

# A Reflection on 22 years of SiMO – Studies in the Middle East

Uwe Gräbe

## Introduction

The intercultural study program SiMO – “Studies in the Middle East”<sup>1</sup> – was established in 1999; the first group of three students went to Beirut in summer 2000. Since then, almost every year, a group of 2-8 students sent by the German SiMO-board has attended the 2-semester-program at the Near East School of Theology (NEST). There are just three notable exceptions:

- During study year no. 7 (2006-2007), only one student attended the program, and this only for one semester. Due to the summer war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, scholarship-awarding organizations had withdrawn their approvals, and the SiMO-board agreed not to follow up with the regular process of sending students.
- For the study year no. 9 (2008-2009), the SiMO-board did not send any students, because all those already admitted withdrew after the political situation in Lebanon had become increasingly unstable.
- After most of the students in the study year no. 20 (2019-2020) had returned early, in spring 2020, due to the worldwide pandemic, no students have been sent for the study years no. 21 (2020-2021) and 22 (2021-2022). Four students, however, have been selected to start their study year (23) in late September 2022.

Altogether, there have been 91 students sent by the German SiMO-board, mostly from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, but also one student from an EMS member-church in Korea. These 91 have so far been joined by 40 international SiMO-students recruited by NEST itself, mostly from the Netherlands, Canada, United States, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, Armenia, South Africa – and even from as far away as New Zealand. The NEST even managed to attract 5 international students during the two “Covid-years”, which shows that this institution is crisis-tested in a way that it manages to provide for a certain study routine even under most difficult conditions.

This reflection is based upon a quick survey of the final reports of the 91 students sent by the German SiMO-board. Sometimes, the available intermediate reports and study papers of the students have also been included. In cases of conflicting information, the minutes of the SiMO-board have been helpful to reveal any missing background-information.

However, I am reluctant to call this humble reflection an “evaluation” – and this for two reasons:

- First: The sources used for this reflection cover only one single perspective: the perspective of the European SiMO-students. Since the main purpose of the SiMO-year is an “immersion” into a different cultural context, and thereby an attempt to instigate an intercultural exchange, any serious evaluation should include other perspectives as well: first being the perspective of the local (Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, and Palestinian) fellow students who attend the same courses

---

<sup>1</sup> A description of the program (which won't be repeated here) can be found in: Uwe Gräbe, Studium im Mittleren Osten (SiMO) – Ein ökumenisches und interkulturelles Studienjahr an der Near East School of Theology (NEST), Beirut/Libanon, in: Martin Repp (Hg.), Theologische Ausbildung im Zeitalter zunehmender Globalisierung. Ökumenische und interreligiöse Studienprogramme in Indien, Israel, Japan und dem Libanon. Im Auftrag der Evangelischen Mission in Solidarität und des Zentrum Oekumene der EKHn und EKKW, Leipzig 2022, 27-39.

and share the same place of living. And secondly, the perspective of the faculty, lecturers, and staff at NEST. After years of debates on post-colonialism, basing an “evaluation” on the European perspective alone should be simply a “no-go”.

- And second: The purpose of any meaningful evaluation would be to point out the achievements and the shortcomings of the program, and from there to draw the necessary conclusions on what needs to be done in the future. However, this whole pattern has been shattered recently by the spiraling disaster in Lebanon. First and foremost, any future development needs to be a response to this disaster; conclusions from a “better past” can only come after. Currently, Lebanon is facing an unprecedented, multi-faceted crisis: political, economic, humanitarian, ecological, medical... The political system has imploded, hyper-inflation is wreaking havoc, banks are largely dysfunctional, parts of Beirut have been destroyed by the port explosion of 2020, waste is not properly disposed of, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are remaining without hope, tap water (if available) has become a health hazard in most places, and for most of the day, no public electricity is available. Running a fridge at home has become a challenge as has running respirators and incubators at the hospitals. Whoever comes to study in Lebanon must be aware that teaching staff (just as anybody else) are receiving salaries which have lost 95% of their original value, and those who retire will have to manage with pension funds that have been reduced to crumbs. This is not just an economic issue but also deeply affects the human dignity of long-standing partners. At the same time, NEST is struggling with dramatically shrinking numbers of its core student body: Currently, there are only 5 local full-time students left (as compared to 25 in 2005, which was considered a “low number” back then), who are being trained to serve in one of the four NEST member-churches. This puts the whole future and purpose of NEST at stake. Two consultations on the future of NEST have taken place recently, involving the NEST board of managers as well as international partners from three continents. One question is whether NEST will merge with another institution of higher learning, and if yes: whether it will be a merger between two roughly equal partners or rather a takeover of a small and weak institution by a much larger player. Or, on the other side, whether NEST may succeed to “reinvent itself” (as it has started already!), by offering new study courses and diplomas, in classroom, hybrid, and online alike, in Arabic as well as in English. Of course, any combinations of the two options – merger and expansion of programs – may also be possible. Any reflection on a study program like SiMO can only be one tiny, small mosaic stone in this setting, on the path towards the future.

