Chapter V

Experiences of the Middle East in pre-revolutionary Egypt and Syria

The Middle East has its fascinations for everyone: there is our indebtedness to the Fertile Crescent where civilisation was borne, to the history and civilisation of Egypt or the Holy Land which has bequeathed to us the sometimes mixed blessings of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. To the Westerner the Middle East is often seen to be in turmoil and as a place to be avoided. It can be all of that but the chief reasons are generally not of the local peoples’ making but originate either from one or all three of the impositions imposed on them by the curse of oil which brings the outsiders to intervene and meddle, mis-governance and the contrast between the rich and poor of the region or the historic imposition of the State of Israel on the unfortunate Palestinians by the Western powers.

Already in earlier chapters I’ve covered missions and impressions of Iran, Jordan and the West Bank. Below I cover the experiences I’ve had working in two heavyweight countries of the region: Egypt and Syria. In presenting these impressions as with those of Jordan and Yemen I would emphasise that my impressions are based upon missions well before the tumultuous events that have reshaped almost all of North Africa commencing with Tunis and then Egypt, Libya and Bahrain and most of the Middle East and which are ongoing. I have candidly been horrified by what has been taking place across Syria in late 2011 and early 2012. The situation in Egypt with a very unpopular president deposed by an army coup doesn’t bode well for the future and has yet to work itself through.

The creation of the State of Israel is a political fact which has been accepted in principle by the peoples of the World and inscribed in the United Nations’ charter. The comprehensive endorsement by the West of the actions of Israel does not however extend to their annexation of East Jerusalem nor does it cover Israel’s attaching to itself large tracts of the West Bank. This approach continues to sour relationships between the Muslim world and the West. It contributes to making the world a dangerous place. It may well in retrospect be seen as the single most intractable conflict which has wasted away much of the power, influence and treasure of the United States as the most powerful state in history.

But with those significant exceptions I think that anyone with a modicum of egalitarianism and feeling for democracy with all its many shortcomings has to celebrate the changes taking place across the remainder of the Arab world and which indicate degrees of emancipation for these most deserving populations. While it may well be prudent to factor in reverses and some deviations on the road to a more egalitarian future I wish these nations well in their new situations.
Egypt has played a crucial part in the making of my international consulting career. I’ve noted earlier that in 1973 the Irish Export Board approached my then senior partner, Desmond MacGreevy, and suggested he propose someone to make a presentation to the First Symposium on Housing and Reconstruction to be held in Cairo following the Israeli/Egyptian War. On that first occasion I flew from Dublin to Rome and on to Cairo. It was all very new and I was a little anxious when I arrived in Cairo.

I distinctly recall the smell of the desert and the heat when the plane doors were opened. In the years that followed the airport which was then in and surrounded by the desert has been integrated into the suburbs of Cairo and its sixteen or is it seventeen satellite cities. At that time the airport was much smaller. I waited at the ramp for my suitcase to emerge but all that came out were suitcases covered in white material. I learned these were the cases of the pilgrims returning from the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. Sure enough when I went to the Mecca ramp there I found my own travel effects! That has stuck in my mind and has helped me to understand and adjust to aspects of life in the developing world.

39 See Annex where I wrote up what to me was an amusing account of that occasion.
I was collected and installed in a hotel by one of the local Superintendents of Police. I wasn’t used to that kind of reception but for the Westerner working in development it does become commonplace. There were receptions and social occasions. There were numerous official invitations and always there were the exhibitions of Eastern Dancing - or belly-dancing to us. The Egyptians were very proud of their dancers.

Cairo is one of the great capitals of the world. I stayed at the Meridian Hotel directly overlooking the Nile and its several beautiful bridges. The world and his wife seemed to pass over them each morning either walking, driving with horns blaring or crammed onto the many buses. It was a wondrous sight. There was every physique to be seen Arabs and fellahin, wealthy types in straw hats, soldiers, Europeans and Americans, Saudis, Yemeni, Sudanese. There were Western clad ladies and ladies covered in black from head to toe in designer clothes. I thought that if I stood long enough on one of the bridges I’d see even familiar faces from Dublin. It was as if everybody passed this way.

At that time it was still reasonably safe to cross the streets of this great city. Later I was to visit Cairo on several missions for FÁS and even more recently for the ILO/IPEC reviewing the worst forms of child labour. In the first half of 2007 I spent five or six months based in Cairo preparing an EU support for Egyptian education. Each time the traffic has swollen with the expansion of the population to some sixteen or seventeen million. It takes a stout heart to attempt to cross the street at peak times. During my last stay it wasn’t unusual for me and my friends to go out to a restaurant behind the Egyptian Museum for a meal and to cross the street junction there. Afterwards and with a glass or two of wine aboard we never had the stomach to repeat it when homewards bound. Instead we always returned by taxi. Sadly, the traffic
densities and increased pollution have gone some considerable way to reduce the attractions of the city, especially during the hot summer period.

