The National Security Education Program in Syria

By Graham Auman Pitts

In the early 1990s, US Senator David Boren (Democrat of Oklahoma) proposed a huge funding bill that would support the study of ‘critical languages’ and be administered by the Department of Defense. In 2003, the US Congress renovated the program and infused it with millions more dollars. Since then, many of the American students in Syria have lived and studied on the tab of the US Department of Defense. Removing study abroad funding from the control of the US Department of Education was controversial and, in protest, groups such as the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) boycotted the program.

Under the auspices of this bill, the National Security Education Program (NSEP) was created. It came to administer two different grants that send American students to Syria (among other locations): David E. Boren undergraduate scholars and graduate fellows study and research on their own while the NSEP also provides funding to the students of the ‘Flagship’ program. Flagship scholars spend one year in College Park, Maryland studying Arabic in preparation for a year in Damascus. Once in Syria, Flagship students take classes administered by the University of Damascus.

The most cursory of glances at the NSEP website for either program reveals that both Boren recipients and Flagship graduates owe time to the security apparatus of the American state. Both must make a “good faith” effort to gain employment in one of five agencies directly involved in issues of national security. In the recent past, Fulbright scholars, who make no such commitment, have been discouraged from entering Syria, closely monitored when there, and even expelled altogether. Meanwhile, students taking NSEP funds benefit directly from the resources of the University of Damascus. Boren students in Syria are listed on the program’s website. There is no indication that the security services pay any special attention to either Flagship or Boren students. Thus, the welcoming of NSEP students must represent a conscious policy on the part of the Syrian government. Their logic might be something close to the following: if the future shapers of American Near East policy have eaten, lived and studied in Syria, they will be sympathetic to the country, its inhabitants, and the Arab cause generally. The policy demonstrates deserved confidence in Syria’s ability to win over American students with its hospitable people, safe streets and reasonable cost of living.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am a 2008-09 Boren Fellow researching agriculture in Syria and Lebanon. Also, I must confess that over my time in Syria, I did indeed become sympathetic to the country, many of its regime’s policies, and its people. My hope is that the exchange will continue. I am deeply indebted to NSEP for funding my research and to Syria for hosting me. It is exactly by sending future policy makers abroad that the United States can pursue its interests by cultivating public servants who speak Arabic and understand the Middle East. In the end, all sides benefit, as Syria is pursuing a sensible policy of hosting American students to infuse them with a nuanced understanding of its culture, history and politics.

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