This reflection will focus on eight topics from the final reports:

1. The NEST – how to get there
2. The study course and seminar papers
3. The “NEST Family”
4. Christian-Muslim relations
5. A transforming experience
6. A long-lasting dedication

### **1. The NEST – how to get there**

In general, students become aware of the program through the posters and leaflets distributed by EMS to the universities every year in September. Some know former SiMO-students or have been in touch with members of the Alumni organization “Freunde der NEST”. Others have searched the

internet for options to study in an Arabic speaking country. The yearly application deadline is December 10<sup>th</sup>; most of the applicants usually send their application papers at the very last moment before this deadline – after having observed the political situation in Lebanon for a while. If there are any incidents between September and December – like politically motivated assassinations, the demission of a government, hostilities with the “southern neighbor” etc., the number of applicants is usually low. Candidates are selected in January by the executive committee of the SiMO board which includes the head of the scholarship desk of Bread for the World and DNK/LWB who will forward the files of the eligible applicants to their organization which will then decide about awarding an eventual scholarship. EMS and the SiMO board are extremely thankful to Bread for the World for having kept this level of cooperation even in times of general cutbacks and restructuring. A scholarship from this organization covers around two thirds of the actual costs for a study year.

From March till July, preparatory meetings of the new students take place on EMS/mission theology, intercultural training, and practical issues. These units may be combined in one weekend or divided into separate meetings, out of which the first can be done together with the students of the EMS Intercultural Study Program in Japan (ISJP). Usually, the students’ final reports tell us very little about this part of the experience. However, it is uplifting to read a sentence like: *“The ems is not only at your side for questions throughout the duration of your stay abroad, but also enhances the program by two comprehensive seminars for preparation and follow-up, in which you are introduced to organizational issues as well as to the country and its people.”*<sup>2</sup> (2020)

In the past, the visa issue has been a considerable challenge time and again. Especially during the first few years of the SiMO program (and then again around 2010), constant worries about their legal status in Lebanon have accompanied some students for most of the year. In recent years, however, this has changed a lot. Of course, there are still cases in which the Lebanese General Security tends to complicate the issuing of a study visa. But those in charge at NEST have developed a routine on how to deal with these complications in a very professional and efficient way.

## 2. The study course and seminar papers

When discussing the study course at NEST, one needs to be aware that NEST is first and foremost an institution to train the pastors and catechists of the four Protestant NEST member churches: The National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the Armenian Evangelical Union, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. These Churches have carefully selected the students they send to NEST, they accompany them very closely throughout their studies, and they want them to be good and reliable servants in the Lord’s vineyard. This leads to a very clearly structured, practice-oriented study course.

The term which is mentioned most in the final reports of the SiMO-students, when it comes to the study course, is *“verschult”*, “like in school”: German students notice that there are very strict curricula, putting much emphasis on basic overviews, and that active participation of each student is expected. One student notes: *“It is impressive how such a small university as NEST manages to teach*

---

<sup>2</sup> “Die ems steht einem nicht nur während der gesamten Dauer des Auslandsaufenthaltes bei Fragen zur Seite, sondern begleitet das Programm auch durch zwei umfassende Seminare zur Vor- und Nachbereitung, bei denen man neben organisatorischen Anliegen auch auf Land und Leute eingestimmt wird.”

