

Arab-West Report, November 21, 2012

Title: Dutch politician Henk Jan van Schothorst's meetings with representatives of Egyptian political parties, newspaper editors, and Coptic bishops

Author: Diana Serôdio

(Note: Dr, Tāriq Sha'lān, member of al-Nūr Party, has made some open remarks and comments to the following report which were added to the text between brackets and properly marked out with the initials Dr. TS.)

Dutch politician, Henk Jan van Schothorst, International Secretary of the Dutch SG Party, visited Egypt between September 26 and October 1, 2012 in the context of the MATRA South program of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Arab-West Report (AWR)* was asked to arrange meetings with representatives of Egyptian political parties. This is a report of the various meetings that were conducted. Many of the meetings concerned members of the Egyptian delegation that was planning to visit The Netherlands from 8 to 12 October. Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst had all opportunities to ask whatever questions he wanted. These have been listed in this report as "Q HJS".

In the beginning of 2012, the Dutch government created the MATRA South Program. Through such a program, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands envisions “supporting activities that stimulate the democratic transition in the Arab region and strengthens relations between The Netherlands and recipient countries”. By providing incentive to economic development, motivating the creation of civil society initiatives, and cooperating directly with local and national governments, the MATRA South Program attempts to bring about an effective democratic transition in the countries with which it works.

Having already had experience in the dealings with countries in Southern and Central Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, Henk Jan van Schothorst's visit to Egypt happened thanks to the MATRA South Program. The purpose of his visit was to establish contact with political parties in Egypt that might benefit from the lessons and trainings the SGP is in the position to provide as an almost centenary political party. On the other hand the SGP wants to learn from the political experiences in Egypt, which in turn could benefit a better understanding between Egypt and The Netherlands.

To more effectively collaborate for the democratic structuring, stabilization of Egypt, and cooperation between Egypt and The Netherlands, Cornelis Hulsman, the Editor-in-Chief of *Arab-West Report*, has proposed to Dutch political parties and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs the necessary funding for the invitation of a delegation of nine Egyptian party representatives to The Netherlands. The initiative was approved and, in order to better introduce its program, goals, and conditions, Mr. Hulsman arranged several meetings with the party representatives and some of their leaders. In addition, important personalities of the Egyptian socio-political spectrum, whose status and position makes them vital cornerstones to the achievement of democratic stability, were also contacted. Since the SGP is a conservative Christian party they also wanted to better understand Muslim-Christian relations and become acquainted with the opinion of Christian leaders in the country.

Meeting with al-Wafd Party on September 27th, 2012

Participants:

- Ahmad ‘Iz al-’Arab: Head of the Committee of External Relations and Vice-President of al-Wafd Party
- George Misīhah: Former Member of Parliament for al-Wafd Party
- Henk Jan van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief
- Jayson Casper: Researcher and writer for AWR

Q HJS: Are you optimistic that the outcome of this Revolution will be a solid democracy?

Ahmad ‘Iz al-’Arab replied quickly and with conviction: he is optimistic. His major concern is, nevertheless, the Islamists’ intention of implementing Islamic values and “laws” in the state at the expense of democratic values and rights of minorities (such as the Christians, for example).

In 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood’s electoral results were better than expected, and so Mubārak was startled by the news. When, after the Revolution, free elections finally took place, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) tried to play an organizing role in society. In the opinion of Mr. al-’Arab, the MB, having been such a strong institution since its formation many decades ago, got impressive results in the January 2012 elections for having always been the strongest critic of the National Democratic Party of Mubārak. Thus, it was seen as the logical alternative after the regime was toppled.

Salafīs (and Sufīs as well) were known for not believing in resistance and always encouraging Muslims to be passive and pray to God instead of organizing protests and mobilizations. However, following the Revolution, they formed al-Nūr Party (Dr. TS: Please “they” replace by Salafīs, as Sufīs are not members of our party). This party is funded by Salafī organizations in Egypt which, in their turn, are financed by Gulf Wahābī countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Dr. TS: Please remove this section because it is not true, it bear no evidence, and we (al-Nūr Party) could easily sue and prosecute Mr. Ahmad ‘Iz Al-’Arab for this false accusation it is will be published under his name).. Their results in the elections were remarkable, and in addition to those of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), gave way to an Islamist majority that smashed the liberal opposition.

The Islamist popularity, however, has been decreasing, as can be noted by the election results: In January, 2012, the FJP obtained 13 million votes for Parliament. Only two months later, the votes for the FJP decreased to 7.5 million. In the presidential elections in June 2012, the number of votes for the Freedom and Justice candidate, Muhammad Mursī, went further down to around only 5.5 million.

Ahmad ‘Iz al-’Arab also mentioned the existence of enemies of the Revolution that are attempting to tear Egyptian society apart from within: the Saudi Salafīs, Qatar and other Gulf Monarchies, and the Fulūl or remnants (name given to members of the old regime). However, he firmly believes all of these will fail in the end.

Q HJS: How can the friction between Christians and Muslims in Egypt be resolved?

For the Vice-President of al-Wafd Party, Egyptian society, despite the undeniable factions it contains, is very different from Sudan, for example. Sudan is a large country, with many different religions and ethnic groups, and the only way to deal with such differences was to establish a democracy. However, in order to avoid that, it was instead decided that the country should be split in two, each half having a majority that can more easily rule over the others. Such an outcome could never take place in Egypt because Christians are not located in a specific area – they’re mixed among Muslims.

Concerning Copts in Egypt, Mr. al-’Arab believes there should be more cooperation between these and the Muslims, and that confrontation should be avoided as much as possible. Copts are well aware of the changes in the Egyptian society, however, and it is his opinion that they will not give in to oppressors, and because they still constitute an important minority, they will be integrated in the system eventually. The existence of a Coptic minority is, therefore, not a real problem in Egyptian society.

Cornelis Hulsman agreed to the need for cooperation and integration, but stated that reports such as the report “Tell My Mother I Miss Her,” presented last summer by Christian Solidarity International to the United States’ Congress do not help. This report accuses Muslims of kidnapping Christian girls in order to force them to convert to Islam. Reports like these create fear of Islamists, something with which President Mubārāk has also been playing.

Mr. al-’Arab’s response to the veracity of such a report was short: it is not true. There might have been some very rare cases of forced conversions, but this is most certainly not systematic as the report claims. It is thus an overall erroneous report. Christian girls might seldom be persuaded to marry a Muslim, but if this is done with the girl’s consent, it cannot be considered unlawful behavior.

Q HJS: What is the consistency of al-Wafd Party?

Al-Wafd Party gained only about 10% of the total Egyptian votes in the past parliamentary election, which was a big disappointment as they were expecting at least 20 or 25%. However, they believed they had members belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood who had infiltrated their party and are now making an effort to “clean up” the party and solidify its structures in order to avoid such a situation in the future.

Most of al-Wafd Party’s voters are among the older generations who are usually also fond of ‘Amr Mūsá, the former Secretary-General of the Arab League.

Al-Wafd Party is interested in a weaker military. Mr. Al-’Arab believes that the more powerful the military, the stronger the MB will be as well.

Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst commented on the elections’ result, saying that, to the Dutch, it was surprising how many votes the Islamists got. For him, as for other Dutch politicians, it was a surprise how more moderate and more balanced parties such as al-Wafd did not get more votes.

The explanation to this, according to Mr. Ahmad ‘Iz Al-’Arab, was the lack of time parties (other than the already well-established Freedom and Justice Party) had to organize themselves. The Muslim Brotherhood now holds significant power. According to al-Wafd’s Vice-President, they have attempted to have Egyptians swear loyalty and obedience to the Muslim Brotherhood—in what he called a fascist fashion. However, the people complained and, thus, this was not carried out. For him this is a proof that, even if at the moment there is turmoil and Egypt’s situation is still very fluid (meaning it can still take many different directions), eventually the Revolution will succeed.

Q Mr. al-’Arab: There is a big debate among and within European countries over the Euro (as Dutch elections took place on September 12th), and it was noted a rise of both hard-line liberals and socialists. Christian Democrats in Holland, for example, as a center party, had significantly less popularity nowadays. Why? (Question directed to Mr. van Schothorst)

There is a rise of both the right and left wings of roughly every country in Europe. In Holland, both fought to have one of their members as the Prime Minister, and the right ended up prevailing, playing on austerities, jobs and anti-European sentiments.

As Northern European countries are paying more and more for the debts of countries such as Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and Greece, they have become concerned about their own future as well as the European Union’s.

Concerning his own party, Mr. van Schothorst pointed out that, despite being more conservative and religion-oriented than other parties in Holland, the SGP has changed its perspectives overtime, allowing for an evolution in the way the women's role is played, for example. Most importantly, even if it defends very strongly Christian values, first and foremost it abides by the essential freedoms such as the freedom of association, expression, and religion.

Although the International Secretary of the SGP believes his party would be able to help conciliate some of the Egyptian parties' political and religious agendas, Mr. van Schothorst showed some concern for such parties' respect for the basic freedoms mentioned.

Following up this statement, George Misīhah expressed some concern for Egyptian society due to the FJP's lack of practical solutions to the most urgent problems affecting Egyptians, focusing instead almost solely on religion (CH: This was prejudiced and an opinion that was not maintained after George Misīhah's participation in the multi-party delegation to The Netherlands, October 8-12) and, thus, taking attention away from the issues that truly matter. The Muslim *sharī'ah's* clause in the Constitution, defended by the Freedom and Justice and al-Nūr Parties, is a crucial obstacle to a serious democracy and the rule of law due to the thousands of interpretations that can be made of the *sharī'ah* (Dr. TS: You may need to revise this statement with George, specially that he himself is presently a member of the Constitution drafting committee).

Nonetheless, Dr. Misīhah also affirmed being optimistic about his country's future. He believes the people are increasingly able to discern for themselves: what is essential, what is right, and what is wrong.

Q HJS: How can the SG Party concretely help al-Wafd Party?

For a start, in Mr. van Schothorst's perspective, there should be an exchange of impressions and historical experiences in order to identify common characteristics that could be essential to a better coordination between both parties. One of the common traits is surely the age of these parties, both being almost 100 years old.

The SGP could possibly provide some practical assistance, such as training on manifesto writing, effective institutionalization, and valuable political campaigning (best communication and interaction with the electorate; avoidance of promises that cannot be attained, etc.).

Mr. Ahmad 'Iz Al-'Arab appreciated this idea and suggested training sessions were arranged for the improvement of the internal structure of his party. He observed, however, that some changes were already being made to the party's political design, such as the implementation of a bottom-up decision-making system as opposed to centralized power, as the latter system, among other consequences, had made the party easier to infiltrate. Al-Wafd Party has elections for a sixty member general assembly, then, out of those, eleven officers are chosen and, finally, five vice-chairmen are elected.

Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst said that given the possibility of organizing another delegation in December of this year, it is important to define what is to be done beforehand. The earlier party building starts taking place, the better.

Q CH: There is an increasing fear in Coptic communities outside Egypt for developments in Egypt. That in turn negatively affects the outlook of Western political parties towards Egypt. What is to be done about this?

Mr. Al-'Arab agrees that, indeed, the image of an oppressive Egypt towards Copts is prejudicial to the country, but he does not believe this will lead to the separation of the country. Mr. Hulsman insisted, however, that Copts inside Egypt are becoming increasingly isolated, especially local communities, and that such a tendency

will most certainly have bad consequences for the country's socio-political landscape and image of Egypt in the West.

