

Arab Nationalism and Christianity in the Levant. The Politics of Religion during the Fag End of the Ottoman Empire
Introduction

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Abstract

Levantine politics was always intermixed with confessional identities given the volatile mix of ethnic and faith based groups in the Ottoman Empire. The impact of missionary movements in the Levant meant that more and more confessional groups tended to be created reducing the space for manoeuvre by the already established mainline groups. This inevitably resulted in tensions between the different faiths. Coupled with this was the rise of Arab Nationalism among the Arabic speaking citizens of the Empire which had a simultaneous effect on the Christians, concerned as they were with inter-religious relations in a post-Ottoman set-up. My paper will try to highlight how the Arabic Christians of the Ottoman Empire used the nationalistic band-wagon as a vehicle to forward their own security and protection in a society that was rapidly disintegrating under the influence of modernism and western interference.

Jerusalem, ‘the City of God’, as it is known in religious terminology, has always captured the fascination of devout people across the monotheistic world. Before and since the time of Christ, people of all persuasions, animist, pagan, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have flocked to Jerusalem. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was often seen as a spiritual antidote to the religious yearnings of a broad range of people, whether from the Roman West or Persian East.

Early History

With the rise of Islam and the conquest of Jerusalem in 636 CE, symbolized by Khalif Umar Ibn-al-Khatib’s ahd-name (edict)“Al-‘Uhda al-‘Umariyya” to Sophronius, ‘Patriarch of the Imperial Nation of the Romans’, guaranteeing the safety and security of Christians and their Holy Places, especially “our subjects the Monks and Priests and their churches and monasteries, and everything under their ownership, and other shrines situated within or outside Jerusalem shall be assured and the Patriarch shall be their head.”¹ Byzantine support for the established Greek Church in Jerusalem ceased after the Islamic conquest and the other national churches started to acquire a voice in the management of the Christian affairs of the city. The Fatimid period particularly under Caliph al-Hakim saw the destruction and terrorization of Christians and their property in Jerusalem which culminated in the tearing down of

¹ Papastathis, Charalambos. K, ‘A New Status for Jerusalem? An Eastern Orthodox Viewpoint’, in the Catholic University of America Law Review, Vol. 45, No. 3, Spring 1996, p. 726.

the Byzantine Holy Sepulcher Basilica in 1009 CE. With the final split between Eastern and Western Christians in 1054 CE, it was the time of the Crusades to see which form of Christianity would prevail in Jerusalem. The Crusaders expelled the Greek Patriarch and placed a new Latin Patriarch on his seat in 1099 CE. This event inaugurated the official presence of the Latin Church in Jerusalem. Though the Latin Patriarch later left the city when it fell to Salah el-Din in 1187 CE, the Latin presence was continued in the form of the 'Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land', an ecclesiastical organization formed exclusively to maintain and protect Latin rights and heritage in the Holy City. The Ottoman Millet system that was devised to successively rule large numbers of people belonging to minority religions was again based on the earlier Omar's rulings. It recognized the autonomy of the Christian communities to run their own internal affairs particularly those relating to religious and civil matters.

The Early Period

Christian endowments also flourished, particularly during the early Byzantine and Crusader period. The Crusader era saw the displacement of the Constantinople supported 'Greek' Patriarch in favour of the Roman supported 'Latin' Patriarch. The reconquest of Saladin resulted in the return of the Orthodox Patriarch to Jerusalem. From 1250 till about 1675, the Orthodox Patriarch was back in Jerusalem before departing again for Constantinople till the middle of the 19th century. In contrast, the so-called Latin Patriarchate was based in Rome with the fall of the Crusader kingdoms till 1847 when it was re-established in Jerusalem.²The later Ottoman era saw the start of what would be a state of virtual warfare between the different Christian sects in Jerusalem, a state of affairs that continued well into the twentieth century before realpolitik forced the Churches to call a truce of sorts.

The early Arab-Muslim rulers and later Ottoman Turks gave rights of privilege and access to three main Christian groups, the Greek (Rum) Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox and the Latin Catholics who were mainly represented since the middle ages by the Franciscan Order of missionary friars in the Holy Land. In 1384, it was recorded that there were seven different Christian communities resident in the Holy Land.³ As a result of mainly historical and geopolitical reasons as well as a result of centuries of internecine squabbling and politics among the Churches and with the ruling authority, the Greek Orthodox Church managed to emerge as the pre-eminent ecclesiastical grouping among the varied Christian groups of the Holy Land. One of the main reasons for this was the predominance of the Greek Orthodox rite in the city of Constantinople. As a result the Ottomans were far more familiar with this form of Christianity than any other form. The meeting up of ethnic Orthodox Christianity with the Arab forces of Islam in the Levant resulted in a peculiar combination of Arabic Christianity that superseded the previous Greek form. This would result in clashes and controversies between the Arab laity and the Greek dominated clergy that have continued to the present day.

² Anthony O' Mahoney, 'Christianity in the Holy Land: the historical background', in 'The Month: A Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs, The Christians of the Holy Land', December 1993, p.469.

³ Ibid.