at a high academic level.”<sup>3</sup> (2012). Another one writes: „In my opinion, this teaching system is very effective, although it seems to be more 'like in school', because you are forced to follow the courses in a concentrated manner throughout the semester, and the grading is more differentiated.”<sup>4</sup> (2006) Most students, however, would agree with a sentence like „The teaching at NEST does not meet the academic standards of German universities. It is much more practical and denominational.”<sup>5</sup> (2004) While it is an excellent, yet basic discovery that educational methods differ from country to country (why should one study abroad then, if the course were the same everywhere?), not all students are ready to accept this as a neutral fact or even cherish it as an opportunity for themselves. One female student even lashes out at NEST in very rude way, mentioning that she was “disappointed by the content and didactic quality of the courses”<sup>6</sup>, even blaming a lecturer for having used „questionable literature”<sup>7</sup> in his course (2018). Comparing the final reports of the SiMO-students and following up on their CVs however, it was most interesting to discover that some of those students who had engaged with the course at NEST in an open-minded and positive manner (instead of looking down on the academic standards of NEST in a rather presumptuous way) were those who later embarked on the most fascinating and discerning academic careers (see below, paragraph 5).

It is interesting to note that until 2004, all SiMO-students attended the courses at NEST simply as auditors. Only since the 5<sup>th</sup> study year (2004/2005), have they had to pass the examinations in two obligatory courses per semester. This is much less than the local full-time students have to take, but, as one student notes, it seemingly improved the reputation of the SiMO-students among the locals. Still, it has always been a challenge to get NEST-courses accredited by German Universities. With the official partnership between NEST and Universities like Bochum and Göttingen, this has certainly become easier. But in most cases, the issue remains a question of individual agreement between the student and his/her German University.

On top of the examinations, the SiMO students usually write two rather extensive seminary papers, which they are strongly encouraged to share with the Middle East Desk of EMS as well. While most of these papers cover standard themes like dogmatic positions of theologians from the Eastern Churches or Muslim intellectuals throughout history, there have been some outstanding contributions to current discussions in recent years. One student analyzed the concept of “embodiment” in the liturgical practice of an international Christian congregation in Beirut (2015), another one looked into the situation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon from an ethical perspective (2017), and a third even dared to study the ethical question of “killing in self-defense” based on an example from Israel (2018). Actually, the task of reading such papers is a rather enjoyable duty for a Middle East desk officer in Germany.

While the students attend two obligatory courses per semester<sup>8</sup>, to which they may add other courses they can attend as auditors, there are some courses which consistently receive the highest

---

<sup>3</sup> “Es ist beeindruckend, wie eine so kleine Hochschule wie die NEST es schafft, auf einem hohen akademischen Niveau zu unterrichten”

<sup>4</sup> „In meinen Augen ist dieses Schulsystem, obgleich es ‚verschulter‘ zu sein scheint, sehr effektiv, da man dazu gezwungen ist, semesterbegleitend konzentriert die Kurse zu verfolgen, und die Benotung geschieht differenzierter.“

<sup>5</sup> “Der Unterricht in der NEST entspricht nicht dem akademischen Anspruch deutscher Universitäten. Er ist viel mehr praktisch orientiert und konfessioneller.”

<sup>6</sup> „von der inhaltlichen sowie didaktischen Qualität der Kurse erheblich enttäuscht“.

<sup>7</sup> “inhaltlich fragwürdige Literatur“.

<sup>8</sup> This has been described in Gräbe, Studium, 31-32.

praise in all final reports. The most impressive example here is the course on “Contemporary Eastern Churches” which, over the last 22 years, has been taught by three different lecturers. No matter who teaches this course, the well-balanced combination of in-classroom reflection and frequent field trips seems to be a recipe to immerse the students into the local culture in an intellectual and emotional way which leaves a deep impact on them.

One point which appears frequently in the reports is the library at NEST: The sheer availability of a treasure of books on Exegesis, Church History, Dogmatics and Ethics, but also on Eastern Churches and Islam, combined with long opening hours and good working facilities, contributes a lot to the success of the study year.

