



MODERNISING CUSTOMS IN SYRIA

By Dr Basel Sanofi, General Director, Syrian Customs

I am happy to have been asked by the British Embassy to write this article and to be able to explain how Syrian Customs is adapting to customer and Government requests for more facilitation in trade. We accept that our Customs procedures need modernising, particularly to fit in with the procedures of our neighbouring countries and the European Union, which has become Syria's major trading partner. The process of modernisation and reform, which we have started, will take some years to carry out and must by necessity go hand in hand with other reforms that the Government is introducing in other Ministries and State Organisations. In Customs there are four main strands of modernisation that will carry us forward.

1) With the assistance of the European Union the Government of Syria has begun a project to modernise the Ministry of Finance. Customs as part of the Ministry of Finance is included in this project which will provide technical, administrative and training support to Customs to ensure that by the end of the project it has the necessary skills and infrastructure to meet the challenges of the future. The project, which started in March 2005, will last for three and a half years.

Since the inception of the project support has been given in the restructuring of the Customs administration to provide a modern organisation

more suited to its future role. A key role in this will be the creation of a fully computerised Human Resources Directorate that will carry out all the functions required to better manage personnel resources and plan for the future. We also carried out workshops to identify how Customs needs to change in order to improve its staff and provide a better service to the Syrian Government and people. Working Groups have now been set up to implement these changes. Training was conducted in Risk Management, Anti-Smuggling and Change Management to help management meet the challenges of the future and better identify the risks it faces when tackling smuggling while at the same time facilitating trade. Training in other key areas of Customs work will also be carried out during the project life span. A Train the Trainers programme using local trainers will be introduced to ensure self-sufficiency in each subject.

Whilst most of the training has been carried out in Damascus, training in Risk Management has also been conducted at Aleppo in the Syrian European Business Centre and at Latakia. This training helps management and staff identify high risk commodities and people thus allowing better targeting of smugglers whilst at the same time providing the opportunity for quicker clearance times for the honest importers and passengers. Training in Anti-Smuggling has also been carried out in Homs

and Aleppo.

2) In addition to the EU modernisation project the Government of Syria has, with the assistance of UNDP, undertaken a project to computerise the Customs declaration system and provide Customs with an Intranet system for internal communications. This computerisation will eventually allow importers and Customs agents to make their declarations electronically from their own offices and allow for quicker and more accurate checking of the declarations. This will result in quicker clearance times and a more efficient service. The provision of an Intranet facility will also give managers and staff quicker access to more information to help inform their decisions.

3) The draft of the new Customs Code has already gone through Parliament and once it is enacted we shall introduce the secondary legislation necessary to implement the modern procedures envisaged in the new Customs Code. We shall also liaise with the other Government Ministries that are stakeholders in the import and export trade to ensure that their decisions and decrees help facilitate our new procedures. As part of our re-organisation process we also plan to introduce a Public Relation Office in Customs that will be responsible for timely and adequate release of information to the trade and public. In addition it will be responsible for ensuring that queries on Customs procedures and