The VP of al-Wafd Party confessed to being skeptical that what is happening to a few Christian girls will affect the whole Coptic society or Egypt as a whole. Most Copts (inside and outside of Egypt) are well aware that what is being said is not true and so this tendency will not be going on forever. "What is happening here," he said, "is that there are people trying to plant the seeds of internal segregation. President Mursī said Egypt will always be a civil, democratic, and plural society because he knows he could not possibly Muslim Brotherize the whole society." And so in the end, he repeated, democracy in Egypt will prevail.

Hulsman responded that he agrees with Mr. Al-'Arab that much of what is said is not true and he too supports President Mursī's statement on Egypt remaining pluralistic, democratic and civil but he also believes that Mr. Al-'Arab and many other Egyptians underestimate the negative impact of distorted reporting about Egypt. Mr. Al-'Arab had to leave for another meeting and agreed to continue this discussion later.

2nd Part of the Interview – without Mr. Ahmad 'Iz Al-'Arab

Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst raised the issue of the compatibility of religion and democracy; the dangers of such an intertwined relation between the two at the moment in Egypt.

Having been a representative of his party within The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy–NIMD (an institute that describes itself as "a democracy assistance organization of political parties in The Netherlands for political parties in young democracies") for over four years, Mr. Henk van Schothorst can be considered a professional instructor of party institutionalization.

Speaking extensively about his party, the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (the Reformed Political Party), Mr. van Schothorst explained that the SGP is an orthodox Protestant Calvinist political party in The Netherlands that represents a select group of individuals, independent of coalitions that would compromise the Christian values that define this particular political party. Thus, for being more conservative than the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) and less willing to give up their core values for more votes, they usually occupy only around 3% of the 150 parliamentary seats. During the elections two years ago the SGP was already close to three seats. The elections of September 12 resulted in many more votes for the third seat. Because of a horizontal list-connection with the Christian Union, they got our extra votes and thanks to that got their extra seat. However, as The Netherlands' voting system of proportional representation makes it almost impossible for a single party to gain the majority of votes, it requires parties to form coalitions. It is in such cases—when the bigger parties are in need of more seats to get their majority, that parties such as the SGP gain significant importance and are able to achieve their demands.

As religion plays an essential role in the SGP, the "attacks" from outside secularists makes its members more united, even if there is some dissent between them on certain points. Still, they respect different religious beliefs and are always willing to engage in dialogue.

Thus, as Mr. van Schothorst pointed out, religion is absolutely compatible with democracy, so long as the basic liberties and freedoms are respected and given priority over the religious preferences of any particular group of people.

In contrast to the situation in The Netherlands, according to George Misīhah, religion in Egypt has been wrongfully conveyed.

As poverty and economic performance are generally accepted as the biggest problems the Egyptian society faces, the Islamist parties (more specifically, the Freedom and Justice and al-Nūr parties), have not presented practical solutions to address such issues. Instead, they have been focusing on religious premises and details (such as discussing the legality of women going out to the streets without wearing a *hijāb*, for example), and have been confronting other religions and ethnicities, which, as a result, have become increasingly isolated from the rest of the society.

Despite this, Dr. Misīhah believes that the Muslim Brotherhood might still be able to deviate from this tendency to religious extremism if some of its very well-educated members (civil engineers, doctors, etc) who have presented good and focused ideas are able to increase their influence within the party.

Q HJS: What are the advantages that the Islamist parties – and most especially the Freedom and Justice Party – have over the liberal parties?

The advantage of the FJP, in Dr. George Misīhah's view, is that, throughout the years and even under the oppressive regime of Mubārak, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to maintain close and direct relations to the poor, providing people good quality services when and where the state was not present.

Al-Wafd and other liberal parties aspire to have such a connection, but they lack the funds and the historical links to be able to have such closeness with the people, at least in the near future. It is thus essential, as stressed by Dr. Misīhah, to get more involved with regular people and consult them more instead of keeping the decision-making process indoors where discussions take place between the party members who belong almost exclusively to a very selective elite. What is it that people want? What do they consider would be good or bad for them? What would they like the Constitution to grant them? These are all important questions that should be asked to voters.

Socialist parties are already moving quickly to address the people, but liberal parties, and among them al-Wafd party, are still primarily represented in the big cities, such as Cairo and Alexandria, therefore not being known to around 70% of the voters. Hamadīn Sabāhī, the Socialist candidate in the presidential elections, obtained 4,800,000 votes in the first round of the Presidential elections which made him obtain a secure 3rd position out of the 13 candidates that were running. This is a concern to the liberals because what we are looking at is to a rise of the two extremes of the Egyptian socio-political *spectrum*: the Islamists and the Socialists. In order to change this tendency, al-Wafd Party needs to look for a charismatic leader, to have a well-defined political vision and program, and to avoid attacking other parties, focusing instead on presenting itself as a serious and viable alternative.

QHJS: How can we define the very identity of al-Wafd Party? What are the party's potentialities and fragilities?

Dr. George Misīhah first joined this party in 2005, quitting in 2007 due to his discontentment with all parties in general. Following the Revolution in 2011, the "Egyptian Bloc" – a group of new parties that intended to unite – was formed, but those in it constantly and severely attacked each other and, as a consequence, Dr. Misīhah retreated from the political stage.

Now he is again part of al-Wafd Party, but he believes that its restructuring is essential for it to be more efficient and credible, for it already has the necessary tools to be successful. Its first priority should now be the creation of a clear vision—the establishment of attainable objectives integrated in a feasible and well-organized plan.

Al-Wafd Party has branches all over Egypt; however, these are not too well organized, which is related to a centralized funding structure. Communication channels have been created for better and closer relations with the more peripheral party offices, but there is still the need for increased decentralization that allows for each office to more effectively raise funds locally.

In the last parliamentary elections, al-Wafd Party obtained only 52 seats. Who voted for the party? Mostly people living in the cities. The Delta region and southern Egypt are known to be regions where Islamists have great influence.

How good was the media's coverage for al-Wafd Party? The party was extensively promoted in the media, but the poorest layers of the society have only the mosques to provide them with information since TV and newspapers are, for the most part, out of their reach. Consequently, the Freedom and Justice and Al-Nūr parties obtained much better results among the lower social classes.

Q: Why was George Misīhah one of the ten Members of Parliament appointed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)?

Dr. Misīhah started by running in the elections as the number two of the “Egyptian Democrats” party list. Since, according to the law, the Parliament needs to have at least 50% of members who are farmers or workers, Dr. Misīhah was not the one from his list taking the place in the Parliament for the Delta region, despite having collected 80,000 votes as an independent. Nonetheless, given the SCAF's willingness to compensate for the lack of Christian representatives present in the Parliament, they chose to attribute five of the ten seats they were legally entitled to fulfill, to Christians. Among these five was George Misīhah.

Besides being Christian, Dr. Misīhah was known by SCAF members to have a balanced political approach. Indeed, he had been present in various meetings held between young revolutionaries and the SCAF during the weeks following the Revolution, and was seen as a good example for 1) being a Coptic Christian able to discuss in a civilized manner and effectively deal with different ideas and points of view; and 2) for being neither hateful against the old regime, nor an extremist.

When appointed by the SCAF, Dr. Misīhah was still be part of the “Egyptian Democrats” party, which was formed a mere two months before the parliamentary elections. The lack of time to prepare for the elections after the Revolution, however, was a big obstacle for all parties except for the FJP, which was already very well prepared. With low funding and the need for big compromises to unite the parties (which destroyed the ideals which led to their foundation in the first place), the youngest parties were easily scattered. Consequently, after being appointed, lacking a solid political party to stand by him, George chose to reunite with al-Wafd Party.

Q HJS: How is Wafd party organized?

1) Funding:

There is no funding from the government to political parties. Al-Wafd Party is not as rich as the MB—far from it, but it is richer than other liberal parties. There are many businessmen loyal to the party who provide funding willingly and who, at least so far, have made no attempts to interfere unlawfully in the party, nor tried to change its identity.

2) Recruitment:

Membership is acquired either by reference or by participation in the open discussions and conferences organized by the party. Nonetheless, Dr. Misīhah still believes the human resource management in al-Wafd is

insufficient and, thus, welcomes Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst's assistance and training in order to improve the Party's capabilities on this particular matter.

Some of the training that would be greatly appreciated: 1) How to organize a leadership "competition"; 2) Determining which rules to fix to avoid infiltrations from other parties; 3) How to define and maintain the party's identity and have it reflected on its members.

3) Communication/Media:

There is al-Wafd newspaper with daily publications in print and online. Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst alerted, however, for the need of being as objective as possible on all news published and advised the Party to try to strengthen readership within as many different backgrounds as possible.

4) Charismatic Leadership:

In the opinion of Dr. Misīhah, this is an essential point that al-Wafd needs to address. In his opinion, there are 12 people within the party who have a bright political future.

Q: How is the relationship between Christians and Muslims seen by al-Wafd Party?

Western reports accusing Muslims of discrimination against Christians (most especially Copts) is creating many problems for Egyptian society and making it easier for Islamist parties to get more votes.

There is no problem in trying to preserve the numbers and rights of Christian communities in Egypt, but, according to Dr. Misīhah, this must be done without criticizing Islam, or else it will only be counter-productive.

New members elected to the party pushed to add "[...] if it is not against God" as an alternative to the *sharī'ah* statement at the end of the sentence in the Constitution, which starts with "I promise to respect my country, its Constitution [...]". It was then advised by Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst that parties in agreement to that alternative unite to get it passed—in The Netherlands, the SGP is also forced to unite with other Christian parties to fight secularists' attempts to, for example, intervene in the Christian education system.

For Dr. Misīhah, keeping an open mind is fundamental, as people need to ultimately work for the benefit of the Egyptian nation. Hate and insults is thus a big obstacle for an outcome that is in the interest of all Egyptians. Consequently, fighting for "Copts' rights" only is, in his opinion, only negatively affecting the nation, since it promotes the differentiation of this community from the rest of the population. By pushing for the rights of a specific part of the Egyptian people, there are rights being taken away from others, and this cannot be allowed.

In the Sinai, the Bedouins, for example, are a permanent target of injustice. The police arrest them by the hundreds, postponing trials in an undignified way and, sometimes, not even providing them with such an essential political right. They are also often prohibited to own land.

Everyone should be equal before the law, with no differentiation—positive or negative—of any specific religion or ethnic group. Parties should be fighting for equality and against discrimination, and should have as a priority combating poverty, which is common to all communities and which is the most destructive factor to Egypt, seriously compromising its present and future.

Al-Wafd stands up, not for Copts, but for Egypt and the Egyptians. This nationalist approach is very appealing to the general public. In addition, it has a lengthy and very honorable past that is still not forgotten.

Q HJS: What is al-Wafd Party's main priority and how does it plan to address it?

Address poverty.

The Revolution made it clear that the poor were desperate for a better future, as the big numbers of protesters came from the slums. The MB knows this and it has worked hard to maintain its ties with the lower class.

George pointed out that appealing to big business might not make these people happy. However, Mr. van Schothorst reminded him that if Egypt is able to attract investors, they will create jobs and they will allow for national production instead of having the country rely on imports for so many products.

Egypt, as Mr. Hulsman remarked, has labor, land, and raw materials. If it is able to create some kind of an investment fund, it might be able to attract investors.