Eventually, some words need to be said here regarding the possibilities to learn Arabic in Beirut. While some proficiency in the local language is without any doubt the main key to an intercultural experience, the official language at NEST – for locals and foreign students alike – is English. (Only very recently, an online course in Arabic has been added to the study guide.) This does not distinguish NEST from other universities in Lebanon, which in most cases teach either in English or French. Additionally, the Hamra area of Beirut, where NEST is located, is a rather cosmopolitan place, where most locals insist on speaking English with foreigners. Nevertheless, a multitude of options to learn Arabic have been tried out at NEST over the last decades – not always to the satisfaction of all those involved. In the early years, students were invited to take preparatory courses in Damascus (not possible anymore) or at the Landesspracheninstitut in Bochum (expensive!). Part-timers have been hired to teach the international students, and at some point, even the lecturer for New Testament at NEST offered a language course. For most of the time, students have been encouraged to find their own courses on the private market in Beirut (with a wide range in price and quality). Only for two years preceding the pandemic, the NEST had hired a part-time language instructor again. This is only possible when students can agree on a common level and form (colloquial or classical Arabic) that should be taught. In general, the language question remains a challenge exactly because the students arrive with very different pre-conditions.

### **3. The “NEST-Family”: an intercultural experience**

The term “NEST-Family” is repeated time and again in the final reports – often followed by the remark that it would be difficult to define what exactly it means. According to the reports, it generally encompasses a certain culture of living together, a strong sense of belonging, maybe even upholding specific moral standards. Local as well as foreign students and faculty belong to the NEST-family. Students and a good part of the faculty live and study together in the same building: Lecturers in small flats, students in single- or double-rooms. They come together for the daily chapel service, and they organize a good part of their social life together. Some of the SiMO-students compare this with a smaller seminary in Germany, like Hermannsburg (2002, when this still existed). However, the boundaries of the NEST-family become fluid and maybe complicated when it comes to the “residents” – students from other universities who have rented a room at NEST – or even to the migrant domestic workers who keep NEST running. In what way and how much do they belong? And in which way are the SiMO-students expected to belong: those who share the daily life at NEST for only two semesters?

No matter what, the NEST-family usually leaves a deep impact on the students. One of them writes that living together of local and international students “*was one of the most enriching aspects of the*

*academic year for me*<sup>9</sup> (2008). However, this living together is not self-evident. While one student praises the lively debates between locals and foreign students, another one summarizes: *“It was not easy for me to get in touch with the students at NEST during the academic year.”*<sup>10</sup> (2018) Of course, it makes a big difference whether you study at NEST for three or four years, seeing new SiMO-students coming and going every year – or whether this is your one and only year in Lebanon, and you have to decide how to make the best out of it. Usually, the SiMO-students realize very slowly to what point their local fellow students are consumed by their workload as well as by the expectations of their respective churches: On weekends, they usually go to serve in their congregations across the country, to hold Sunday School or to preach in worship services. They see their place in a Church which is struggling for its survival at the very places of its origins. But they normally don’t impose this reality upon the SiMO students. Some international students then turn away, looking for friendships rather outside the NEST-context. One student goes as far as to note in his intermediate report: *“The NEST is very much stuck (...) in outdated, conservative structures.”*<sup>11</sup> (2018) Half a year later, however, the very same student had undergone a total reversal when he states in his final report that during the first half year his assumptions were based on a severe intercultural misunderstanding.<sup>12</sup> For the majority of SiMO students who decide not to spend the holidays in Germany, it is usually around Christmas that they start to understand better about the reality of their local fellow students. Quite a number of them get invitations to the families of their classmates – which opens up a whole new world: One of them mentions the *“generous hospitality by the family of a fellow student over Christmas”*<sup>13</sup> (2020). Another one is stunned by the *“unconditional acceptance into the family and circle of friends”*<sup>14</sup>, and summarizes: *“First and foremost are relationships with people whose life situation allows me to look at my own life differently.”*<sup>15</sup> (2019) A third student looks back to her study year: *“Relationships developed at NEST continue even after the end of the stay abroad.”*<sup>16</sup> (2019) And a fourth even reports about having formed a piano trio with two Armenian musicians (2012). The essential discovery here is that if you want to build relations with the local students, you need to do so within their structures and according to their rhythms of life, instead of having in mind a rather German concept of students’ life (“Studentenleben”) and being astonished that the locals won’t attend.

Another topic appearing frequently in the final reports is the recurrent debate of rules and policies. Especially the no-alcohol policy on the NEST premises and the gender segregation on the residential floors are quite often a matter of discussion in these reports. However, most students don’t get to a point where they may truly understand the role of NEST in its surrounding society and the resulting reasons for these rules. Instead, some students rather wonder about the seriousness of these rules (and the way it may be communicated to the following generations of students).

