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***Syrian Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol 18, No 1 (May 2013)**

<https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/ssa/article/viewFile/2845/843>

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By the end of 2012 the Netherlands Institute in Damascus, together with its sister institutes in Beirut and Amman, stopped operating in Bilad al-Sham, because the Dutch Government decided to stop funding them.

The Dutch State Secretary for Education based his decision to close the Damascus Institute on several arguments, the first of which was the precarious situation in Syria, which had already prevented the Institute from being fully operational since June 2011. He claimed that the institutes in Beirut and Amman could not function properly without making use of the knowledge and expertise of the Damascus Institute, although these two other institutes were already officially independent from Damascus and could always use the expertise of the former Director of the Damascus Institute, who at the time was the Regional Coordinator of all three institutes. A third argument was that the cumulative value of the three institutes had been too small, contributing insufficiently towards the exchange and recruitment of students from Syria, Jordan and Lebanon to Dutch higher educational institutions. According to the State Secretary, this should have been their "core business". This, however, had never been identified as such beforehand. Even if such a "business" had been clearly identified, not much could have been expected from the relatively poor countries concerned in the first place.

Parallel to the closure of the Dutch Levant institutes, a Netherlands Centre for Higher Education and Research is due to be opened in 2013 in Oman, covering the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council countries. This center is to have quite a different character, as it is to be much more commercially oriented towards the "educational market" than were the institutes in the Levant. In the case of the Arab Gulf states the flow of students and academics will be going much more in the direction of the Netherlands (although the official intention is to have a more balanced student exchange in both directions), whereas the institutes in Bilad al-Sham promoted a stronger flow of Dutch students and academics in the direction of the Arab Levant, to the advantage of their knowledge of and experience in the region. At the time, due to the economic crisis in Europe and the Netherlands, Dutch governmental economic motives were given the highest priority, and these clearly prevailed over academic, cultural and other aspects. Contacts with Syrian, Lebanese, and Jordanian society were given lesser priority. A Dutch academic presence there was apparently no longer considered relevant enough to justify support, just as many other activities which had been coordinated and supported by the institutes in Damascus, Beirut and Amman to the benefit of so many, were suddenly removed from the list of worthy or "profitable" pursuits.

To some it might appear as if the Dutch academic community had turned its back on Syria and wanted to leave what some imagined to be a sinking ship, but the contrary was true. It was, in particular, the Dutch academic community which expressed its deep concern and regret over the closure of the institutes, and strongly pleaded with the Dutch Government to undo its decision, but to no avail.

A variety of objections were put forward. Recurrent arguments were that these Dutch institutes had, during the past 12 years, developed into excellent contact centers for Syrians, Dutch academics and students. Scientific and cultural exchange had been successfully promoted. Useful networks had been created and expanded. Many academics and students had profited extensively from the services and support which the institutes had provided them with. The institutes created a valuable bridge between Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Western world and its values. They were somewhat like oxygen to the region, and were of substantial value in adding to our possibilities of gaining further knowledge of, and experience in the Levant region. The Arab revolutions painfully uncovered a lack of knowledge of the

region which should urgently be replaced by deeper insights, experience and, hopefully, some erudition. It is much easier to close institutes than to reopen them. Precious infrastructure would be lost and immaterial damage would be caused. The image of the Netherlands as a reliable partner, further, could be undermined.

All these arguments, and many more, however, did not manage to convince the Dutch Government to change its course of action, supposedly because the decision had already irreversibly been taken, and because the establishment of the new institute in Oman was considered a new priority. The Arab Gulf region is undeniably very important, especially economically speaking, but it cannot be compared with Bilad al-Sham, which, although relatively poor, has a completely different order of dimensions, which is much too relevant to be neglected, certainly when viewed from political and strategic, as well as cultural angles.

Instead of turning away from Syria during a period of severe crisis, it would have been, and is, of the greatest importance to keep our channels open, perhaps even more so than in the past, particularly under circumstances of bloody civil war, which is exposing the Syrian population to the severest kind of hardship and suffering. Keeping in contact with Syria via our institutes, would have been and could still be of utility, not only in contributing to the educational, academic and cultural spheres, but also by way of an indirect contribution - however modest - to the development of currents of freedom and democracy in these countries.

Among the countries of the European Union the Dutch Government has been the only one to close its institutes. Other European countries with institutes in the Levant region have only temporarily closed their Damascus representation, waiting for a better situation to emerge, whilst at the same time continuing their operations from Beirut and Amman.

A further important question that remains is why contact with Syria and other Levant countries was allowed to be brushed off the table so easily just because of economic interests elsewhere in the region. Was it just a lack of vision? It is obvious to anyone who has some knowledge of Syria and Bilad al-Sham, that it is a great omission not to have any representation there, especially when considering that the budget of the closed institutes constituted an almost negligible quantity in the large budget of the Dutch Ministry of Education.

Another reason for ignoring our stakes in Syria might be - and I am speculating here - a lack of empathy for the Syrian population in general, whether it concerns those suffering under the Ba`thist dictatorship, or, much less, those who are part of the ruling Ba`thist system itself. When looking at the half-hearted foreign support for the Syrian Revolution which started in 2011, one might even conclude that there is a lack of empathy for those Syrians who, after a bloody civil war, might one day, in the perhaps far away future, achieve a free and democratic society. Is it because of Syria's long standing principled and hostile stand against Israel, which in various ways is fully justified? Have the pro-Israeli policies of various Western countries generated a prevailing negative sentiment towards Syria and its population, almost by default? Or were the many decennia of dictatorship a reason, even though the majority of Syrians were first and foremost victims of that iron grip themselves? And was the Syrian Ba`th regime's poor performance in public relations an additional factor? Was it a combination of these factors, and others, like the Ba`th regime's interfering over the years in neighboring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey?

What I do know is that the wide spread lack of empathy towards and understanding of Syria and the Syrians is to a great extent due to a lack of knowledge. Ironically, that is exactly where our institutes could have continued to play an important role.

The Dutch government would do well to reconsider its position and reestablish a Dutch Institute presence in Amman and/or Beirut in the shorter term and to reopen the Dutch Institute in Damascus, once the security situation has sufficiently stabilized again. With a new Dutch Government in place new policy choices could be made, and the importance and subtle potency of these choices is not to be underestimated.

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