French Cultural Efforts Towards Jerusalem's Arab Population in the Late British Mandate in Palestine

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When it comes to the French presence and activities in British Mandate Palestine, it is typically associated with Catholicism. Nevertheless, as shown elsewhere,¹ the interwar period was also marked by an attempted renewal of the French presence in the Holy Land, specifically through secular means. This obviously accommodated new, numerous Jewish aspects in Palestine in connection with the growing Jewish/Zionist population and political influence in the area. In contradiction to what is generally understood, France developed concerns for the development of a new Palestine, interested in making contact with the growing population, and the increasing options; for instance, it introduced French courses at the brand-new Hebrew University, and opened a Centre for French Culture in the very heart of the expanding New City on the west side of Jerusalem. Parallel to this, France was also interested in renewing its approach to Arab populations.

The following discussion will deal with this latter aspect, with the evocation of a short-lasting experience that took place at the very end of the 1930s,

¹Dominique Trimbur, "L'ambition culturelle de la France en Palestine dans l'entre-deux-guerres," in *Entre rayonnement et réciprocité - Contributions à l'histoire de la diplomatie Culturelle*, eds. Dominique Trimbur et al. (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002), 41–72.

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at the beginning of the end of the British Mandate in Palestine: A Centre for French Culture established on Mamillah road, devoted to the Arab population of the Holy City, with the aim of expanding French Culture to a population which had been previously somewhat neglected, and which should be included in a then new French cultural policy, beside the traditional French Catholic activities and new developments towards the Jewish population. Nevertheless, due to general and local circumstances, the ambitious, but fragile, experience already failed after some few years.

PRELIMINARIES

Arab Palestinians had for a long time been a major point of interest for the French presence in Palestine, at least since they were considered seriously by French politicians. In a way, since the French return to Palestine in the mid-nineteenth century, the local inhabitants had been somewhat ignored by the French authorities, the latter being in contact with the Ottomans, wishing to enlarge the French network of religious institutions, and looking on Zionist activities with disdain. In this context, the Arabs were traditional clients for French Catholic institutions, especially the numerous schools.² But they remained for a long time *objects* in a sense, and not *subjects* of the history of the area, and one has to say that only shortly before WWI, through the elections following the Young Turks' coup, were they considered as actors by French observers.³

Before the war, Arab girls and boys alike were pupils of schools, or young adults attending various Oriental seminaries, run by French nuns and friars, on behalf of French Catholic congregations or orders. It was important for France to have them educated in a French way (the "mission civilisatrice"),⁴ becoming and being one and for all bearers of French values, almost without interrogating their own destiny as adults. During and immediately after WWI, the Arab populations, of whatever confession, became of more interest

²Karène Sanchez Summerer, "Langue(s) et religion(s) en Palestine mandataire au sein d'institutions éducatives catholiques – Etablissement des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes et Sœurs de Saint Joseph de l'Apparition 1922–1940," in *Documents pour l'histoire du français langue étrangère ou seconde*, Dossier "Langue(s) et religion(s): une relation complexe dans l'enseignement du français hors de France XVI^e–XX^e siècle" no. 37 (Décembre 2006): 93–132; Esther Möller, *Orte der Zivilisierungsmission – Französische Schulen im Libanon, 1909–1943* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2013); Orit Ichilov and André E. Mazawi, *Between State and Church—Life-History of a French Catholic School in Jaffa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996); Jennifer M. Dueck, *The Claims of Culture at Empire's End: Syria and Lebanon Under French Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³Dominique Trimbur, "Les acteurs de la politique palestinienne de la France, 1901–1948," in *France in the Middle East—Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Michel Abitbol (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004), 55–97.

⁴Mathew Burrows, "Mission Civilisatrice: French Cultural Policy in the Middle East, 1860–1914," *Historical Journal* 29, no. 1 (March 1986): 109–135.