The Status Quo

The entire period of Turkish rule lasting 400 years saw the three main churches, namely Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox as well as the Latin rite, all jockeying for power and recognition from the Ottoman authorities. And under Islam, the rights, duties and privileges of the churches slowly started to crystallize though the final format that we know today known as the 'Status-Quo of the Holy Places', would only come about after centuries of conflict and 'warfare' among the churches as well as their supporting Christian powers in Europe. The Sultans in Istanbul were forced to issue repeat proclamations in 1458, 1517, 1538, 1634, 1731, 1757, 1809, and finally 1852, either confirming the edict of 636 CE or on various issues regarding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and conflicts between the Latin's and Greeks for supremacy and control in Christian Jerusalem.⁴ The Turks learnt from their mistakes that it would be folly to interfere with the established status quo or to allow Western national-religious influences to play havoc with inter-Church relations in Jerusalem. Thus in 1740, the Ottoman government which was anxious to cultivate French support, disregarded the Greeks who had held the traditional spot of pre-eminence for hundreds of years and gave that position to the Latins. The Greeks were understandably so furious that armed clashes took place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with Greek and Latin Monks attacking each other with candlesticks and crosses⁵. The most important undertaking given by the Turks to protect the Holy Places in Palestine was the written declaration made by Sultan Abdul Majid in 1852, which officially brought in to being the concept of 'Status Quo', as a means of guaranteeing and keeping the peace on the ground in Jerusalem⁶.

The Status Quo later was internationally recognized by the 1856 Conference of Paris (after the Crimean War), and the 1878 Treaty of Berlin⁷. The Treaty of Berlin stated that:

“No alteration can be made in the status quo in the holy places”.⁸

The Status Quo that determines the Holy Places in the Holy Land is independent of territorial sovereignty. Thus Christians like the Greek Orthodox, the Armenians and the Roman Catholic all exercise rights in the Holy Land irrespective of state sovereignty. The status quo thus comprises of three elements:

1. A fixed area;
2. Precise rights; and
3. Certain groups or individuals to whom the rights belong.⁹

The rights that determine the Status Quo may be on the basis of both written and unwritten legal sources. The rights in turn can be divided into three groups:

⁴ Papastathis, Charalambos. K, 'A New Status for Jerusalem? An Eastern Orthodox Viewpoint', in the Catholic University of America Law Review, Vol. 45, No. 3, Spring 1996, p.726-727.

⁵ Marshall J. Breger and Thomas A. Idinopulos, 'Jerusalem's Holy Places and The Peace Process', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Paper No. 46, Washington, D. C., 1998, p.5-6.

⁶ Refer in <http://www.armenian-patriarchate.org/page2.html>

⁷ Ruth Lapidoth, 'Jerusalem-Some Jurisprudential Aspects', in The Catholic University of America Law Review, Columbus School of Law, Washington. D. C., Vol. 45, No. 3, spring 1996, p. 663.

⁸ Breger and Idinopulos, p.6.

⁹ Papastathis, p. 724.

1. Those related to the foundation of religious institutions in the Holy land
2. Rights that deal with the particular religious group and
3. Rights that are connected with the particular Holy spots.¹⁰
4. Historical conditions, the socio-cultural orientations of the various religious groups as well as the local ruling authority, all determine the actual manifestation of these rights.¹¹

The Orthodox in Jerusalem and indeed much of the East are divided between those who subscribe to the Council of Chalcedon and those who don't. The Chalcedonian position, which is followed, by all the East and South European Orthodox Churches is that the nature of Christ was dual in perspective, one human and the other spiritual or divine. The non-Chalcedonians take this to be heresy and contend that in Christ the divine and human nature have become one, without any separation, theological confusion or even evolutionary change.¹² The trouble with the Christians of Jerusalem has been that each church is so fractured and small, that every church is very jealous lest the other should secure privileges that the first does not have. This has produced what can only be called a farcical situation where the Churches insist on the Status-Quo at all times, even if doing so might hurt their own personal interests¹³. Interestingly Islamic rule resulted in quite a few advantages being accrued by the Armenian, Jacobite and Coptic Churches as they were no longer persecuted by the Byzantines based in Constantinople (Istanbul). These churches were free to follow their own paths of development, though always under the watchful eyes of the Muslim/Ottoman authorities. It was only after 1516 CE that Jerusalem became part of the Ottoman Empire that by then included Constantinople, taken by the Turks in 1453 CE. Correspondingly the Ottoman Sultan in his new role as 'Byzantine Emperor' had to contend with the various controversies and infighting of the myriad Christian cults of the Holy Land. This resulted in the development of what came to be called the 'Status Quo', the set of Ottoman firmans that sought to lay out the agreed position with regard to inter-Church relations in Palestine.

4. Growth of Orthodox Arab Nationalism.

Before the Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem and thereby the whole of Palestine in 1517 CE, Palestinian Christians had an identity that was Arabic in its outlook and mentality. After the re-unification of Asian Levant with Constantinople via the Ottoman Empire, the Patriarchate of Constantinople again emerged as the political centre of Orthodoxy. That meant that the Greeks again acquired supreme influence over the Jerusalem Patriarchy as the Ottoman rulers preferred to deal with a centralised authority in Istanbul than with an assortment of Patriarchs and Bishops scattered across their Empire. This induced the Orthodox Patriarchs of Jerusalem to shift their place of residence to Constantinople so that they could be near the all-powerful ecumenical Patriarch and his secular Greek 'Phanariotes' allies.¹⁴ A decree by Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople after the Ottoman conquest of Syria, which

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Refer 'Oriental Orthodoxy' in <http://www.bellatlantic.net/~vze48txr/OrientalOrthodoxy.htm>

¹³ Breger and Idinopulos, p. 27.