Shortly after our arrival for the Symposium as guests of the Egyptian nation we were invited to make a visit to the Pyramids which are located about five miles from the centre of Cairo. There was so much to see. I went inside the Pyramid of Cheops and then went to see the stepped pyramid at Sagarrah and the old capital of Memphis. I’ve made visits to these stupendous places a number of times on subsequent missions to Cairo but nothing prepares you for the first occasion. Another time we were invited to a sonne et lumiere exhibition at night under canvas beside the Great Pyramid.

Over the millennia the River Nile has rushed or meandered on its way past the great sites of antiquity. It no longer fills the Roman Port at the Old Quarter. Earthquakes and other natural and man-made phenomena have helped in this process. But one feature remains the same and captures the imagination. It is the slender green thread carved out by the Nile and its banks through the Egyptian Desert.

Before I left Dublin I had been inoculated against cholera a procedure which has long since been discontinued as a requirement. That first time in the heat and more than thirty years ago I dragged myself from historic site to historic site immensely excited although slightly drugged and mentally disordered from the cholera shot - but so anxious not to miss any of the great sights.

As the time for the presentations approached the tension amongst the presenters began to build. The time allocations for each of us moved up and down the scale starting from an hour then forty, then thirty and finally we were limited to about twenty minutes. The great event came and we found ourselves seated in sequence in a huge conference hall somewhere in Greater Cairo and clutching our papers. We sweated and we squirmed in our seats awaiting our individual calls. The man before me was from the ILO. Just as his time came he lost his self-control, collapsed and was helped away.

There were mad celebrations afterwards and a great weight was lifted from my shoulders personally. I bought the little camels and other toys for the boys – some of which we still have – as well as nectar of perfume for Daphne and departed Cairo for home with a strong sense of professional and personal satisfaction. I wrote a report of the people including Ministers I had been introduced to and gave a short summary of the events I had attended. This experience and this paper played a major role in changing my future career. As a result the Irish Export Board made a proposal to my senior partner that they would share the costs of installing me with my family for a two-year period in Dusseldorf in then West Germany to promote Irish construction services to the major European construction organisations working in third-world countries.40

I made a couple of later visits to Cairo in the early to mid-eighties when managers from the Egyptian construction training organisation Tomohar were trained in Ireland

---

40 I made a fairly light-hearted note of the events surrounding my first visit. It’s maybe somewhat naive. I’ve attached it as the second last Annex below.
by FÁS. These missions were all concentrated in the area of Greater Cairo and it was many years later before I had the opportunity to visit Alexandria and then Upper Egypt and the historical areas covering especially the Valley of the Kings and Luxor. I have a poignant memory of one of those earlier visits which nearly cost me my life.

I had carried out my business with the Tomohar officials and was riding back in a taxi to the airport to return home. I noticed the driver was travelling very fast in an old venerable Peugeot 505 estate. He was chewing the local Kat drug probably to keep awake. I watched absorbed as if in slow motion the vehicle mounted the kerb of the central island of the dual carriageway. Then slowly, as if I was in a sailing dinghy, the whole vehicle capsized. I was upside down and I could smell and feel petrol trickling over me. I tried to get out one side but the door pillar had crushed and I couldn’t manage. Suddenly I was aware I was being pulled out from the other side by several Egyptian fellahin who had been passing by.

I stood up, thanked them and quickly opened the car booth and extricated my luggage. I then photographed the scene and paid the driver. In a few minutes I flagged down another taxi and made it to the airport. There were glass splinters in my hair and in my clothes.

As I checked in at the airport about a half an hour later I was given a warm handclap by other passengers who had passed by and seen what had happened. I ordered a brandy when I was through and sat down. Then I began to shake and tremble as I switched out of auto pilot and reverted to a somewhat sane and a much shaken human being. I was amazed at the contrast between my active fast-thinking performance immediately after the crash and the trembling shaking person I was a half an hour later. I developed several copies of the photograph and I like to think that for FÁS people subsequently travelling overseas it helped to obtain adequate insurance cover.

