

INTERVIEW

EXCHANGES

GILLES DE ROBIEN:

"The installation of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi is an incredible challenge."

The French Minister of National Education, Higher Education and Research, Gilles de Robien has been a frequent visitor of the United Arab Emirates where he was very impressed, in his words, "by the country's capacity for growth and development and its openness to the world." In "Message des Emirats", he explains the educational and cultural significance of the installation of a Sorbonne unit in Abu Dhabi and the perspectives it offers in terms of cooperation between the Emirates and France.

Interview conducted by Fouad Boumansour

What educational and cultural significance does the Sorbonne "Two" in Abu Dhabi have for you? What are its short and long-term challenges?

The project to expand the Université Paris IV – Sorbonne to Abu Dhabi is particularly close to my heart because it incarnates my hopes for French universities and I am aware of all the benefits it will bring to both our countries. French universities in the 20th century must be both welcoming and offensive: welcoming by being able to educate motivated students from the entire world, offensive in order to promote the quality of its education and the skills of its professors.

The credits (European Credits Transfer System) granted these students may be accumulated and transferred to other European universities. With a diploma recognized internationally, these students may, if they wish, pursue their studies in France and Europe. Abu Dhabi's Sorbonne will be an educational setting open to the world and will provide the Emirates with young, skilled graduates who will in turn share their knowledge, in particular in the field of the humanities.

You recently visited Abu Dhabi where you met with very senior officials. What subjects were discussed and what conclusions were reached in these meetings?

Indeed, I was very warmly welcomed in Abu Dhabi last February. I was in particular very sensitive to the signs of friendship Sheikh Mohamed Ben Zayed demonstrated, who I know is very attached to this project. I know that all of the Emirate's authorities are mobilized to serve this immense project of cultural and scientific cooperation. Our embassy in Abu Dhabi is working closely with the Université Paris-Sorbonne and the Emirian authorities so that, in September 2006, students from the region may be welcomed in the best of conditions and pursue education that is perfectly identical to that of the Sorbonne in Paris.

What are your impressions after this recent trip to Abu Dhabi?

This was obviously not my first trip to Abu Dhabi. My ministerial functions have taken me there on a number of occasions. But on each of my trips, I am always even more impressed by the

United Arab Emirates' capacity for growth and development, the quality of their welcome and their openness to others by being the open to the world.

A Dynamic French-Emirian Partnership

What specific role does your Ministry play to encourage dynamism and optimize cultural and scientific exchanges between the UAE and France?

This agreement relates, first, to two higher education institutions, the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne and its unit in Abu Dhabi. I'd like to acknowledge the determination of the President of the Université Paris IV, Jean-Robert Pitte, and I am also aware of the importance of the role of His Excellency Saif Sultan-Mubarak Al Aryani, the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates in Paris. His involvement was decisive.

As Minister for National Education, my role is obviously to support this type of ambitious initiative and its implementation. I therefore wished, by my presence with Sheikh Mohamed Ben Zayed Al-Nahyane and Sheikh Nahyane Ben Moubarak Al Nahyane, to be one of the privileged witnesses of the signature of this agreement on February 19.

What means and what type of actions do you recommend to consolidate what might be rightfully called a partnership between France and the Emirates?

First, I would like to remind you that this partnership in the fields of education, culture, science and technology is already rich and varied, as illustrated by partnerships between numerous French institutions in higher education. French companies present in the Emirates also participate in this cooperation.

I believe that cooperation between two nations is based on an ability to understand and exchange with one another. What better way to do so than by allowing our youth to meet and take advantage of a common culture and education to better know and understand each other. In my opinion, education is one of the fundamental levers to reinforce ties between the Emirates and France. It is the basis for potential partnerships in all fields of economic and cultural life.

On May 3, at the Institut du Monde Arabe, I inaugurated the magnificent exhibit entitled "Languages of the Desert". This major event in the Gulf Season opening in Paris was an occasion for me to confirm the need we have to discover each other beyond and through our differences. Industrial cooperation and commercial exchanges can only be solidified over time through the acquisition of knowledge and mutual respect.

I am therefore very pleased to see the ties between our two countries solidifying more concretely through the knowledge and respect of our differences and also through the pursuance of common ambitions.

In your opinion, what are the differences between French and English-speaking programs? Would you recommend a review of French programs to make them more coherent with the job market and globalization?

Our higher education programs have nothing to envy of education pursued in the United States, for example. The proof lies in the continuously increasing number of foreign students who wish to take one or more semesters of classes in France. Our university curriculum is now harmonized within the European system for the deliverance of diplomas, the LMD ("Licence

Master Doctorat”), which has been adopted by the vast majority of universities and major schools. Our educational system is now more coherent with the international job market.

