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Original paper



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The Importance of Russian Schools in the Levant

Abstract

The article analyzes the cultural significance of the Russian schools established by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in the Levant in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The study addresses an important yet understudied aspect of the sociocultural interaction between Russia and this Middle Eastern region in modern historiography. The aim of the article is to examine the influence of Russian schools on the formation of the cultural, religious, and national identity of Arab Orthodox communities, as well as their role in the process of the Arabization of the patriarchates. The author demonstrates that the Russian schools not only provided free education but also contributed to strengthening the Arabic language and literature, the development of a local intelligentsia, and the broader cultural revival known as the Nahda. Through the example of the schools' graduates (such as Mikhayil Nu'aymeh, Khalil Baydas, and others), the study shows how exposure to Russian literature and culture influenced the emergence of modern Arabic literature and journalism. Particular attention is given to the role of Russian diplomats and educators in supporting the Arab Orthodox communities in

their pursuit of the Arabization of the local church administration. The research confirms that the activities of Russian schools and diplomats played a key role in the Arabization of the Antiochian Patriarchate and contributed to the cultural renaissance of the Arab world. The main contribution of the work lies in the use of new historical sources (including interviews) as well as in the systematic analysis of historical evidence demonstrating the interconnection between Russia's educational policy and the religious and national developments in the Levant.

Keywords:

Russian schools, Orthodox communities of the Levant, Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, Middle East, Antiochian Patriarchate, Jerusalem Patriarchate, Nahda.

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Starting the 16th century, with the arrival of Western Catholic and Protestant missionaries to the East, numerous Orthodox families were attracted to the West and to the services offered by missionaries' schools, and consequently, converted to Catholicism and Protestantism. In the centuries that followed, the Ottoman Empire, commonly known as the 'sick man', came under the grip of the European powers, whose privileges and interests were clearly recognized in the Capitulation agreements.

Various religious brotherhoods and orders within different communities became intertwined with the political interests and agendas of afore-mentioned powers, from whom they received donations and ensured protec-

tion for their schools: for the Catholics, from France and Austria, and for the Protestants, from Great Britain, Prussia and later, the United States of America. Their schools spread throughout the Ottoman Empire, especially in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. It was only towards the last quarter of the 19th century that the Russians would start establishing schools in the Levant. It was in Palestine that the Imperial Russian Society of Palestine founded the first schools in Galilee in 1882.

On the eve of the First World War, Russian schools numbered 105. Yet, despite the short time that these schools operated in the East, their memory remained alive in the mind of the region's Orthodox community. In fact, these schools, aside from functioning free of charge, provided their pupils with books and other school supplies.

They dedicated several hours to the teaching of the Orthodox faith, where the various subjects covered: dogma, history, and the saints. These schools gave particular attention to the teaching of the Arabic language and valorized its literary and poetic heritage.

The importance of Russian schools in the Levant can also be found in the writings of their former students. We report in this article on the testimonials of two former students, Mikhayil Nu'aymeh and Georges Hanna, on the testimonial of a Muslim Sheikh professor of Arabic, and on the testimonial of other missionaries working in the region. In a last part, we will look at the role of Russia in the Arabization of the Patriarchate of Antioch.

1. Two Testimonials from Former Students

In his autobiography, Georges Hanna praised the free and open-minded nature of these schools, while Mikhayil Nu'aymeh stressed the importance of the girls' access to education and the interest they showed in the Arabic language.

Georges Hanna, a student at the Shoueifat school, testifies that these schools developed the love of Russia in children's hearts. Russia was seen by the Catholics and Protestants as the protective power of the Orthodox Christians. Despite the setbacks endured by Russia — the war with Japan and the 1905 revolution — children continued to shout “Long live the Tsar”, unaware that a few years later, he would be dethroned. Russian schools were open to

all students without any segregation based on religion. In those schools, everything was free: tuition, school uniforms, books, etc... This free education enabled the poorest students, whose financial situation would never have allowed them to attend other schools, to receive some education. Hanna insists that the level of Arabic instruction was better than in any other missionary school that only gave importance to their own national languages¹.