My next visit to Cairo was in 2003 when I was carrying out a survey of child labour. I’ve returned to this topic in a later Chapter. I found the study of child labour very difficult; especially on the worst forms. The estimated population of working children in Egypt is of the order of three million. From a slow beginning there has been some shift towards support for reform and moves for its ultimate abolition. Of the three countries of Cambodia, Egypt and Sri Lanka I had surveyed I felt that in Egypt, the battle to combat child labour, which enjoyed a broad raft of support at the top political, institutional and trade union levels, had the best potential for the integration of child labour issues systematically into social, education and economic development policies, programmes and national budgets.

I arrived in Cairo from Cambodia via Kuala Lumpur early on a Friday morning when the city was asleep and I struggled around as I tried to find a reasonable hotel to stay in and which was open and where I could check in. On the Saturday morning I turned up at the appointed hour in the ILO Office in Garden City in Cairo. I found to my irritation that I was an hour ahead of everyone else. I hung around feeling less than well-disposed to whoever had drawn up my planned itinerary. But later I developed a very warm and close working relationship with my Egyptian colleague, a surgeon who had given up a prestigious career to look after the interests of the working children of Cairo.
The Nile taken from the hotel where I made a presentation to the ILO on my study findings relating to working children.

He was descended from a Saudi family which had led the invasion of Egypt somewhere in the sixth or seventh century. Memories are long in rural Egypt. His family owned vast tracts of land in Upper Egypt and he was destined to follow in the family tradition and to become a member of the Egyptian Parliament. He loved the convivial visits we made to his favourite pubs around Old Cairo after work and report writing.

So much a pair of night owls we had become that on my last evening in Cairo I almost missed my flight because he insisted on driving me to the airport but not before I attended a party of his friends which went on to all hours. I arrived at the party with my bags packed. He became a little incapacitated and I made it alone by taxi to the airport and on to the plane by the skin of my teeth. Sadly and although the party was a most interesting and cosmopolitan gathering - I was conscious of the departure time weighing on my mind. Four years later when I was again living in Cairo I found it hard to track him down. When we met he had changed from his late night habits and was by then a senior and deservedly a much respected figure in Cairo society.

My most recent mission to Cairo was from January to June 2007, when I worked in the EU Delegation in Cairo. The overall objective of the mission to quote from my Terms of Reference was to prepare a comprehensive assessment on how the EC could provide, in an effective and efficient way, support to the education system policy and reform through a substantial sector budget support approach.
A couple of calling cards from Upper Egypt.

My Egyptian counterpart and I got on extremely well and I think we both enjoyed a subtle clash of cultures. He was more than generous but on occasions when I ordered a beer it was understood I paid for the meal. There was no way he was going to risk eternal damnation by making this decadent Westerner Crusader turn into an alcoholic. We laughed over this on many occasions. As a Muslim he took no alcohol. Later he and I went together on a mission to Sanaa in Yemen and Mohammad was masterful in translating and compeering our presentations. He remains a good and close friend. I noticed Mohammed had a gleam in his eye sitting near the swimming pool when we holidayed for a couple of days at Crocodile Island on the Upper Nile at Luxor.

Professionally, he is highly respected by the Egyptian Education establishment which includes the World Bank. The most senior advisor to the education ministry was a personal friend of his. On occasion, he had a delicate balancing act to perform when the EC’s objectives did not fully coincide with those of the World Bank or even the Education Ministry. Together, either by his agreed absences or by preparation of a compromise paper we both managed to negotiate most of those occasions. Then there was, as there always will be, the tensions between Boutros Galli, the then Minister of Finance and his colleague the Minister of Education. Boutros Galli is a Copt (an Egyptian Christian) and was related to Boutros Boutros Galli a one-time Secretary General of the United Nations. He appeared at meetings to have all the instincts of a strong street fighter and in his position as number two in the political hierarchy to Egyptian President Mubarak was a formidable figure on the Egyptian scene. He sided with the EC’s aim for better quality education, improved access and efficiencies and was prepared to say so. Meetings took place on the seventeenth floor of the Ministry of Finance building near the City of the Dead in Cairo.

I was taken aback somewhat by his candid descriptions of the Minister of Education and his assurances that the EC could rely on him personally and on the Ministry of Finance, which he led to see the agreed education reforms through.
In addition to his home in Cairo my colleague has an apartment on the seafront in Alexandria. Again it’s up high on about the nineteenth floor. When we visited it and I saw the holes in the in-situ concrete framework and the exposed steel bars I was more than a little shocked. Candidly I was glad and much relieved when we descended to earth again.