Some students notice a concept of “distance and privacy” which is different from the experiences they brought from home: While most Germans anxiously hope to be among the lucky few who get a

---

<sup>9</sup> „war für mich einer der bereicherndsten Aspekte des Studienjahres überhaupt“.

<sup>10</sup> „Die Kontaktaufnahme mit den Studierenden der NEST fiel mir über das Studienjahr hinweg nicht leicht.“

<sup>11</sup> „Die NEST ist sehr festgefahren (...) in veralteten, konservativen Strukturen.“

<sup>12</sup> „Im ersten halben Jahr interkulturell missverstanden“.

<sup>13</sup> „Großzügige Beherbergung durch die Familie eines Kommilitonen über Weihnachten“

<sup>14</sup> „Bedingungslose Aufnahme in Familie und Freundeskreis“.

<sup>15</sup> „An erster Stelle bleiben Beziehungen zu Menschen, deren Lebenssituation mich mein eigenes Leben anders betrachten lassen.“

<sup>16</sup> „An der NEST haben sich Beziehungen ergeben, die auch jetzt nach Beendigung des Auslandsaufenthalts anhalten.“

single room at NEST, they realize with astonishment that most Lebanese or Syrians would feel lonely if they had no roommate. And even getting a hold on a single room does not mean total privacy: The cleaning staff insists on coming in every now and then, even without prior announcement. The NEST family is a tight-knit community: Many aspects of campus life are organized in the different committees which students are strongly encouraged to join; one of the more recent students feels that her actions are “mirrored” by the locals and states soberly that while in Germany, every child above the age of 14 has a right of privacy, this was not the case in Lebanon (2020).

Many final reports discuss the different concepts of “criticism” at the NEST and at their previous universities. Some SiMO students notice that some lecturers are doing just that in their courses: lecturing, rather than discussing the topics with the students in a critical way. This can lead to the easy verdict: *“Honest criticism (...) is actually not wanted.”*<sup>17</sup> (2018) Most students, however, look beyond this first impression: While there is little discussion during some of the courses, it is *“much easier to get into conversation with both students and lecturers outside of the courses”*.<sup>18</sup> (2019) One student is amazed that a professor took up a question asked casually in the elevator, only to come back to the student to bring him some of his private books, with the intention to discuss the issue further. At the same time, students realize that in the Middle East, the process of ascertaining the truth is linked to authority: *“Truths sometimes seem to be constituted completely differently and are, for example, sometimes more tied to people than to the coherence of the respective lines of argument.”*<sup>19</sup> (2005) Some SiMO-students, however, speak about „hierarchy“ rather than about “authority”: They notice a “hierarchical structure” at NEST, typically expressed by the fact that lecturers are always addressed as “Dr. XY” and pastors as “Reverend” or “Assis XY”, while students are usually addressed by their first name. Some are puzzled to see that when members of the Board of Managers meet at NEST, they eat separately from the students and get their own food. One student claims that within this “hierarchy”, the participants of the Pastors’ Program of EKHN hold a higher rank than the ordinary students: Much more will be made possible for them than for those who will be ordained a few years later, at best. Indeed, NEST regularly arranges several special activities for these pastors which are not part of the usual curriculum (but which are paid for by the pastors!). Already back in 2008, one student notes that after the return of the pastors to Germany, some programs have been “dying out”. But there is also a notably positive side to the special attention the pastors receive: Of course, SiMO-students also participate in the pastor’s activities, which is usually an inspiring start into the study year. The final reports from study years in which the pastors’ program took place are generally much more enthusiastic than the reports from years without any EKHN pastors.

However, the pastors’ program is not the only factor that usually facilitates a good start of the study year. The NEST retreats are an equally important factor. Local and international students and faculty alike attend these retreats, and one may say that if the students are thrilled by the retreat, the whole year will be looked at positively. But what follows a good start? Some students in their final reports discuss the question of mentoring. The clear majority of SiMO students are very satisfied with the solution that Rev. Dr. Rima Nasrallah serves as a mentor for them, while they can also contact the pastor of the German congregation (a 5 minutes’ walk from NEST) at any time. A few however

---

<sup>17</sup> „Ehrliche Kritik (...) ist eigentlich nicht gewünscht.“

<sup>18</sup> „Wesentlich leichter, mit sowohl Studierenden als auch Dozierenden außerhalb der Veranstaltungen ins Gespräch zu kommen“.

