

Pilgrims and Colonizers

Diplomacy and Nationalism in Palestine during the Late Nineteenth Century



By Xavier Abu Eid

Imagine a deserted piece of land void of any culture. A country whose population is mainly nomad, with no attachment to the land and a poor economy. Could this description apply to a country that over 100

years ago hosted diplomatic representations from all the main Western colonial powers? Certainly not. Palestine's historical, archeological, and religious richness is unquestionable, and references to a "land without a people" or a "desert" that was made to "bloom" by others, incomers, must be understood as Orientalist political marketing by these others to legitimize their control, not expressions based on reality. This article is not comprehensive, yet it describes some of the aspects that shaped the work of diplomatic representations in Palestine during the last years of the nineteenth century.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Palestine's population amounted to almost 600,000, the vast majority of them Arabs, and over 12 percent of them Christians. The Jewish population stood at around 3 percent, considerably less than the thriving Jewish communities of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt at that time. Those were the years when the Zionist movement was created. Its founding father, the Austro-Hungarian journalist Theodor Herzl, wrote in "The Jewish State": "We should there [in Palestine] form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism."

This was certainly a suitable starting point to gain the sympathy of European colonial powers. Pro-Zionist British officials, such as James Balfour and Lloyd George, tended to agree with such perceptions, including the justification to negate the rights of the indigenous Arab Palestinian population. It was also a period when Christian Zionist narratives were not rare in the United Kingdom and part of Protestant missions in Palestine.

Palestine's religious significance and privileged geographical location attracted pilgrims, foreign congregations, and foreign workers who needed consular services. But this was just the beginning. Around 1870 – before the Zionist Congress, the First World War, Sykes-Picot, Hussein-McMahon, and Balfour – the main colonial powers had already collected vast amounts of information about Palestine, the land and the people.

French intellectual Victor Guérin produced several volumes of his *Geographic, Historical, and Archeological Description of Palestine between 1868 and 1880*. Meanwhile, the British Palestine Exploration Fund

responsibilities at the Christian holy sites, involving a set of regulations and practices that aimed to prevent any disputes or changes over the most important sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Status Quo later included other sites and was not reduced only to the Christian presence, including notably Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound. In terms of practice, the agreement strengthened the importance of the Western diplomatic missions, with the French in charge of protecting Catholic interests in Palestine, and confirmed the role that, since the eighteenth century, Russia had increasingly played in protecting Orthodox interests.

Augusta Victoria Hospital.



had prepared some of the most detailed maps of Palestine, including extensive archaeological descriptions. European travelers wrote descriptions of Palestine that excel in the number of details they provide, many of them unrelated to religion.

An important part of the Berlin Treaty of 1878 was the ratification of the Status Quo agreement over rights and

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were several diplomatic missions in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa. Palestine, being the oldest pilgrim destination worldwide, certainly played a role in this important development. The first European country with a continuous diplomatic presence in Palestine was France (since 1623). French diplomatic activities were

closely linked to the country's assumed role as protector of Catholic interests in the East. In Palestine, other countries entered this exclusive club, not necessarily without creating rivalries. The most relevant was the inclusion of Italy (that opened its Jerusalem consulate to represent the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia before the

presence of Protestants (supported by the British) in Jerusalem and by the fact that the Franciscans of the Custodia did not speak Arabic and had not ordained Palestinian monks. Father Joseph (Yousef) Valerga became the Latin patriarch that year. He was young (34 years old) and fluent in Arabic, having served as a Holy See diplomat in

of Jerusalem's main churches for centuries.

The Latin Patriarchate contributed to the expansion of the services provided by Catholic institutions for all Palestinians. Saint Louis Hospital in Jerusalem, for example, attended to 1,200 patients in 1897, only a year after its completion. Almost half of these were Christians from various denominations (mainly Latin, Orthodox, Armenian, Copt, and Protestant), whereas the other half were Muslims. Three Jewish patients were also treated. Among the most fascinating documents that describe this process are the diaries of Soeur Emilie de Vialar, the French founder of the Saint Joseph congregation who created a network of institutions in Jaffa, Bethlehem, Ramleh, Jerusalem, and Ramallah for the benefit of the Palestinian population.

But here comes the clash: Despite the fact that Patriarch Valerga's popularity and enthusiasm had brought fresh blood to the local Catholic Church, it was France, the "protector of the Catholic interests in the East," who initially opposed the move – without considering the reality of Palestine. "I believe that the establishment of



■ Entry of the Latin Patriarch to Jerusalem.



■ (Yousef) Valerga, the first Latin patriarch who spoke Arabic.

country's unification in 1843), Belgium (1851), and Spain (1853).

In 1847, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem was reestablished in an attempt to expand the Roman Catholic presence in Palestine. The initiative was partially encouraged by the increasing

Syria. He was welcomed by the French consul (who had already reported to Paris that the new patriarch was from "Sardinia," insinuating the rivalry with the French interests) and impressed the faithful by delivering his first sermon in Arabic. This was warmly welcomed by the Palestinian Catholic community, yet it increased the existing tensions with the Franciscans and with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. Patriarch Valerga strongly pushed the idea of a national church, with Palestinian priests, arguing that "A patriarchate without national clergy is a mockery, something like a ghost."ⁱⁱ This was not necessarily a popular idea among the foreign clergy who had monopolized the control

**Nineteenth-century
Palestine was a subject
of research and
colonialism.**

**While outlining
the rights and
responsibilities of
the various Christian
denominations with
regard to the Christian
(later on, also Muslim)
holy sites, the Status
Quo also increased
the influence of
foreign powers that
were establishing
themselves as
protectors of these
communities under
Ottoman rule.**

a Catholic diocese in Jerusalem will not be a good project in itself for us. In fact, it is not useful and is perhaps harmful,"ⁱⁱⁱ wrote French Foreign Minister Guizot in 1847 to his ambassador in Rome. One of the French concerns was that the existence of a "Bishop of Jerusalem" would lead the British to do the same and install an Anglican bishop, expanding the British interests in the area.

