

How the Sorbonne sold off its Name in the Middle East

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Paris-IV Sorbonne having granted the exclusivity of its name to Abu Dhabi for the region, Paris I-Panth on Sorbonne is no longer entitled to create an annex.



The Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, a wonderful showcase for French culture in the Gulf. Three years ago, the United Arab Emirates and the Paris IV-Sorbonne University signed an agreement that was “secret” at the time and provided for the exclusivity of the use of the La Sorbonne name in the Near and Middle East. But this name does not belong to Paris IV.

Pierre-Yves H enin fought right to the end. His mandate as President of the Paris I-Panth on Sorbonne University expires today and, despite his steadfastness, he was unable to create an annex of his university in the Middle East. He tried Qatar, then Bahrain, but was systematically refused by the French authorities.

In April 2007, the Prosecutor General of Qatar, the equivalent of our Minister for Justice, Ali Bin Fetais Ali Marri, suggested Pierre-Yves H enin create an institution affiliated to the Paris I-Panth on Sorbonne University in Qatar. The two men prepared a dossier, which they sent to Rachida Dati, Minister for Justice. In Pierre-Yves H enin’s words:

“At the end of April 2008, the Justice Conference in Doha took place in Qatar in the presence of Rachida Dati. She told us, ‘I will take responsibility for signing the cooperation agreement.’ Prior to the conference, she received a phone call from the Elys e Palace prohibiting her from signing anything.”

The same occurred in Bahrain at the beginning of 2009. Pierre-Yves Hénin received an invitation from the Minister for the Al-Khalifa Royal Court to discuss the potential creation of a Paris-I annex in Bahrain on the occasion of Nicolas Sarkozy's visit to the country, which was planned for February. He accepted. On February 9th, an e-mail from the Ambassador of France to the Kingdom of Bahrain informed him that,

"Upon verification with my Ministry, I was informed that your visit to Bahrain raised objections, which I have therefore indicated to the Bahrain authorities."

Furious and seeking to understand the reasons for this decision, the President of Paris-I wrote to Valérie Pécresse, Nicolas Sarkozy and Bernard Kouchner. Only the latter replied, with this explanation:

"The French authorities are bound by the agreement signed by France and the Emirate 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 an annex to the Paris-IV Sorbonne University in the Emirates, includes a clause that indicates that the university will be the only annex for the Paris-Sorbonne University in the Near and Middle East."

Yet, the prestigious name of the Sorbonne does not belong to Paris-IV. After the events of May 1968, thirteen universities were created in the Academy of Paris. A number of them bear the Sorbonne name. The term therefore does not belong to a specific university and cannot be registered as a trademark.

Pierre-Yves Hénin then asked Bernard Kouchner in a letter date March 13th for the text of this agreement between Paris-IV and the Emirates so as to "understand the content and scope of the terms that may be opposable against him". No answer. The President of the University exclaims,

"It is not normal to treat an agreement on a university as confidential. There is no transparency in this matter."

Furthermore, Paris-IV only receives 15% of the registration fees for the some 400 students of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, which total approximately \$13,000 per year per student. Pierre-Yves Hénin continues,

"When the Louvre Museum opened in Abu Dhabi, the exclusivity clause for the name was negotiated for €400 million per year. Here, 15% is ridiculous, especially as there are not many students. The French university is being sacrificed either for financial interests, which prove to be minimal, or to favor higher interests."

In 2006, Pascal Renouard de Vallière acted as an intermediary between the Paris IV University and the United Arab Emirates. An advisor in international relations and a friend of Olivier Dassault, he introduces himself as a lobbyist:

"I spent 20 years of my life creating relationships in the Middle East. I was the one who had the idea to create a major French university in Abu Dhabi, and the President of Paris IV, Jean-Robert Pitte, was the only one to agree with me.

With regard to the exclusivity clause, perhaps we didn't negotiate well, but we did not have the means to do better. We arrived only with what we had in our pockets. So we agreed to the exclusivity clause in return for the operational and construction costs."

Incidentally, Pascal Renouard de Vallière also acknowledges he did not receive the €2 million promised for his role in the success of the transaction:

"According to a verbal agreement, the Emiratis were going to pay me. But at the time, the French Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates was furious that I had been able to reach a conclusion on this project. He managed to discredit me in the eyes of the Emiratis and asked them not to pay me. Obviously, they followed his instructions."

Paris IV, for its part, admits that the cooperation agreement was poorly negotiated. Michel Fichant, Associate Professor and Member of the Board of Directors of the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi:

"The agreement was not sufficiently prepared and negotiated. Jean-Robert Pitte wanted to move forward much too quickly. The Emiratis bought a name without truly being informed of what it covered. But our government, which is endeavoring to increase its partnerships there, does not want to upset them and is therefore agreeing with them."

The trademark/name issue will be raised again when diplomas are issued to the students. Authorized to issue university diplomas only for Letters and the Humanities, Paris IV partnered with Paris V-Descartes for the Law and Economics programs, and this will be the institution that issues the B.A., Master and PhD degrees in these subjects - without the Sorbonne name, as the term is not part of the University's name.

The Emiratis are already concerned with this. With the Quai d'Orsay, they are reflecting on how to have the prestigious Sorbonne name appear.