<sup>19</sup> „Wahrheiten scheinen sich teilweise völlig anders zu konstituieren und sind zum Beispiel mitunter vielmehr an Personen gebunden als an die Schlüssigkeit der jeweiligen Argumentationsgänge.“

complain that Dr. Nasrallah, as a member of the NEST faculty, is “too much part of the system”, while others are unhappy that the German pastor is “too remote from the realities at NEST”. You can’t please everyone.

The NEST family does not live in a bubble, but it exists within a very specific political reality. In the final reports, phrases like “after the collapse of the government”, “after two years without a president”, “after the latest round of hostilities”, “after the shooting in xy”... are common. Two students even got kidnapped for a few hours (in 2014/15 – because they did not listen to very clear advice given by NEST not to travel to a specific place that was known as rather unsafe); one describes how he had to make his way through military barricades in Tripoli, while another one talks about mistrust between Syrian and Lebanese fellow students after the events of 2005. On occasions like these, the role of the President of NEST becomes pivotal: Several students express their gratitude on how Dr. Sabra explained the respective situation to them and gave the students the assurance they needed.

#### 4. Christian-Muslim Relations

Some misunderstandings about the different meanings of Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon and in Germany have been discussed elsewhere<sup>20</sup> and don’t need to be repeated here. The reflection of these misunderstandings as mirrored in the final reports of the SiMO-students, however, is most instructive: Many of them are rather flabbergasted by the critical attitude of their Arab-Christian fellow students towards Muslims and Islam. One student writes that he was “*shocked by students’ arguments against Islam*”<sup>21</sup> (2003). Another one laments these students’ “*exaggerated claim to absoluteness compared to other religions*”<sup>22</sup> (2005), while a third puts it in a more general way: “*I was somewhat disillusioned with the poor contacts between the religious groups in Lebanon.*”<sup>23</sup> (2005) Another participant of the program expresses a certain disappointment: “*Actually, I went to Lebanon expecting to hear something about interreligious dialogue. (...) In that regard, my expectations were disappointed.*”<sup>24</sup> (2005) While one student rudely accuses the SiMO board of having misled her by “selling” the program as “interreligious” while she claims not having had “*any other interfaith experiences here*”<sup>25</sup> (2018), the overwhelming majority of the SiMO students, however, manage to look beneath the surface: One of them expresses her thankfulness for the presence of local Christian fellow students in the Islam course, noting that many Western perceptions of “dialogue” and “Islam” were “*too short-sighted*”<sup>26</sup>. She realizes that Islam in the Middle East “*corresponds only to a limited extent to our Western concept of religion*”<sup>27</sup>, especially in as far as “*Questions of faith are subordinate to questions of law*”<sup>28</sup> in Middle Eastern Islam. And she concludes about the kind of dialogue she was involved in before coming to Lebanon, that many

---

<sup>20</sup> Gräbe, Studium, 32-35.

<sup>21</sup> „Schockiert über Argumente der Studierenden gegen den Islam“.

<sup>22</sup> „Übersteigerter Absolutheitsanspruch gegenüber anderen Religionen“.

<sup>23</sup> „Etwas desillusioniert haben mich die weiterhin schlechten Kontakte zwischen den religiösen Gruppierungen im Libanon.“

<sup>24</sup> „Ich bin eigentlich mit der Erwartung in den Libanon gegangen, auch etwas über interreligiösen Dialog zu hören. (...) Dahingehend wurden meine Erwartungen enttäuscht.“

<sup>25</sup> „Keine weiteren interreligiösen Erfahrungen hier gemacht“.

<sup>26</sup> „Zu kurz greifend“.

<sup>27</sup> „Nur eingeschränkt unserem westlichen Religionsbegriff entspricht“.

<sup>28</sup> „Glaubensfragen haben eine untergeordnete Stellung gegenüber Rechtsfragen.“



questions had been asked *“in a fundamentally wrong way”*<sup>29</sup> (2008). The baseline cannot be more different: While one Christian group comes to discuss theological questions in the form of an academic dialogue, the other Christian group is struggling for survival in an increasingly challenging socio-political fabric. Having realized this, one SiMO-student notes: *“In line with my expectations, I was able to improve my skills in interreligious and intercultural dialogue many times over.”*<sup>30</sup> (2012) Another student explicitly expresses his thankfulness toward his lecturer for Islam and Christian-Muslim dialogue – a Christian missionary who often challenges local students through his openness toward Islam – for having imparted this basic knowledge.

