

Gazette Varieties

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'Assad's extreme cautious attitude proves correct'

Dr. Nicholas Van Dam, ambassador of the Netherlands in Cairo, is the author of an important book on Syria entitled "The Struggle over Political Power in Syria."

The book first appeared in English in 1979, and earlier this year the authorised Arabic translation of the book appeared in Cairo, following a number of unauthorised translations in previous years that were sold out in a few months.

The main thesis of the book is that President Assad's pragmatism helped him achieve Syrian and pan-Arabist ideals missed by his more idealistic Syrian pan-Arabist rivals and predecessors.

According to the author, Syria owes her domestic stability and regional status to Assad's pragmatism and extreme caution.

Here are excerpts from an interview with Dr Van Dam

By **Osama Basiouny**

Your book has been sold out, so fast. What does that mean? Does this fact have any political significance?

In the first place I should like to mention that I am very glad of the fact that the interest in the first Arabic edition of my book on Syria has been enormous. What else can an author wish for than his book being widely read and distributed? It is the most satisfactory award for all the efforts put into it. The book sold out within four months, irrespective of the fact that it had not yet been freely available in those Arab countries where one would expect most of the potential readership. A new, fully updated and expanded second edition is scheduled to be

published by Madbouli in Cairo at the end of this month.

As my book deals with a subject, which by some is considered as being of a delicate political nature, one might conclude that the great interest shown it can be considered a political fact in itself. On the other hand it is only natural that people are more eager to read about topical political issues. Another, not less important factor which has apparently contributed to the popularity of the book, I think, is the fact that there are hardly any publications in Arabic, if at all, which deal with the subject in an objective manner, as most of the publications which have appeared thus far are of a polemical nature. More scientific treatises therefore seem to be a most welcome alternative to many readers.

How did it sell in its (earlier) English version? Would you think of publishing a new edition in English now?

Dr. Nicholas Van Dam



The first two English editions published in 1979 and 1980-written like the Arabic edition on a strictly personal basis-have done extremely well. As the demand for my book has persisted for more

than 15 years since its first publication, I decided to produce a fully revised, enlarged and updated new English edition which covers developments until 1995. It is scheduled to be published simultaneously in Great

Britain and the United States by the end of this year.

The persisting demand was also the reason for my decision to publish an Arabic edition. For many years, various Arabic "pirate" translations have been circulating.

As I did not always agree with the translations concerned, I finally decided to publish my own.

The issues related to Israel's confiscation of Arab lands in East Jerusalem are seen by many Arabs as an evidence that Syria's attitudes towards peace with Israel are correct, what would you say about this?

The question of Jerusalem only underlines the importance and sensitivity of the issue of "land for peace". The expropriation of lands by Israel in East Jerusalem is contrary to the spirit of the Palestinian-Israeli Declaration of Principles and is of such a nature that it puts the whole

peace process into danger.

Taking into account that Israeli settlements have been established on the Syrian Golan Heights for many years, and that Israel has extended its legislation to cover the Syrian occupied territories, it seems only logical that the Syrian Government is extremely cautious in its approach towards the peace process, and takes as its position that it is only willing to support a comprehensive settlement that is based on full Israeli withdrawal and full respect for Syrian sovereignty.

How can we link Syria's approach to negotiations (with

Israel) to the internal political situation in Syria?

I have the impression that there is one issue on which the position of President Hafez al-Assad is most widely supported among the Syrian population, it is his line followed in the Syrian-Israeli peace process. Otherwise, I do not see any link between Syria's approach to the peace process and its internal political situation.

The ban clamped by President Clinton on Iran, how does it affect the peace process?

I do not see any clear relationship between the US embargo against Iran and the peace process. Sanctions against Iran should not be expected to result in a more lenient attitudes by Iran towards Israel.