However, while education and in particular higher education must prepare students for professional insertion in our globalized world, it is also crucial that higher education open the doors to the world for students and allow them to study other cultures and acquire other knowledge. These two facets of preparation for professional life and international culture are the two pillars for the installation of the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi.

Will we one day see a process for scientific exchanges, in particular at the level of research, between the U.A.E. and France? What framework would you propose to trigger this new form of cooperation?

In France and in Abu Dhabi, universities must be able to attract students, researchers and research teachers from the entire world. This is Université Paris IV-Sorbonne's challenge and I support them, as well as all universities, in facing this challenge.

In the field of humanities, this project provides us with a positive scientific dialogue. The installation of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi is a first step in a scientific and cultural cooperation that I obviously would like to see expand. I believe initiatives should be allowed to deploy and should be encouraged when they correspond to a need and are truly scientific development projects.

Cultural Diversity versus Globalization

Some believe that France has difficulty making itself known in the Arab Gulf region through its "scientific and cultural heritage" and blame this deficiency on a somewhat "traditional" form of relations that is not coherent with the international scene. What do you believe?

Strong ties have been created between France, the Federation and each of its Emirates. Since, 1997, our preferred relations have progressed in the context of a strategic partnership illustrated by the frequent reciprocal visits of the highest authorities of each country. These ties are also illustrated by the achievement of common ambitious and joint projects. Already, the EUROGOLFE network, whose cultural Foundation is based in Abu Dhabi, encourages partnerships with Arabic and European universities through the creation of a network of correspondents in the field of social sciences and plays an active role by feeding the debate on reforms. The IEP of Paris has also opened a "Middle-East Mediterranean Political Sciences" unit in the south of France in Menton and held the "Eurogolfe Forum for Human Development".

Creating the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi was an incredible challenge. We faced it and won, along with all those who led this ambitious project. It is proof that our relations are capable of expanding even further into all fields of cooperation. The recent partnership agreements that the Université of Abu Dhabi has just signed with higher French educational establishments and the IAT's desire to establish a high level scientific and technological cooperation with a certain number of French and international establishments demonstrate that France and the quality of its higher education no longer have any difficulty in being recognized, and I am pleased with this achievement.

How do you defend a concept dear to France, cultural diversity, when faced with globalization that at times diminishes identities and specificities?

In this world both global and violent and deeply fractured, we need to know and understand each other better in our diversity. The humanities in particular allow us to do so. Knowing the language, history, geography of others and, in a word, all that forms their identity, is a source of rich exchanges and a formidable path to peace.

Throughout the world, the humanities must be developed to promote culture that is both diverse and shared: the development of knowledge is the best answer to all forms of oppression and barbaric acts.

The French government defends this ideal. It is in the pursuit of this ideal that its universities will continuously seek to be settings for research and education at the service of high level humanities.

*The Emirates add to their Regional University Offer:
INSTALLATION OF THE SORBONNE IN ABU DHABI*

Jean-Robert Pitte:

"An inter-cultural bridge is the only hope for peace."

The Sorbonne is assuredly one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Founded in 1257 by Robert de Sorbon, Confessor to Louis IX, this venerable institution has expanded to the Middle East 750 years after its creation. The new campus will open in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. Jean-Robert Pitte agreed to an interview with the "Message des Emirats" to provide more details on this historical event.

Interview conducted by Fouad BouMansour

President, can you provide our readers with the chronology of this major project, the Université Sorbonne-Abu Dhabi?

This project was the desire of the late lamented Sheikh Zayed Ben Sultan Al-Nahyane, then the new President of the Emirates, Sheikh Khalifa and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed, as well as certain members of the elite in the United Arab Emirates, in particular the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. We were contacted a year and a half ago and I enthusiastically agreed to participate in and implement this project. I am pleased that just over a year after our first contact – my first visit to the Emirates was in February 2005 – we are going to lay the first stone for the university. The agreement has been signed and we will open in temporary buildings for the next year in the month of October. This project was executed very rapidly.

You will therefore open for the 2006-2007 year?

Yes. We will open our doors on 2 October 2006.

People in the Emirates are asking many questions about this project. The first is how are you going to overcome or solve what is referred to as a language difficulty with French? Because this project relies on a certain linguistic capacity.

The question is simple. As you undoubtedly know, the university is open to anyone in the Middle East, in fact from anywhere in the Arabic, Persian and why not Indian world, where there are French speakers. Secondary French-speaking institutions and French high schools exist in many of these countries, so these constitute a portion of our clientele. Some Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians and Egyptians speak French by tradition, due to historical ties with France. And Iranians. There are indeed fewer in the United Arab Emirates, but there is no tradition related to the speaking of French in the Emirates. So we have set up a preparatory study year, which will be a year of intensive French and initiation to French civilization and culture and, after a year, maybe even a semester for some, our students will be able to tackle real French studies at the Sorbonne.