¹⁴ Sotiris Roussos, 'The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and Community of Jerusalem', in Anthony O' Mahoney, et al (eds.), 'The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land', London, Scorpion Cavendish, 1995, p. 213.

also included Palestine, was that henceforth no native-born Syrian and by extension any Arab Orthodox should be allowed into the exigencies of Orthodox monastic life, which ensured that there would be no Arab Bishops in the whole of the Non-Greek Levant for a period of 400 years from that date. This policy was to have grave consequences on Orthodox pastoral and communal life in Palestine.¹⁵

The administration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during this period was in the hands of the brotherhood or the confraternity of monks, mainly Greek that were also in charge of Orthodox pastoral affairs in the absence of the Patriarch. As the leading Church community in Jerusalem and indeed Palestine at the time, the Ottomans accepted the authority of the Greek Orthodox of Jerusalem as regards the Holy Places in the early 'golden' era of their rule. It was under Ottoman rule that Jerusalem entered the modern era, with the so-called 'reforms' (Tanzimat) allowing the opening up of Jerusalem to the Western powers. During this period, Ottoman rule in Jerusalem was mainly undertaken through the judge or 'Qadi' who was responsible for all aspects of city governance, including all matters of inter-communal conflict, whether on a legal, civil or penal basis. As far as the Christians of Jerusalem were concerned, the Qadi had the right of appointment and dismissal of the heads of the various Christian communities and any repairs to the various Churches and monasteries that dotted Jerusalem and Palestine had to be authorised by him.¹⁶ Islamic law held that the legal ownership of all religious institutions and infrastructure within the dominions of a Muslim ruler belonged to the state, irrespective of the different faiths represented in the state. This was one of the reasons that lay behind the frequent confiscation, destruction and eventual reconstruction of many of the Christian Holy Sites in Palestine over the years of Islamic rule.¹⁷ These circumstances started to change after the 'golden era' ended in the late seventeenth century and outside Western powers started to interfere in Ottoman affairs.¹⁸ This interference was mainly directed against Ottoman rule in Palestine as various European powers competed to install religious orders of their own liking and colouring in the driving seat in Jerusalem. Thus the French claimed to protect not only those foreign 'Latins' resident in the Empire, but also those Ottoman natives who had either converted or were members of the Catholic communion. The Russians followed this up with a similar claim as regards those Ottoman subjects of the Orthodox persuasion who formed by far the majority of the Christians in the Levant during the period from the 16th to the 19th centuries.¹⁹

Among the Greek Orthodox communities of the Levant the so-called 'national' question was always a very emotive one. From the time of Suleiman, the Magnificent, in 1453, the Greek Patriarch of Antioch had been the civil head of the Orthodox of the Empire since 1453. The Greek families based in the 'Phanar' quarter of Jerusalem, had from the 17th century played a big role in the Ottoman Empire and gradually they exerted their influence to control Orthodox ecclesiastical affairs through out the Empire. The Greeks sought to dominate and indeed 'extinguish' the indigenous Orthodox patriarchates of the Balkans such as the Serbians, Bulgarians and the

¹⁵ Kenneth Cragg, 'The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East', London, Mowbray, 1992, p.118.

¹⁶ Dr. Sami Aoun, 'The Muslim Perspective', in the Middle East Council of Churches Journal 'Perspective: Jerusalem, a shared trust', Issue No. 8, July 1990, p.18.

¹⁷ Anthony O' Mahoney, 'Christianity in the Holy Land: the historical background', in 'The Month: A Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs, The Christians of the Holy Land', December 1993, p.469.

¹⁸ Kenneth Cragg, 'The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East', London, Mowbray, 1992, p.118.

¹⁹ O'Mahoney, Op. Cit, p. 470.

Macedonians. Greece was a prime example for a Mediterranean state that used the importance of a shared language and culture to build up a unified and independent national territory. Again the Greeks had always been able to protect a national identity of their own through the medium of the Orthodox Church. As in the later case of the Arabs, language was the most important means of the Greek independence struggle. It however took well over a century for the majority of Greek speaking lands to pass into the control of the Athens government. The case of Christian Bulgaria was different as they had to fight against both Greek over lordship as well as Ottoman domination before they were able to establish their own national state. Again, the means adopted by Bulgarian nationalists was to concentrate on the revival of Bulgarian language and Slavic-Bulgarian culture, before finally working towards the establishment of a Bulgarian Patriarchate, independent of either Athens or Constantinople, which was ironically the same path followed by Athens in the first part of the 19th century when they separated from Constantinople to establish their own autocephalous church. Political independence was achieved by the Bulgarians only after these initial, but highly important steps towards cultural independence were attained.²⁰

