

Bakchich

**LA SORBONNE
SOLD “EXCLUSIVELY” TO THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

Sorbonne Gate Wednesday, April 29, 2009 By **Eric Lafitte**

Confidential agreements between Paris IV and Abu Dhabi, approved by the Quai d’Orsay and the Elysée Palace, are causing growing concern within the university world.

While Valérie Pécresse is promoting the “autonomy” of universities and students and professors are in the streets demonstrating, the Quai d’Orsay and the Elysée Palace are quietly negotiating the marketing of the most prestigious of French universities, the Sorbonne, in the Gulf. Secret dealings or a confidential agreement? Some university professors have already coined the phrase “Sorbonne Gate”, while others speak of a “time bomb”.

Presidential Dictate

The “franchising” of the Sorbonne name, a university founded in 1257 under Saint Louis, in the form of an “exclusive” agreement with Abu Dhabi, was negotiated by Paris IV with Chirac and Sarkozy’s blessing. Three Parisian universities are legally authorized to bear the Sorbonne name in their official titles: Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III) and Panthéon-Sorbonne (Paris I). It is difficult to understand on what legal grounds Paris IV, under the cover of “exclusivity” negotiated behind the scenes, could prohibit its use by the other two in the Middle East. Nevertheless, this is what has currently been upheld by the Elysée Palace.

The genesis of the creation of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi: on February 19, 2006, Gilles de Robien, then Minister for National Education under Jacques Chirac, sponsored an international partnership agreement he signed as a “witness” for the creation of a private annex of the Sorbonne University. On the same date, the Minister obviously did not forget to praise in his speech both the French and Emirati cooperation and “our old and wonderful Sorbonne (...), heir to a multi-secular tradition of excellence”.

Mysterious Agreements

The 10-year agreements signed by the Emirates and the former President of Paris IV, Jean-Robert Pitte, remain mysterious. We only know that this annex of the Paris Sorbonne will be private and that the initial project plans for 1,500 student enrolments over the long term. Registration fees are relatively steep: \$13,000 per year, 15% of which would be paid to Paris IV.

For the 2007-2008 year, only 273 students were enrolled in the “Paris – Sorbonne Abu Dhabi” University. Registrations therefore only generate very modest “royalties” for this annex ensconced in the rich Emirate. Another concern: to satisfy Emirati demands, “Paris – Sorbonne Abu Dhabi” undertook to also issue diplomas in Law, a competence that Paris IV does not have. To remedy this situation, Paris IV sought help from its “sister” universities, more specifically its neighbor in the Latin Quarter, Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne), and asked that it assume the simple role of subcontractor. To protect its prestige, Paris I refused to play

second best ... In order to honor its undertaking to issue diplomas in Law (Undergraduate and Masters), “Paris - Sorbonne Abu Dhabi” was forced to enter into a subcontracting agreement with Paris II, then Paris V, which caused some giggling within the university world as to the shabby structuring and “improvisation” that underscored Paris IV’s attempts at globalization.

(image)

In the university world, this cooperation agreement is seen to as a “chiraquerie”, referring to the former French president, Jacques Chirac. In fact, Pascal Renouard de Vallière, an international consultant, was at the origin of the idea of a Sorbonne in the Emirates. This former Dassault employee owes his Chevalier National of the Ordre du Mérite medal to Chirac. For his efforts (the cooperation between France and the Emirates on the university project), Renouard de Vallière was supposed to receive \$2 million, believes a Paris I professor aware of this history. But it seems that the payment of the promised sum has encountered unforeseen obstacles.

Mirages in the Gulf

In 2007, also inspired by the potential windfall the Persian Gulf represents and the desire to become international, Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne) started negotiations with Qatar, one of the most dynamic oil states in the region who was seeking to attract French universities. Discussions were also initiated between Qatar and the Saint-Cyr military school and the National School for Magistrates (*Ecole nationale de la Magistrature*).

On the Qatari side, the Prosecutor General, Mr. Al Marri, acted as the contact for the President of Paris I, Pierre-Yves Hénin. Al Marri became unexpectedly famous in France these past months as the father of Rachida Dati’s daughter thanks to the “Bel Ami” book ... which he has firmly denied!