The United Kingdom had already opened a consulate in 1839, and Prussia (which later became Germany) had established its diplomatic presence in Jerusalem in 1842. By the end of the nineteenth century, Germany had consuls also in Jaffa and Haifa. The



■ Greek Orthodox Patriarch Cyril II of Jerusalem, 1846-1872.

first Protestant missions in Palestine were part of a Prussian-British decision to establish a joint presence in Palestine. Mainly political differences split the church a few decades later, consolidating separate Anglican and Lutheran missions.

Eventually, France changed its position and cooperated with the Latin Patriarchate. This cooperation ranged from financial contributions to the strong defense voiced by Consul Paul-Emile Botta when members of Beit Jala's Orthodox community, opposing the establishment of a Latin church in their town, besieged Patriarch Valerga in the property acquired by the Latin Patriarchate, even shooting at him. The siege ended with the intervention of the French consul who pressured the Ottoman authorities to take action. The patriarch was "exiled" to Jaffa, where he had to await a verdict from Istanbul.

Patriarch Valerga's case remains a testimony to the intermingling between diplomatic engagement and nationalism in Palestine during the

second half of the nineteenth century. Notably, the parties that opposed his appointment shared their disregard for the aspirations and rights of the local population.

In other words, was it a coincidence that most if not all foreign congregations discouraged the presence of Arab Palestinian priests? Certainly not. A struggle between the Arab congregation and the Greek hierarchy in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem had already manifested itself during the early nineteenth century and kept the parties' relationship tense. Greece established its consulate general in 1862, a logical move considering the geographical proximity, religious importance, stream of Greek pilgrims, and growing Greek population in Palestine, a common trend in other Arab countries, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, as well. During the British Mandate, though, it became clear that Athens' essential diplomatic goal was "the preservation of the Jerusalem patriarchate's Greek national character,"^{vi} as explained by Konstantinos Papastathis.

The case of the Arab Palestinian Orthodox community can be taken as one of the seeds of the Palestinian national movement. It is not a coincidence that most notable Palestinian nationalist media outlets in the first years of the twentieth century – notably *Falastin* newspaper edited by Issa al-Issa in Jaffa – included broad coverage of the *orthodoxiyat* (Orthodox affairs) section with regard to the demands to fulfill the rights of the local congregations. This case also attracted the attention of the Russian Orthodox Church that developed its own outreach in Palestine and was perceived to be close to the Arab-Palestinian faithful. Russia opened a consulate in Jerusalem in 1858 and built a complex for Russian pilgrims, with Russian

diplomacy also getting involved in ecclesiastical matters.

The disputes over the "Arabization" of the Catholic Church through the Latin Patriarchate and the struggle over the Orthodox Patriarchate can be considered as demonstrations of a national will for independence. But the relationship was not entirely antagonistic, and some tried to find a balance. France had developed important relations with the Melkite Church that was perceived as the most Arab and independent church of all. Its clergy adopted the French language in addition to Arabic and collaborated with French efforts in the region. A few years into the twentieth century, Bishop Gregorios Hajjar, one of the most influential Arab nationalist figures in Palestine, was sentenced to death by the Ottoman authorities for recruiting Palestinian youth to fight for the French army. He escaped to Egypt.

The mixture of interests – including Western colonial ambitions, Arab demands for independence, and the collapsing last years of the Ottoman Empire – represented a particular scenario in Palestine, a land whose centrality to religion and archaeology attracted explorers and diplomatic missions, though this eventually served as a first step that evolved into colonialist ambitions against the inalienable rights of the indigenous Palestinian population.

The various examples of diplomatic engagement in Palestine during the nineteenth century are a testimony

The countries that supported diplomatic missions in Palestine included France (1623), Italy (1847), Britain/ the United Kingdom (1839), Prussia/ Germany (1842), the United States (1844), Belgium (1851), Spain (1853), Russia (1858), and Greece (1862).

to the country's rich history and geographical importance. France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, Greece, and even the United States (since 1844) are among those who can simply open their diplomatic archives to attest to what has happened to the people of Palestine since the nineteenth century. Perhaps this exercise will also help them realize the moral responsibility they have in remedying the catastrophe committed against the land and the people of Palestine.

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ⁱ Theodor Herzl, "The Jewish State" (1988 edition, originally published in 1896). Dover Publications: New York, p. 96.

ⁱⁱ Hanna Kildani, *Modern Christianity in the Holy Land*, AuthorHouse: Bloomington, IN, 2010, p. 310.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

^{iv} Konstantinos Papastathis "Greece in the Holy Land during the British Mandate: Diplomacy and Religion" in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Autumn 2017, Issue 71, Institute for Palestine Studies, p. 33.