He and his family also owns a small farm on the Sinai Peninsula which had been given to his wife’s father on his retirement from the army. He loved to spend long weekends there revelling in the rural bliss. Then he has another apartment on the Mediterranean coast near Al Alamein which we also visited. My impression was that he certainly lives his life to the full between visits to his various dachas. Although he may not earn as much as we Westerners do - in Egyptian terms - I found his standard of living to be somewhat superior to ours.

For the inhabitants of Cairo the Second World War period must have been an exciting time – given the heady theme of nationalism and independence from Britain in the air. The German army came so close under Rommel to blasting its way through the allied defences. He and I visited the battle site at Al Alamein. I admit to being shocked and saddened by the huge numbers of graves laid out in the respective military cemeteries. I noted the grave of a young British airman who met his death at the age of nineteen. Incidentally, from reading a few Egyptian biographies relating to the Desert War it was evident that most Egyptian radicals had had enough of imperial rule by that time and were happy to look forward supporting the Axis side during the desert campaigns. It must have been a close-run victory for the Allies.
A long-term Cairo resident

In Cairo I was a long-time resident at the Hilton Hotel. The long term rates I negotiated were good and I had guaranteed wireless access which is essential for consultants as all communications and reports are shared over the internet. The Hilton looked out over the Nile and is situated in a most attractive part of the city. It’s actually only a stone’s throw from the Egyptian Museum and Tahrir Square. At night after meetings and report writing I never felt alone as I had my meal outside in the courtyard and listened to the traditional Egyptian songs and tunes played by the hotel musicians. I became quite friendly with the staff and the musicians and they always knew my choice and a glass or two of wine and made it their business to see that I, an Irish, was comfortably looked after. There were other places to go and eat especially the large floating restaurants moored along the Nile but those were places one went in company. For a considerable amount of the time I was on my own and could adapt most but not always to my own company.

I had my rituals. I particularly enjoyed the wedding festivals in the hotel when the bride and groom were celebrated and danced to by dancing girls with lighted candles set in golden coronets on their heads. That was really spectacular and to me seemed to be a relic of ancient high Egyptian culture. I’ve never seen anything like it.

On weekends I’d stroll along the Nile Boulevard and stop off for lunch and a glass of wine and a read of the paper in one or other of the rose gardens of the Nile-side hotels. Otherwise, I’d often go out to the pyramids or to other historical sites up or downstream on the Nile. I had planned to take more boat trips but somehow never managed to get the time to do it. In Cairo there are many things to do but it’s always better when you can share it with family, friends or associates.
I remarked to see how close the desert comes to Cairo. A visit to the pyramids included a camel or horse ride through areas of desert where it is estimated there are thousands more tombs of the ancient Egyptian nobility of the Pharaohs’ times awaiting discovery.

Wedding festivals with great spontaneity and a huge din.

A visit to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is a must. Admittedly its design is somewhat dated. A new museum is nearing completion not far from the pyramids but the present museum houses the wonderful death masks of Tutankhamen and other pharaohs as well as immensely interesting artefacts and chariots preserved from that era. It’s humbling to think that when this ancient civilisation was thriving our forefathers in Ireland were somewhat behind and perhaps living as mere hunter gatherers. Another artefact of immense size is the rush boat designed to transfer the pharaoh’s sarcophagus across the Nile to its final resting place in the pyramid. There are no nails: the planking is held together with rope fasteners. The plan and the overall balance built into the vessel to allow for the huge weight of the sarcophagus are most impressive. It’s well worth a visit to the museum which houses it close to the Pyramids.

In Cairo I was also very impressed by my visits to the Citadel. It dominates the city and really it is an area which can’t be missed. Then I loved to visit the bazaars in the Khan Khallilli area.

When travelling outside the city it was so pleasant to stop and eat lunch at open restaurants along the canals and to eat traditional Egyptian food washed down with wine. In contrast Alexandria, apart from King Farouk’s former palace and the
beautiful fortress on the site of the Pharos doesn’t have anything that I saw to compare with Old Cairo and the towns and sites close to it.

Alexandria: The Citadel said to be on the site of the Pharos lighthouse and close to Mohammad’s Yacht Club

Sadly, the whole of the Mediterranean coastline from Alexandria westwards up unto the Libyan border is “developed and blighted” and covered with thousands of apartments.

With my colleague I went to meetings and discussion groups out beside the lake of Fayoum situated in the desert west of Cairo. It was a surprising spectacle to come upon the lake after a long journey through the seemingly endless desert. It is a very important location for the history of the Pharaohs and especially of the generations relating to Akhenaten and Nefertiti and their capital at Amarna. I found I was absorbed in Egyptian history but it takes a more experienced historian to retain that huge level of detail. Sadly again and following my departure from the country I seem to have mentally jettisoned much of the history I had learned.