The Prosecutor General, however, has other affinities with France, in particular his PhD in Law from Paris I ... In February 2008, he invited the President of Paris I to Qatar to “implement an academic cooperation program”.

Public Prosecution
Attorney General’s Office

January 3, 2007

Mr. Pierre-Yves HENIN
President of Paris I – Panthéon – Sorbonne University

Having returned to Doha, I want to thank you for your warm welcome to Paris and the efforts you deployed to organize this meeting within your admirable university.

In order to reach a more concrete understanding of the cooperation project we discussed on October 16, 2007, I am pleased to invite you to Doha on February 9, 10, 11 and 12, 2008.

My team will make itself available to your office to discuss your travel dates and related questions.

I look forward to welcoming you to Doha in the near future.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ali Bin Fetais Al Marri
Prosecutor General of the State of Qatar

Objections

In parallel to the discussions with Qatar, Paris I started negotiations with Bahrain also regarding a project to create a Panthéon Sorbonne annex in this Kingdom... Yet again, the discussions advanced sufficiently for an official invitation to be extended to Pierre-Yves Hénin at the beginning of February 2009 on the occasion of Nicolas Sarkozy's official visit. Suddenly, the Quai d'Orsay and the Elysée Palace intervened to prohibit (!) the President of Paris I from signing an agreement with Qatar or Bahrain and initially advanced no explanation in this regard.

The French Ambassador to Bahrain, Yves Oudin, then sent an odd letter to Pierre-Yves Hénin: after consultation with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. "I have been informed that your visit to Bahrain raised some objections, which I indicated to the Bahrain authorities," the Ambassador explained. In other words, the Quai d'Orsay took the initiative to cancel the President of Paris I's trip! In the name of "objections as to the potential opportunity"! Amazing ...

Management at Paris I is attempting to understand this situation, but the Minister for Higher Education, Valérie Pécresse, is obviously not aware of anything. A letter to the Head of State has remained unanswered (officially). However, one can understand that this matter falls under the joint competencies of Claude Guéant and Jean-David Lévitte.

Kouchner Remains Silent

Two letters from Paris I were necessary to incite Bernard Kouchner to respond on February 18, 2009. The Minister finally indicated that, "The French authorities are bound by the agreement between France and the Emirate" signed in February 2007, in which there is a "clause that indicates that the university will be the only annex of the Paris-Sorbonne University in the Near and Middle-East. In this context and in light of the current challenges facing our cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, it does not appear possible to use the word 'Sorbonne' again in this region of the world."

Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs

Republic of France

Minister's Office

February 18, 2009 001042 CM

Dear President,

It is with great interest that I read your letters of January 8 and February 11, 2009 on the implementation projects for the Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne University in Qatar and Bahrain.

The fact is that any implementation project in this region for a university institution that would locally use in its name the word “Sorbonne” faces the difficulties that were indicated to you during a meeting with members of my cabinet on September 12th.

Indeed, the French authorities are bound by the agreement between France and the Emirate signed in Abu Dhabi on February 19, 2006 by Mr. Jean-Robert Pitte, then President of the Paris IV Sorbonne University, and Mr. Gilles de Robien, then Minister for National Education, Higher Education and Research, who initialed the agreement as a witness. This agreement, which formalizes the creation of the Paris IV Sorbonne University in the Emirates, includes a clause that indicates that the university will be the only annex of the Paris-Sorbonne University in the Near and Middle-East.

In this context and in light of the current challenges facing our cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, it does not appear possible to use the word “Sorbonne” again in this region of the world.

Bernard Kouchner

The response from the Minister leaves the players in this matter totally speechless. They cannot understand how the Sorbonne name could be abandoned in this manner to the Emirates exclusively for all of the “Near and Middle East” in exchange for a simple 15% royalty on registration fees for 250 students.

It is worth noting that the transaction agreed to by these same Emirates for the “Louvre Abu Dhabi” carried a €400 million price tag ...