All the main Byzantine Patriarchates such as Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem in addition the ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople were dominated by Greek clergy. The Patriarch of Constantinople was the acknowledged 'civil' head of the 'Greek-Rum' nation and by the 18th century, he had succeeded in bringing all the other historic Patriarchates such as Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem under his control. He did this by abrogating to himself the right of confirmation of the 'berat' (election) of the other Patriarchs and Bishops of the Greek Orthodox world. This procedure became a major source of corruption in the Ottoman Church of Constantinople, more so because it often involved high officials in the Porte as well. It was a reflection of this procedure that ensured that the Istanbul Patriarch would have important influence over the Jerusalem Patriarchy and contributed practically to the phenomena by which the office of the Patriarch in person was situated in Constantinople from sometime in the 17th century till 1843. He was even elected by the Constantinople Synod during this period.²¹ It was also during the same period that the Phanar-Greeks rose to prominence, and in alliance with the patriarch (who was always a member of one of these 'great' families), they managed to obtain certain important offices of state in the Ottoman Empire.²² The Greeks off-course could always fall back on their own nostalgic memories of Byzantine greatness (though the Byzantine Empire had been well past its heyday, when occupied by the Turks in 1453 AD). By the end of the 18th century, the Greeks were confident enough to think about the next step in their own liberation struggle which would be launched in the second decade of the 19th century. In Alexandria the situation was not so bad as most orthodox in the Patriarchate were ethnic Greeks. However in Syria and Palestine, the situation was the opposite, with a large number of the laity and even lower clergy. The sense of grievance in these territories was of long standing, dating back even to the 18th

²⁰ Ibid, p. 114.

²¹ Daphne Tsimhoni, 'The British mandate and the Arab Christians in Palestine 1920-1925', unpublished Ph. D Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, January 1976, p.40.

²² Albert H. Hourani, 'Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939', London, Oxford University Press, 1969, p.40.

century or even before.²³ For the Christian Arabs of the Levant, a similar struggle had to be waged against Greek domination of their important Patriarchal institutions, a process still incomplete as far as Jerusalem is concerned.

The Syrian Catholic nationalist Nejb Azoury in his book 'Le reveil de la nation arabe' tries to defend the Arabic speaking Orthodox Christians against the Greek hierarchy of the Orthodox Church in the Levant.²⁴ Christian Arabs did play a major role in the development of Arab nationalism in the Levant during the later part of the 19th century. Christian Arabs had no religious attachment to the Ottoman Caliph and so were more liable to see Ottoman rule as an imposition that could be overthrown, given the right circumstances. At the same time, Christian Arabs were very conscious of their cultural identity as Arabs within what was an overwhelmingly Muslim Arab society. One reason for the spread of more nationalistic orientations among the Christian Arabs was the reason that the Ottoman Empire allowed the minority Christians of the Empire to maintain and develop their own sectarian religio-cultural organisations while denying the same to the Arab Muslims.²⁵ Western liberal values were more liable to pervade the Christian community given the contacts that the Christian Arabs had with West European society. Missionary activity, particularly Protestant activity put emphasis on the use of Arabic, which in opposition to the Turkish spoken in the Empire, served to inculcate in the minds of the Arabic speaking people, a sense of nationality based on a common language and culture, as had happened in Greece and would soon take place in the Balkan states. Not only Nejb, but a secular Muslim Arab nationalist like Sati al-Husri saw the appointment of a Syrian Arab as the Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, a real victory for Arab nationalism.²⁶ Al-Husri maintains that there was an Arabic language before there was Islam. Writing after the First World War, he states that the recent Arab revolt (against the Ottoman state), had shown that,

“Christian and Muslim Arab have the same language, the same long history, and an overlapping literature and culture, all of which was never possible for the Balkan peoples and which will never be possible for the Islamic peoples.”²⁷

The establishment of the Greek Republic was a factor in making the Arabic speaking laity of the Ottoman provinces restive over their continued domination by the Greek speaking clergy. The revolt in Syria in the Patriarchate of Antioch was a result of this conflict as well as the support provided to the native Orthodox by the Russian missionaries and aid workers in the province of Damascus. The work of foreign missionaries in the Levantine provinces as well as their schools helped in revitalising Arabic language education particularly among the Syrian Christians of the Levant. The Russians were mainly against Greek domination of the Orthodox Church in the Levant. The Russians are often credited with the raising of an ethnic Arab Orthodox as the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch in 1899, withstanding opposition from the Greek Orthodox hierarchy.²⁸

²³ Ibid, p. 273.

²⁴ Ibid, p.278.

²⁵ William L. Cleveland, 'The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati al-Husri', New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 125.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sati al-Husri, *Nushu' al-fikrah al-qawmiyyah*, pp. 217-218, in William L. Cleveland, p. 150.