An important part of the Christian-Muslim encounters the SiMO students are exposed to, however, happen in the form of a “dialogue of life”: The Islam courses at NEST have always included very practical field trips. While around 2005, visits to a Shiite institute were regularly part of the course, a tradition has been developed over more than a decade now, to visit the Sunni Sharia court in Saida, and its energetic judge, Sheikh Mohammad Abu-Zayt. Here, the students can experience first-hand the defining impact of religious law on ordinary people’s life. More privately, a part of the students usually visit the Ashura celebrations in the Shiite town of Nabatiyeh. Moreover, many SiMO students, outside their studies, decide to volunteer in institutions like the Moadieh Evangelical Center (MEC) for the elderly, or at the Joint Christian Committee (JCC) which maintains essential services at the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. While at the MEC, residents from all religious backgrounds live together (and can give a living witness about the rich past of Lebanon), working with the JCC directly confronts the students with the pitiful situation of Sunni Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Some students note that their perception of the Middle East had changed through their work at these camps. One even states: *“The historical picture formed in school, in which the state of Israel was founded to protect against anti-Semitism and was thus supported by the new German government after 1945, was put into perspective.”*<sup>31</sup> (2015) Of course, a notion like this raises additional questions. Does the student want to vouch for a “relativization” of a post-Shoah approach by a post-Naqba approach? This would certainly need a follow-up after returning to Germany.

## 5. A transforming experience

Through their two semesters in Lebanon, SiMO students experience a transformation in numerous ways – specifically: professionally, religiously, and personally.

On a *professional* level, one can say that until today, a considerable part of the former SiMO-students have embarked on most amazing careers. Of course, the overwhelming majority have become pastors in their respective churches. But also, there are several lecturers at prestigious universities (among them a Princeton professor!), a desk officer at the German Foreign Office, a Middle East country representative of a political foundation, an education advisor to a political party in the parliament of a German federal state, an education advisor to a German foundation involved in

---

<sup>29</sup> „Grundlegend falsch gestellt“.

<sup>30</sup> „Entsprechend meiner Erwartungen konnte ich meine Kompetenzen im interreligiösen und interkulturellen Dialog um ein vielfaches verbessern.“

<sup>31</sup> „Das in der Schule formierte Geschichtsbild, in dem klassischer Weise der Staat Israel zum Schutze vor Antisemitismus gegründet wurde und somit von der neuen deutschen Regierung nach 1945 unterstützt wurde, relativierte sich.“

interfaith dialogue, a Middle East country representative of a European mission agency, a project advisor to a German mission agency working (among others) with Evangelical Armenians in Lebanon and Syria, and the person responsible for the Ecumenical Volunteers' Program at my own organization, the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS). Former SiMO students are a component of church and society in Germany which should not be underestimated.

On a *religious, or faith* level, former SiMO-students write about some remarkable transformations: Some students mention the daily chapel service at NEST – a practice many had not been used to. One of them writes that she was first “skeptical”, but then she learned to appreciate the devotions. (2017) Another one notes that during his study year, he developed an “*emphasis on my faith*”<sup>32</sup>, inspired by the fact “*how naturally people pray, have icons hanging in their living rooms or use rosaries*”<sup>33</sup>. His striking conclusion: “*I miss such lived faith in Germany.*”<sup>34</sup> (2015) A third student, however, draws a fine line of distinction from these rather Catholic or Eastern expressions of faith: “*Above all, this has led me to appreciate the Lutheran liturgy more.*”<sup>35</sup> (2015) And the fourth draws an astonishing conclusion – or rather a commitment for the future: “*What I want to keep is the joy of going to church happily on Sundays; trying to welcome people into worship, as I learned in the church in Beirut.*”<sup>36</sup> (2017)

