dutch Indies. Some of the best libraries on the subject were established in the Netherlands and many of the studies that were carried out by Dutch scholars at the time are still valuable today. The libraries and materials are still there, but the number of scholars dealing with Indonesia has drastically declined. So has the interest among students. One would have expected that the Kingdom of the Netherlands of today, formerly being the state with the largest number of Muslim citizens in the world, would be populated by people with special awareness, experience and knowledge about Islam. But this is not the case, and probably never has been so. Two main reasons for this are that the people of Indonesian origin living in the Netherlands are almost exclusively Christians, and that the Dutch in the Indonesian Archipelago generally were not very close with the Muslim communities there, for fear of Islamic opposition and hostility towards Dutch colonialism. This attitude is reflected in the collections of today's Dutch museums. In the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam a lot is exhibited about Indonesian minorities like the Bataks, Dayaks, Papua's, and so on; but hardly anything can be found on the Muslim majority. And this is no coincidence; it was on

purpose, because in the past special public attention to the Muslim population was avoided in exhibitions.

The Dutch used to be the academic top elite where Indonesia studies were concerned, but not any longer; although there are still some highly qualified Dutch scholars in this field today.

■ A Babel-like Confusion of Tongues and the Fixation on Islam

Today's interest in Islam, and the discussions about it, have obtained completely different dimensions. It seems there is sometimes a Babel-like confusion of tongues. Many people talk about Islam these days as if it were a fixation. And when people discuss Islam, they sometimes have completely different things in mind. Some talk about various regions in the world, each having different cultures, from Morocco to Indonesia, and wrongly imagine that they are talking about the same subject; some talk about Muslim immigrants in Europe, but ignore the fact that these people are not always representative of the societies in their countries of origin; some talk about terrorism, and identify Islam with violence; some about sharia being applied in different forms, some about the Taliban in Afghanistan, some about the Ahmadiyah, and so on. Many of these discussions are often closely linked to our daily lives or to our foreign policies, instead of really having to do with Islam as a religion. As a result, there is a lot of room for confusion, particularly if people talk about completely different things without even being aware of it.

■ Serving in the Islamic World

Almost 35 years ago, I started working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. During this period I had the luck of always being posted in places that had my highest interest. Most of the time I lived in Arab or Islamic countries – mainly at my personal request. First in Lebanon and Libya; and later as ambassador to Iraq, Egypt and Turkey; and now in Indonesia. Only once did I serve as ambassador to a non-Islamic country, notably Germany, although I should add that in Ankara Berlin is labelled as being the largest Turkish city outside Turkey.

Before joining the Ministry I was active in the academic field. Having studied Arabic and Political & Social Sciences, I did field studies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, and obtained my PhD on modern Syrian political history. Originally, I had foreseen an academic career, but more or less by coincidence I joined the Foreign Ministry. Nevertheless, until the present day, I have always remained loyal to my academic interests, and combined them with my work, whenever this was possible. As a result, I have been in a position to closely observe the issue of 'the relevance (or perhaps irrelevance) of academic research to foreign policymaking'.

I can do so as an insider on both sides, and therefore feel sufficiently equipped to make some remarks based on practical experience.

■ Generalists and Specialists

When I started at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague the prevalent approach was that of *generalism*. Diplomats were supposed to be able to be posted anywhere in the world, and therefore should be generalists. Specialists, on the other hand, were supposed to be less suitable to carry out general tasks all over the world, and should for this simple reason be guided and directed by generalists. My first director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that I was a specialist who only knew something about the Middle East, and by implication was therefore less qualified to do any other tasks. Even when I told him that I had also graduated *cum laude* in Political & Social Sciences, which can be considered as one of the most generalist studies, he was not convinced. A specialist remains a specialist, and is therefore less capable of doing work which falls outside the scope of his specialism. In other words, by obtaining more specialist knowledge, one is supposed to be capable of doing less. Fortunately, such irrational ways of reasoning have become less common, be it that in practice the value of specialism is still strongly underrated.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is obliged to rotate its diplomats more or less every four years, and therefore does not always have the 'luxury' to keep rotating specialists only within their region of specialisation, apparently because there are not enough of them. That is one of the reasons why the Ministry keeps trying to recruit more Arabists, Sinologists and other linguists in an effort to help solve this problem. But it is apparently more difficult than it appears at first sight. When I started 35 years ago, a pilot project was started to attract more Arabists. But the results have been far from impressive, if not very disappointing. In the eighteen Dutch diplomatic representations which today cover the Arab world there is presently not one single Foreign Ministry diplomat who is an Arabist. A new pilot project has been started, and two Arabist trainees have been recruited, but the problem will remain as long as specialists are not kept for longer periods in their areas of specialisation.

■ The Practical Use of Specialist Knowledge

It is obvious that a specialist, who is posted in the country of his specialisation, can achieve much more than a non-specialist, at least if he can combine his expertise with other qualifications needed for his job, be it as an ambassador, as staff member of an embassy section in the field of economics, development cooperation, political affairs, press and cultural

affairs, and so on. But his personality and communicative capabilities also count strongly. If he does not possess the right skills in this respect, a capable non-specialist might achieve even more. Many non-specialist diplomats can obtain extensive knowledge within the period of their posting, but the possibilities are of course limited by the duration of their stay, which on average is only four years.