What criteria will you use to recruit candidates?

The same criteria as the Sorbonne in France, in other words, either a French baccalaureat or a French equivalent or, for those who do not have a French language or French baccalaureat, a secondary studies equivalent, with a French admission test to see if the students' language skills are adequate. If so, we will help the students choose the best field possible depending on their project, employment opportunities they wish to access, their study plan - in other words, obviously provide real tutoring and orientation.

How long will classes last to achieve a "license" (B.A.), for example?

Three years, the exact same as in France. We are implementing the exact same system here. In fact, it is the European system. In other words, at any time during their studies, students may use the credits they have obtained in a French or European university. We are fully integrated into the European system and the Université Sorbonne-Abu Dhabi is therefore a unit of the university in France with identical advantages in terms of European access, since one can enter another European university at any time.

Multilingualism

The objective is for the French language to be either equivalent or superior to the English language? Is that the challenge?

The challenge is that we are against the theory of a clash between cultures in today's world. At Paris-Sorbonne, we are entirely against the theory of a clash between cultures and I believe many Emirians, in particular the Emirates' government, are highly opposed to this theory that has caused, and continues to cause, havoc. I imagine you have had occasion to hear, for example, a program on the Al Jazeera channel that refers to a clash between cultures, stating it is crucial and represents the future of the Middle East. This is tragic and does not constitute a future, but the death of the Middle East and the death of the world and the death of peace. A clash between cultures is war: civil war, international war, misunderstandings between populations. So if we want to fight against this current trend, there is only one solution: inter-cultural exchanges. The Université Sorbonne-Abu Dhabi must be a platform for inter-cultural exchanges and the youth of tomorrow must be multilingual. The youth of the Middle East must speak Arabic or Persian or both, but also English, of course, because English is essential today, and also French, and why not Italian or German, as we will teach Italian, German and Spanish in our university. The objective is to have our youth become open to the diversity of the world. Proud of its traditions, culture and maybe its religion, but open to the diversity of the world and exchanges that create an enrichment, but not exchanges to hinder - exchanges for mutual enrichment.

Is that the core reason for opening the Sorbonne at Abu Dhabi, in other words a history of opposition to a clashes between cultures and the promotion of an osmosis between cultures?

Yes, that's it. I believe that all of us, on the Emirates' side and the Sorbonne's side, need to remain open to the world. We need to exchange. At Paris-Sorbonne, we have so much to receive at a cultural level from our students in the Emirates and I hope they will also receive from us. That's really the mind frame in which we are working. The Sorbonne has a longstanding tradition of having students from the entire world study with us. Until now, we had never left the four walls of our fifth arrondissement in Paris. This is the first time. And it is a fantastic experience for us, as I believe it will benefit us as well.

Cultural Diversity

If one looks at the equation from another angle, could one say that the Emirates are generally a means to expand French culture?

Yes. Similarly, I am convinced that in terms of France's perspective, thanks to this installation, the Sorbonne will be a means to promote the Emirates' culture, as well as that of the Middle East, in France. We live in a country where many of our co-citizens are of Arabic origin, North African, in particular; they are French, with a French identification card and passport, but, for a large part, come from this culture. There is no reason to suppress it. One of France's goals is to become this inter-cultural bridge.

Do you believe that French could one day find itself at the same level as English? That they will both achieve parity?

I hope so with all my heart. It would be great to achieve this one day and for the Sorbonne to contribute. To be perfectly clear, I'd like to highlight that our goal is not to fight the English language. That would be totally ridiculous and absurd. We need the English language. It is a beautiful, interesting and useful language, but does not allow for the same things to be said as French. There are things that are well and easily said in English and there are things that are better said in French. Again, the youth of tomorrow should be multilingual. In general, in the Middle East and the Emirates, one speaks Arabic and English. If one can also speak French, this will provide for openness and fabulous benefits, not only economically or politically, but culturally as well. When one can read Voltaire or Montaigne, for example, in the original version, one acquires another vision of the world, rather than reading them in an English or Arabic translation. I think we all need this. Personally, when I discovered Don Quixote in Spanish when I was learning Spanish in high school, I understood Spanish art much better.

How is this unit of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi going to work? Is there an organization chart for expatriate professors, a campus, etc.?

We start next fall, in October, on a temporary campus which in fact consists in the current buildings of Abu Dhabi University on the road to the airport. We will use their premises for a year, and next year, we will have our final premises. I hope that for the year starting 2008 or at the latest by the winter of 2008, we will be in Khalifa City in the new university complex that will be created on the road to the airport. We will be located in the heart of this university complex. Next fall, first, a Chancellor, who is my current cabinet director, Daniel Olivier, will relocate there, and there will be the Secretary General, who will take care of admissions. There will no doubt be one or two other people in administration and a certain number of people recruited by the Council for Education of Abu Dhabi that is currently helping us, obviously, with our installation. Similarly, depending on the number of students, there will be five or six expatriate professors on two year renewable contracts and people who will conduct two week or one month missions and who will then supervise their students via the internet. A library will be available on site, as well as IT and remote education: we will work with the most modern means of information and knowledge transmission.