Mikhayil Nu'aymeh, another former student of Russian schools, who graduated from the Nazareth boys' seminary and attended university in Russia, reports that: "For the first time in Baskinta, an ideal school was founded. It was the first time that girls could go with boys to a school that had a well-established curriculum, discipline and courses. "Importance was given to the Arabic language, unlike in other schools"².

In addition, Mikhayil Nu'aymeh and Khalil Baydas both bear witness to the influence of Russian language and literature on their lives, as former students at Russian schools.

New means of expression, new aspirations, new horizons and new activities were acquired. Russian school education was instrumental in the birth of an Arab cultural movement in North America. The al-Rabitat al-qalamiyya (The New York Pen League) movement was founded in New York by four educated graduates of Russian schools, of whom three Syrian nationals: Nadra Haddad, Abdel Massih Haddad and Nassib Arida, former students at the Russian school in Homs, and the Lebanese Mikhayil Nu'aymeh, former student at Baskinta school. Nassib Arida and Mikhayil Nu'aymeh had also studied at the *l'École normale russe de Nazareth*. Al-Rabitat alqalamiyya included two Lebanese poets as well: Gibran Khalil Gibran and Eliya Abou Madi.

When Alexei Dmitrievsky was in office as Inspector and General Secretary of the Imperial Palestine Society, he regretted the two poets' departure to the United States of America because Russian schools would be losing future young teachers. On the other hand, he also felt that they could be vessels of the rich Russian literature to the New World. As a matter of fact, on April 23, 1912, Abdel Massih Haddad and Nassib Arida founded the New York-based magazine as-Sa'ih (The Traveler)³, that included several trans-

¹ HANNA Georges, *Qabla Al Maghib*, p. 60

² NU'AYMEH Mikhayil, 1960, *Sab'un (Seventies)* p. 86

³ DE TARAZI Philippe, tome IV, 1933, *Tarikh al Sahafat al Arabiyya (History of Arab Newspapers)* p. 4

lations of Russian literature articles. For five years (1913–1918), Arida served as the editor of the magazine called al-Funun (The Arts), in which novels by Tolstoy, Pushkin, Lermontov and others were published in Arabic.

In Palestine, several graduates of Russian schools contributed to the Arab Nahda⁴ movement, including Salim Qab'in. After graduating from the *l'École normale russe de Nazareth*, he settled in Egypt, where he specialized in translating Tolstoy's works. He published a study on Tolstoy, wrote several articles on Russian literature and, above all, he developed an agricultural project modelled around projects developed in Russia.

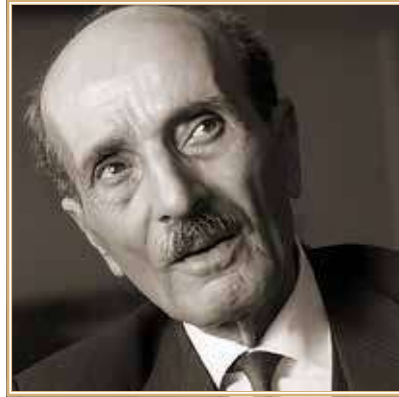
Mikhail Nu'aymeh, who had studied at the Poltava seminary in Russia and was also a member of al-Rabitat al-qalamiyya, says: "I quickly immersed myself in Russian literature. I read avidly. It was hard to find an author whose works I had not read. Literary stagnation in the Arab world had become obvious to me by the time I left Russia. This issue was discouraging and humiliating for someone who had experienced the delicate art of Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenyev, the laughter to tears of Gogol, the appealing realism of Tolstoy, the literary ideal of Belinsky and, above all, the great humanity of the most profound and powerful of writers, Dostoyevsky".

Khalil Baydas, a graduate of schools in Palestine, talks about his impressions of Russian language and literature: "It was not only about the Russian language", he writes, "that was close to my heart. As soon as I had barely started to write it with difficulty... that I began to devour Russian books abundantly available in the school library. Each book I read gradually dispersed the fog obscuring my knowledge of Russia. What was merely a word at first, became a country, then an idea, and finally a whole world – the only world I could live and breathe in"⁵.