Dr. Misīhah accepted these ideas, but added that, for businesses to invest in Egypt, it needs to give them assurances such as political stability and a functional system based on a clear and explicit rule of law. Thus, a well-structured and unambiguous constitution is a fundamental step towards a solid economic recovery.

Mr. Hulsman, however, suggested that, once in The Netherlands, the Egyptian political party representatives could always try to seek investors and businessmen that would be interested in signing agreements that would benefit all parties involved.

Q: In what ways can al-Wafd Party, and Egypt in general, benefit from the coming visit to The Netherlands and best take advantage of Henk Jan van Schothorst's know-how?

Through the incentives given by Dutch Government for Dutch parties to create close bilateral relations to parties from young democracies, the SGP can get al-Wafd as well as other Egyptian political parties in contact with parties in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, for example. Such a relationship could be mutually beneficial, as it would allow for an exchange of views and know-how from parties in countries at more or less the same stage of democratic transition.

In addition to this, Mr. van Schothorst and other members of the SGP can provide assistance, not only to al-Wafd Party, but to all Egyptian parties that would be interested in receiving their help. Through trainings and some guidance, parties could become more efficient and effective, and, as a result, the country's democratic institutions would be strengthened, which would, of course, be extremely beneficial for Egypt as a whole.

The Egyptian Parliament could also benefit from handbooks that have been written specifically on the formation of Parliaments. An adaptation of such manual to be used in Egypt, accounting for its social-political landscape, religious issues, culture, and economic situation could perhaps be arranged.

There is also the possibility of getting the Venice Commission to cooperate with Egyptians in writing the Constitution. The content is not questioned, the Commission's role being only to provide technical and legal support. However, the Venice Commission will only help in case all parties agree to ask for it, so it is fundamental to show no internal dissent.

Mr. Hulsman emphasized how valuable such an initiative could be to Egypt, underlining that this assistance should, by no means, be considered an "external intervention" given the purely technical nature of its approach and, of course, the participation of an equal number of Egyptian constitutional and legal experts.

Indeed, it was generally agreed by those present that, by going beyond values and generalist ideas, this program would focus on verifying the coherence and legality of the Constitution, and thus other assisting parties could

concentrate almost solely on accomplishing their goals regarding the substance of the document. The Venice Commission's role is even more pertinent as there is, according to Dr. Misīhah, a lack of a sufficient number of legal experts within the Constitutional Assembly (Dr. TS: Please re-check Mr. George's opinion about this statement???!).

Dr. Misīhah warned that Europe is not seen by many as an example and there is a very negative view of external interventions, despite the assurances given that the content itself will not be questioned. Concerning the possibility of a discussion on Israel compromising the success of the visit though, Dr. Misīhah reminded us all that those who will be traveling to Holland are all in favor of the peace treaty and thus are believed to be responsible enough to behave and surpass religious differences.

Q HJS: What has been the effect of external condemnation of discrimination against Copts in Egypt?

Despite the unwillingness of the embassies of Canada, the U.S., and of some European countries to provide exact figures, there has not been a significant increase in Coptic emigration numbers, [as had been claimed by Najīb Jubrā'īl](#). Adding to this, the rumor that it is "common practice" that Christian girls are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam, the image of Egypt, and especially of Egyptian Muslims, has been severely denigrated, Dr. Misīhah stated.

As a result, the fragmentation of Egyptian society has become even more profound. Copts condemn inter-religious marriage to Muslims due to the conversion that follows, there is an increasing mistrust between both communities, and some Orthodox Christians have even suggested the revival of the Coptic language in Christian schools.

Mr. Hulsman condemned the revival of the language as it would be only one more excuse to separate Christians further from Muslims. The Coptic language can, of course, be used in religious services, but at school this would make no sense, since it is almost a dead language at the moment. Dr. Misīhah agreed, pointing out the need for better education of Copts in order to prevent inter-religious marriages that later could be regretted by Christian men and women who engage in it. This, however, does not mean that Christians and Muslims should be kept at a distance from each other.

The period from 1920 to 1950, as Dr. Misīhah reminded those present, was considered the Platinum Age for Copts. It was a time where the nationality was given priority in the identification of a person, not being considered necessary to distinguish religions or ethnicities. Indeed, even if many actors and Members of Parliament were Christians, this was not common knowledge. Today, it is immediately asked and everyone knows. During those thirty years, Copts were good businessmen, negotiating with all sectors of the society, and were barely ever discriminated against.

Coptic numbers have significantly decreased in the past decades due to emigration, smaller families, and conversion to Islam. Consequently, the members of this increasingly smaller community feel that the more separated and isolated, the more successful and safer they will be.

In their minds, they need to make twice as much effort as a Muslim that aspires to the same professional post. This may or may not be the reality, but it is nonetheless how they feel, Misīhah said. Acquiring a good job would be the only way to assure their rights. Consequently, though, they often blame those who do not hire or select them among others of discriminating against them, and thus a vicious circle has been created within the Egyptian society.

In truth, Copts do not feel as though they are getting enough help from the outside. However, they can see that the few attempts that have been made by external entities to provide them some assistance have only caused

more trouble. Sometimes, such attempts are but excuses for further interference in national affairs and as such Copts are just a playing card. The old regime, too, had used the Copts as a playing card as it suited them—giving them support sometimes, and at other times killing them—to use in its fight against Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood: try to scatter the opposition in order to prevail.

For Dr. Misīhah, Copts need to stand up for themselves, but should not become confrontational in a way that would only bring about more trouble. When portrayed negatively in the FJP's media, Copts should publish corrections to what was erroneously said by the Muslim Brotherhood, for example.

Most importantly, Copts should not be asking for Coptic rights, but for rights for all and equality before the law. Only by adopting this position could they make Egyptian society become more egalitarian and respectful of the rights of all Egyptians, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs.

Meeting with Yūsuf Sīdhum from the *Watanī* newspaper – September 28th, 2012

Cornelis Hulsman had informed Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst about his [interview with Yūsuf Sīdhum in December 2011](#), just prior to the parliamentary elections. Yūsuf Sīdhum, Editor-in-Chief of the largest Christian newspaper in Egypt, then stated he was not afraid of an Islamist takeover. It was thus only natural for the discussion to use his optimism in December 2011 as starting point for this discussion. Has Mr. Sīdhum changed his opinion or is he still optimistic that Islamists' power will not compromise Egypt's democracy?

Participants:

- Yūsuf Sīdhum: Chairman and Editor-in-Chief of the Christian Egyptian newspaper, *Watanī*
- Henk van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief

Mr. Hulsman started the interview by introducing Mr. Sīdhum to the upcoming visit of nine Egyptian political party representatives to The Netherlands within the MATRA South program and the possibility of having Egypt request the Venice Commission's technical support to write the Constitution.

Mr. Sīdhum agreed it would be a good idea to take advantage of the delegation's trip to The Netherlands to present Egypt as a candidate to the Venice's Commission Constitutional support. It will not be easy because, in order to cooperate, the Venice Commission requires a unanimous acceptance from all the parties in Egypt, and since usually close relations to Western countries are not well seen by the voters, not all parties are expected to accept it easily. To increase the possibilities of approval, it is fundamental that it is made clear to those involved that "interference" is strictly technical and is not extended to the very content of the Constitution.

Even if the Constitution comes to have clauses that mention the *sharī'ah*, it is essential that Christian opposition is not made to protect the rights of Christians. In fact, it is Mr. Sīdhum's belief that, in order for pluralism—and democracy in general—to be successfully implemented in Egypt, Christians, like Muslims, need to advocate for the rights of all Egyptians, and not solely for those of their own religious/ethnic community. If rights are demanded for one specific faction of the population, it will backfire. "Democracy is for all, and differentiating some groups can only harm it."

Before the Revolution, the political party system did not allow religion-based parties to be formed. Islamists, in particular Muslim Brothers who after the Revolution founded the Freedom and Justice Party, however, criticized such a policy and, in 2011 it became possible for political parties to be formed on the basis of religious affiliation.

Mr. van Schothorst, as a member of a conservative Christian Party in The Netherlands, responded and asked if Mr. Sīdhum, personally, condemned parties whose foundations were religious. "In Egypt," Mr. Sīdhum said, "parties should definitely not be formed on religious inclinations only". Following the Revolution such parties, however, were formed which have brought Islamists into the political realm. In Mr. Sīdhum's view, this has been very prejudicial to Egypt, "but now that the Islamists are there and given that this is the system implemented in the country, we—Christians and any other political and religious communities – need to be able to effectively communicate and negotiate with all those involved".

Q. HJS: Why aren't Christians doing the same, and joining under a specific political party? Who represents them?

Christians, fortunately, do not have sufficient numbers, and so they cannot afford to form a party that would consist solely of Christians and oriented to protect their rights only. It simply would never gain sufficient strength in Parliament to even make much of a difference. Perhaps if their percentage were more than 6%-8% of the population, as in Lebanon, for example, that could be possible, but not in Egypt. Egypt does not need any more factions, and Christians cannot afford to isolate themselves from the political system.

Historically, al-Wafd Party represents them, but generally all liberal parties represent Christians—as well as all other religious and ethnic communities in Egypt. However, they are too fragmented among themselves to be able to have significant weight on the political stage. Thus, it would be important to have them unite, so that, rather than 30 weak liberal parties, a strong and solid one could be formed and have real possibilities to face other parties such as the FJP and al-Nūr Party.

Q. HJS: How can Dutch political parties help Egyptian political parties? How can they create close bilateral relations and have Egypt profit from such connections?

As mentioned before, there is a growing sensitivity in the political arena and ties to foreign agents—whatever the sort—are seen as negative. Every party will be unwilling to easily accept any compromise that is not purely made at a national level because it is often seen by Egyptians as a conspiracy against the country.

It is important, therefore, that the Dutch parties and all those involved in the talks with the Egyptian representatives are aware that there will be a general reluctance in accepting foreign support of any sort. Perhaps even more-so if the party is officially a "defender" of Christians. When in talks with the SG Party of Mr. van Schothorst, Muslims are likely to think "if they have a Christian Party, why can't we have a Muslim Party as well?"

Indeed, as Mr. van Schothorst pointed out, the Salafīs of al-Nūr Party thought the SGP was the most interesting of the Dutch parties because they thought of themselves as the Egyptian version of such a party.

Mr. Sīdhum then made a reference to a particular episode as an example. When the Turkish Prime-Minister Tayyip Erdogan visited Egypt, he was hailed by everyone because he had "taken over" power to the Turkish version of an Islamic party. However, in his speech, Prime Minister Erdogan clarified something that was quite surprising for those Islamists who had seen in him an example of how to conquer the government for the Muslims: "I lead an Islamic party in Turkey, but we only succeeded because we rest on equal stand with other religions".

Islamists have never understood why Muslims were so "contained" in Turkey. Since Ataturk, Turkey has been committed to preserve a secular state. Now, Erdogan has been trying to Islamize Turkey, but such an attempt has had consequences: this has made the possibility of joining the European Union less of a reality.

Nonetheless, the government has kept a good and desirable balance between the various religious and ethnic groups, and so if Egypt is to choose between Turkey's or Iran's model, Mr. Sīdhum would much prefer the former to the latter, and he certainly hopes that this is the direction in which Egypt is headed. The FJP has been tightening its bonds with Turkey, and that is, for the Chairman of the *Watanī* newspaper, a reassurance.

Despite this, the Muslim Brotherhood still pushes for a system with religion as its foundation. It is the easiest path for them in a country where Muslims are an undeniable majority.