in terms of helping to have French ideas implemented regarding the fate of Palestine: be it through vain promises during the conflict, or through support of Muslim-Christian committees, when it came to a decision regarding the fate of the area, the committees being in charge of advancing the French option for a region which appeared at the time to be but the southern part of a broader ensemble, "Greater Syria".⁵ The events of the following years, with the League of Nations Mandate in Palestine granted to the United Kingdom and the creation of the French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon, but above all with the Zionist advance following the Balfour declaration and the impossibility for Arabs to achieve an Arab kingdom, or even a whole Arab state on the territory of the previous Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire, led the Palestinian Arabs to focus on their own area. From then on, they largely abandoned their aspiration to be part of a pan-Arab or pan-Syrian entity, concentrating on their Palestinian Arab identity alone. This evolution had its political side, as shown by the events from 1920 onwards (Nebi Musa incidents) until the very end of the 1930s ("Arab great strike").⁶ The evolution was also cultural, the Arab Palestinian identity being built through literature and the press.⁷

Nevertheless, it took a long time for France to consider influencing, through the dissemination of its own culture, the Palestinian Arabs, who were the new actors, the new subjects of their own history.⁸ The evolution towards such a new consideration is part of a general, but slow movement. After the installation of the British Mandate in Palestine, France took time to reconsider how to be present on the spot. The acceptance of the new state of things was difficult, hence the reflection on a necessary adaptation. For French representatives and clerics in the Holy Land, as well as for the decision-makers in France, everything had to be tried in order to keep the old order of things, specifically to maintain French status: France was *the* Catholic power, *the* protector of the local and foreign Catholics, attached to her own traditions, values and ways of action. France could not consider any change, even if some improvements could be contemplated, by limiting support to Catholic establishments which had no real contact with the outside world (contemplative monks and nuns, for instance), and by promoting Catholic

⁵Vincent Cloarec, *La France et la question de Syrie, 1914–1918* (Paris: CNRS- Éditions, 1998); Gérard D. Khoury, *Une tutelle coloniale – Le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban – Écrits politiques de Robert de Caix* (Paris: Belin, 2006).

⁶Nadine Picaudou, *Les Palestiniens, un siècle d'histoire* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 2003).

⁷Qustandi Shomali, "La vie culturelle arabe en Palestine pendant la période du Mandat britannique," in *De Balfour à Ben Gourion*, eds. Dominique Trimbur and Ran Aaronsohn (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2008), 347–356.

⁸Dominique Trimbur, "Les Français et les communautés nationales de Palestine au temps du mandat britannique," in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives/Les mandats français et anglais dans une perspective comparative*, eds. Peter Sluglett and Nadine Méouchy (Leiden: Brill [Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia, 93], 2004), 269–301.

institutions able to maintain, or improve, a French presence within the local populations (schools, seminaries). New ways, new preferences still had to be thought of, invented and attempted.

Before many other countries, France inaugurated a real cultural foreign policy at the very beginning of the 1920s, with the creation of a dedicated department at the French Foreign ministry, the *Service des Oeuvres françaises à l'étranger* (SOFE) headed by the diplomat Jean Marx.⁹ Before this, the “mission civilisatrice” had been coordinated via various sections, and in a non-systematic way. Regarding Palestine, and the Middle East generally, the dissemination of French values was long perceived as only possible through the activities of Catholic institutions, even if alternatives already existed since 1860. The Jewish side was embodied by the *Alliance israélite universelle* and its schools around the Mediterranean. And since the very beginning of the twentieth century a secular structure was created in order to offer other educational, non-religious, or even anti-religious models: the *Mission laïque française* (French lay mission, MLF). The AIU was present in Palestine before WWI, not the MLF, Catholic institutions being considered as sufficiently efficient and not to be subjected to competition in an area where France appeared to be only the Catholic presence.

After WWI, the French presence remained fixed on a rigid perception of the environment and of the local ethnic groups, even if early reports described a need to enlarge its scope.¹⁰ But the evolution of the situation, with the end of the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate and the growing Zionist aspirations, led France to reconsider its approach, which was old-fashioned, no longer economically viable and attracted British distrust in a Palestine which needed to be completely renewed, according to British opinions.¹¹ France had to accompany the evolution, if it did not want to be sidelined, despite its continuing attachment to traditions. The idea of having an active MLF was a result of this reflection.

THE FOUNDING OF A *CENTRE DE CULTURE FRANÇAISE DE JÉRUSALEM*

The *Mission laïque française*, founded in 1902, embodied French anticlerical policy at the very end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Its very name, a “mission”, illustrates a wish for it to replace the activities of the religious missions within French cultural action abroad. France had to return to its revolutionary vocation, the incarnation of *raison*;

⁹Catherine Nicault, “Jean Marx, universitaire et diplomate (Paris, 26 octobre 1884 – Paris, 26 avril 1972)”, in *Archives juives*, 2013/1 46: 120–129.