These testimonials highlight the deep inspiration of Russian literature on former students of Russian schools who, seriously trained in the Arabic language, ignited a literary renaissance movement in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. Owing to this movement, Russian schools tremendously contributed to the development and modernization of the Arabic literature. Journalism,

⁴ The Nahda is the Arab cultural and literary renaissance movement that flourished in the Near East in the second half of the 19th century.

⁵ This testimonial by Khalil Baydas is quoted by Derek Hopwood, "The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine" (1843–1914) 1969, pp. 157–158 (himself quoting A. Shifman, *Lev Tolstoy i Vostok*, Moscow, 1960, p. 447).



Mikhayil Nu'aymeh

<https://www.arabamerica.com/pathbreakers-of-arab-america-mikhail-naimy/>

literature and translation were the fields in which these students excelled. Khalil Baydas, also graduate of *the École normale de Nazareth* was a teacher at the Russian schools in Haifa and Damascus. He translated works by Pushkin and Gogol. From 1908 to 1914, he edited the Jerusalem-based magazine *al-Nafa'is* (*The precious things*) exclusively dedicated to the publication in Arabic of the works of Russian authors.

2. Testimonials of Other European Missionaries

The importance of Russian schools in the Levant was also highlighted in the notes written by representatives of other European missions. In the same context, Russian inspectors' admiration for German schools seems to have been mutual. The missionary Martin Hartmann writes that the Imperial Society founded by Grand Duke Sergei provides support for devout Russian pilgrims and promotes an efficient education policy: "The Society is founding schools throughout Syria, even in the most distant areas". Hartmann also notes that Ottoman authorities are watching all this, anticipating that at some point the Russians might intervene. But Hartmann thinks that no Russian intervention in Syria is to be feared⁶. During his trip, Hartmann noted the presence of Russian schools in Homs and Latakia, where Catholics and Protestants also

⁶ HARTMANN Martin, "Reisebriefe aus Syrien" Berlin 1913, Introduction, p. XIII and XIV.



Students of the Male Teachers' Seminary of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in Nazareth. *Russian Institutions in the Holy Land and Deceased Figures of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. Vol. XXV (1882–1907).* St. Petersburg, Kirschbaum Publishing. 1907

had their own schools; “The Russians”, he wrote, “have also set foot in Beirut, where they founded 5 schools that accommodate 1,050 students in 4 different neighborhoods, and they also took care for the poorest”⁷. While Russia had no fewer than 101 schools in Syria and Palestine, it had no schools at all in Hama, where the Russian Consulate serves the Christian community, the majority of whom are Orthodox⁸. During that period, German newspapers advised Germany to follow Russia’s example when establishing and setting up German schools.

Conversely, French Catholic missions thought differently of the Russian schools flourishing in Palestine and Syria. The newspaper *La Vérité* wrote bitterly: “If the French policy does not change in the Holy Land, the French influence will disappear, soon to be replaced by the Russian power”⁹. The issue of land acquisition and expansion of schools was already worrisome to the Catholics. The same newspaper wrote: “At the cost of 100,000 human lives and one billion in expenses during the Sebastopol war (Crimea), France only acquired one piece of land and the house of Saint-Joachim and Sainte-Anne. Do we still have to wait for Russia to secure the privilege of protecting the Orthodox and that of opening schools in the heart of Jerusalem?” These excerpts from the newspaper *La Vérité* are reposted by the periodical published by the Palestine Imperial Society *Palestinskii Sbornik*, which concludes, with

⁷ Op. cit., p. 33 and 77.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 59.

⁹ Palestinskii Sbornik, tome VI, August 1894, p. 401–409.

a note of pride: “the dissatisfaction of our opponents is the best proof of the importance of Russia’s undertaking in the Holy Land and its duty to protect the Orthodox population”¹⁰.