Mr. van Schothorst, however, pointed out that if Egypt was made to have proportional representation, the Christians might be able to have a solid platform like the SG Party. They might not be able to collect very many votes, and never achieve a majority on their own. Still, majorities are always almost impossible to achieve by one sole party in a system such as that of the Dutch. Thus, coalitions would need to be formed while, at the same time, each party could defend their own electorate respectably. At the same time he underlined the wisdom and rationale behind the Egyptian way of becoming a member and probably electable candidate for one of the current parties.

However, as pointed out by Mr. Sīdhum and Mr. Hulsman, such a system requires a high level of mutual respect and a capability of compromise that perhaps the Egyptian society is not yet ready to have. If this is not achieved, the country's factions might become even more distant and isolated among themselves than before.

Q. HJS: Since your interview in December 2011 are you not anxious about the Islamist influence?

Mr. Sīdhum admits that Islamists had achieved better results than expected. Liberals were guessing at the time that the Freedom and Justice and al-Nūr Parties would gather perhaps 35% to 40% of the seats. They ended up with 75%, meaning the largest share of the Parliament.

However, it is the *Watanī* newspaper chairman's opinion that, from December to May, the Islamists, through their actions in Parliament, their way to control discussions, their manners and dealings during events, etc., have only damaged themselves and their image. They managed to shock not only Christians but Muslims as well. This is verifiable on Egyptian talk-shows. Mr. Sīdhum has heard many Muslims complain about the Islamists' acts saying "What are these people doing?! They are burning our country!"

People know about the falsification of official papers and they ultimately uncover the lies as well. Muslim Brotherhood members have been foolish in doing such things and now it will backfire. If they were first seen as saints, they have now shown Egyptians that they can just do whatever they want, leaving the people with no trust in them anymore.

Not even Christians expected the Muslim Brotherhood could affect itself so much: the talks about the new Constitution have been a shameful example. The result of such behavior is that, from their 75% majority they have now lost at least 25% of the votes. Christians will still not be in an easy position, but now that the Islamists have hurt themselves so much, they are a lot more confident they will have more of a say in the Constitution and in Egypt's future.

Q. HJS: Mr. Henk van Schothorst asked thus which parties Mr. Sīdhum believes will gain in new elections?

For Mr. Sīdhum, the Constitution's final draft will reveal the answer, as he explained, "the Constitution is like a kitchen—it's where everything's cooked". But he assured those present that he, personally, was not as worried as most Copts seem to be. To him, this is the chance for radicals to express their opinions and aspirations, something that was impossible before the Revolution. They have the right to do so and, in Mr. Sīdhum's view that is precisely what will steer Egypt away from radicalism.

The Constitution is fundamental, of course, but ultimately the Azhar is always the final body to interpret the *sharī'ah*. All Egyptians have the right to refer to their personal status and to choose their own leaders, and it was already suggested that such a premise should be either added to Article II, or become the Article III. The Azhar does not want radicals to be able to play with the wording “on the condition that it does not violate the *sharī'ah* of Allah”. It is too broad of a statement to be part of a Constitution. One wonders why they suggest this. What are they hiding under the table? Is there a hidden plan? Nothing should be left to chance and Mr. Sīdhum is confident that the Constitutional Assembly will not let this pass as it is.

Someone (I did not hear the name well) once said: “We should convert Christians because Islam is the better religion”. He was, however, deeply criticized for having made this statement. He also said that, according to Islam, boys are adults from the ages of 14 or 15, whereas girls become women as soon as they get their period. Thus, Islamists tend to push for the lowering of the marriage age, most especially for girls (Dr. TS: This is a FAKE statement. It was proved later that this is a rumor, only initiated and communicated through media, according to Mr. ‘Amr Darrāj, the Secretary General of the Constitution Assembly; this statement does not exist in the new Constitution and was never mentioned by anybody within the assembly).

One of Mr. Sīdhum’s concerns it that, some Islamist values—even some of the most orthodox ones—are deeply rooted in society and in institutions such as courts and even churches, and so they will probably stand by some of the Islamists’ premises.

Q. HJS: Are Copts severely harassed as was reported by Najīb Jubrā’īl to the U.S. Congress?

Mr. Cornelis Hulsman started out by telling the case of a Coptic woman whom he has known since 1998 and whom he had introduced to Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst. She and her husband applied to go to The Netherlands as refugees, but it was later discovered that her husband had falsified a document and so, after 8 years, the family—the man, his wife, and their two daughters—were forced to leave Holland and go back to Egypt. Regrettably though, the Dutch policeman who accompanied the family handed the family and their passports directly to the authorities upon their arrival to Egypt. As a consequence, they have been questioned weekly in the first year after arrival and regularly until today. Her husband abandoned his family and the woman is fearful that Salafīs will take advantage of their situation to convert her daughters by forcing them to marry them and believes this should qualify them to ask for asylum (Dr. TS: Salafīs has no relation what so ever with this case or similar ones (if existed). I only see the lady was abroad and does not actually know much about *al-Salafīyah*, and the reason the lady mentioned Salafīs here is to provide a false excuse to receive asylum by The Netherlands).

In Mr. Sīdhum’s view, this is an unfortunate position for a family to be in, but it is not enough to request asylum. Often, he says, the complaints of forced conversion and kidnapping of Christian girls by Muslims are untrue. Muslim boys may try to enchant Christian girls and women, but it is not as if they were “forced”. Afterwards, because it is such a social scandal for the community and family of these girls, when they find out a girl ran away to marry a Muslim, out of shame, they repeatedly accuse the man of having forced her to do so. These situations usually take place among the lower class, when girls are very poor and lack education, family support, and solid Christian values. The unfairness is in the fact that, if a woman converts to Islam, she can do so through an easy process. However, if a Muslim woman converts to Christianity, there is no turning back and her ID will still read that she is a Muslim, so it can never be official. Thus, if then parents want to bring up the children as Christians, they are denied that right because, according to their ID, they are Muslims and, as a result, need to attend a Muslim school. The only way to solve this problem is to allow for secular marriages so that children are not “stamped” with a religion from birth, and an ID that will define not only their lives, but their descendants’ as well.

Egypt, Mr. Sīdhum explained, has signed the Geneva’s Human Rights Declaration, but added the premise “unless it goes against Islam’s principles”. Saudi Arabia, for example, abstained from signing it. To Mr. Sīdhum, trying to change the Islamic doctrine is already a lost battle, and there is not much that can be done about it.

Since last December, though, as a Christian and as the chairman of a Christian newspaper, Mr. Sīdhum has been approached numerous times by international media and human rights organizations, pressuring him to support the human rights reporting of Najīb Jubrā’īl, who has claimed that over a hundred thousand Copts have left Egypt after the Revolution. To Yūsuf Sīdhum, this is a false figure, which makes Mr. Jubrā’īl a fraud and a lousy lawyer.

Since then, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Watanī* newspaper has tried to verify this information, because he knows this is the sort of information that pleases the West. Thus, last January, he got a man with good relations with the embassies stationed in Egypt—especially with the Canadian, American, and British Embassies, to see about this report and demand information on Coptic migration to be able to collect some more exact numbers. The Embassies, however, refused to give out exact figures, saying that, because they do not differentiate religions themselves, all they know about the migrants headed to their countries is that they are Egyptians. As a result, the most they could provide were approximate numbers.

Mr. Hulsman said he obtained Belgian migration figures that show that Coptic migration and requests for asylum have not increased since the Revolution, and that the requests, when accepted, were not due to religious grounds.

Towards the end of our meeting, Mr. Sīdhum kindly showed us how, since 1958, the *Watanī* (meaning “homeland”) has sent out their publications for Copts all over the globe on a weekly basis. Also, the *Watanī International* in English started being published in February 2001, and, in May 2006, they launched a French version of it. Remarkably, the newspaper also has a Braille version that comes out monthly and which is sent for free to the visually impaired Copts all over the globe.

As advertisements reduced significantly after the Revolution, the newspaper was forced to reduce its international section, which is written both in Arabic and in English. Editorials also have both versions. Some of these were written by Mr. Yūsuf Sīdhum himself, such as one entitled, “Did Mursī honor his pledge to the Copts?” and another named, “Asylum: if for Muslims, they are heroes, if for Copts, they are traitors”. Explaining the latter one briefly, Mr. Sīdhum clarified that Copts are believed to make Egypt and Muslims look bad, and some even argue that, as a punishment, their Egyptian identity should be withdrawn. Indeed, Copts seldom ask for asylum without previously asking their own government for assistance. They are accused of writing directly to European institutions complaining about being politically harassed in Egypt, yet they also criticize the notion of “freedom” in Europe when they are finally granted permission to live there.

Meeting with Bishop Marqus – September 28th, 2012

Participants:

- Bishop Marqus: Bishop of Shubrā al-Khaymah, a northern suburb of Cairo
- Henk van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief
- George Misihah: Member of Parliament for al-Wafd Party

The meeting with Bishop Marqus started out by having Mr. Henk van Schothorst introduce the SG Party’s constituency and overall ideology. Mr. van Schothorst defined it as a small Christian conservative pro-life party, meaning anti-gay marriage, anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia, which is unwilling to make coalitions that

could compromise its core values. His role in Egypt is to get to know some organizations and institutions and try to find a way to build bridges and to cooperate effectively, envisioning mutually-beneficial relations. The SGP being a party highly committed to Christian values, it is instinctive that it should try to create bonds with Copts in Egypt, providing assistance to the best of their abilities as their present situation is not an easy one.

Indeed, the Bishop said, the situation was never easy for Copts—neither before nor after the Revolution. However, after the Revolution it seems as though things did become more difficult than usual. According to the Bishop, 65% of the members of the Constitutional Assembly are hard-line Muslims (CH: I would not call Muslims who are committed to their own religion as "hard-line"), the *shari'ah* remaining a component of the Constitution is now more likely than ever before. And this endangers the situation of Christians in Egypt very much. Bishop Marqus provided an example: in the proposed constitution the “Personification of God,” can lead to the imprisonment of any person who alleges Jesus Christ is God. And the same might even happen to those who do not believe Mursī is President because God chose him (Dr. TS: Both examples represent cases that in fact are not part of the *shari'ah* by any mean!!!!).

Q. HJS: Mr. Yūsuf Sīdhum (Chairman of the *Watanī* newspaper), a Copt himself, is optimistic and does not think things are irreversible at this point. Does Your Grace agree?

Bishop Marqus was definitely less optimistic than Mr. Sīdhum. To him, certain premises defended by Islamists severely undermine fundamental values such as equality of religion and gender. The fact that women cannot be accountable as witnesses in court unless there is another person witnessing the same is an example of such inequality. For the Bishop, this means that one man is equivalent to two women. In other words, that one woman is worth, in fact, just half of a man. In addition, if indeed it becomes legal for women to marry at the age of 9 years old, as is defended by al-Nūr Party (Again, this is a rumor. Al-Nūr Party has never defended or requested marriage of children. However, the origin refers to a statement written by a Salafi *shaykh* who was criticizing the double standards of some westerns and Christians who ridicule Islam by stating that Aisha was married to Prophet Mohammed PBUH at the age of 9, while they deliberately hide the fact that Mary PBUH was engaged to Joseph the Carpenter and married him at the age of 12, and Sara married Prophet Ibrahim, and Jacob’s wife married at almost the same age, but all that was in the past, due to cultural and social habits at that era, similar to current Amazon tribes and some Bedouin and African cultures who still do the same), and if one man is allowed to marry four women (Dr. TS: In reality, even if religion allow this to happen, how many Muslim men in Egypt marry four women? Answer is almost ZERO!!!!), then they are perhaps just one quarter of a man. This takes away women’s dignity, and, along with it, the whole society’s.