²⁸ Bassam Tibi, 'Arab nationalism: A Critical Enquiry', London, MacMillan Press, 1981, p. 75

Ultimately both the Protestants as well as the Russians worked towards undermining the loyalties of the ethnic Orthodox people of the Empire for their own particular interests. The Russians always wanted a weak Ottoman Empire that would permit them to expand their influence downwards towards the warm waters of the Mediterranean. In addition to this the Hatt-i-Humayun Sultanic firman (edict) of 1856 granted to each community in the Empire, the right to have a constitution as well as properly elected representative institutions. The unwillingness of the Greek and Armenian dominated Orthodox churches to reform in accordance with the prevailing sentiment of the age, meant an increasing number of Christians of these sects who had been exposed to Western education as a result of the above-mentioned religious schools, felt compelled to join the reformed churches of the missionaries or to set up reformed branches with their own traditional churches. A new Protestant community had been recognised by the Sultan in 1850.²⁹ Finally when American missionaries founded the Syrian Protestant College in 1866 in Beirut, later the American University of Beirut (AUB), al-Bustani as well as Hasif al-Yaziji gave this new institute all their help. It was this college that was responsible for training the first and many subsequent generations of Western educated liberal Arab Nationalists.³⁰

The Turks were particularly sensitive towards European interference in their domestic affairs, particularly in vogue of the long history of animosity between Turk and Frank, in the greater Middle East. This increased as a result of the decline of the Ottoman Empire that started in the later seventeenth century and went on through out the succeeding decades right up to the early 20th century. The Wars of Greek Independence as well as other territorial conflicts culminating in the Crimean War from 1853-1856 CE, all put their mark on Ottoman-Christian relations in the Levant. The re-establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem after a gap of over 600 years in 1847 CE, itself was a sign that the old order was changing in the region. Another Greek Catholic Patriarchate was established in Damascus in 1848 with jurisdiction over the Greek Catholics of Jerusalem and Palestine.³¹ The newly established Latin and Eastern Catholic Patriarchates often found themselves at the losing end as far as wealth and resources were concerned when compared with the much more powerful and longer settled Franciscans, who were the official representatives of the Vatican in the Holy Land, with the somewhat imposing title of 'Custodia Terrae Sanctae'. A Custodian 'Custos' of the Holy Places who had control of almost all the Catholic Holy Places headed the Franciscans.³² This was coupled with the Ottoman firman issued by Sultan Abdul Majid in 1852 CE with reference to Church rule and precedence in Jerusalem. The firman sought to give legal backing to the 'Status Quo' on the ground in Jerusalem and the oft-disputed title of the Greek Patriarch as the symbolic leader or 'first among equals' among the Church leaders in Jerusalem was confirmed by the firman. The Crimean war by its indeterminate finality also sought to re-affirm the 'Status Quo' as it had stood previously in Jerusalem and Palestine.

The 19th century saw a massive input of Western missionary movements into the Levant, as various European nations competed to influence the local Christians in

²⁹ Hourani, p. 96.

³⁰ Bassam Tibi, p. 78.

³¹ Ibid, p.471.

³² Ibid.

their favour. The missionaries typically worked by establishing schools as open proselytising in the Islamic Ottoman Empire was banned. The vast majority of these schools were focussed on the greater Syrian region of which Palestine also formed a part. The Greek Orthodox Clergy tended to be suspicious of the various missionary groups that worked in Palestine as they actively sought to convert the local Arab Orthodox Christians to their particular profession of Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic. Indeed, during the 19th century, protestant congregations were established in Palestine as many Orthodox switched sides. The Church Missionary society (CMS) of London started inquiring about possibly working in Palestine around 1821 and the London Jewish society (LJS) established its first mission station in the city around 1833 after the capture of the city by Mohammad Ali of Egypt in 1831. In 1845, the first Anglican Church in the city, St. George's was dedicated. Meanwhile, the first Protestant Bishopric was established under joint British and Prussian collaboration in 1841.³³ This reflected the common interest that both Anglicans as well as Lutherans had in proselytisation in Palestine. One Ottoman Sultan promulgated a law by which no Muslim subject of the Empire was allowed to study in the missionary schools, a decree that no progressive Muslims would take any notice of, as the best schools in the Empire were inevitably the missionary schools.

The Ottoman division of Palestine finally crystallised into three administrative regions by 1878, with the two northern districts of Nablus and Acre forming part of the vilayat of Beyrouth (Beirut) and the Sanjak of Jerusalem being ruled directly from Istanbul.³⁴ The rapid development of Jerusalem as well as the other port cities of Palestine in the later 19th century ensured greater prosperity for the Christians of Palestine as they started becoming more active in the municipal as well as councillor affairs of various Palestinian cities and Jerusalem in particular. Christian Arabs were also involved in the rise and development of Arab nationalism. Michel Aflaq, a Syrian Christian established the pan-Arabist Ba'ath party in Damascus that was aimed at the secular regeneration of the Arab people. After the widespread Muslim, Turkish and Druze massacres of Christians in the Syrian Levant during the 1860s, local Christians came to view secular, progressive and liberal 'Arab Nationalism' as the only suitable weapon in their hands against the retrograde Turkish sponsored Islamic irredentism that was making headway in the lee years of the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile Russian and French interference in the Ottoman Empire and consequently among the Christian subjects thereof resulted in a multitude of pressures both on the state as well as on the individual Churches of the region. The Russians were quick to capitalise on the frustration and dissatisfaction felt by the local Christians, particularly those of the Greek Orthodox persuasion against the Greek clergy that dominated the affairs of the Church. The international rivalry that was visible between the two main Orthodox nations, Greece and Russia for the hearts and minds of the orthodox people of the Empire was quite intense during the later half of the 19th century.