3. Testimonials from Muslim Sheikh Professor of Arabic

Predominantly, Russia’s image within the local communities was shining. Moreover, the 19th century was marked by the rapid expansion of the Russian empire, then at its glorious peak. Shaykh Mohammad Ayyad al-Tantawi, Arabic teacher at the Russian school in Jerusalem in 1855, founded at the time of the mission of Kapoustine¹¹, and who also taught Arabic at the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg, wrote three poems to praise the glory of Russia and its tsars, characterized by the strong praise and a hagiographic style.

The first poem commemorates the 25th anniversary of the coronation of Tsar Nicholas I, emperor of Russia (1855–1825). In this poem, the author lists and glorifies the works and victories of the Tsar during his reign. He begins by citing his military victories and the growth of his army. He also mentions the construction of a luxuriously decorated palace. Yet, the work that he considers greater than the pharaohs’ pyramids consists of the arcaded bridge over the river “la Neva” that facilitated the movement of inhabitants during the periods of heavy snow. The author once again mentions the army, its strength and glory, as well as the expansion of Russian territories, which clearly constitutes a source of frustration and jealousy of other countries vis-à-vis Russia’s power. He also praises the Tsar’s family, his impressively beautiful wife, whom he describes as the “countless procreator” (“من المنجيات بلا عد”) and his sons, one of whom was to become the crown prince and the other the commander of the armies.

The last line of this poem is the traditional method to find a date, in which the number of letters constituting words mentioned after the dated word, would give the exact date of the coronation¹².

¹⁰ Op. cit.

¹¹ In other words, this is a school of the Russian Mission that opened prior to the establishment of the Imperial Society.

¹² Arabic Manuscript 111, University of Halle, Manuscript Department.

The second poem was written to announce the death of Tsar Nicholas the First. He describes this event as an astronomical catastrophe, the falling of the sky, an earthquake, an eclipse of the moon and sun, the disappearance of the star Venus. Foreigners, magazines and orphans mourn him for his generosity! His courage and his fight against the enemies did not prevent him from freeing the hostages and prisoners. The buildings he built mourn him, so do schools, newspapers and pencils! His daughters and subjects mourn him. His fleet and all Russia mourn him. The poem ends with the same way of dating the event.

A third poem was written to mark the enthronement of his son, Crown Prince Alexander II (1855). The same poet describes the joy that substitutes the sadness of the people. He describes the new Tsar as a renowned horseman and hunter, victorious over his enemies. He also evokes the beauty of the new tsarina, before whom “the moon bows”, “children are honored like flowers”, writes al-Tantawi¹³, “whose fragrance perfumes the world with dew”. The poem celebrates the strength of the new tsar’s armies and his victories over territories to which the occupation instills justice. The poet mentions that he had the honor to meet the Tsar, and that the latter was pleased. Furthermore, even when the dating process was finished, the author continues to praise the tsar in five verses, describing his trip to Paris and the signing of the treaty that ended the war.

Though written in the 19th century, these poems echo the poem composed by bishop Issa who had accompanied the Antiochian Patriarch Yuwakim Daw to Russia in the 17th century. We find therein the same admiration for the power and glory of Russia, the same amazement vis-à-vis the grandeur and luxury of the tsarist power. What is remarkable here, however, is that Shaykh al-Tantawi praises the military victories and the posterity of the royal family for both Tsar Nicholas I and his successor Alexander II, even though he himself is Muslim and Ottoman.

This form of admiration for Russia, illustrated by these poems, not only resonated with the local communities, but was also reflected in the Orthodox keen interests in all the news they received from Russia. Thus, in 1905, news of the assassination of Grand Duke Sergei fell like a thunderbolt on the students of the *École normale de Nazareth*. Students did not understand how

¹³ Arabic Manuscript 111, University of Halle, Manuscript Department.

the Tsar's uncle, the founder of the Society, so generous to them, could be so hated in his own country. The school organized a condolences session in his memory, attended by all notables of Nazareth. The school management chose a poem by the student Mikhayil Nu'aymeh to be read in public. At the time of writing his memoirs, the author remembered only the following two lines:

سرى نعيه بالبرق في كل جانب»
 «وما كان ظني الطود بالبرق يرفع¹⁴

(*"The news of his death came like a bolt of lightning from all sides, and I did not think the mountain could be lifted by lightning"*).

