



# Introduction Part I Indigenising Cultural Diplomacy?

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Is cultural diplomacy a term that should only be applied to the activities of states or parastatal organisations? The chapters in this book would seem to suggest not. While some show culture being deployed by consulates or major church bodies in international machinations—that is, a fairly conventional view of the concept—many, especially those in this section, urge us to push our understanding of the idea further. This isn't just a matter of following the rationale of cultural diplomacy to its logical conclusion, but also a necessity if we want to use the concept meaningfully in colonial settings such as Mandate Palestine. How to understand a Palestinian presence in the world of cultural diplomacy while Arab Palestinians were denied an active role in the proto-national scene?

Michael Birnhack's work on copyright in Mandate Palestine throws colonial assumptions involved in much cultural diplomacy and policymaking into sharp relief: many local cultural forms did not fit into British concepts of the kind of culture which should be legally protected by copyright,<sup>1</sup> but while the British authorities discounted Arab knowledge, they had no compunction about consulting Zionist and Jewish organisations on their legislation, and moulded much of it around a Eurocentric concept of authorship which encompassed Jewish but not Arab writers and artists.<sup>2</sup> The main driver

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<sup>1</sup>Michael D. Birnhack, *Colonial Copyright: Intellectual Property in Mandate Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 47–48, 98–105, 107, 109–111.

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behind the introduction of copyright law was thus British, not Palestinian, interests,<sup>3</sup> but the British authorities' interactions with different communities differed greatly according to colonial stereotypes of their creative lives.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines diplomacy as “the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad”.<sup>4</sup> How is that carried out? By negotiations; performances of military, economic or political power; ingratiation and the building of mutually beneficial relations; manoeuvring of friendships and enemies; underhand and clandestine methods such as bribery and blackmail. Cultural activities might fall into many of these categories, and none, or very few, of these criteria are confined to the state; even the classic Weberian pinpointing of the legitimate use of violence as the monopoly of the state is more an ideal type than a representation of reality. The fact that in 2015 five of the largest economies in the world were corporations, not nation states, highlights the extent to which few of the characteristics and practices of diplomacy are exclusively state preserves.<sup>5</sup> Indeed in the present day, the fact that the Palestinians have never been recognised as having an independent state of their own, but entities with vague titles such as ‘authority’ are expected by the international community to carry out state-like functions, highlights the problems with a state focus in understanding diplomacy. One facet of the need to question is thus ethical: the extent to which colonised peoples and independence movements, for instance, are conceptually excluded from discussions of cultural diplomacy.

The second aspect draws on the empirical fact that state exercise of cultural diplomacy does not itself recognise clear state-society boundaries. The cases in which those on whom diplomatic effort is expended are not states themselves but groups within them are innumerable, be it attempts to sway the opinions of ethnic or religious groups in cases of rivalry, or cultural diplomacy as enacted by well-known organisations such as the British Council, Instituto Cervantes, Goethe-Institut or l'Institut français. In highlighting these, this essay thus draws on the kind of trends traced by Charlotte Faucher in her historiographical review of cultural diplomacy. While some schools of thought still draw sharp distinctions between the actions of state and non-state actors in cultural and other forms of diplomacy, an increasing volume of work see these relations as more complex and entangled,<sup>6</sup> which demands that we consider a broader range of power dynamics—from the individual to community

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 79–80, 92–94.

<sup>4</sup>‘Diplomacy,’ in *Oxford Reference*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095719998>, accessed 12 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Pat Sweet, “Corporations Dominate World's Top 100 Economic Entities,” *Accountancy Daily* 14 September 2016, <https://www.accountancydaily.co/corporations-dominate-worlds-top-100-economic-entities>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>6</sup>Charlotte Faucher, “Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations in Twentieth-Century Europe,” *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 374–376.

levels, organisations and parastatal institutions, and the state and supranational strata.

Are those at whom such diplomacy is aimed to be understood only as passive recipients? Or should we understand them rather as participants in a multidirectional encounter in which power and influence can go both ways? For centuries before the British imposed their mandatory rule on Palestine, European powers sought to burrow their way into the Ottoman Empire via its Christian and Jewish communities, but as historians of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa have repeatedly shown, on the ground, those communities also found many ways to make the situation work for themselves. On the cultural plane, European ideas and styles were not adopted unchanged, but were rewritten, remodelled, adapted and contradicted according to local conditions, concepts and desires.<sup>7</sup>

The picture becomes even more complicated in a colonial setting such as Mandatory Palestine. Many of the territory's inhabitants, both Arab and Jewish, questioned the legitimacy of the ruling state, imperial Britain. The Yishuv certainly regarded itself as building a series of state institutions during the Mandate period; many Arabs wished that the leaders of their community would or could do the same. Zionist and sometimes Arab leaders attended and at times had official status at peace conferences or sittings of the League of Nations. The extent to which there is, therefore, a clear sense of who is involved, legitimately or otherwise, in diplomatic relations in this setting gets more and more blurred.