It was in the 19th century that the Greek monastic confraternity dedicated to protecting the Holy places associated with the birth, life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, known as the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre grew to prominence. The Synod or governing body of the Jerusalem Greek Patriarchate was elected from this brotherhood and presided over by the Patriarch who himself had to be a member of this same organisation. As a result of the edict of Germanos (mentioned on page 4),

³³ Ibid, p.471.

³⁴ 'Palestine in Focus', available at http://islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/PalestineIn_Focus/Ottoman/01.shtml

the Brotherhood grew into an entirely Greek body. Local and parish level clergy tended to be of local Arabic origin. This in turn gave rise to an interesting play of definitions, as the locals saw themselves as Arab Orthodox in opposition to the Hellenic definition of them as Arabic-speaking or 'Arabophone' Orthodox as in Syria.³⁵

As far as the Greek Orthodox (and Uniate) Arabs of the later Ottoman period were concerned, it often seemed that Arab nationalism was the over-riding ideology of the age, to the point when there was equal disillusionment with the prevailing Greek (or Latin) control over their respective churches. There was also what seemed to be an acceptance on the part of many Christian thinkers and political activists of the importance of Islam and its impact on the Arab psyche. Thus Constantine Zurayq, a Greek Orthodox thinker used to insist

“In the present day, the bond of nationalism is supreme over every other and that it was the duty of every Arab, regardless of his religious faith, to study Islam”.³⁶

In the days before the First World War, when the plans that the European powers had for the Ottoman-Arab world were still unclear, there were quite a few who dreamed of a new Arab empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean with a spiritual and possibly political centre based at Mecca. Possibly with the experience of the multiplicity of Middle Eastern Churches behind him, one early twentieth century Melkite Najib 'Azuri who had been an Ottoman official in Jerusalem before moving to France sought to picture a single Arab Christian Church formed by amalgamating all the myriad denominations and one that was completely Arabic in liturgy and ecclesiastical control.³⁷ The Greek dominance of the Orthodox Church was thus a powerful motivating factor in making many Orthodox Christians turn against their own confession because of its lack of Arabness. This conflict within the Church between the Arab laity on the one hand and the Greek clergy on the other would continue well into the twentieth century of Christendom.

With specific reference to the Jerusalem Orthodox Patriarchate, the main grievance of the parishioners was that a small group of Greek clergy were monopolising the resources of the church and thereby depriving the Arab parishes of their due. This prompted the Arab Orthodox to struggle for their rights against the Greek Patriarch and the clique of monks that controlled the affairs of the Brotherhood and the Patriarchate. In this struggle, their Muslim brethren, in what they perceived as a legitimate aspiration for Arabisation, always supported them. The first revolt by the Palestinian Orthodox against Greek domination occurred in 1860.³⁸ This was influenced by extraneous happenings, in neighbouring Syria and also in the Balkans and Russia where the indigenous churches were able to finally cast off the mantle of the Istanbul ecumenical Patriarchate and establish autocephalous churches of their own national communities. It's interesting to note that in the context of the Ottoman

³⁵ Anthony O' Mahoney, 'Palestinian-Arab Orthodox Christians: Religion, Politics and Church-State Relations in Jerusalem, c. 1908-1925.' *Balamand, Chronos: Revue d' Histoire de l'Universite de Balamand*, Numero 3, 2000, p.70.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.154

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.155

³⁸ Thomas Hummel et al (eds.), 'Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the future: The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land', London, Melisende, 1999, p.327.

authorities, they were more interested in supporting the extraneous Greeks against the indigenous Arabs when an issue of local nationalism came to the fore. This should be seen in the context of the united front that the Muslims and Christians of Jerusalem put up against the Greek domination of the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem.

The modern struggle of the Orthodox Arabs of Palestine for their ‘undeniable’ rights as they saw it, is usually dated to the deposition of the Patriarch Cyril in 1872 by the Jerusalem Synod for refusing to extend his support to the move by the other Greek Patriarchs on excommunication of the Bulgarian Orthodox church that had recently declared independence from Constantinople. The Russians who were in favour of Bulgarian (and other Slavic and non-Slavic church) independence, supported the Patriarch against the other Greek Bishops. This influenced the local Arab Christians and helped to fan the flames of their national consciousness. The main demand of the Arab community at this stage was the creation of a constitution that would allow the participation of the lay community in the internal administration of the Patriarchate. There was widespread agreement among the Arabs that this constitution should be modelled on the Constantinople (mother church) constitution.³⁹

The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society

The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society was formed in St. Petersburg in 1882. The Russians were motivated by geo-political considerations to meddle in Palestine, as were many of the other Western powers, but they also had the excuse of being in sympathy with their fellow Arab Orthodox brethren in Palestine who were under the yoke of foreign (Greek) domination. As a people who had once to liberate themselves from the Greek ecclesiastical rule in their own country, the Russians could well claim that they understood what it was to be ruled by a ‘corrupt and repressive Greek hierarchy’.⁴⁰ The Arabophile members of the Russian Church saw the raising of an ethnic Arab as Greek Orthodox patriarch of Antioch in 1899 as a great victory. Contrast this with the situation in 1760s when a native Syrian Bishop for the throne of Antioch was rejected by the Ecumenical Patriarchate based at Istanbul