Another Russia-related event was to upset the Eastern Orthodox community's opinion. It was the Russian-Japanese War (1904–1905), at a time when the radio did not exist yet, and Beirut newspapers needed at least one week to reach Nazareth, and Russian newspapers, one month. The defeat of Admiral Stepan Makarov and the destruction of his battleship "Petropavlovsk" in the port of Vladivostok (1904), was perceived as a great tragedy at the schools of Nazareth. The Orthodox went to *École normale de Nazareth* to get the latest news on the war. Nu'aymeh narrates that students would sometimes manipulate the feelings of an old gentleman who was very attached to Russia by distorting some events, only to see him react in a very theatrical way and shout: "Zito, may God give him victory"¹⁵.

This war gave rise to a song celebrating the Russian tsar, to the tune of the Turkish song "Uskudar" or the Arabic song "Les filles d'Alexandrie", "*Ya banat Iskandaria*"

قيصر الروس نيقولا صنه يا متان
 واجعل النصر حليفه في حرب اليابان

*O tsar of the Russians Nicolas may God the Generous keep him
 And may victory be his ally in the war against Japan.*

This lullaby is still sung to this day by Lebanese Orthodox grandmothers who put their grandchildren to sleep¹⁶.

Russia's influence on the region's Orthodox communities continued even after the 1917 October Revolution. In Lebanon, for example, at the end

¹⁴ Nu'aymeh Mikhayil, *Tis'un* (Nineties) 1988, p. 213–214.

¹⁵ Verbal testimonial by Marie Zakhour collected in 2000 by Souad Abou-Rousse-Slim.

¹⁶ Interview with Dr. Nadim Nu'aymeh (nephew of Mikhayil Nu'aymeh) in 2012.

of the Second World War, and following the victory of the allies, during the Pascha holy liturgy in Baskinta in 1945, the celebrants intoned “May God protect our hero Stalin” instead of the prayer “May God protect our believing (Orthodox) kings”.

In the Orthodox homes of Koura (a territory in north-western Lebanon), one would see photos of Lenin and Stalin surrounding the icon of the Virgin by the same people who had previously hung the photo of Tsar Nicholas II and his family.

4. Russia’s Role in the Arabization of the Antiochian Patriarchate

In people’s memory, the Arabization of the Antiochian Patriarchate remains one major achievement of Russia’s influence in the Near East.

In 1895, the Greek Patriarch of Antioch in Damascus, Spyridon I who was facing a myriad of difficulties, was unpopular and deeply indebted. That same year, he invited the Imperial Society to run the schools of his Patriarchate, hoping to benefit from the Society’s popularity and efficiency. This decision generated the first positive impact, that of accelerating the Arabization of the Antiochian Patriarchate.

By entrusting the schools to the Russians, Spyridon condemned himself: he had to flee to Constantinople 4 years later (see *infra*).

Another result followed. In Syria, the 15 schools that existed in 1895 would grow to become 41 schools with 5,500 students by 1900. With the arrival of Meletios, the first Arab Patriarch on the See of Antioch since 1724, Syria would account in 1905, 70 Russian schools with over 9,000 students: not only did this unexpected expansion put a serious strain on the Imperial Society’s budget, but this development did not please all its members. Grand Duke Sergei, the Society’s founder and honorary president, saw this as a deviation from the Society’s original aims, which were to welcome pilgrims in the Holy Land. In fact, the 1888–1890 report already mentioned the idea that Syria was not a field of action likely to supersede the objectives of the Society in Palestine¹⁷.

¹⁷ HOPWOOD Derek “The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine (1843–1914)”, 1969, p. 150.