The Bishop worries about Egypt’s future because he sees many institutions and important posts being occupied by Islamists. [Husām al-Ghurīyānī, for example, the head of the Supreme Judiciary Council \(SJC\)](#), is extremely conservative. It is even more so worrisome as these men have a lot of money which they can use to increase their supporters. In Mubārāk’s time, the Christians still held some important posts, fulfilling two ministerial positions. Today, they have but a half post as the Education and Scientific Departments are not two separated departments anymore.

Q. HJS: What is the Bishop’s insight on an Egyptian multiparty delegation going to The Netherlands?

After being briefed about the goals and conditions of the visit of the nine Egyptian Party representatives, the Bishop’s initial reaction was a very negative one: “They will go to the West, get confronted by secularists, and then they will come back even more religious than before” (Dr. TS: ???!!!!!!).

As Mr. Hulsman pointed out, however, the overall goal is to help strengthen Egypt's democratic institutions, and then possibly enhance the economic relations between Egypt and Holland. Of course discussions on where Egypt is headed, on the content of Article II, and other matters will probably take place, but it is a program meant to support key democratic institutions.

Indeed, Islamists do hold a parliamentary majority. Precisely because of that, there needs to be not only more cooperation between the opposing factions, but also more dialogue between such factions and the Islamists. To such a suggestion made by Mr. Cornelis Hulsman, the Bishop rushed to point out that, a few months earlier, a few hundred Salafī Islamists attacked a building belonging to the Church in his diocese and those opposing were told they should use their own means, nothing more, to try and defend it. The situation, he said, is out of control.

Mr. Hulsman, however, remarked that it would perhaps be helpful to discuss issues such as this with Dr. Tāriq Sha'lān from al-Nūr Party. He is, in Mr. Hulsman's opinion, a very approachable man with whom it might be easier to communicate and start building relations with the more religious faction. The Bishop declared being open to talk to everyone, but told Mr. Hulsman that, from time to time, at the Church, they would receive calls from Salafīs, asking for big sums of money in exchange for tranquility, to which, of course, the Bishop would never agree (Dr. TS: I don't know about this, but I don't tend to believe it really happened, maybe some individuals with a beard did so, but let's remember that not everybody with a beard should be considered a conservative Muslim, i.e., "Salafist" (as in the *al-Da'wah al-Salafiyah*, or *Al-Jabhah Al-Salafiyah*, or Al-Nūr Party). Let's remember that "Jihadists", terrorists, and "*al-Takfir and Al-Hijrah*" are extremist Muslims who also have grown beards, but to define them as Salafists, I see this is a misunderstanding by the community about the different groups and paths in Islam, and inability to differentiate between conservative Muslims and Extremist Muslims!!!!).

Q. HJS: The next Papal election and Demography of Copts

There are now 17 candidates, but in the Bishop's view, there are many among those who are not qualified enough. On the 13th of October elections should reduce that number to five to seven candidates. It is, according to the Bishop, absolutely essential that a good Pope is elected: one that is accessible and understanding, and who can be effective in communicating with other Churches and religions.

The percentage of Copts in Egypt is not agreed upon due to a critical lack of reliable sources of information. In Dr. George Misihah's opinion, however, this should not matter much, most especially at a time when rights and laws are being written and discussed. If there are people of one confession, no matter how small that religious or ethnic community might be, they must be taken into account in their own country.

Some actions and mistakes are, nonetheless in the Bishop's view, not acceptable. To acquire a military certificate (stating that one has completed military service), many Christians were registered as Muslims, which meant that their whole family was also "miraculously converted" all of a sudden. To correct such errors was a bureaucratic nightmare. Mr. Hulsman commented that these mistakes were made at the time the IDs were changed from a paper to an electronic format and now that is over. All in all, he said, the Coptic population in Egypt ranges between 5 to 7%, but that claims of up to 20% are impossible. Even considering a margin of error, it would just be too much.

Newspapers cannot be trusted concerning statistics, unless they present very credible sources to the information presented, Hulsman said. The Pope could try to get more accurate numbers by asking dioceses around the country; however, the problem is that often, Christians are double-counted. It is thus necessary to create networks that are not too expensive to form, but that can be accountable for the results and be transparent about

their sources. Another suggestion was to simply access the database of the Minister of the Interior. But even so, there are people who do not hold an ID.

As Mr. Huslman pointed out, this is a delicate discussion that can have no clear end, but using statistical figures for religious purposes never works. Unless there is good evidence and a credible methodology behind the final result, the numbers will never be taken in account as worthy information.

Q. HJS: Concerning Copts' rights: Are Coptic girls really being kidnapped?

Bishop Marqus: No, they are not being kidnapped. These are girls that are not well taken care of by their families and so they are easily misled. Mr. Hulsman referred to a priest who told him that involved Muslims are using the carrot and the stick. The carrot is the encouragement they give to these girls to become Muslim, including offering them protection from families who had been abusive, and the stick being their unwillingness to let them return to Christianity when they realize that is not what they wanted after all.

Families of converts usually say that their family members were forced to convert or even kidnapped because either they had problems with their husbands, or because they come to regret having been separated from their families.

Almost no one in Egypt believes that kidnapping takes place. Only those who are not informed well enough believe it. Westerners are the easiest to convince this is happening, and some Christian organizations take advantage of that.

“Every girl who asks for help, gets it,” the Bishop assured. “The Coptic Orthodox Church offers assistance, protection and even education to the children of the women who request support. There are various centers where this sort of assistance is provided. In his center located in Cairo, there are about 50 women being assisted at the moment, and they have space for entire families. Some more buildings are prepared to host more.”

Concerning church-building, the Bishop denied the existence of many problems because they have a license. Dr. Miṣṭāḥ, however, says he has faced many obstacles trying to get a project for a church approved in a village where there are about 300 Christian families. Given that the closest church is located 6 km away and transportation is very inefficient in that area, he never expected it would take over 3 months to get the authorities' permission.

Q. HJS: How are the Coptic Christians politically situated in the Egyptian political realm?

They join different parties, refusing to create a party that is exclusively Christian or Coptic which would be easily crushed by the others and create a deeper segregation within the Egyptian society. Thus Christians are encouraged to spread themselves out over whichever parties they identify themselves with the most, not as Christians, but as Egyptians. There are, however, 40 parties exclusively Muslim, so those are out of Christians' reach.

In order to overcome some problems, the Bishop reaffirmed his availability to talk to anyone. He declared he had even invited Salafī *shaykh* Hasan previously to try to cooperate, but he got no reply from him. Nonetheless, he would prefer addressing the Muslim Brotherhood over the Salafīs, because with the latter it is indeed very hard to achieve an agreement (Dr. TS: ?????!!!!!!).

Mr. van Schothorst stated that religious freedom is of paramount importance to him. But, despite differences with Salafīs, the SG Party representative, said he was nevertheless willing to meet Salafīs and try to build relations and cooperate with them in any way possible.

Meeting with Bishop Yuhannā Qultah – September 28th, 2012

Participants:

- Bishop Yuhannā Qultah: Deputy Patriarch of the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt and member of the Egyptian Constitutional Council
- Henk Jan van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief

The meeting started with an introduction to the MATRA Program and an explanation of the reasons behind the visit of nine Egyptian Party representatives to The Netherlands on October 8th for five days.

Q. HJS: What is the Bishop's insight on this initiative?

The Bishop's initial response was not very enthusiastic. "It is a good initiative, but it is not great," he said. Why? Because the European community does not understand the Islamist mentality. They look at the Arab World as if they were superior, because they are the ones who have the best education and good economic performance, and so they do not look at Arabs as equals.

Arabs also think they are superior to Europeans. They believe they hold the truth, while the Europeans stay in the darkness, despite all the money they possess. And so they only seek Europeans for three main reasons: 1) Money/financial assistance; 2) to spread Islamic values; 3) seeking support against Israel in whichever way they can. Thus, there is a lack of honesty and sincerity on both sides as both are really only trying to satisfy their needs and pursue their interests.

One of the main reasons why he does not believe this initiative will be successful is the inherent differences in values and priorities on both sides.

Europe has lost faith in Jesus Christ, in Christianity and so religion is no longer important in Europe (The Netherlands included). The great majority of ambassadors and "thinkers" are agnostic (at best). And so Arabs and Europeans come from 100% different worlds.

Europeans are focused on boosting economy, obtaining petrol, and on feeding their consumerist society. During the colonial period, they were making an effort to expand their cultural features to their colonies around the world, most especially the French. Today, they no longer make that effort, and so Christianity has become very weak in those remote places.

Relations between Europe and the Arab World have, thus, changed significantly. Arabs no longer see anything Christian, not even in Europe, and so they are convinced—and rightly so— that they can Islamize the whole world without much opposition. They marry Christian girls both in their own countries and in Europe, and so there is now a big mixture between the two religions, making Islam the predominant one, both in numbers and in "doctrine," as it is always the one which does not allow the reversal of a conversion.

For Arabs, Europe is also important for the weapons it possesses. But, as Gaddafi pointed out in the past, "they might have the atomic bomb and other powerful weapons, but we, Arabs, have the demographic bomb. Our weapon is our population" (formulated in Arabic as a wordplay, words that are very similar in Arabic).

Religion, which for the Bishop was the vary basis of Europe, has been taken from them. Education and economy are there, but without religion and spirituality to support all of this, the whole thing can become catastrophic in the future.

Arabs, on the other hand, have no education and their economy is debilitated, but their faith and religion are strong and growing stronger. Their world shows no signs of modernization, but it does not matter so much as, for most of them, there is nothing else but God. They are extremely committed to their faith and it is through that same faith that they move. Muhammad ‘Imārah’s article (a fanatic Islamist) shows this very well as it is entitled, “How to Islamize the modern civilization and not modernize the Islamic civilization”.

"Why does the Muslim Brotherhood have power?" the Bishop asked rhetorically.

In the Bishop’s view, their electoral results were but expected as 40% of Egyptians are analphabet, poor, jobless, and without prospects of a better, brighter future. As a consequence, they all turn to God to answer their prayers.

The MB gave out food during elections, giving the people the impression that, always through God and Islam, they would be the ones providing them with a future. They were not buying their votes, per say, but in the end that was the effect their actions had.

Schools in Egypt are also very Islam-oriented, and so people are “brainwashed” at a very young age. Thus the Revolution naturally got them to elect Islamists as their leaders.

The United States provided 50 million dollars to Mursī’s political campaign as they want to secure normal oil supplies from the Middle East, Egypt’s Peace Treaty with Israel, and regional stability. So this situation is also a result of the Westerners’ unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of minorities and the internal constitution of Middle Eastern countries.

The question for the future is not really if Arab countries can truly develop into democracy, it is how to push Islamist fundamentalists away from power. With Islamists leading the country democracy is impossible to establish. This might result in a second round of revolutions throughout the Arab World (Dr. TS: ?????!!!!!!).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is another issue that will be on the table. For the Muslim Brotherhood, cooperating with the U.S. is not a problem. As the Sinai Peninsula is chaotic, the MB would be keen to have Hamas occupy it. Given that this organization is supra-national and advocated for Arab countries to be united, it does not really matter to them if Palestinians occupy the Sinai (Dr. TS: ?????!!!!!!).