Just being a linguist is not enough, however. Excellent knowledge of, for instance, the Arabic language, does in no way guarantee that an Arabist is better qualified to be an expert on the Arab world or specific Arab countries than a non-Arabist. To achieve this, a lot of additional work and studies are required. On the other hand, it goes without saying that an Arabist has many more possibilities to go into depth when wanting to study the Arab world, or certain aspects of it. But he must also really do it, instead of just having the potential of doing so. As a specialist in the Islamic and Arab world I have always enjoyed an enormous advantage over non-specialist colleagues. Being fluent in the local language, both in its official form and in dialects, combined with being well versed in the local culture and history, is a decisive key to success. I am convinced that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies abroad could do their jobs very well if the necessary expertise would not only be available somewhere in the Ministry apparatus, but would be adequately used in the right place.

■ Is Outside Academic Expertise Really Needed?

Does this mean that in case there is no specialist knowledge available on a specific topic that we have to get our expertise from elsewhere? From outside the Ministry in the academic world? From academic specialists, including linguists? Or can the Ministry manage to solve such a problem by itself? The answer very much depends on what type of problems or questions are to be solved, and how operational or crucial the role of the Netherlands really is. Quite another aspect is that the presence of expertise in itself is not enough. There should also be a willingness on the side of the government to seriously listen to expert views. It sounds obvious, but in practice such willingness is not always there.

■ Snouck Hurgronje's Advice (*ambtelijke adviezen*) on Aceh

Just take the role of Islamic society in certain countries: What do we need to know about it in order to cover our bilateral relations properly? The need for specialist knowledge is much more urgent when a country is a real key player than when it is just an observer. When the Netherlands was still a colonial power in the Indonesian Archipelago, it was highly relevant to have such specialist knowledge. By way of an example, the

well-known Dutch Arabist and Islam expert Snouck Hurgronje, who was advisor to the Dutch colonial government, at the time played an essential role because of his detailed studies on the people of Aceh. By providing detailed studies about Acehnese society, he could make a crucial contribution by explaining which (Machiavellian) tactics and strategies could best be followed in order to defeat and subdue the Acehnese. The bloody war in Aceh therewith came to an end after more than 30 years.

■ Preventing Stoning (*rajam*) in Aceh

Today the situation for the Netherlands is completely different. We are fortunately not a colonial power anymore. Nevertheless we want to be informed well enough so as to be able to adequately carry out our operational policies. Take for instance the newly introduced draft bylaw in Aceh on stoning people to death (*rajam*). We are against such a development and want to counter it if possible. But what to do about it? Of course we need to be well informed first, but we do not need an academic study of several months or years about the state of affairs concerning sharia regulations in Indonesia in order to help prevent these regulations from being effectuated. Usually we do not have the luxury of being able to wait such a long time before taking practical action. For that aim we need good contacts and exchanges of views with the Indonesian parties directly concerned. And in order to achieve appropriate results, we need to have the right contacts and the right persons to carry out the task of directly convincing people. With some effort we can obtain enough essential expertise from within Indonesia.

■ Fitnah

Something similar was the case when in 2008 protests erupted in Indonesia because of the badly received film 'Fitnah' of Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders, who identifies Islam with violence and terrorism. The most important thing for me to counter the protests and demonstrations was by communicating face-to-face with a high diversity of Islamic groups, both moderate (such as the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdat al-Ulema) and more radical (such as Hizbut Tahrir), and by having an open dialogue with them in Indonesian (and occasionally also in Arabic), both behind closed doors, as well as in front of the media. Fortunately, I already had a wide network of contacts with various Islamic parties long before these problems started, as a result of which many difficulties could be overcome relatively easily. I could, however, never have delegated my task – which also had a strong public relations component – to an outside academic expert. I needed to have the knowledge and expertise myself.

Military Intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan or Lebanon

Let me give some other practical examples about the relevance (or irrelevance) of academic research to foreign policymakers. What to do if the Netherlands wants to cooperate in military operations in, for instance, Lebanon, Iraq or Afghanistan? Do our ministers consult academic experts from outside the government administration before coming to a decision? Most probably not. Generally, they will want to consult with experts from within their own ministries, including law experts. This is yet another reason why it is so important to have our own experts within the ministries. But in the end it remains a political choice and decision, to be made by the government and its ministers.

What did the United States do before attacking Iraq in 2003? Academic advice may have been sought in the US, and certainly also the advice of some intelligence services. But in the end primarily political motives prevailed. Academic advice which was not supportive of the chosen policy line generally would be ignored, if not criticised with insinuations of disloyalty and disturbing unity among allies. It was only after the US occupation of Iraq that some US academic experts were recruited to help find out how the US presence could best be brought to a satisfactory end. Also outside the United States, criticism of the foreign intervention in Iraq in 2003 (and afterwards) was generally not welcomed, at least by the governments of those countries which had supported the US intervention.