“Lest some of the Arabs come in and.... extinguish the bright flame of Orthodoxy”.⁴¹

The Imperial Russian Society concentrated on precisely the areas where the Greeks had been so tardy, namely education. Witnessing the success of Western schools and missionary endeavours in educating and converting the native Arab Christians of the Levant, the Society proceeded to set up schools in the centres of Orthodox population. In this project they faced an extraordinary amount of opposition from the entrenched Greeks that saw the Russian social activities as a threat to their spiritual monopoly over the indigenous Orthodox population of Palestine. As a result of the traditional animosity between Russians and Turks for influence in the Caucasus and by extension in the Levant, it behoved the Russians to act with circumspection in their dealings with the Greeks. Thus they were unwilling to provoke any direct confrontation. This was in spite of the fact that the Russians had become the chief

³⁹ Tsimhoni, Ph. D Thesis, p.42.

⁴⁰ Hopwood, Op. Cit., p.5.

⁴¹ Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), ‘Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society’, Volume 1: The Central Lands, New York, Holmes and Meier, 1982, p.187.

financial backers of the Patriarchate in the 19th century. The first director of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, Mr. Vasili Khitrovo confirmed in 1892 that the situation was something similar to being between the devil and the deep sea. To quote him,

“ We could either have renounced the local Orthodox Arabs or have worked independently. We decided on the second course. We sought reconciliation, but in vain.”⁴²

As a result of these pressures, Patriarch Hierotheos was forced to issue the ‘Katastatikon’ or constitution of 1875, which were again the result of Ottoman Imperial regulations of 1875 concerning the so-called Roman- Greek Patriarchate of Jerusalem.⁴³ Among other things, this constitution established a mixed council composed of clerics and laity for the administration of education and other welfare needs of the Arab-Orthodox community in Palestine. Arab-Orthodox clergy were admitted to the ‘Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre’ with limited participation assured in the election of the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, that had till then been a purely ‘Greek’ affair. A new constitution was approved for the Ottoman Empire in 1908 that resulted in modification to the ‘Millet Rules’, which controlled minority communal relations in the Empire. More democratisation was envisaged as a result of which community councils were stipulated to control communal property and affairs. For the Jerusalem region and the Greek Church in particular, a new mixed council was envisaged to be set up that would involve six clerical and six lay members so as to bring about some Arab participation in the affairs of the Patriarchate. It was additionally stipulated that an income of up to £ 30,000 per annum must be spent on the local community by the patriarchate.⁴⁴ However, No Arab participation was ensured in Patriarchal elections, for the simple reason that there were no Arab Bishops as yet in the Greek controlled Jerusalem Patriarchy.⁴⁵ So unlike the case of Antioch, the Patriarch in Jerusalem would continue to be Greek in the immediate perspective. This reflected a failure of the aims for which the Orthodox Arabs had campaigned and fought so determinedly for. The mixed councils referred to above never functioned, as they should with both sides to the dispute hardly willing to give way on any aspect what so ever. They eventually stopped functioning in 1913 as a worsening political situation and impending war in the Levant diverted the attention of Church notables and administrators’ alike.⁴⁶ 1913 saw the establishment of the first communal organisation of the native Orthodox of Palestine known in Arabic as ‘al-Nahdah al-Urthuduksiyyah’. This was in continuation of the wave of reforms that were implemented in the Ottoman Empire during the later part of the 19th century, particularly in the field of representative government.

⁴² Hopwood, Op. Cit., p.7

⁴³ Ibid,p.71.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Derek Hopwood, ‘Russia and the Holy Land: Paper presented at the First International Conference on the Christian Heritage in the Holy Land, Jerusalem, 5-9th July, 1994,p.11.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Turkish Reforms

The reforming movements had their impact on each of the churches of the Ottoman Empire as new constitutions were drawn up and approved by the Porte, as well, during this period.⁴⁷ Clerical authority over lay affairs was sought to be reduced and for each nationality (millet), a general assembly was introduced that contained elected non-clerical members of the community. This inaugurated the start of popular representative self-governmental practises for the non-Muslim Millets of the Ottoman Empire. It's interesting to note in this context that the start of representative arrangements for the various Millets also had an impact on provincial governmental administration in the Empire. This was known as the 'vilayat' system after the name of an Ottoman province. The system of having equal numbers of elected Muslim as well as non-Muslim members at the administrative council level in the 'vilayat' as well as 'sanjak' level was adhered to in this new scheme of 1864. This model was ultimately carried through to the new parliamentary body known as the Council-of-State (Sura-I devlet) that was set up in 1868. Almost one-third of the members of this council were non-Muslims, though the minority presence was more a corporate representation than as a strict proportion to the individual Millet population.⁴⁸ In the 'Young Turk' Parliament of 1908-09, there were 72 Arabs out of a total membership of 260, out of which 214 were Muslim and 42 Christian.⁴⁹