Q. HJS: What is the Bishop's insight on the Copts/Christian’s situation in Egypt?

According to Hillary Clinton, after the Revolution, over 100,000 Copts went to the U.S. In the Bishop’s opinion, this number has been exaggerated by Najīb Jubrā’īl. Rather, there were only around 20,000 Copts who went there.

In Bishop Yuhannā Qultah’s perspective, neither the U.S. nor Europe is very interested in Christians all over the world. Rather, they use them as means to achieve something else of interest to them. If they really did care, they should speak to the Muslim Brotherhood and the government in order to have them accept and take in account the minorities living in Egypt. The Western countries might argue that they help by opening their borders, but that is not enough. People do not want to leave their country. And sometimes, when they do, they are not necessarily better off.

Concerning the accusations of Islamists kidnapping Christian girls and women, the Bishop says that it does happen, and when it does, it is tragic. However, it is not a recurrent practice. Egypt is a safe, peaceful country for the most part, and Christians generally hold good relations with Muslims.

The real problem lies in the vision the Muslim Brotherhood has of Europe and the relationship it has with European and Western countries in general (Dr. TS: ??????!!!!!!!).

Q. HJS: Does the Bishop believe Islamists will have similarly good results in the next election?

No. The Bishop is certain that the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Nūr Party will not obtain a majority. However, the MB has appointed several of its members as governors, editors-in-chief of prominent media, directors, bank managers, etc., and so they will use them for their own benefit as much as they can.

Their electoral achievements will also, of course, be dependent on the Constitution. The Constitutional Assembly has only thirteen Christian members (he being one of them), thirteen liberals, and the rest are either Islamists (50%) or friends of the Muslim Brotherhood (20%). And so it is not going to be easy to have a balanced, just, and coherent Constitution.

Some of the Islamists' ideas and proposals are of particular concern to the Bishop. Both the FJP and Al-Nūr Party members have been pushing for lowering the legal marrying age for women to 9 years old (or even before, if their menstruation arrives earlier—as the Qur'ān states that, from that moment on, they can be considered women already) (Dr. TS: NOT TRUE!!). Also, they advocate that men can legally have four wives, which, in the Bishop's view is the same as legalizing organized prostitution (Dr. TS: It is already legal in the current law to marry four, so what is new????). But in Europe, values are denigrating as well, the Bishop said. Prostitution is being legalized, it is acceptable for anyone to have intercourse with more than another person in the same day, and Europe has, surprisingly enough, also been allowing Muslim men to get married in Europe, having already a wife in their countries back home. Worse than that, Mr. van Schothorst added, they have been given financial help for each of their children, of their various wives, outside The Netherlands, but this practice has been stopped now by Dutch authorities.

It is mostly a matter of mentalities. And mentalities are the hardest thing to change. How can we do that? People should learn how to be critical. Self-critical, if possible. This would be a good idea, although one that requires some planning.

Europe, or at least some European countries, will become Muslim within around 20 to 50 years. Regardless of how long, the Bishop warned that, more and more, the question Europe will have to ask itself is: “To be or not to be”. With the percentage of marriages falling steeply (in France, for example, 75% of the marriages are either civil or the couples are simply “living together”), a weakened Christianity, and a general lack of religion and of children, Muslims have their “invasion” incredibly facilitated.

Regardless of Europe changing the present course of things or having a Muslim majority in the future, there will still be need for dialogue. The problem is that Muslims feel more confident than ever that their moment to expand and reach out to the world is coming, and so, they have never been so at ease and unwilling to change their mentality. Why let the world change the Islamic mentality if they can have the world Islamized?

“Islam will change,” Bishop Yuhannā Qultah said, “slowly, but I believe it will change. In the meantime, however, more «factions» will be created, making peace harder to achieve in the short and medium-term” (Dr. TS: Why are some people trying hard to change others????!!!!!!!).

The Bishop has been a Theology and Philosophy professor at Cairo University and has been asked frequently why he is not a Muslim since he had studied Islam and the Qur'ān so thoroughly throughout the years. The Bishop always gives the same answer: “I compare Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad—their birth, their lives and their messages—and I prefer Jesus Christ and believe Him the most”.

Mr. Henk van Schothorst asked: Muslims in Europe do not practice their religion in the same way as Muslims here do: they do not pray on the streets; on Fridays streets do not get packed with people waiting to get in a Mosque. So does this mean Muslims are changing in Europe or that they simply keep to themselves and are more discreet about it?

Bishop Qultah: They are more discreet about it at times, as some can recognize the value of freedom; at other times, however, they become even more religious, except that they keep it to themselves. And the reason why this happens is because they are not welcomed in the West.

In order to increase understanding and build a healthy relation between the West and Arabs (especially Muslim), is to respect them, love them, and never undermine them or their culture/religion. Embrace them, help them understand the value of human dignity, especially women's dignity, and hope that such an embrace will bring about the best in them and contribute to a better, more loving and considerate society.

At the moment, most Muslims do not like Europeans. Rather, they need Europeans. For them to get to the next step and start respecting and loving them truly, Europeans need to stop focusing solely on business and economy and start looking at one another (and to "the other") with the respect and love they deserve. The Bishop himself has been applying this at the Constitutional Assembly meetings—to not only bring about arguments that could lead to an endless debate, but also speak of love. He likes Muslims and seeks good relations, so bringing about docile humor and true respect is often more effective to build bridges of communication between both worlds.

"Changing a person," His Grace added in French, "a daughter, a son, whomever—is impossible if you don't love him/her beforehand. To change the human being, you need to love him/her first. This is what is missing in Europe". And so letting Arabs cross frontiers is not the solution unless you do it with the willingness to receive them because you truly care for their well-being. Things should not always be about the money. There is already too much money, perfumes, beauty in the world, but not enough love.

That is what Christianity is all about: love; nothing else. It doesn't matter what you do in your life, so long as you do it with love and you live in a loving atmosphere.

Q. HJS: What is the Constitutional Council going to do?

One more month, the Bishop said, and they will be finished.

Muslim Brotherhood members who, in the first meetings were always so serious and grumpy, are now, after some weeks of talking and showing respect, his friends. So there is a little proof of how one can create a bridge between two "opposites" if love and respect are shown.

The Constitution being drafted is supposedly going to state what Egypt's official religion is, whereas the previous one said nothing about it. "Are we regressing since it needs to be stated now?" the Bishop asked rhetorically.

Shiites and other religious minorities, have no religious temples. Why not? Because they say these are not religions accepted by God and acknowledge only three "official religions": Sunnī Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

Q. HJS: And why would they want marriage to take place at such early ages for women?

Such questions need to be asked. "We must be strict and frank about this, but talk to their hearts and not just argue rationally."

Meeting with al-Tajammu' Party on September 29th, 2012

Participants:

- Nabīl Zakī: Al-Tajammu' Party official spokesman, member of the leadership of the party and former *al-Ahālī* newspaper Editor-in-Chief
- Henk Jan van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief

In his introduction, Mr. Nabīl Zakī described himself not only as a politician, but also a writer. During his lifetime he has published many books, mostly related to history as it is a great passion of his: two on the Vietnamese War, many on 19th century Egypt. Some of the book titles are *The Kurds: Legends, Revolutions and Wars*, *The Confessions of Kissinger*, *America's Political Thought and the World*, *Jean Paul Sartre – Thinker, Militant and Human*, and *Press and Press Men*, which referred to some of the problems in the Egyptian press and within the party.

Q. HJS: What was Mr. Zakī's motivation to write all these books?

When you start by choosing journalism as profession, Mr. Zakī said, it means you have certain ideas, principles, and philosophies. You use the press—in the form of news, comments, and articles—to communicate them and make them available to a wider public. Some topics and big issues need to be explained and analyzed through books.

Personally, he much prefers discourse on democracy, human rights, and social justice: all issues related to human dignity. Thus, he uses his writings to educate people, to make them aware of certain problems and help them figure out solutions. For example, he has publicly condemned torture in the past years, making facts available to discourage all those who want to deny it.

In the planning of the visit of the delegation to The Netherlands, Mr. Nabīl Zakī was confused: Mr. Cornelis Hulsman had mentioned in an e-mail the "need for unity in diversity," "finding solutions in unanimity," and "go[ing] beyond the political party's sphere to focus on Egypt". Surely Mr. Hulsman could not expect them all to agree on many matters.

Mr. Hulsman quickly clarified his request: of course he did not expect all the parties' representatives to agree on all matters. However, he would like them to understand and agree on the basic premise that this initiative can be very beneficial for democracy in general; for each political party in concrete; for the stabilization of Egypt and, thus, for all Egyptians as well. Having this in mind, it would be important that each party representative tried to show as much sympathy with the idea as possible because, if serious conflicts were to come up in the face of those who are offering help, they might step back and give up.

Q. HJS: How does Mr. Nabīl Zakī see the MATRA South Program and a possible request for the Venice Commission's help with the technicalities of Constitution-writing?

The National Constitutional Assembly only represents the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafīs, and their allies. Together they amount to more than 65% of the Assembly's constituency. In Mr. Zakī's perspective, this is not correct, because, to write a Constitution, the "majority" obtained during one specific electoral period should not matter. Instead, every party, trend, school of thought, religion, ethnicity, and class should be included and able to participate in the writing of the Constitution, regardless of their electoral results.

Mr. Nabīl Zakī supports the formation of a civil state, not a religious one. A religious state is a threat to democracy—he himself (as a leader in the opposition), would be considered an atheist were he to oppose the religious rule or the official policy within such a state. He might even be killed. A religious state is thus a danger for those who do not abide by the state's ruling group.

Opening up to the world is important. People need to see what there is out there, to learn and to take in what is smart and useful and dismiss what does not apply, what has failed, and what is not pertinent. Mr. Nabīl Zakī has travelled a lot and visited a lot of countries. Through this he has had contact with much of mankind's heritage and learned that religion should be a permissive thing; something that is neither closed nor narrow-minded, for fanaticism does not allow for freedom of thought and without it a society cannot evolve.

Could the Parliamentary Representative Democracy of The Netherlands be applied in Egypt?

Concerning Mr. Zakī's remark that "majorities should not write Constitutions," Mr. Henk Jan van Schothorst pointed out that Holland, not believing that majorities should neglect the rights of minorities either, adopted a political system that gives space for everyone to express their opinions. There is certainly permanent tension in the Parliament as no one party can be discriminated and impeded to express its position, but despite all the discussions, they have managed to maintain a nice balance and they are generally happy with the system. So long as everyone accepts the basic freedoms of speech, assembly, expression, etc.

Mr. Zakī clarified immediately that as a leftist, he believes in the original and the positive content of liberalism, and so all those freedoms are absolutely sacred to him. To the Constitution Assembly members, however, it is less clear that they matter all that much. As an example, it is often referred that "sovereignty" is God's. God is discussed more than rules, laws, and the Revolution itself. It has even been considered in the meetings of the so-called Constitutional Assembly that there should be no Presidential elections so that Mursī can keep his post. When Mursī got elected there was no Constitution and thus he had no definition, no clear limits to his authority. Now, while stipulating such articles in the draft of the Constitution, Mursī has an invisible hand in it, and so it is dangerous. There must be new Presidential elections after having a real democratic Constitution of a civil and modern state.

Women have been mentioned in 3 or 4 articles, and they are all conditioned by the *sharī'ah*. So what we see is that the religious law is the ultimate "referee" to the main document that will be the basis of a whole nation and a religious state.

