

A personal journey to Aleppo, *Bilad al-Sham* and the Syrian Arab Republic

Keynote speech on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Dutch Consulate in Aleppo, 28 October 2007

by Dr. Nikolaos van Dam¹

Excellencies,

Mr 'Abd al-Qadir Jazmati, Deputy Governor of Aleppo,

Mrs. Désirée Bonis, Ambassador of the Netherlands in Damascus,

Barones van Lynden, Director for North Africa and the Middle East of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Mr. Ma'an al-Shibli, Mayor of Madinat al-Shahba',

Members of the Consular Corps,

Dear Syrian friends and friends of Syria,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Aleppo severed from its hinterland

Some 400 years ago, when the first Consul of the Netherlands was officially nominated in Aleppo, we started the long bilateral relationship that we are celebrating here today. But today I will not deal with the intricate history of this centuries old relationship as it has already been dealt with extensively in the interesting and beautifully produced book, published on this occasion by the present, 38th Consul of the Netherlands in Aleppo, Mr. Hussein El-Mudarris, in cooperation with Mr. Olivier Salmon².

Today my focus is on the modern times. During my lecture in Aleppo on next Wednesday, 31st October, I shall go more in depth.

The journey from Amsterdam to Aleppo cannot have been an easy one at the time, if only because of the more difficult means of transportation and the prevailing dangers and sometimes risky circumstances. But the more positive side was that within the Ottoman Empire fewer political and state boundaries had to be crossed, than the ones that obstruct our ways today.

The socio-economic location of the city of Aleppo, although geographically the same, was quite different then. Aleppo had not yet been cut off from its so-called natural hinterland as it is today, due to the boundaries resulting from the First World War and the subsequent French and British Mandates.

In Arab nationalist literature Syria has often been described as a country which has been severed from her hinterland, and thereby become a *limbless trunk*. Aleppo is a clear example of this phenomenon. Whoever looks at the political map of Syria of today considers it self evident 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, for instance, Aleppo and Mosul were even more intensive than those between Aleppo and Damascus. And towns like Mardin, 'Ayntab and Harran, let alone Iskenderun, all now within Turkey, were still part of the natural Aleppo-network.

Starting a "Syrian life"

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over 40 year ago I started a kind of second life which I would like to call “*my Syrian life*”. It all began with my first journey to the Syrian Arab Republic, to the city of Aleppo and its rural countryside. It was in the beautiful traditional suqs of Aleppo in 1964, that a Syrian student from a nearby rural village invited me to stay overnight to be his guest under the open summer sky, next to his traditional beehive mud-brick house. Inside the mud-brick cupola it was too hot to sleep comfortably, but it was a different kind of comfort that I grew accustomed to. In his tiny rural village I for the first time enjoyed the great Arab hospitality of a Syrian family. It was almost like being born for a second time, but now in a new country, in another culture and in a new family.

This first personal encounter with Syria, which was both beautiful and personally exciting, turned out to be of great influence for the rest of my life, both intellectually and emotionally, and I never lost interest in this beautiful country ever since. On the contrary, my interest and eagerness to get to know Syria better and more intimately, have only intensified along the course of time.

I should not omit mentioning that the opposite may also happen. Just imagine being bullied by the immigration authorities when entering a certain country for the first time. This can leave a negative mark, which is difficult to eradicate later on. I do not recall the Syrian border police to have been excessively friendly to me at the time, (most of them were already in pyjamas or had gone to bed when I arrived late at night), but what happened to me at the Syrian Bab al-Hawa crossing was – and I shall never forget it – that, early next morning, a friendly Syrian gave me back the wallet which I had apparently lost over night, it had fallen on the ground as I slept on a hard wooden bench, patiently waiting for the border to be opened. As the wallet contained all my important belongings, without which entering Syria would have been difficult anyway, this was a very pleasant and soft first landing in the Arab world indeed.

In the beginning of the 1970s, I for the first time got acquainted with the Honorary Consul of the Netherlands in Aleppo, who at the time was the sympathetic Mr. Jean Mégarbané. He cordially received me in his office in *Qastal Hajjarin*, and later on also invited me with generous hospitality both to his home and to the Aleppo Touring Club, together with his wife Mrs. Arda Mégarbané and their two sons Edouard (who now is Honorary Consul of Finland and Member of the Syrian Parliament) and his beloved late brother Karl, with whom I used to play chess.