All of these considerations are linked to a very *personal* level: After the study year, students realize that they haven't remained the same. This realization may come in terms of national identity: “*My nationality has never had a special meaning for me, but the year also made me think about the image people abroad have of Germans and German history.*”<sup>37</sup> (2005) It may also come in the form of a more general worldview: “*I've definitely become a bit more conservative.*”<sup>38</sup> (2008), or: “*I now look at what was once self-evident with a more critical eye.*”<sup>39</sup> (2010) In a most impressive, almost lyrical, final report, one student states: “*Beirut hit me: I looked myself in the face.*”<sup>40</sup> According to her, the study year is not about acquiring “knowledge about something”, but rather: “I got to know myself.” (2018) Most students may agree with a statement like: “*The two semesters in Lebanon shaped me like no other year.*”<sup>41</sup> (2015), or even: “*During my year abroad, I repeatedly came up against my personal limits and sometimes even exceeded them.*”<sup>42</sup> (2018) The highest praise for the study year,

---

<sup>32</sup> „Schwerpunkt auf meinem Glauben“.

<sup>33</sup> „Wie selbstverständlich die Menschen beten, Ikonen in ihren Wohnzimmern hängen haben oder Rosenkränze verwenden“.

<sup>34</sup> „Solchen gelebten Glauben vermisse ich in Deutschland.“

<sup>35</sup> „Dies hat vor allem dazu geführt, dass ich die lutherische Liturgie nun mehr schätzen kann.“

<sup>36</sup> „Was ich mir bewahren möchte, ist die Freude daran, sonntags fröhlich in den Gottesdienst zu gehen; zu versuchen, Menschen im Gottesdienst willkommend anzunehmen, wie ich es in der Gemeinde in Beirut gelernt habe.“

<sup>37</sup> „Meine Nationalität hat noch nie eine besondere Bedeutung für mich gehabt, aber das Jahr hat mich auch darüber zum Nachdenken gebracht, was für ein Bild Menschen im Ausland von Deutschen und deutscher Geschichte haben.“

<sup>38</sup> „Definitiv bin ich etwas konservativer geworden.“

<sup>39</sup> „Ich betrachte ehemals Selbstverständliches nun mit kritischerem Auge.“

<sup>40</sup> „Beirut traf mich: Ich sah mir selbst ins Gesicht.“

<sup>41</sup> „Die zwei Semester im Libanon haben mir wie kaum ein anderes Jahr geprägt.“

<sup>42</sup> „In meinem Auslandsjahr bin ich wiederholt an meine persönlichen Grenzen gestoßen und habe diese teilweise auch überschritten.“

however, might be expressed as follows: *“In retrospect, I can even rate my disappointments about NEST as positive.”*<sup>43</sup> (2010)

## 6. A long-lasting dedication

Several students, in their final reports, look already into the future. Some of them decide that besides theology, they now plan to take Islamic studies as well. Some decide that they want to return to Beirut in a not-too-distant future. One even casts an eye on the German-speaking congregation of Beirut: *“And who knows whether the pastorate of the German congregation might not become vacant at a suitable time.”*<sup>44</sup> (2019)

One of the most amazing results of the study year, however, is an ongoing commitment to the program and to the former local fellow students. Several long-lasting friendships have evolved out of the study program. Meanwhile, many of the former Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian or Palestinian students have become pastors as well. Together with some of these colleagues, former SiMO students have edited the amazing volume *“ORIENTierungen: Die Bibel im Kontext gelesen”* (Berlin 2017). Today, it has become totally normal that during a yearly meeting of the German SiMO-board, these former students arrange for an online discussion with a Lebanese pastor who used to be one of their fellow students at NEST. Former students have established the alumni organization *“Freunde der NEST e.V.”* (<http://freunde-der-nest.de/>) which meets regularly and supports the NEST in multiple ways. Among others, after the multiple disasters in Beirut, these alumni have collected thousands of Euros in support for the rebuilding and relief effort of NEST. And in these challenging times, it was a group of mainly former students who developed ideas under the title of *“SiMO+”*, intended to expand the cooperation and the ministry of NEST, and to make both more sustainable in the face of a spiraling crisis. Engaging in the SiMO program doesn't just mean an additional point in a student's CV. It rather involves a long-lasting dedication to a common cause.

---

<sup>43</sup> „Sogar meine Enttäuschungen über die NEST kann ich im Nachhinein positiv bewerten.“

<sup>44</sup> „Und wer weiß, ob nicht die Pfarrstelle der deutschen Gemeinde zu einem passenden Zeitpunkt vakant wird.“