It has also been suggested that newspapers can be conditioned and possibly even closed if they make people "perplexed or confused"—two very broad words that put in danger freedom of thought, speech, expression, and press.

"Some have suggested to have a referendum on the main articles of the Constitution. You know what they responded? 'No'". Mr Zakī believes that the referendum itself would be just a formality. He expects a storm of religious propaganda and hysteria claiming: "If you say yes, you will go to Paradise; if you say no, you will go to Hell". He also does not expect a real dialogue in society about the articles of the Constitution.

Mr. Zakī also expressed his unhappiness with some of the so-called "liberals" in the Constitutional Assembly. "We appealed to them to retire from the Constitutional Assembly, as the people who used to applaud those men are now unhappy with them for still being a part of it."

With the Muslim Brotherhood increasingly dominating the Ministry of the Interior, the mass media, the national newspapers, the governors, the national security, and now trying to control also the al-Azhar (which is

led by men that are too progressive for their liking) and the judicial system, Mr. Zakī cannot allow himself to be very optimistic about the future.

“The only hope we have,” he added, “is if liberals can coordinate efforts and join in a united front for the next elections”. Something good can only be achieved if they do so. For Mr. Zakī, the proof that such a union, if formed, could be preeminent is the numbers achieved by the many liberal candidates in the first round of the Presidential elections. Had liberals not been divided and put forward instead a single candidate, they would have won.

For Mr. Zakī, however, the country could experience another revolution. IMF conditions are harsh because it will include the ending of subsidies on goods or items necessary for poor people. Everyone knows that, if such subsidies were to be canceled, the prices would increase brutally, an effort is being made by us not to fulfill the agreement with the IMF. If this happens though, those who were hungry before and remain so and those who were not hungry before and became so will be severely disappointed and go back to the streets.

Q. HJS: What is al-Tajammu’ Party position in the current political system?

“Socialism,” to Mr. Nabīl Zakī, does not mean the exclusion of the market economy, but rather the introduction of a social dimension to it.

Some capitalists are wise and know that, if they give their workers what they deserve and an extension of their rights, they will be more committed to their work, stay longer, and work better. Others, however, are short-sighted and just want all the profits to themselves, as quickly as possible, creating acute social contradictions and a class struggle in the country,

Mr. Zakī clarified. Thus, he calls for a civil state, one that keeps religion in a place where it can be respected by all, but never used to deceive people and exploit them, as it would be harmful for the religion itself.

As Mr. Huslman pointed out, however, Egyptians are a largely religious people, so that needs to be taken in consideration when proposing such a major transition to a secular modern, democratic, and civil state. Mr. van Schothorst added that, regardless of religion, what should really be emphasized is the utter respect for classical basic rights—not in a hierarchy (having ones more important than others), but all at the same level of priority and importance.

Mr. Zakī agreed with both interventions and asked rhetorically, “So what is the solution?” Some of his friends did vote for the FJP, but they have admitted they regret it and will not do it again. They are Muslims, like most Egyptians, and people to whom religion matters a great deal. But this does not mean the state should be religious. “We have many *shaykhs*—scholars—in Egypt who can explain and deal with religion in a correct and enlightened way, and still have the society progress.”

The old regime was strongly supported by great business men such as Ahmad ‘Iz who were very much criticized in the Revolution. However, that is not being changed with this new government. All they are doing is changing from one group of businessmen to another group of businessmen such as Khayrat al-Shātīr and Hasan Mālik (both prominent Brotherhood businessmen), for example, who are making great profits through commercial activities and trade, supported by this new government.

Al-Tajammu’ Party was part of the Egyptian Bloc. Mr. Zakī represented the party in coordination of the lists of candidates according to a proportional system and single seats. The problem was that many of those involved from other parties did not have much political or electoral experience. When choosing a candidate, while some chose him for his popularity and experience, others promoted their own party leaders, threatening to leave the

coalition if they were not chosen. Too many concessions needed to be made in order for all to be one bloc and the parties did not succeed in many cases in choosing the convenient or suitable candidate. Instead, they started tearing each others' parties apart and thus ended up even more divided than before.

Nabīl Zakī's goal now is to build a new leftist coalition of 10 parties and ally it with another coalition of liberals led by 'Amr Mūsá and Hamadīn Sabāhī. The idea is to make alliances with everyone, appeal to the common priorities of defeating the ruling party that is in power today, and save the civil state. It is fundamental that they all learn from their past mistakes of not uniting for parliamentary and presidential elections. This has resulted in the Islamist majority, offered to them on a silver platter due to the supporters of the civil state's lack of willingness to cooperate. At this time, effective cooperation and dialogue among the defenders of the civil state with respect and civility is more important than ever.

Egyptians are often sensitive about their own religion, especially with Westerners, and this will be felt in The Netherlands. But those who first distorted the reputation of Muslims around the world were Muslims themselves: *al-Qā'idah* on 9/11, the Taliban destroying the Buddhist statues, etc. "If I am discussing something in the Torah, I am not despising the religion. Of course I should respect religious people and their views, avoid using impolite words and expressions. But things need to be discussed. To be sure, such issues should be talked over using valid arguments put in a civilized way, but it is important to have in mind the fundamental freedoms of respectful opposition and criticism," remarked Mr. Zakī.

Q. HJS: How can the liberals best prepare for the parliamentary elections that are coming up?

New parliamentary elections are expected to take place in the beginning of the year 2013. An important part to this, however, is the Constitution.

Mr. Hulsman passed on to explaining how the Venice Commission could provide assistance to the Constitutional Council, not making reference to its content, but rather to the technical features it should have in order for it to be clear and coherent as the legal document that it is. For such help to be granted, however (and as mentioned previously), the parties need to agree to it unanimously.

Mr. Nabīl Zakī agrees to accept the help of the Venice Commission, and so Mr. Cornelis Hulsman should expect his support for the initiative. He considers this an even more fundamental proposal as, in his view, there are members of the Constitutional Assembly that do not know as much as the very meaning of Constitution, given that they were chosen not for their expertise or knowhow, but rather for simply belonging to this or that party.

Even as the spokesman of al-Tajammu' Party, Mr. Zakī no longer has a role, and he attributes the blame "to the so-called Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, who handed over the country to the Muslim Brotherhood step by step". He is now worried about the new law on political parties. The 1971 Constitution stipulated that each and every party that made reference to religion was to be banned. This norm, however, was now removed from the Constitution, and so at the moment there are around seven or eight religious parties (Al-Nūr Party and others) who focus almost solely on having their way of thinking prevail at the expense of the other religious communities' rights, which they can do openly and legally. They are against Christians; they intend to take away women's rights; they push to lower the legal marriage age, etc.

In Mr. Nabīl Zakī's view, it is the SCAF's fault that this is happening. The transfer to Islamists was done on purpose so that, under religious parties' leadership, the people's main focus will be on marginal matters and not on things that really matter to get this country back on its feet.

Mr. van Shothorst, responded that provisions need to start being made for the upcoming elections. His party, SGP, starts to prepare for elections over a year before they take place because there are a lot of things that need to be taken care of. It is an important part of the party's job, and so its members need to update their manifesto, outline a marketing strategy, work on the posters and propaganda, etc.

It is fundamental for al-Tajammu' Party and for all other liberal and socialist parties to start preparing for elections now. If their goal really is to overcome the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Nūr Party in the next elections, there is not one minute to waste. They need to organize themselves and work on the image and message they want to pass on to the Egyptian people. They need to appear as a consistent body, a reliable group of individuals, and this requires time to inform the voters on their intentions and goals properly.

Mr. Zakī, however, is quite sure that, so long as they can reach the population outside of Cairo and Alexandria, they will be able to gain more voters. During the last presidential elections, he added, there were threats made by Islamists that, if Mursī would not get elected, they would burn the country down. This frightened the SCAF who, despite starting out by declaring "Religious state only over our dead bodies" and, "A civil state? Of course! It is a matter of national security! We need to defend the civil state," ended up supporting the Muslim Brotherhood themselves out of fear.

Q. HJS: How can al-Tajammu' Party best take advantage of the MATRA South Program?

Mr. Hulsman pointed out that the most likely allies of al-Tajammu' Party in The Netherlands with whom it could create strong and mutually-beneficial bilateral relations would be the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA) and the Socialist Party. It would, thus, be very advantageous for Mr. Zakī to try to establish contact with these parties, which will surely be interested in creating ties with Mr. Zakī's party within the MATRA Program and would be willing to assist in multiple ways: training, transmission of expertise on organizing and structuring the party, manifesto writing, and so on.

It is important however, as Mr. van Schothorst pointed out, that the parties do not see this initiative as an unlawful and disrespectful intervention in Egyptian internal affairs. The SGP representative remembers quite vividly that when some people, included himself, were informed that Iran was providing some expertise to Dutch parties, they were not comfortable with it, and so he wants to avoid creating a similar sentiment in Egyptians. If Dutch parties lose the sense of what their place is, they will get nowhere. It is important to keep in mind indeed that external interference, in general, is not seen as something positive in Egypt, Mr. Zakī warned.

Mr. van Schothorst explained the aims of The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) within which he has been representing the SG party for over four years. This institute's three main goals are: 1) Build political parties' internal structure; 2) strengthen multi-party political systems; and 3) work on the connection between the political parties and civil society. To be sure though, assistance is purely technical, not ideological.

In order not to compromise the effectiveness of this delegation's mission, Mr. Huslman said that there would be no media interviews before the end of the delegation.

Q. HJS: How prepared is al-Tajammu' Party for elections at this point?

Mr. Zakī assured that the leftist and the liberals are doing their best to coordinate their efforts and unite for elections. However, the lack of a defined electoral law is delaying them. Will it be a single-seat parliamentary election or a proportional system? In question is also the integrity of the electoral committee, as some members of the MB have shown interest in canceling jurists' supervision of the election.

There are local Al-Tajammu' representatives all over Egypt. The contact is made through the internet, visits are made for important issues to be discussed, and there are internal publications that allow for members to make remarks, ask questions, and show different perspectives. Al-Tajammu' also benefits from having headquarters in every governorate, but they are in need of more popular activities that will open the party members' mind and have more members integrate it.

Egyptians suffered a lot under Mubarāk and Sadāt as al-Tajammu' was the only party in the opposition. They were arrested and tortured and the regime opposed popular gatherings and prevented the party from having direct contact with the people. At the moment, al-Tajammu' has the biggest number of workers' membership in the party, of which about forty are leaders of labor-trade unions. They are now working on re-activating the popular movements.

The student organizations, which were so active in their times, were banned, and so they need to be re-activated as well. The MB is very influential among students, but Mr. Zakī believes al-Tajammu' Party may start small, but gain influence among the younger generation as the MB is now starting to lose some of its influence in that circle.

Mr. van Schothorst pointed out how fundamental it is that the party shows good, strong ideas. Mr. Zakī showed him al-Tajammu' Party's program: "For the building of People's participation in Society—for Egypt as a homeland for freedom, socialism and unity." According to Mr. Zakī, it is a book that talks about politics, economy, family, environment, and which would be good to translate to English (at the moment there is only a summary written in that language).

Mr. van Schothorst, however, alerted Mr. Zakī to the need for periodical actualization of the program, with a specific platform on what the party's goals are in the short, medium, and long term; what are their economic principles; what is the party's perspective on the events taking place right now in order to be better aligned with the upcoming election. The program is good, but it was written before the Revolution.