Ever since, I have always had very intensive and friendly contacts with the subsequent Honorary Consuls Mr. Ismet El-Mudarris and his wife Mrs. Dalal El-Mudarris, and with their son Mr. Hussein El-Mudarris, who as a real expert and connoisseur of Aleppo led me around with great enthusiasm in this beautiful ancient city and its surroundings, and made me acquainted with its cultural heritage even more intensely.

I wish to thank them all, together with their families, for the most cordial and everlasting friendship and their unforgettable and generous hospitality. And of course I should also like to include here the Honorary Consuls of the Netherlands in Lattakia, Mr. Riyad Azhari, and his daughter Mrs. Yasmina Azhari and their families.

Within this context I appreciate the more that I am given the opportunity of addressing you here today in Aleppo.

Although I spent most of my academic life dealing with Syria, and visited Syria on many occasions, also with several Dutch official ministerial delegations, I never have had the pleasure of serving as a diplomat in the Syrian Arab Republic, this in spite of the fact that I had clearly made this strong personal wish known to our personnel

department from the very beginning when starting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague.

But I have nothing to complain about, because I *did* serve in all of Syria's neighbouring countries, including *all* of the relevant Arab Fertile Crescent lands, which means that I served in a substantial part of what is usually called *Bilad al-Sham*, covering Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and even *al-Liwa' al-Iskandarun* when being posted to Turkey.

And after all, perhaps it is good that some wishes remain unfulfilled, so they can be longed for even stronger.

Dutch Arabists can be categorized into Shami and Masri

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is only normal that Dutch Arabists, as well as Arabists of other nationalities are categorized according to their personal academic interests, and regional preferences or tastes. Those who have studied in respectively Cairo or Damascus, sometimes categorize one another as "*Masri*" or "*Shami*". The explanation of this categorization is self-explanatory. The so-called "*Shami*" Arabists usually take a strong interest in anything related to Syria or Bilad al-Sham, whereas the others tend to concentrate more on themes dealing directly or indirectly with Egypt or the Nile Valley. But, it should be stressed that there are also various Dutch Arabists whose multi-faceted interests do not allow them to be fitted into any of these two categories.

Much of this phenomenon is simply a result of possibilities for students to study in the Arab world, or the lack of such possibilities. It is obvious that the first contacts which students have with an Arab country usually play an important role in their further academic development or their primary interests. That is one of the reasons why it is of essential importance to have Dutch academic institutes in the region. The Netherlands Institute for Archeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo, founded in 1971, (now called the Netherlands Flemish Institute) is the oldest Dutch academic institute in the region, and has inspired many Dutch students of Arabic and the Middle East to start their studies in Egypt. As an indirect result of this, many of these students have focused their attention somewhat less on other countries such as Syria, for instance. I know a professor of Arabic at a Dutch university who had been studying Egypt for more than 20 years before making his first ever visit to Syria. For me this appeared to be quite unusual, but for him there had not been any compelling reason to visit Syria at an earlier stage.

So it is very important that in 2001 The Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies (NIASD) has been established in Damascus, providing an excellent opportunity for students and academics to get much better acquainted with Bilad al-Sham, with all the implications this has for a better understanding in the Netherlands of Syria and its surrounding countries. It can also indirectly contribute to a strengthening of the bilateral contacts in many fields between the peoples of Syria and the Netherlands. After all, it is personal contacts which can play a pivotal role in helping achieve a better mutual understanding. Also from that perspective Syrian-Dutch cooperation is highly deserving of further promotion.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The road that has joined the Syrians and the Dutch stretches back more than 400 years. Ahead, the road is rich in its possibilities; the Syrians and the Dutch can learn from each other's experiences, and can enrich one another through more intensive contacts and relations in various fields.

I am convinced that this week of intensive Syrian-Dutch encounters can be a serious contribution to the progression of this relationship. Let us work together towards a common future that is to the benefit of both our countries and regions.

Thank you.

¹ Dr. Nikolaos van Dam (www.mfa.nl/jak), currently Ambassador of the Netherlands in Indonesia, and former Ambassador to Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and Germany, has a special academic interest in Syria. He served most of his academic and diplomatic career in the Arab world, also covering Libya, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestinian occupied territories. The views expressed here are his own.

² Hussein El-Mudarris and Olivier Salmon, *Les relations entre les Pays-Bas et la Syrie ottomane au XVII^e siècle. Les 400 ans du Consulat des Pays-Bas à Alep (1607-2007)*, Aleppo, 2007.