The highlight of my stay was the visit Mohammad and I made to Luxor and Karnak in Upper Egypt in early April where we visited several schools and the governorate directorates.
We stayed on the Crocodile Island which was about half a mile long by a quarter of a mile wide. From there we travelled up river by ferry boat into Luxor. The Arab conquerors are said to have taken the word ‘luxurious’ from the city when they beheld its wonderful riches. I like to think so.

What can one say of the treasures of Luxor and the nearby Valley of the Kings and the Colossi? Where was it I read that Browning wrote of Oxymandias and “look on my works ye mighty and despair”? I hope some day that Daphne and I can return to Luxor. I will always remember with amusement the incredulity and horror on Egyptian colleague’s face when he learned that our Dara who went sightseeing earlier had successfully traversed the mountains shown here above Hatshepsut’s temple.

I found it very interesting to see the Greek inscriptions – I assume some of it was historic graffiti - on several of the pharaonic tombs and monuments. Clearly the Greeks came, saw and marvelled and brought much of the culture they witnessed back with them for a future flowering in Greece. We Europeans whether we are aware of it or not owe a huge debt to this fantastic old Egyptian culture.
Syria should be the Western World’s prime country for students of Byzantine and Middle-Eastern history. Simply, it has everything of interest from the Assyrians to the Greeks, Greco-Roman cities of the Silk Route, temples and amphitheatres, mosques and Byzantine basilicas, the tomb of Saladin and the Crusader Castles. To my mind I see Syria in many ways to be Western or closely linked to the West. I found it closer even than Egypt; perhaps it is because of its historical biblical connotations.

A recent World Bank profile cites Syria as a lower middle-income economy (per capita annual income of US$1,570) with a population of 19 million growing at about 2.3 percent per annum and a labour force growing at the rapid rate of about 5 percent per annum. The oil sector provides half of government revenues and about two thirds of export receipts; the agriculture sector contributes about 30 percent of GDP and employment. As I revise this piece in early 2012 the political future of Syria is most uncertain. The country has been affected by the examples of the Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. It appears to be drifting towards civil war.
There were times when I questioned myself as to why I was here in Syria acting for the European Union in the first place? Damascus is one of the cradles of Judaeo/Christian civilisation. In Lattakia, a town on the Mediterranean Coast as already noted the first alphabet was assembled or created. From the West Coast of Syria and adjoining Lebanon the Phoenicians had expanded westwards to found Carthage and cities and towns across the Western Mediterranean, which challenged Rome itself. A small island we passed off the coast, Tarthus, had been a major trading player during the Iron Age.

Of all the countries I’ve visited there there’s none like Syria where literally you are confronted by the earliest periods of recorded history. For the Westerner, Rome or Greece transports us back maybe two and a half thousand years – with Syria and I suppose Iraq where I’ve never been it goes back much further; to the earliest origins of recorded history – perhaps five to six thousand years ago. Displayed in the garden of the Damascus Museum there’s a sarcophagus with the portraits of a married couple sculpted on it. There’s the somewhat anxious fleshy face of the husband while his wife is more composed and proud and wearing the fashion of the time – but I was so struck by the relevance of this ancient portrait probably from Roman or earlier times to the physical features of the society we saw around us in Damascus.

Then again having made contact in some fashion or other to this Patrician family you contemplate the wealth and luxury in which they lived – if they were lucky and lived in the upper social bracket in one of the Decapolis cities established on the Silk Route to China, such as Palmyra. The Grand Mosque in Damascus has a lower layer of up to five metres built by the Romans for their Temple to Jupiter. On top of this are the Roman arches of the Byzantine era and finished off with the architectural marvels of
Islam. Then you reflect on the long history of conquest and development from the Assyrians and even before them through the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines and the Muslims and the connection between these ancient developed societies such as at Lattakia you ask yourself whether we in the West are not somewhat presumptuous in promoting our education and attitudes among such an historic and cultured people.

In Damascus, the Jews greeted St Paul on his arrival but after his conversion tried to kill him. So Damascus was then a city with a dominant Jewish society. I was advised that there remain only about an hundred Jewish families in Damascus today. Not long ago Israel offered the Jewish population of Damascus a permanent home within its borders. Most emigrated and Damascus has to be the poorer for it. Their homes have been blocked up by the government and will be held for them for twenty five years in the event some wish to return.