A definition of cultural diplomacy is hardly the hill on which this writer would choose to make her last stand. However, the more we delve into the interactions between colonial states and the different ethnic and religious communities in Mandate Palestine, the more it seems to make sense to understand cultural diplomacy as a route by which nation states and large-scale international institutions—France, Russia, arms of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches—sought to influence groups of Palestinians, but also by which those groups also tried to push back, extract greater financial or political support, or enhance their own standing within their fractured and changing political environment. No nation state offers funds, resources or support to people who are not its own citizens out of a sense of altruism, and where there are needs there is room for negotiation and leverage. There are also imbalances of power, granted, but to deny the agency and subversive abilities of the congregations and communities to which states and their diplomats proffered goods is both counterfactual and condescending.

In this section, then, we encounter examples such as Charbel Nassif's chapter on the politically militant Melkite bishop Gregorios Hajjar, who articulated his relations with France in ways which maximised French support for

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, the range of examples in L. Kozma, C. Schayegh, and A. Wishnitzer, *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

his project to expand education for Melkite children across the Galilee. Hajjar may regularly have infuriated the British authorities with his Francophilia—rumoured to have extended to espionage—but that did not mean he was an unquestioning instrument of French policy in British-ruled Palestine. While the Paris government was deeply concerned to maintain the position of the French language in the Middle East, Hajjar was able to cite growing Anglo-Protestant, Italian and Russian influence in the region as a means to hasten the flow of French money.

As Sadia Agsous shows, that Russian Orthodox influence, which ceased abruptly with the October Revolution, was perhaps most enduring in its impacts on Palestinian literature. Highlighting the linguistic divides which define so much academic output, the cases of Palestinians who were educated by Russian missions and who even went to university first in Tsarist Russia and later the USSR are radically understudied. Agsous' chapter follows the likes of Spencer Scoville in illuminating the role of Russian-Arabic translation and Russian institutional support in Palestinian manifestations of the broader Arab Nahda.<sup>8</sup> Agsous' account foregrounds the ways in which Russian literary ideas—particularly realism—influenced Palestinian authors such as Khalil Baydas and Iskander al-Khourri al-Beitjali, and how they then adopted these theories to convey socio-political messages (and not ones which would necessarily have been endorsed by their original sponsors) within their own societies.

Maria Chiara Rioli and Riccardo Castagnetti's chapter is the third focusing on solo or small groups of individuals whose biographies shed light on the interplay between benefactor and beneficiary in the Palestinian cultural sphere. While the orphans of the Franciscan choir in Jerusalem might sound like figures bereft of much agency or leverage, for those with talent and tenacity the training they received could be the start of long and successful careers. More broadly significant is the way in which the influence of local musicians in the Franciscan chapel led to Arabic being introduced into the sung services, Palestinians taking their own positions in major debates on musical style occurring within the Catholic church at large, and even a piece of music with clear political themes being linked to the Holy Sepulchre. Could there be a clearer indication of a Palestinian intention to use the methods of cultural diplomacy to make his own points to a highly political audience than the Prayer written by 'An Arab Palestinian'—the Holy Sepulchre organist Agostino Lama—for the UNSCOP delegation in 1947?

Norig Neveu and Maayan Hillel, on the other hand, both present us with images of how specific communities used the tools of cultural diplomacy to further their own aims. In Haifa, as Hillel outlines, members of the various

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Spencer Scoville, "Reconsidering *Nahdawi* Translation: Bringing Pushkin to Palestine," *The Translator* 21 (2015): 223–236.

Christian groups took the skills learned at missionary schools and used them not only to strengthen their economic and political positions but also to build internal cohesion and solidarity within the community itself. Neveu's chapter, meanwhile, traces the complex and intertwined ways in which the associations, charities and social clubs of Orthodox laity in both Palestine and Jordan operated on the cultural plane in the church's long-running disputes over control of ecclesiastical property and decision-making. Cultural diplomacy is shown as one of the means by which Orthodox congregations and lay organisations sought to negotiate with entities such as the Transjordanian state and the British Mandate authorities, deploying cultural capital to expand the space in which they could challenge the Greek-dominated religious authorities and make linguistic, educational and legal demands.

Between them, these chapters all highlight the ways in which Christian communities in Mandate Palestine, or individuals within them, adopted and adapted the methods and tools of cultural diplomacy to their own settings. Whether interacting with the British mandatory authorities and their colonial rule over Palestine, or with other European state and state-like powers, fields such as language, music, education and literature offered ways for Palestinians to negotiate with or push back against ostensibly more powerful entities. Indeed, in many cases culture was one of the only tools in the hands of ordinary people in their encounters with the imperial state, and theories of cultural diplomacy offer modern scholars a useful way of understanding the dynamics of these colonial encounters.

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