

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

**Lecture on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Dutch Consulate in Aleppo, 31 October 2007**

**by Dr. Nikolaos van Dam<sup>1</sup>**

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, 38<sup>th</sup> Consul of the Netherlands in Aleppo, Mr. Hussein El-Mudarris, in cooperation with Mr. Olivier Salmon<sup>2</sup>.

Today my focus is on the modern times.

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"***

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.

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.

### ***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 clearly 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 already 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's 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 it has officially 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 mainly “Turks”, be it of Arab ethnic origin, who feel much more attracted to Turkey and Europe than to Syria or the Arab world.

Turkish state loyalties have apparently 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 inter-state boundaries.

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; and in Mardin the children at the school place no longer speak the Arab language of their parents, but the educational language of their school, being Turkish, which is just a natural modern development.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

When 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 is rather convenient to define it as “*the territory of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine which could be viewed as geographically, culturally and historically having been a 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 really correct? I personally 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 so-called “Syrian Arabic” with common characteristics are being spoken, which can generally not be found outside Bilad al-Sham. But certain areas of north-eastern Syria, in my opinion, are not really part of Bilad al-Sham, because they constitute a natural part of Mesopotamia, or *Bilad al-Rafidayn*, or the land between Euphrates and Tigris, which is equally a clearly identifiable Arab region with its own specifics.

Seen from the Syrian side, the dividing line between Bilad al-Sham and Bilad al-Rafidayn, both part of the so-called Fertile Crescent region or *al-Hilal al-Khasib*, could be located at the eastern end of *Badiyah al-Sham* and somewhere at 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 now fall within the Republic of Turkey - but it on the other hand also covers areas which fall outside Bilad al-Sham, notably

some north-eastern parts of the Syrian Arab Republic which start somewhere at the Euphrates river, which is the al-Jazirah area in the wider sense.

Please do not mistake this way of reasoning for yet another Western effort or plot to divide Bilad al-Sham into even more parts than is already the case. 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 impression, all of a sudden, of entering an area which reminded me very much of Iraq. And just as, when arriving in Iskenderun, I had already entered Bilad al-Sham from the west whilst I was within the Republic of Turkey, I had already entered Mesopotamia when descending into the Euphrates valley to the east, before officially entering the Republic of Iraq.

I do not know whether the British and French colonial powers drew the borderlines between Iraq and Syria on purpose in such a way that not only Bilad al-Sham was cut into various so-called artificial parts, but also divided parts of Mesopotamia between Syria and Iraq on purpose; or whether other practical factors played a role.

The thought of wanting to divide Bilad al-Sham and Bilad al-Rafidayn in such a way seems rather far fetched at first sight, but I prefer to leave the answer to that question to other historians.

And, I should admit that, before preparing my speech for today, it had never even occurred to me that al-Jazirah might not be part of Bilad al-Sham. I think that is probably because we are all brought up with the political maps of our own times. As a result of that, one would almost automatically consider the whole area of the Syrian Arab Republic as part of Bilad al-Sham, although it is, in fact, not logical on basis of the arguments I just provided.

But does it really matter? I do not think so. Moreover, it makes no difference with respect to the legitimacy of the states as they exist today.

It should be concluded that present day Syria is, historically seen, indeed an artificial creation, one of Western colonialism, just as its different shapes in the past were creations of other power constellations, whether these could be described as “colonial” or not. And some of these previous entities, containing Aleppo and Damascus, could similarly be considered artificial creations, simply depending on their geographical composition and on which party or dynasty held power at the time and where.

I fully agree with the description of Bilad al-Sham as constituting a “*geographic and cultural entity*”. And I also agree with the concept of the Western colonial powers having separated it on purpose into different pieces for various reasons. But whether Bilad al-Sham was “*historically a united entity*” beforehand, seems to me a rather idealistic way of looking at things that does not conform to historic reality. It appears to be a way of saying that “*if the colonial powers would not have split up the Arab Fertile Crescent area as they did, then this area would now have been a united unit as far as Bilad al-Sham is concerned.*”

I should stress that making this personal observation does not in any way mean that I would not wish the countries of Bilad al-Sham to be united or to be a fully integrated entity, as Western colonial powers apparently wanted in the past. On the contrary, just as the political and economic integration of the European Union countries has brought them economic prosperity and stability, it would be a much to be desired ideal if something similar could be achieved 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.

Besides, it would also impose unnecessary restrictions on modalities and possibilities of cooperation.

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 could imagine other Arab regions in such a way as well.

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 territory, irrespective of whether this would be based on facts of history or not, if there is such a thing as "historic logic".

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”?***

Ladies and gentlemen,

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 more than a thousand islands, which are being inhabited by a highly diverse population, which speaks a multitude of languages, is Muslim by large majority, 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 it 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 get acquainted with? Because, he concluded, each of the colonial powers dominating the Arab world might after all also have left behind its respective colonial share as a unified entity, instead of transforming it into separate states.<sup>3</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Dutch did, indeed, apply a type of colonialism which ultimately led to the unification of that 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. Irony of history has it that, without this war, Aceh would now most probably not have been 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 shreds of control in 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 all over the country. As a result, the former colonial boundaries became the official and final borders of the Republic of Indonesia. Not an inch more (as a result of which East Timor was not included, because it had not been colonized by the Dutch but by the Portuguese) and not an inch less (as a result of which Papua was incorporated after all in the 1960s).

When dealing with international boundaries, every inch of territory acquires an almost holy importance, because national sovereignty is at stake. And loss of any inch of territory can lead to further claims, political instability, tensions in international relations, and sometimes to further wars. 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?***

Ladies and gentlemen,

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 it is *en vogue* to say in some circles, particularly by those who strive to explain almost everything in terms of Islamic fundamentalism, as if they have a sort of "fixation" on this theme. Certainly, several Arab forms of *Wataniyah* type state nationalism have now become much more acceptable in the Arab world, and are no longer pushed aside by *Qawmiyah* types of Arab nationalism, as appeared to be the case in some periods of the past in various Arab regions. But again, this does not mean that Arabism has disappeared as a political force or has become so weak as to justify saying that Arab nationalism is dying or dead. It depends to a great extent on the political issues which are at stake and in which context. Arabism, in my view, just has merely developed into new varieties, as a result of which inter-Arab cooperation has a potential to develop with even greater strength than in the past. Diversity is not any longer seen as something that hinders Arab unity and cooperation. One can now be proud of being an Iraqi or Syrian, without being accused of a kind of regionalism. The time of forced or artificial homogenism, which in bigger societies is an anomaly anyway, is apparently over.

### ***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.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Nikolaos van Dam ([www.mfa.nl/jak](http://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.

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

<sup>3</sup> ‘Abd Allah al-Ahmad, ‘Ila al-Safir Nikolaos van Dam’, *al-Safir*, 8 June 1995.

<sup>4</sup> In 2006 another Dutch academic institute was established: The Netherlands Institute in Morocco (NIMAR) in Rabat.