St Paul and the Damascene Christians were persecuted but they prevailed and Judaism gave way to a Christian society and the old Christian area and its substantial Christian population and churches and grottos attests to this time of several hundred years. I was struck by the irony of Pope John Paul in tears in the Grand Mosque as he stood in front of the tomb of John the Baptist. Then with the Muslim conquest the majority turned to Islam. Apparently this was because the population had grown weary of the impositions imposed on them by the Byzantine rulers. As you walk through the old city the question begs itself as to whether there will be new confessions and world religions and of course there will. I think history repeats and reinvents itself in subtle ways.

I first went to Syria in 2000 to present on courses on developing feasibility studies for investment by the private sector. Nobody had advised me that Syria then had a private sector. It appeared to be very much a command economy and society. I arrived there at about 3 am in the morning having travelled from Kathmandu in Nepal via Vienna. The Colonel in charge of immigration had no difficulty in arranging a visa for me. The next morning in response to advice from the Syrian European
Business Centre I had to change my tune and try to download examples and approaches of private sector feasibility study models. I presented on three courses in the marvellous and fascinating old cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

On that occasion I didn’t have much time off. Private sector investment was seen as a priority because at that time there were possibilities of a peace agreement being reached between Syria and Israel and the Palestinians. Possibilities condemned later to founder due to Israeli intransigence and the resulting Palestinian Intifada. I found myself trying to hold the floor between the young Western, usually American Ivy-League educated sons and daughters of the establishment and the older businessmen who were participating on the course. Both sides wanted to talk about Western especially European investment in hotels and night clubs and various touristic amenities. While there was unanimity on the objectives - there was no love at all between the two groups. Indeed, they appeared to despise each other. At the time I was reminded of an earlier similar and ultimately more ominous experience I witnessed in Iran when there were the same confrontations and where the younger generation threw in their lot with the Ayatollahs. But this hasn’t happened. All development involving Western investment was put on hold after the failure of the peace negotiations underway at that time.

I was there again in 2008 before this awful civil war broke out. Then it had an emerging middle class that again wanted to have stronger linkages to the West and especially to the European Union. It was rumoured when I was there that peace talks
between the Syrians and the Israelis were being brokered by the Turks. If this had come to pass, as I hoped it would, then Syria as a Mediterranean Neighbourhood Country to the EU might have been expected to come under the influence of the Western democratic tradition and to evolve and to open up to and to contribute as a bridge to allowing the West a closer understanding of the Muslim mind. Sadly too much blood has been shed. It now appears unlikely to happen anytime soon.

In recent times and just before my second mission in 2008 the Government of Syria had made the decision to engage in the social aspects of market reforms. At the time of my mission the government was going through a transition process. While economic reforms, as a rule, do not take place overnight these were reforms going forward which covered all sectors. There was a strong identification and ownership by the government with the reform process. However, the speed at which the reforms were progressing was an issue. There were slowdowns in a number of cases affecting areas of lower priority. An overarching reason was the situation in relation to national security. A major contributing factor was that overall human resources were lacking or had low qualifications.

Education in Syria was in the process of emerging from being an adjunct to a managed command economy and historically had been tightly controlled from the centre. Then authority for all functions was concentrated centrally in the Ministry of Education (MoE). Education at all levels in Syria was provided free of cost. As noted previously there was huge pressure on the Ministry to adequately fund secondary education. The situation we in the mission found was sorely exacerbated by the increased numbers in the student cohort in transition to secondary level. There was enormous pressure arising from the high numbers of Iraqi refugees who had settled in Syria.41

41 According to UNHCR there were about fifty thousand Iraqi children enrolled in Syrian schools during 2007/8. The majority of them some 42,000 are enrolled in grades 1 to 9. Iraqi refugees are out of school in grades 10, 11
Reform of the education sector was one of the main components in the 10th Five Year Plan (FYP). Given the present situation is is quite probable that the full Five Year Plan will never be enacted. At the same time it was impressive. A major priority lay in its strategy of augmenting human resource development through a series of wide-ranging reforms. The Plan emphasized the necessity for a well-balanced educational process. It stressed the importance of school-society linkages and the creation of new curricular subjects designed to promote and develop skills in languages, the sciences and mathematics. It encouraged the use of internet facilities as an important source of education over and above the basic class syllabus. Other areas it highlighted embraced the importance of the preparation of well qualified teachers and a concentration on vocational and technical teaching.