There are, however, some drawbacks that need to be taken in consideration. Parliament has been dissolved in June according to the decision made by the High Constitutional Court. President Mursī still tried to reverse the decision as he was unsure the Islamists could ever get such good results again. The Constitution, in the meantime, needs to be written and a referendum will take place right after.

Only then can the date of the next parliamentary election be set and the election law defined: if the proportional system is adopted, the electoral districts will be wide—almost the size of governorates; if it is single seat per district, the electoral districts will be a lot smaller. It is also unknown if the 50% peasants/workers role will be maintained, as some are for it and others oppose it. Mr. Zakī himself would like it to be abolished, but in his party it is quite popular.

Meeting with Delegation Members for the visit to The Netherlands on September 30th, 2012

Participants:

- Dr. Pākīnām Sharqāwī: Assistant President (host)
- Nabīl Zakī: Al-Tajammu' Party spokesman and former *al-Ahālī* newspaper Editor-in-Chief
- George Misīhah: Former Member of Parliament for al-Wafd Party
- 'Amr Sulaymān: Free Egyptians Party
- Dr. Tāriq Sha'lān: Al-Nūr Party
- Dr. Ahmad Kadrī: Al-Nūr Party
- Dr. 'Amr Darrāj: Freedom and Justice Party

- Dīnā Zakarīyā: Freedom and Justice Party
- Henk van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief

This meeting had as its main goal informing the chosen representatives of the main Egyptian parties enrolled in this visit about the procedures, expectations, and purposes of their visit to The Netherlands, as well as about the schedules of flights, conferences, and meetings that were going to take place during those five days in Europe. In addition, it was expected from the members to pose questions or ask for some clarifications.

During presentations, most of those present pleaded for respectful, effective, and comprehensive dialogue between the members of the delegation in a collective effort to serve their country well, more so than their individual political parties.

Mr. Cornelis Hulsman went through the program—every person in the room had received a copy, referring to several essential points and travel details that were important to bear in mind.

The members of the delegation were pleased to learn that the Egyptian Embassy in The Netherlands was going to organize a reception in their honor. In the past, embassies were only keen to receive members of the National Democratic Party and were rarely interested in matters of this sort. This time, on the contrary, the Ambassador showed eagerness to receive them as he was himself very pleased with this initiative.

The state-to-state cooperation of the MATRA Program was to be postponed as there are still many things to be defined on Egypt's side, but the party-to-party cooperation was already in progress and will be discussed thoroughly during the 5 days. Mr. Hulsman said that it is important to bear in mind that within the Dutch party system there are parties, mainly the PVV, who have taken actions in the past that displeased many Muslims. One of such actions was the launching of *fitnah*, a very strong anti-Muslim movie, which was criticized worldwide. *Arab-West Report* immediately showed claims in the film to be wrong by presenting questions to Muslim scholars and asking them to respond. So Mr. Hulsman himself has quite a history of clashes with the PVV. Nonetheless, this party exists, thus they might attend meetings with members of other parties. As a result, delegation members must be prepared to deal with the situation, ready to meet with PVV members if they would come, as unpleasant as it might be to them.

Mr. van Schothorst added that there is another issue that some of the delegation members might face: as the Dutch Foreign Minister is known for being very pro-Israel, it is likely that some questions will be asked, not only on Israel, but also on other regional pressing issues such as Syria.

Another issue that will most likely be discussed is the position of Christians in Egypt. Dr. 'Amr Darrāj of the Freedom and Justice Party showed some disagreement in pressing on this matter as he does not consider it to be a real one. There are certainly social problems in Egypt, but the way this subject has been approached has only denigrated the image of Egypt abroad and does not, by any means, represent the reality in the country. Indeed, Mr. Hulsman agreed, the problems that there are have been extremely overstated to the detriment of Egypt.

The party-to-party cooperation is definitely one of the strongest and most important matters to be discussed and established during the visit to The Netherlands. The NIMD (Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy), to which Mr. van Schothorst has belonged for four years as political advisor and currently as member of the Advisory Council on behalf of the SGP, has a lot of practice in providing technical assistance and it has proved beneficial to political parties all over the world.

A "Best Practices" handbook could be made especially for Egypt, taking into account its socio-political context. Such an initiative, Mr. van Schothorst remarked, could be greatly beneficial to the country.

Another initiative that could be very useful for Egypt is the Venice Commission's support in Constitution-writing. Of course Egypt might choose not to accept, but it should be noted that, in case any support were to be provided, it would only be in technical terms, not ideological. In other words, rather than focusing on the content, the Venice Commission would just be focused on making sure there were no contradictions that could undermine the validity of the constitutional document.

Dr. Darrāj responded that even if some technicalities of the Constitution had already been discussed with some Ambassadors, for example, it is his and the Freedom and Justice Party's belief that there should be no formal assistance by foreigners in the writing process as this is a matter concerning Egypt and Egyptians only.

Another matter of interest to the delegation members would be to strengthen economic ties with The Netherlands. The Minister of Agriculture and Trade is expected to meet with the delegation and thus suggestions could be made on issues related to trade, agriculture, clean energy, and water management—despite the intrinsic political nature of this initiative. If they are successful, they could perhaps establish similar ties with other European countries such as Germany for example. As one of the problems that Egypt faces is the deactivation of the largest mine field in the world—located in their territory—the members of the delegation might also lobby for funding as it is a costly, complicated, and lengthy process to carry out.

Meeting with al-Nūr Party on September 30th, 2012

- Dr. 'Imād 'Abd al-Ghafūr: Chairman of al-Nūr Party and Assistant President
- Dr. Ahmad Kadrī: Al-Nūr Party
- Dr. Tāriq Sha'lān: Al-Nūr Party
- Henk van Schothorst: International Secretary of the SG Party of The Netherlands
- Cornelis Hulsman: *Arab-West Report* Editor-in-Chief
- Dr. George Misīhah: Former member of Parliament for al-Wafd Party

[first part of the discussion was in ARABIC]

"Why would the Islamist Al-Nūr Party choose the Christian SG Party out of all Dutch parties to cooperate with within the MATRA Program?" Dr. Tāriq Sha'lān asked. Because it is easier for al-Nūr Party members to establish relations with a conservative religious party—even if Christian—than with a liberal party.

Q. HJS: What are al-Nūr Party's political goals?

The new Constitution, just like the old one, should declare all Egyptians equal, in rights and in responsibilities. To the present draft they are considering perhaps adding, "regardless of religion and ethnicity," albeit not considering it necessary.

Dr. 'Imād 'Abd al-Ghafūr: Al-Nūr Party is interested in having all Egyptians united, making the society homogeneous and without conflicts. For this to happen, however, everyone needs to have the national interest and common interests as their priorities. Egyptians need to look all in the same direction, because if there are conflicts and clashes, that would be disruptive for the country.

Mr. van Schothorst commented that perhaps, in order for that to happen, the Constitution should be simpler, with only basic premises from which to build the society and other laws. He had heard about an article which would stipulate the women's legal marriage age as 9 years old for example.

“The media distorts,” Dr. ‘Imād ‘Abd al-Ghafūr interrupted, “this matter has not even been discussed in the Assembly” (Dr. TS: Please mention here that these are clarifying answers to the rumor allowing marriage to 9 years old children which was mentioned earlier in the statements made by both, Bishop Marqus and Bishop Yuhannā Qultah). Indeed, Dr. Misīhah agreed, the media in Egypt is not reliable. Dr. Tāriq Sha’lān said that they rarely have the evidence on which they can base their statements and so they take words and distort them as they please. For years and years now, Mr. Hulsman has been trying to revert this situation, but it has proven hard to change the bad habits of unreliable media reporting, Egyptian and non-Egyptian.

Dr. ‘Imād ‘Abd al-Ghafūr added, however, that although nowadays this situation is not agreeable to many people, in the past—during Jesus Christ’s period, for example, it was very common for women to get married at a younger age. People are judging with a 2012 mentality. Dr. Sha’lān reminded those present, however, that even if such a law were to be adopted, it would not have much of an effect, for who would want their children to be married at age 9?

Referring to the Muslim-Christian relationship in Egypt, Dr. ‘Imād ‘Abd al-Ghafūr believes that the common space for both religions in Egypt is very wide and thus, once again, there is a need for all to stop emphasizing the conflicts and instead center their thoughts and actions on the common points they share. Mr. van Schothorst agreed that there are indeed many points on which they agree, but al-Nūr party representatives going to The Netherlands need to be prepared for questions to be asked in The Netherlands.

Bottom-line, Dr. Sha’lān said, the important thing to bear in mind is that there is the Constitution and then there is the law, and Egyptians are all equal before them regardless of their religion. Indeed, he added, as it is mentioned in the Qur’ān, if the Prophet Muhammad himself was alive, he would also put himself under the same rules as others.

Dr. ‘Imād ‘Abd al-Ghafūr underlined the need for common ground as, when the Prophet found Christians in MeDīnā, he himself pleaded for common ground to be valued over differences because if so, the importance of those differences will fade away slowly and eventually they will be considered only as normal and no longer as disruptive.

Q. HJS: What is al-Nūr Party vision on gender?

Dr. Sha’lān gave the example of civil divorce. In al-Nūr Party’s view, it should be allowed, but for Muslims only, not for Christians (which has been a demand of the Coptic Orthodox Church). Thus, even if the principles of Islam are to be the basis of the Constitution, Christians will still be able to guide their lives by the Bible.

Indeed, Dr. ‘Imād ‘Abd al-Ghafūr said, that in the beginning of Islam there was equality of rights regardless of faith, age, and gender. It needs to be present in people’s mind that the Qur’ān was the first book mentioning human rights. It was very advanced compared to Europe in the beginning as, at the time, women were badly treated, could be slaves, were not allowed to inherit, etc. According to Islam, women can make the choice themselves to wear the *hijāb* or not. They do not have to pay for anything within the household; they do not have to pay for their children’s education; they could even be paid for breastfeeding. And so women are often even richer than men.

Q. HJS: The delegation representatives from al-Nūr Party should be prepared to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while in The Netherlands. What is their view on the matter?

Mr. Henk van Schothorst started out by explaining how the Dutch’s proximity to Germany got them to see from very closely how Jew’s suffered through the Holocaust and, thus, the delegation should be expecting to face Dutch sympathy for Israel as a sovereign state.

Dr. Sha'lān assured Mr. van Schothorst that Islam accepts the Jewish religion and so do Egyptians. Indeed, the reason why so many Jews ran from Europe towards the Middle East was precisely due to their protection. But Zionism and Judaism are not similar. The first Zionists were atheists who took over the land of "Palestine" which had a history of being always open to every religion given its importance to all: Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Israel should be a land of God. Muslims do not discriminate because discriminating, even if it is in name of Islam, as many claim, is still discrimination and it is not permitted. So if Jews want to live in that land, there is no problem because all religions should be accepted. The problem is that Zionists want it all to themselves and prohibit others from sharing this land with them—sharing the land with those who actually believe it is sacred.

Q. HJS: Is it true that it would be desirable for Islamists to have Palestinians inhabit the Sinai in order for that region to finally stabilize and have the Israeli-Palestinian conflict settled?

No, it is not al-Nūr Party's intention at all, as the Sinai belongs to Egypt.

All meetings had been very fruitful and showed people eager to meet with non-Egyptians whereby always all questions and all subjects could be frankly discussed.