The Arabization of the Antiochian Patriarchate in 1899 was in fact, the result of a series of events. In this context, since the Greek War of Independence that lasted from 1821 till 1832, negative feelings related to the differences between the Greek Patriarch and his Arab parishioners had grown considerably. The Greeks had gone from being Ottoman subjects, to foreigners and enemies of the Ottoman state. The empire had taken this war very badly and took revenge on its Orthodox subjects, especially those who dared to support Greece. In Beirut and several Syrian coastal cities inhabited by large Greek communities, riots broke out in support of the Greek people. The Protestant printing house, established in Beirut since 1827, had to relocate to Malta where it operated for some years before returning to Beirut. As a revenge move, Ottomans recognized the Greek Catholics in 1848, following several requests by their Patriarch Maximus III Mazloum (1833–1855). Priest Porphyrius Uspenski, of the Russian Mission in Jerusalem and one of the few Russian dignitaries renowned for his in-depth knowledge of the Antiochian Patriarch prior to 1850, considered it impossible for the Syrian Orthodox Church to continue to be ruled by a Greek Patriarch, and therefore advised the Russian Church to exert pressure for the election of an Arab Patriarch.

The issue of Arabization of the Patriarchate of Antioch arose again with the Bulgarian crisis. In 1872, the Damascenes revolted against their Greek Patriarch, Iérothéos, who had voted with Constantinople for the excommunication of the Bulgarians. If the Antiochians saw this as a reason to revolt against their Patriarch, the Orthodox of Damascus, on the other hand, mainly revolted against the way in which the Patriarchate's revenues were being utilized¹⁸.

The Orthodox believers of Damascus found support in their uprising against the Patriarch in the Russian General Consul in Damascus, Belyaev. The latter was in fact sent from Jerusalem to Damascus that soon became the seat of the General Consulate. Seemingly, this assignment was not a routine procedure. Belyaev was keenly interested in Arab affairs and the situation of the Orthodox Church. He would later be appointed as president of the Imperial Russian Society of Palestine. He forged ties with Arab bishops (namely Bishop Gerasimos Yared of Zahle, who had pursued his studies in Russia)¹⁹, and seeing

¹⁸ op.cit., p. 162.

¹⁹ Op.cit., p. 160.

the increasing intensity of the “Arab national” feeling, he joined forces with the Arab bishops in their uprising against their Greek Patriarch, Spyridon I.

By calling for the election of an Arab Patriarch, Arab bishops were seeking to bring to light the issue of schools in the Patriarchate of Antioch. Spyridon hoped that by improving the schools and entrusting them to the Russian Society, he would calm his Arab parishioners. However, the Patriarch did not foresee that the Arab bishops, backed by Russia, would succeed in making their voices heard to the capital Istanbul and to the Sublime Porte, the two spiritual and temporal authorities of the Ottoman empire.

In the summer of 1898, the Holy Synod of the Church of Antioch met and, with a majority of the Arab bishops, decided to revoke Spyridon, who, after taking refuge at the Saydnaya convent, fled to Constantinople. Discussions that would eventually lead to the election of his successor would last two years²⁰.

To succeed in the election of a Patriarch from among their own ranks, Arab bishops needed external support in two capitals: Damascus, where encouragement and talks with Arab Orthodox bishops and local authorities were necessary, and in Constantinople, to face up to the opposition from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. They would benefit from the support of Belyaev in Damascus and that of the Russian ambassador Zinoviev in Istanbul.

The major problem for the Damascus Orthodox Christians was the absence of a constitution for the Church of Antioch. It had not been necessary for so long as the Patriarchate of Antioch functioned under the auspices of the Patriarch of Constantinople. However, the election of the Patriarch needed to be validated by the Ottoman governor of Damascus, who required that Greek bishops participate in the election. The synod, meeting in an electoral assembly, appointed Germanos, the Greek bishop of Adana, as patriarchal vicar. The latter presided over the synod; yet, the Arab bishops were in the majority and acted under the leadership of the bishop of Zahlé, Gerasimos Yared. They were determined to elect an Arab Patriarch to the seat of the Patriarchate in Damascus.