The FYP in its analysis was hard hitting. It acknowledged that despite the successes made in the different fields of education, the sector was still suffering several problems. These problems included a decrease in this sector’s economic viability at all levels, resulting in a large-scale wastage and declining manpower productivity in addition to deficient qualification, bureaucratic tendencies, weak performance, and lack of sufficient quality control. It was critical of what it saw as the reduction of an education vision to mere service rendering. It noted that modern teaching techniques and utilization of the existing technologies and IT systems as necessary developmental requirements had been shunned. It ascribed this situation to have resulted from an absence of coordination among the competent official authorities coupled with the lack of a strategic vision. Perhaps we over here in Ireland could do with some similar trenchant commentaries of this nature regarding education!

Again, I wonder with all the civil strife and bloodshed that has occurred in recent

---

42 When writing this piece my sympathies appear to have been with the government of then President Assad and its focus on education reforms. Following the massacre of unarmed demonstrators by his troops during late 2011 and 2012 my support for that awful regime has changed.
months in early/mid 2012 whether any of these aspirations will ever see the light of
day.

During June and July 2008 I was stationed in Damascus with a Dutch-Italian
colleague. We worked on formulating a project for the EC for the secondary
education sub-sector. We worked closely with two Syrian lady colleagues; both of
whom represented different social and religious backgrounds although both are
committed Syrian citizens. Our local counterpart was a Syrian American lady and we
worked closely with a Syrian Christian who as secretary to the Minister of Education
had a lot of influence and was in charge of the Minister of Education’s office.

My Dutch-Italian colleague I found to be intelligent and industrious. He speaks six
languages and has a wide experience in vocational training and in evaluation. Sharing
a large apartment meant we lived very closely together and we discussed family
situations freely and openly. He has his own huge problems in current relationships
and maybe because of them he behaved less than graciously with our Syrian
counterpart, I thought partly because with his working class origins he had a chip on
his shoulder. With the Minister’s secretary who existed on a Syrian salary he had
fewer complaints and was quite civil.

The two ladies were quite unique; each in their different ways. Our counterpart is a
blonde. Her mother is French-American and Roman Catholic and was raised in a
Christian society somewhere in the US. She and her father fell in love while the latter
was studying in the US. She has returned to live in the US since the death of her
husband.
Standing with a Syrian colleague at the Byzantine fortress and cathedral dedicated to Simon Stylitis.

Our counterpart’s father was of the Syrian upper middle class. Her uncle was the retired Minister of Defence\(^43\). I found her to be a liberal and pragmatic on the major issues and the post-Iraq situation. A warm open person she was studying for her PhD and was registered with a US university I hadn’t heard of. She has dual American and Syrian nationalities and was educated in the U.S. She holds a senior position in the American Language Centre in Damascus\(^44\). She was greatly concerned about her children and the education they were receiving. At the same time I couldn’t but be aware that the senior politicians would have heard of our mission through her and the fact that she was such a supportive person made life so much easier. Easier but for the fact that my Dutch/Italian colleague - too short sighted to see her significance as a way to have doors open to us – he continually sniped against her. This went on to the extent that I had to threaten to have him recalled to Brussels before he came to heel. It made for unhappiness and unpleasantness. To compensate for this both ladies went out of their way to be pleasant and helpful to me and I’m grateful to them.

The Minister’s secretary is a devout but proud Roman Catholic and traces her family history in Damascus to before the Arab invasion. She candidly traced the emergence of a dominant Islamic character in Syria simply to the fact that the Christians were outbred by the Muslims. She has considerable esteem for the present Minister and is committed to teaching. Recently she married another Syrian Christian but sadly it didn’t work out and she is now seeking an annulment of which she is fairly confident. In many ways her sense of Christianity reminds me of Irish society in the nineteen sixties and seventies - before the emergence of a more liberal questioning Catholic culture post-Vatican II and the shock induced by revelations of paedophilia amongst the clergy and all the cover-ups.

\(^{43}\) When the uncle retired the President of Syria gifted him with an apartment block in an upper class area. Soldiers were appointed as security guards as well as servants.

\(^{44}\) I found it very difficult to square the guardedly pro-American stance of many educated Syrians with the condemnation of Syria as one of “the axes of evil” articulated by US President George Bush.
The President of Syria and his family come from a small Muslim minority sect who reputedly worships St. George and probably the Dragon as well as the Virgin Mary. Given the need to contend with the overwhelmingly superior numbers of Sunni and Shia Muslims it occurs to me that it is very much in his family’s and the Christians’ interest that there is tolerance and acceptance of minorities.

The minister’s secretary lives with her family in the old Christian/Jewish quarter of Damascus. It’s a most interesting place to visit with shrines to the Virgin set up in the narrow medieval streets and alleyways and illuminated at night. Signs and notices are in Arabic and Roman script but one could be forgiven for believing it to be a Southern Italian city. There are restaurants and troubadours. Wine and liquor are freely available.

