



Self-Knowledge and Perception of the “Other” in Politics, History and Culture

This program started out with two very basic observations: There exists a long tradition in German universities of an interest of and research about Arab societies concerning religion and language during the early periods. But this interest was characterized by an “Orientalist” approach, that is to say, it made the Orient into an object but never a partner. Hence, an academic dialogue between European and Arab academics hardly existed. Academic institutions in the Arab World, on the other hand have no centres for research on Europe, there are no specialised degrees for European Studies, and no academic discipline has made Europe or Germany the main topic of its research, although a lot of people possess excellent foreign language skills.

To overcome this situation of mental enclosure, we put at the centre of our project the issue of “Self-Knowledge and Perception of the ‘Other’” and decided that our target group should be the young generation, the German and Syrian students. We relied on a variety of means to accomplish our aim of creating a greater curiosity in and awareness of the other society. Intensive language studies, German and Arabic, respectively, were obligatory. Seminars, attended by both group, led to many discussions inside and outside the classroom. Excursions, workshops organized by the students, and internships were all useful to learn about one another.

For the Syrian students, however, we also wanted to systematize an academic interest and knowledge about Europe in a regular study program with a Master’s degree. We believed that with the increasing role that Germany plays individually and the European Union collectively in the economics and politics of the Middle East, the promotion — with the help of Damascene colleagues — of an academic interest in these topics at Damascus University would be of utmost innovative importance and considerable benefits for Syrian students.

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The leadership of the University of Damascus was extremely receptive to this idea and recognized the need for independent scholarly research on Europe and the teaching of European topics easily. The university was ready to begin with the development of a study program immediately.

After having selected from 145 applicants 25 Syrian students for the program after consideration of their grade averages and with the help of in-depth interviews the two center pieces of the program were established:

A) Seven “Intensive Seminars” in which German visiting lecturers taught each a four-week seminar, which met three times per week for three-hour sessions. The idea to teach such “Intensive Seminars” grew out of practical concerns about the financial costs and the administrative difficulties at the respective German home universities to keep three or four German lecturers for a whole semester in Damascus. The seven seminars dealt with the following topics:

- 1) *Self-knowledge and perception of the ‘Other’ in history, politics and culture*
- 2) *Modern Political Thought in Europe and the Arab World*
- 3) *Construction and Institutions of European Unity*
- 4) *The concepts of the individual and the citizen in European Liberalism*
- 5) *European Democracies: Comparative Study*
- 6) *Nationalism and its Formation in Europe and the Arab World*
- 7) *Intensive German Language Studies for two full years.*

The first six courses were taught in the first year of the Master study program, i.e. in each semester three.



B) The second year was dedicated to writing the Master thesis and spending half a year in Erlangen, Germany. The students first had to present their thesis topic to a committee of advisors and outside evaluators at the Damascus University. After that collecting of materials began. The half year stay in Erlangen served to train the students in working in libraries, collecting English and German materials for the topic and to design in consultation with German professors the concepts and structures of their thesis. The writing of the thesis was accompanied by further German studies, a seminar and an internship to get a better insight into the German society. Upon their return to Damascus, the students concluded their Master theses.

OF SHORT CHRONOLOGY THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

- ◆ May 2007 Selection of candidates for the program.
- ◆ September 2007 Begin of courses.
- ◆ February 2008 Recognition of the program by the University Erlangen.
- ◆ July 2008 Establishment of the innovative Master's study program with the designation "Political and Social Science approaches to Europe and the Arab World".
- ◆ August–September 2008 Final exams of the course curriculum.
- ◆ September–December 2008 Selection of supervisors for the Master Theses from the Universities Damascus, Erlangen and the Free University Berlin. Conclusion of the discussion of the theses in the various committees.
- ◆ March–August 2009 Stay of ten selected Syrian students in Germany in order to pursue their research, get in contact with their German counsellors, doing internships in different institutions, and taking further courses in German language.

During the whole period nine Syrian lecturers came to Erlangen, participating in a variety of seminars. Seven German lecturers went for Intensive Seminars to Damascus. From Germany 25 students came

to Damascus to study Arabic, participate in some of the Intensive Seminars, carrying out research projects jointly with Syrian students, and doing internships in various Syrian institutions.

What has been accomplished here in very short time is the establishment and accreditation, in cooperation with Damascus University, of an innovative Master studies program, new in its content and its form. It is an interdisciplinary study program, it is taught in English and Arabic by German and Syrian lecturers and its all encompassing topic is a region: Europe. It is the first such collaboration in the Humanities. Furthermore the University of Erlangen has recognized the Master's certificate as the permission to enter doctoral studies in its Faculty of Philosophy. The program has opened the way for the Syrian students to continue doctoral studies in Germany after a good conclusion of their thesis work for the Master.

Each who wishes to do so will be advised and guided individually to the institute and university that fit his or her doctoral plans. The strong hope is that some of those returning with their Doctorate will join the ranks of the teaching faculty in Damascus and gradually take over the teaching and development of this new Master's program.

The ultimate goal is the institutionalization in the Damascus University of this graduate study program and a continuous, own research program on Europe. In the meantime the joint effort to develop this joint program of academic collaboration in the social and political sciences between Germany and Syria, Damascus and Erlangen, should be consolidated by the establishment of a joint degree, and further strengthened by common courses for Syrian and German students not only in Syria but also in Germany and by joint research projects on the faculty level.