In Constantinople, the conflict crystallized between two parties: Sultan Abdel Hamid on the one hand, and his ministers on the other. The

²⁰ Op.cit., p. 166.



Beit Jala. Female students of the Women's Teachers' Seminary of the IOPS.
*Russian Institutions in the Holy Land and Deceased Figures of the Imperial
 Orthodox Palestine Society. Vol. XXV (1882–1907).*
St. Petersburg, Kirschbaum Publishing. 1907

Russian ambassador addressed the Grand Vizier, Tewfik Pasha, to convince him to support the election of an Arab Patriarch²¹ arguing that a system of autocephalous patriarchates not dependent on Constantinople would make it more difficult for the Orthodox to rally to obtain political privileges. The Grand Vizier was not convinced by the ambassador's arguments, so he turned to the Sultan, and obtained what he requested. Once Abdel Hamid convinced, the Ottoman administration understood that Russian pressure would be too strong and could not be countered.

On the Greek side, the Patriarchate of Constantinople started to address ambassadors from France and Great Britain, warning them against the growing Russian political influence in the Middle East. The French ambassador felt unable to intervene because of his country's alliance with Russia, and the British ambassador O' Connor, did not wish to get involved in a dispute that did not directly serve the British interests. Nevertheless, he sent his interpreter to speak privately to the Sultan's secretary to explain to him "the danger of giving official support to Russian propaganda".

The Grand Vizier received a delegation composed of three Greek patriarchates and a representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch himself²². They offered him 25,000 Turkish pounds as a gift. The Ottoman ministers could not show a direct opposition to the Sultan, so they embraced the cause of the

²¹ Op.cit., p. 168.

²² It is the Patriarch of Constantinople that is meant here. See chapter I, note 30.

Greek Patriarchs and attempted to influence the actions of the governor of Damascus²³.

The outcome of the conflict largely depended on the attitude of the governor of Damascus, Nazim Pacha, who seemed to favor the Arab party from the start. He was in an embarrassing position given the different views of the Sultan and his ministers, and the persistent pressure exerted by the Greeks and Russians in Damascus. In March 1899, shortly following ambassador Zinoviev's visit to the Sultan, Nazim Pasha informed the Antioch synod that he had received instructions to dismiss the Greek patriarchal vicar, Germanos for opposing the decisions of the majority of the synod, and suggested that they appoint the bishop of Latakia, Meletios al-Doumani as patriarchal vicar. The latter was confirmed patriarchal vicar by the Sultan in March 1899. The Sublime Porte informed Nazim Pasha that the three Greek patriarchates had protested the exclusion of Greek bishops from the elections, which constituted an infringement of their rights. The Orthodox replied that their language was Arabic and that their sacred right stipulated that their spiritual leader be an Arab Ottoman who would serve the State and his community. They argued that the situation that had prevailed in the 18th and 19th centuries had not affected the ancient tradition of the Patriarch being elected by the various bishops and parishioners²⁴.

The governor of Damascus sent this reply to Istanbul, which only added up to the existing confusion. On a desperate note, Arabs realized that time was running against them. They wished to hold the elections before even receiving official authorization. Belyaev promised them that he would ask the Tsar to intervene in favor of an Arab Patriarch. Most bishops estimated that they should benefit from the Sultan's support and call for immediate elections without the presence of Antiochian laity. They soon nominated three candidate bishops: Meletios (Latakia), Athanasios (Homs) and Gerasimos (Zahlé). The doors of the Cathedral of Damascus, closed for the short interval of the election, finally opened to announce to the crowd the election of Meletios al-Doumani to the seat of the Patriarchate of Antioch. Celebrations of joy in Bab al-Charqi district lasted until midnight.

²³ HOPWOOD Derek op.cit. 1969, p. 168.

²⁴ Op.cit., p. 169.



