

AAINews

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Computer Show in Damascus

From 25th to 30th April there was a computer show called "Shaam '99" held in the International Exhibition Hall in Damascus, Syria. According to the promotional pamphlets it was the fifth time this kind of computer exhibition had been held and, since the first event in 1994, each year had witnessed an expansion in its scale. This time about 170 private companies and government agencies participated, and it was said that the estimated number of visitors was 50,000. There were six rooms in the exhibition hall, where they displayed computer hardware, accessories, software programmes and related publications, and held talks on topics such as the Internet, GIS etc.

Syria has been witnessing a rapid increase in computer use in recent years, and there are an increasing number of shops dealing with assembled hardware, parts and software, as well as a surge in the number of computer training schools. Brand products of IBM, Compaq etc. are available but they are expensive, and here the so-called "\$1,000 computer", i.e. hardware assembled by retailers, is the mainstream. Incidentally most of the software available in the city seems to consist of illegal copies, and they are distributed free of charge upon purchase of hardware. Within the government sector including the Ministry of Agriculture, computers are used every day for preparing documents and statistical tables. At provincial level also, computers are being introduced to the Agriculture Directorate offices of each Province, and it is planned to gradually introduce computers to lower District levels and create an IT network with telephone cable connections.

In general the Syrians seem to be very fond of brand-new machines and fashionable commodities, and this is true when it comes to computers also. However, it is common sense to realize and understand that the introduction of computer technology does not in itself provide a magical solution to every problem. For example, some staffs of the Ministry often fail to keep their hard copy documents and files in order. It seems they are not good at filing, such as classifying documents by subject, placing them in titled files, and shelving the categorical files in chronological order. File management with computers is just the same as handling hard copy documents, and it sometimes happens that staff cannot find files they have created and saved somewhere on their computer.

Also, people often say that they want to learn how to use a computer, but when asked what they want to do with their computer skills afterwards, they fail to give specific answers. Looking at the working attitude of the Syrians, especially those working in government offices, I feel that they lack the mind set to do things on their own, with their own ideas or initiative, whether it is dealing with computers or conducting any of their other daily routines. I cannot give any conclusive observation as there is a big difference in working cultures between Japan and Syria, but I think if individual Syrians can work with more originality and creativity instead of just following instructions from above, the country will make more progress. Therefore, it is an important task in AAI's given field of agricultural staff training to transfer soft techniques, such as "systematic planning and undertaking of one's tasks" and "more proactive attitudes towards one's own work", to our counterpart staff through the programme of technical cooperation. However, in reality there is some difficulty, for instance in that in Syria those in the management level is not willing to educate the staff under them. Indeed they tend to even antagonize capable staff members who they see as their future rivals in the promotion stakes. If one hopes to foster human resource development in Syria, it may also be necessary to enlighten those in the higher levels of the system.

(by Akira Koto in Damascus, August 1999)

