Syria Studies in Scotland and Scandinavia

The Finnish Institute In Damascus

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The Finnish Institute in Damascus has been present in Damascus since 2002, but only rather lately it has had proper premises for its activities. In December 2008, the institute celebrated the inauguration of its new premises close to the Eastern Gate (Bab Sharqi) in the historic old city of Damascus. The house is built in a traditional Damascene style with an iwan-recess, a beautiful qa’a or reception room, and a courtyard with a fountain and citrus trees. The restoration was done in cooperation with the institute and Syrian craftsmen and an architect specialized in the restoration of traditional houses.

The institute is the only Finnish research institute in the Arab world and it is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, private foundations, and individual contributors. At the moment, the personnel of the institute includes the director, the administrative assistant, and a trainee. The institute also has a part-time representative in Cairo and two part-time employees in Helsinki at the Foundation for the Institute (The Foundation of the Finnish Institute in the Middle East) that governs the institute. The institute works closely with the Finnish embassies in Damascus and Cairo. Consequently, the director of the institute is listed as a Cultural Counselor at the Finnish Embassy in Damascus.

The institute carries out research in the Middle Eastern languages, cultures, history, and politics from Turkey and Iran to Morocco. In practice, the main areas of operation are Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey. The research profile of the institute is defined by the director of the institute. During the current director’s period, the focus lies on modern Middle Eastern societies and politics. In addition to the research, institute’s main task is to organize courses, seminars, and workshops (often) in cooperation with Finnish and/or local universities and research institutes. Many of the courses are designated for Finnish university students, who come to Syria or other Middle Eastern countries for a given period of time in order to learn more about the Middle East. The themes of the courses range from ancient Egyptian art to the Middle East in international relations. This May we organized in cooperation with the Foreign Policy Institute...
(Helsinki) and local actors a course entitled “Climate Change and Water Security in the Middle East.” The course was held in Syria and in Lebanon and was aimed at Finnish specialists in water questions (engineers, political scientists, NGO activists, and civil servants). In addition to learning and fact-finding, the aim is also to create contacts between Finnish and Syrian/Lebanese specialists. In general, enhancement of scientific and cultural cooperation between Finland and Middle Eastern countries, particularly Syria, is our third main task alongside research activities and scientific courses.

Further, the institute building has five guestrooms with eight beds for scholars, students and others interested in experiencing Damascus. Scholars from such countries as the USA, England, Nordic countries and Greece have already come to stay at the institute. Most of the Finnish guests come here to study Arabic. Even though the institute is basically a scientific institute, we also have cultural events such as art exhibitions, concerts and public lectures.

There is a long-established tradition of studying the Middle East in Finland. Yet, this research has mainly focused on the ancient and classical periods of the Middle East. It is evident that the presence of the institute in Damascus also enhances interest in the modern Middle East among Finnish scholars and students. It is also clear that such an institute brings Finland, a small Nordic country, closer to Syrians and others in this interesting area. As a director of this institute, I strongly feel that the institute provides an excellent opportunity to closely follow and understand developments in Syria.

*Dr. Hannu Juusola is the director of the Finnish Institute in Damascus.*