The new constitution of 1908 with its provisions for democratisation as well as nationalism was an added impetus for many Orthodox Arabs to take over the Greek institutions in Jerusalem in the name of Arabism and to impose Arabic liturgy in the place of Greek. From initially demanding increased participation in the management of the Patriarchate, the Arab Orthodox eventually reached a stage when they could not be satisfied with anything less than the full indigenisation of the whole ecclesiastical apparatus, in short, Arabisation on the Syrian Antiochian model. The two years from 1908-1910 were bitter times for the Jerusalem Patriarchate with the Patriarch Damianos being deposed by his own fellow clergy for daring to give a few concessions to the Arab camp. This further inflamed the situation as a revolt spread among the Christians of Palestine. Russians in Jerusalem supported the deposed Patriarch against the rest of the Synod and with the support from the Mufti of Jerusalem; the Ottoman rulers were forced to appoint a commission of enquiry into the grievances of the local Jerusalem Orthodox.⁵⁰

Arab Muslim notables both in Jerusalem as well as Istanbul supported the case of the Arab Orthodox of Jerusalem. They petitioned the Porte to adopt a pro-Arab stance. Ultimately the Patriarch was re-instated against the wishes of the Synod and the 'brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre', the pre-eminent Greek monastic body that controlled the affairs of the Jerusalem Patriarchate. Understandably, this decision to re-instate the Patriarch was favoured by the Russians as well.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Roderic Davison. "The Advent of the Principle of Representation in the Government of the Ottoman Empire" in William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (eds) *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*. Univ of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 93-108.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kenneth Cragg, 'The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East', London, Mowbray, 1992, p.148.

⁵⁰ Thomas Hummel, *Op. Cit.*, p.328.

⁵¹ Derek Hopwood, 'Russia and the Holy Land: Paper presented at the First International Conference on the Christian Heritage in the Holy Land, Jerusalem, 5-9th July, 1994, p.11.

The Greek (Arab) Orthodox was the majority within the minority community that Christians were in Palestine. They along with the Greek Catholics formed the overwhelming majority of the Christians in Palestine. Palestine was always important for the local Christians from a religious and nationalistic point of view and this often coalesced with the concept of 'Filastin' (Palestine).⁵² It was this concept of Filastin that encouraged the Orthodox of Palestine to see themselves as Arab people within a greater Arab nation, despite religious differences with the majority of the Arab world. Based on the two important censuses carried in mandate Palestine (1922 and 1931), it can be noted that within Palestinian society in its pre-mandate and mandate avatar, the Christians did not live as a segregated group but were dispersed through out the community with the possible exception of Jerusalem. The Christian populace of Palestine in 1922 formed about 9.6% with about 41.5 % of the total living in cities like Jerusalem, Jaffa and Haifa.⁵³ There was a sense of Christian urban concentration that can be seen to be progressing as a result of the prosperity that the mandate regime brought to Palestine. The Palestinian Christian population showed a decline through out the mandate period as a result of a lower birth-rate vis-à-vis the rest of the population as well greater emigration abroad as a result of better education and consequently better employability in the world market. This followed a similar trend among all Levantine Christians as western education penetrated to the Orthodox and Catholic peasantry and the region became increasingly open and accessible to the rest of the 'civilised' world.

The mandate authorities found that they were unable to keep aloof from the intra-communal conflicts that existed in Palestine, as it was traditional for the ruling temporal authority in the Holy Land to have a say in the internal and intra-communal affairs of the various religious groups resident there. The main issue as far as the Rum Millet (Greek Orthodox) was concerned was the issue of Greek dominance and the resistance of the Greek hierarchy against any form of reform. In the 1870s, the Greek Patriarchate of Antioch managed to Arabise itself in what has been seen as

“The first real victory for Arab nationalism.”⁵⁴

This was achieved in the face of both Turkish and Greek (including Cypriot) opposition, but had the support of the Russian Orthodox missionaries and protégé's in the Levant. There is little doubt that the influence of the Russian Church was crucial in advancing Arab welfare as well as increased politicisation among the Arab masses. This in turn created tensions between them and the Greek Church in Palestine. Some of the Greek clergy acknowledged that the Russians were bent on doing good to the native Orthodox in Palestine. With Arab nationalism on the rise in Syria and Palestine, there were calls by some Arab Orthodox for the Greeks to be ousted. The struggle by the Arab Orthodox of Palestine against Greek domination got entangled in the meshes of Arab nationalism and became a demand for the raising of a native Palestinian Patriarch and a movement to

‘Restore the Arab’s national rights usurped by the Greeks’.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid, p.66.

⁵³ Ibid. p.68.

⁵⁴ Derek Hopwood, 'The Russian presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843-1941: church and politics in the Near East', Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p.159-179.

⁵⁵ Hopwood, p. 11.

The Arab Orthodox of Palestine were happy to make use of Russian support, both material as well as associational in their fight against the Greeks. The Russians were however never willing to support an all-out fight against the Greeks. Nor were they willing to condone violence on the streets that took the lives of some Arabs and Russians during the 1908-1910 interlude. The Palestinians on the other hand had no desire to replace Greek over lordship with Russian control and grew alienated from them as the Russians in turn faded from the Palestine scene with the end of the First World War.⁵⁶ The resistance faced by the society in Palestine pushed it to search for fresher pastures in Syria where the ecclesiastics of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch welcomed Russian support. Russian schools also flourished in Syria and consequently there was a good rapport between Arabs and Russians till 1914.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.