Will you provide the students with specific assistance?

The Emirate of Abu Dhabi grants 50 full bursaries and 50 partial bursaries and we hope that a number of other governments in the region will also grant a few bursaries for their citizens to come, and maybe a few private corporations that we hope will be generous enough to also grant bursaries. We would like it to be as open as possible, and that someone who would like

to come could, even if the person's family's finances do not allow for it. We will help students find accommodation and also in other practical areas, as we will have students from Abu Dhabi, but also from throughout the region who are not familiar with the Emirates. They will need help. We will also assist with their appropriate integration and practical insertion into the life of Abu Dhabi.

In your opinion, to what degree will the diplomas you issue fill the needs of the job market? For example, could future graduates become teachers?

For the time being, we have planned on three year "license" programs. We will then decide whether to open master programs or whether we should help students pursue their masters here in Paris. We may open units for some of our masters, in particular, professional masters in communication, international relations, urban planning, land-use planning and transportation. We have those here at the Sorbonne and I think they may interest a certain number of students as well as a certain number of companies in the area who may want to have people educated in these fields.

Do you see this as new life for an old Sorbonne?

Yes, because I believe it is a radical turn. It will shake our traditions. This is very good. At some point, fresh air needs to be let in to do away with the dust. For our university life, I believe it is also a lovely experience, because it is one of generosity. I believe it forces us to go out towards others and not to remain enclosed in our prestigious and ancient buildings, waiting for people to come to us. I must say that for cultural institutions such as the Louvre – when the Louvre holds exhibits abroad – it is a great experience. When the Opera of Paris or a given orchestra travels abroad, these major cultural organizations meet audiences that would not go to the Louvre or the Opera in Paris, but come because it is a foreign location, whether in Japan, the United States or elsewhere. The same applies here. We are reaching out to people who would not normally come to us. I am specifically referring to women who do not easily leave their country or region, because cultural traditions exist, but they can very freely attend the Sorbonne-Abu Dhabi.

Exporting Culture

To what degree does the French "exception" use culture as a means to reinforce its presence?

I believe it's an ancient tradition dating back at least to the times of Louis XIV. One of our country's means for international development relies on culture: literature, theatre, music, architecture, painting, gastronomy, all types of facets of our culture that we traditionally export. A certain number of foreigners visit to "consume" this culture on site, but we also export it. Think about the 18th century writers who spent their lives traveling throughout Europe; they already exported culture. All of educated Europe, the European elite, spoke French practically until the end of the 19th century. Even at the end of the First World War, the Tsar of Russia spoke to his family in French at home and, in 1940, during the war, the Mussolini criticized the King of Italy for speaking French with his family. Mussolini told the king: "Sire, you are not the King of France. You are the King of Italy. You must speak in Italian." That was how it was. The elite liked to speak French, because it is an old French tradition to export France on a political and economic level through its culture.

Having said that, this project is not one into which we were forced by the French government. It is a project that obviously has major political significance, and I can tell you that the various French Ministers and members of cabinets I met were highly supportive of the project.

However, it really resulted between a friendship between the people and government of the Emirates and the Université of Paris-Sorbonne. This is not a criticism of our ministries, but I can assure you that this does not result from a Machiavellian idea of a Minister for Foreign Affairs or a Councilor to the President saying, "Here is a plan. We'll bring in the Sorbonne and then France will be better appreciated, as well as its companies, products, etc." No. Not at all. This was not the initial objective, nor is it ours. If it can strengthen relations on a political and economic level over the long term between the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi and France, all the better. That is not our business. Our business is precisely to create a true cultural bridge and attract a certain number of young people in the Middle East to French culture, and, once again, not to eliminate other cultures. We are not engaged in a fight against cultures, but in multiculturalism, the inter-cultural bridge, because that is our only hope for peace.

How do you perceive the fact that the Emirates chose the Sorbonne as a "battle horse" to communicate more with France? Is this a new stage in bilateral relations between France and the Emirates?

Surely. And it is a great honor for us at Paris-Sorbonne. It is undoubtedly a great honor for France as well and we will endeavor to do everything possible to deserve this honor and for the final project to resemble the dream of the Sorbonne and the Emirates. I am convinced of that, thanks to our mutual efforts, as we meet a lot and have also created friendships with our board of directors, for example General Bitar or Mrs. Al-Shamsi, who is the Vice-President of the University of Al-Ain or with Mr. Zaki Nousseiby. They are three members of our Board of Directors of six, three directors from France and three from the Emirates, and we now have very strong ties with them.