In many other countries all over the world, it would not be very different, when it really comes to highly political and controversial issues. The advice of experts would not really always be appreciated if it would be contrary to what the ministers or their governments had in mind. A ministry official might put forward a deviant or contrary advice once or perhaps twice, or even three times, but then it would be better for him/her to stop. After all, it is the government and its ministers who decide, and they have the prerogative to determine the political course to be taken. And ministers have to take the internal and external political factors into account. Their own governmental positions might even be at stake.

Israel and Palestine: Does Knowledge Change Political Positions?

To give yet another example: Take the policies of Western countries towards Israel. They have not changed very much over the years, even though much more is known and acknowledged now about the numerous Israeli violations of international law, of human rights or war crimes in the Palestinian occupied territories. More knowledge and

more academic research have, however, not led to important changes in the daily policies of European governments. The well-researched book recently published by former prime minister and prominent CDA party member Mr Dries Van Agt, titled *Een schreeuw om recht. De tragedie van het Palestijnse volk*, [A Cry for Justice. The Tragedy of the Palestinian People] has been taken note of by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but Van Agt's book will most probably not change anything, irrespective of his four years of painstaking work. I guess it will rather be considered as a nuisance and that it will further be ignored. Van Agt's work is a clear case of unsolicited academic advice which is not really welcomed.

Papua

Yet another example, but within a completely different context, is the academic study of Dr P.J. Drooglever, *Een daad van vrije keuze* [An Act of Free Choice] about the decolonisation of Indonesia and the right to self-determination of the Papua's. The research was commissioned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the explicit request of the Dutch Parliament. But by the time Drooglever's study was completed, the Dutch Government, in its contacts with both the Indonesian Government, as well as with the Dutch Parliament, had to stress time and again that this research was a purely academic affair, which in no way affected the policies of the Dutch Government, which stress the support for Indonesia's territorial integrity and unity. Drooglever's study had to be ignored because it would otherwise probably have been misused for political purposes.

Studies for the Embassy in Jakarta

At the request of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs a research project was carried out for the Embassy in Jakarta under supervision of Professor Martin van Bruinessen, involving four Indonesian scholars. The result was a 225-page long study titled: *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam. Explaining the 'Conservative Turn'*. One of the main questions is what the practical use of this study has been for the embassy. I conclude that, however interesting the report may be – and it is indeed interesting and instructive – its impact for practical use has been limited. We already have dozens of studies available on Islam in Indonesia (including some highly interesting studies by Van Bruinessen himself), and the subject is also being dealt with in the Indonesian media on a daily basis. Therefore, I do not really need to commission additional studies for my personal use, except of course if there would be a very specific need, for which we cannot find any alternative material. But let us first read the most important works that

already exist; preferably with the advice of some scholars about which works we should give priority to. As for the embassy staff, I think it is much more rewarding for them to explore Islamic issues themselves in direct encounters with Indonesians in several Indonesian provinces, so as to get their first-hand impressions themselves and to build up their own network of contacts and obtain personal expertise, which then later can be used for practical embassy purposes.

If future studies were to be carried out, its practical purposes should be taken into account to the maximum; and a higher frequency of contacts between the embassy – both the ambassador and his staff – and the researchers should be encouraged, to be able to get the necessary feedback which might provide chances to adapt our course, whenever needed. And to learn something in the meantime by discussing the issues at hand. But also without such specific studies being carried out, regular contacts between diplomats and scholars should be encouraged, to create a better symbiosis between policymakers and scholars.

■ Expertise Should Be Highly Valued and Cherished

This being said, I nevertheless strongly support academic studies such as those carried out under the supervision of Professor van Bruinessen. After all, the development of Dutch academic expertise in this field should be encouraged. Expertise on Indonesia has already dramatically declined over the last decades, irrespective of the fact that the Republic of Indonesia remains one of our most important partners in Asia, as is also reflected by the fact that our embassy in Jakarta is the largest Dutch embassy in the world. But whether such studies are really relevant to foreign policymaking is a different matter. Bilateral relations are, however, more than foreign policy alone. They also include scientific cooperation and many other fields.

I would like to stress that I think it is also essential for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries, to further build up and develop the necessary expertise amongst their own staff, *and* to make the maximum use of it. Expertise should be highly valued and cherished.

■ Making Academic Research and Expertise More Relevant

Let me conclude by saying that it is no secret that in the past, some political decision makers of various countries have made historical mistakes with disastrous consequences, partially as a result of the fact that they ignored the good advice of their specialist staff or of academic experts; or by not having sufficient internal expertise and knowledge within their own administrations. When evaluating the course of events in the past, I do not have the illusion that something similar will not

happen again in the future. Let me nevertheless end by expressing the optimistic wish that experts and scholars will persevere in their efforts to put their academic research and experience at the disposal of foreign policymakers in such a way that it will make their work really relevant.

Note

- I These personal remarks were given on the occasion of the conference 'Studying Islam in the Public Sphere: A Critical Reflection on Knowledge Production' (Leiden, 3 November 2009).