Women's School of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in Damascus.
*Russian Institutions in the Holy Land and Deceased Figures of the Imperial
 Orthodox Palestine Society. Vol. XXV (1882–1907).*
 St. Petersburg, Kirschbaum Publishing. 1907

For his official recognition, the newly elected patriarch needed a “Firman of Investiture” (order) from the Sultan. The Ecumenical Patriarchate sent to the palace his opposition against this election²⁵. Under these circumstances, and following a heated debate, the Ottoman Council of Ministers decided to reinstate Germanos, bishop of Adana, as patriarchal vicar and to call for new elections. The Council of Ministers asked the governor of Damascus, Nazim Pasha, to depose Meletios. Although disappointed by the Arab Orthodox (who, in practice, were moving away from the Ottoman support rule), Nazim Pasha continued to support their cause and took no action. The Arabs were losing hope, and tensions in Damascus increased with the numerous demonstrations and conflicts taking place. In the summer of 1899, former Russian ambassador to Constantinople, Nelidov, visited Damascus. After his departure, Nazim Pasha summoned the Russian consul Belyaev and informed him, in the presence of several Arab priests, that there was no risk of Meletios being deposed²⁶.

In Istanbul, the Russian ambassador Zinoviev held further discussions with the Sultan to convince him that refusal to recognize Meletios would create bitter animosity among the Arab Orthodox, which might also encourage them to join the ranks of Arab Muslim movements claiming national in-

²⁵ Op.cit., p. 170.

²⁶ Op.cit., p. 170.

dependence. As for the Arab Orthodox, they realized that their two enemies were the Ecumenical Patriarch and O' Connor, the English ambassador to Constantinople, who declared that the election of an Arab Patriarch would only generate more Russian influence. The policy of the Arab Greek Orthodox was also to refuse any obedience to Russia. They officially declared:

“Nothing links the Arab Orthodox to Russia apart from the community of faith that also links them to the Greeks, Bulgarians and Romanians”²⁷. Until mid-September 1899, no action was taken to depose Meletios. Both the Sultan and Nazim Pasha held firm. Meletios received a friendly reply to his courtesy telegram on the occasion of the Sultan's enthronement anniversary. In November, when the synod was summoned to hold new elections, Meletios got re-elected. Only four days later, Nazim Pasha received confirmation of this nomination from the Sultan and the Sublime Porte. Meletios was enthroned in the Cathedral of Damascus on November 13, 1899, in the presence of the Arab bishops of the synod, of Belyaev, the Russian Consul in Damascus, as well as all consulate officials. That same evening, Belyaev dined with the bishops and the Patriarch.

This eventful episode in the relationship between the Patriarchate of Antioch and Russia formed a founding pillar in the development of this Patriarchate and the cultural and political expansion of Bilad al-Cham in the 20th century. One of the first theorists of Arab nationalism, Sati' al-Husri, would later say in a lecture: “The independence of the Patriarchate of Antioch from the control of the Hellenic prelates and hierarchy constituted the first steppingstone in the Arab rebellion against the Ottomans”²⁸

Henceforth, the efforts of Russians, diplomats and teachers alike, leading to the reinforcement of the community identity and sense of belonging of Orthodox Christians to the Arab identity, undoubtedly succeeded in Antioch. On the other hand, this Russian policy failed in Jerusalem, where

²⁷ Op.cit., p. 170.

²⁸ Sati' al-Husri, *Muhadarat fi nushu' al-fikra al-qawmiyya* (Lectures on the birth of the nationalist idea), Cairo, 1st edition, 1951, p. 171. Sati' al-Husri (1880–1968), Syrian modernist teacher and intellectual, and theorists of Arab nationalism, was appointed Minister of Education in the government of King Faysal I in Damascus. In 1920, he followed Faysal to Iraq following the entry of the French into Syria. Following numerous stays in Syria and Egypt, he returned to Iraq in 1967.

the Orthodox Patriarch is still Greek to this day, despite persistent demands from the Palestinian Orthodox for the Arabization of their Jerusalem patriarchate.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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