On one occasion as we sat in a restaurant in the Christian Quarter and drank our beers I suggested to my Dutch-Italian colleague that I had a premonition. I mentioned it a couple of times and he began to get startled and a bit confused. I said I felt something was going to come about and I asked him with some urgency to get up and go look up and down the medieval streets. More confused he asked as to what he was to look out for. I replied “a miracle”! It is that kind of place.

One week both ladies accompanied me on a visit to schools and Directorate offices in the Northern Governorates of Homs, Aleppo, Lattakia and Tarthus. The exchanges

---

45 I’m reminded of Homs - that battered city in recent times. Well as part of our consultative meetings with the provincial kingpins we were recommended to meet the chief executive in Homs. However one of the ladies complained that she had been pre-positioned by the man on a recent visit and she had reservations. If we were to meet him we must not accept his invitation to dinner. I agreed we wouldn’t and she accompanied us. Sure enough he had only attention for her and the dinner invitation emerged early. A little later I pleaded an acute attack of diarrhoea and required to leave to go back to my hotel in Damascus. Sympathetically I was assisted into the jeep and the two ladies hopped in behind. We laughed and giggled on the way back to Damascus.
with teachers, parents and students were open and free - probably because of the presence of the Minister’s Secretary - who encouraged open discussion. In the resulting reports we raised several issues regarding education which were not only relevant to Syria but to many other developing countries and even to developed countries.

On 16th May 2008 our daughter-in-law Anna gave birth to Cael while I was working in Damascus. I was presenting to a group of Syrian educators and teachers when my wife phoned with the news and came straight through to me on my mobile. All the team with me were awaiting the news so it came as no surprise to them. But when I announced the news and it was translated to the teachers present I received a standing ovation. It was sweet of them but everywhere such good news is always welcome.

On education the feedback we received from all sides was that the general secondary curriculum needed to be modernised. Presently it was too theoretical. Many of the criticisms we’d heard before in several countries. The curriculum required to have a much more practical application. Studies were not related to the needs of the labour market. IT systems were not yet integrated into the teaching process in all schools. Few if any computers had been supplied to the majority of rural village schools which were characterised as the norm: in contrast to the urban based schools visited by the mission.

Aleppo: causeway leading to the citadel

Teachers noted that there is a high degree of “hands-on” knowledge of computers amongst many students. They admitted that such students often know more than their teachers. This conforms to general international experience. Teachers felt strongly that students, especially those interested in IT, should be consulted as regards what areas of IT they wanted to be taught in. Teachers themselves as a profession and at all levels were poorly paid so they provide private tuition to improve their economic
situation. They have no alternative but to increase their income through private jobs. Sadly but understandably, the better performing teachers have a preference to leave the public system and to move to private schools.

We had amusing incidents. Both ladies were aware that they created a profile by being seen to be in the company of a Westerner and were amused by that. On one occasion to their horror I went on my knees in front of them in the foyer of an international hotel. Then they had great fun in turning away or in omitting some comments when they translated for me. On one occasion I mentioned the project we were working on allowed Syrian education the opportunity of getting into bed with the European Union. That wasn’t translated but was the subject of great hilarity afterwards.

While I did not always agree with our counterpart lady in her approval of the secret police and the way they kept violence off the streets I had to admit I always felt safe – even at night. I had also to accept that to a significant degree the presence of the secret police is attributable to the fact that - in the absence of a peace agreement with Israel and the return of the Golan Heights - Syria is still technically at war.

I was impressed with the secular side of Syrian life where women or at least middle-class women appeared to be less constrained than in other Muslim countries. I supposed I admired their pride in being Syrian and in their history. I was amazed to see the presence of ancient history mingling together so much with the buzz of modern life.

Since that visit in 2008 and the Arab Spring which has convulsed the region in the time since there is much that is tragic that has occurred. Sitting in my study in early 2012 I capture in my mind pictures of my friends and of the dedicated teachers and the eager bright young secondary school children I was privileged to meet. I wonder how many of them and especially the young people have suffered under the atrocities
visited upon them by a cruel and repressive regime over the last six years and whether retribution for these awful excesses will bring an early peace and resolution? It is my deepest hope that before long these awful occurrences will come to an end and that the country and its wonderful young people will emerge into the bright new future they so deserve.

Statue of the Arab hero Saladin in Damascus, where he is buried.

Postscript: I was relieved to learn from the Minister’s secretary in late 2013 that after suffering a mortar attack on her home in the older Christian quarter of Damascus that she, her mother and brother have managed to obtain asylum in Germany where other members of her family live.