¹⁰Archives of the French Foreign ministry, Nantes (MAE, Nantes), papiers du Service des Oeuvres Françaises à l'Étranger (SOFE), Série D, 172 Palestine 1924/1929, note by P. Dhorme, 18 May 1922, “La langue française en Palestine”.

¹¹Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete—Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000).

the secular missionaries had from then on to be the main disseminators of the universal values present in French humanism.¹² Quickly the Mediterranean became the first and main zone of activity for the new body, its populations having to be withdrawn from the control of religious institutions. The first such establishments were founded in the main cities of the area: Alexandria, Cairo, Salonica, Damascus, Aleppo.¹³

Palestine was immediately included in the plans, even if the perspective appeared "difficult".¹⁴ A French civil servant, *inspecteur général* Charlot, present on the spot in 1906, concluded that the already existing network of French religious educational institutions was indeed efficient enough and made it useless to imagine the creation there of a school led by the MLF. Moreover, the perspective of such a French secular establishment was quickly rejected by the religious actors present there, fearing any reduction in the grants they still received officially from France.¹⁵

The Idea of a French Lycée (Secondary School)

At the end of the 1920s, the idea of an establishment headed by the MLF to be settled in Palestine came under consideration once more, France having to adapt to the new local context. The idea appears through the correspondence of the French Consuls-general, among them more specifically the somewhat progressive Gaston Maugras (1924–1926). Although he received the usual instructions before taking up his position,¹⁶ once arrived he realised the necessity of adapting to the new conditions. His first and main concern dealt with the Jewish side, which should become focus of the attention of

¹²André Thévenin, *La Mission laïque française à travers son histoire 1902–2002* (Paris: MLF, 2002).

¹³The French journalist Maurice Pernot, in his report on the French presence in the Orient (*Rapport sur un voyage d'étude à Constantinople, en Égypte et en Turquie d'Asie [janvier-août 1912]*, Comité de défense des intérêts français en Orient, Firmin-Didot, Paris, 1913) already mentions it. Regarding Alexandria, Frédéric Abécassis, "Les lycées de la Mission laïque française en Égypte (1909–1961) – L'exportation d'un 'modèle français' en Orient et ses contradictions," paper given during the conference "Lycées et lycéens en France (1802–2002)", Sorbonne, July 2002. Regarding Damascus, Randi Deguilhem, "Impérialisme, colonisation intellectuelle et politique culturelle de la Mission laïque française en Syrie sous mandat", in *The British and French Mandates...*, *op. cit.*, eds. Peter Sluglett and Nadine Méouchy (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 321–341.

¹⁴Archives of the French Foreign ministry, Paris (MAE, Paris), Papiers d'agents-Archives privées (PAAP) 240-Doulcet, 4 protectorat religieux, notes sur le rapport du budget de 1905.

¹⁵The Jesuit Fathers of the Saint-Joseph University in Beirut went as far as to prevent the mission conducted by Charlot entering their establishment: Chantal Verdeil, "Travailler à la renaissance de l'Orient chrétien: Les missions latines en Syrie (1830–1945)," *Proche-Orient chrétien* 51 (2001): 267–316.

¹⁶MAE, Paris, Paris, Levant 1918–1940, Palestine, 18, consulats de France, juillet 1922–novembre 1929, Recommendations by the French Foreign minister to M. Maugras, departing to Jerusalem, 16 April 1924.

a new French diplomacy in Palestine.¹⁷ His successor, Jacques d'Aumale, in Jerusalem from February 1929 onwards, made a new French policy out of the idea. According to him, it "is necessary to proceed to a complete and radical overhaul of our school policy, as well as of the organisation of our efforts in this country".¹⁸

The idea of a French secular *lycée* was considered within this context: it illustrates the wish to have, within a school under French auspices, pupils representing the various populations of the area. In order to express the strong sense of renewal behind the idea, a new partner was involved, the *Mission laïque française*. Personalities until then hardly active on Palestinian topics intervened, such as the French senator Justin Godart, member of the MLF, also known for his pro-Zionist activities within the *Association France-Palestine*.¹⁹ The MLF was at the time quite active in strengthening and renewing the French network in the Middle East, and therefore received funds from the French Foreign ministry.²⁰ In Palestine, the MLF was solicited by Joseph Cohen, a Tunisian Jew, himself leading French courses in Jerusalem, willing to establish a huge institution²¹ to fight against the weakening of the French language and to contribute to a peaceful evolution in the area:

... Christians, Arabs, Jews, receiving a common education, being continuously in contact, would achieve a better knowledge and understanding of each other. Prejudices, atavistic instinctive animosities would lessen; friendships, sympathies would come into being on school seats. The religious dissensions put aside would be replaced by a reciprocal tolerance in all the domains of ideas, principles and convictions.²²

The idea existed between 1930 and 1933: after some prior financial objections,²³ it was maintained due to the wish to act for the benefit of French

¹⁷Ibid., letter from the French Consulate General, Jerusalem (24) to the MAE, 6 May 1925, Maugras.

¹⁸MAE, Nantes, SOFE, série D, 172 Palestine 1924/1929, letter from the French Consulate General, Jerusalem (118) to the MAE-SOFE, 25 November 1929, d'Aumale.

¹⁹Philippe Boukara, "Justin Godart et le sionisme. Autour de France-Palestine," in *Justin Godart – Un homme dans son siècle (1871–1956)*, ed. Annette Wiewiorka (Paris: CNRS-Éditions, 2004), 199–206.

²⁰See for instance MAE, Nantes, SOFE, série O, 53 subventions à la Mission laïque, arrêté du MAE, 6 August 1927. In the Middle East, the MLF's share of the grants provided by the French Foreign ministry represented somewhat less than 10% of the funds.

²¹Ibid., correspondance de Jérusalem, B, 207 Centre de Culture Française, letters by Joseph Cohen to d'Aumale, 11 June and 8 July 1930.

²²Ibid., SOFE, série D, 173 Palestine 1929/1932, report by I. Bassan to the AIU, 4 June 1930 (forwarded to the FO MAE by Bigart, secretary of the AIU).

²³Ibid., correspondance de Jérusalem, B, 207 Centre de Culture Française, letter from Besnard (secretary general of the MLF) to d'Aumale, 6 October 1930, and letter from d'Aumale to Besnard, 15 December 1930.

culture.²⁴ But the very Palestinian context made it difficult to go beyond the idea that: "given the rivalries between races and sects, one cannot imagine a *lycée* like in Beirut and Alexandria welcoming everybody. If Jews enter it, the Arabs will not, and vice versa".²⁵ Difficulties also lay in Zionist opposition to any external actor within the Jewish educational system in Palestine,²⁶ and the solution that was finally found was the introduction of special courses at the local AIU school. This meant that the Arab side was at first set aside, France focusing on a new clientele, but only the Jewish, Ashkenazi and Zionist.

Halted during the Spring of 1933, the project of a *lycée* reappeared a year later, but only under the appearance of a French-Hebrew school. This time the Arabs were included, but only in connection with already existing models: the Damascus French-Arab school (1925) and the Cairo French-Egyptian *lycée* (under construction at the time). But the project remained a project, and no French *lycée* was opened in Jerusalem at the time.

French Courses

Despite the first, vain attempts, the MLF remained a partner for a new, less ambitious project. But again, wishing to avoid problems with the Zionists, and to avoid controversy due to Arab-Jewish antagonism, the MLF proposed sending two French teachers, who would act only for the MLF, without the traditional framework of a secondary school, and so in contradiction with the habits of the educational institution. Saving money, France kept its own aim at the same time. As expressed by the French Consul at the time: "This project appears to me to be immensely interesting and practical. It meets the real desire of numerous Palestinians wishing to learn French. It also allows us to remain neutral, without taking sides for a French-Arab or a French-Hebrew *lycée* which is an advantage".²⁷ Aiming at the expansion of its own ideas among all the populations of the then Palestine, France was also willing to undermine all possible opposition; the project "relieves the *Mission Laïque* of the concern [...] to have to combat the more or less real hostility of the Jewish or Arab Executive and of the Mandatory authorities, and then to be placed under their control".

²⁴Ibid., letter from Jean Helleu (civil servant, French High-Commission, Syria) to d'Aumale, 3 March 1933.

²⁵Ibid., letter from d'Aumale to Helleu, 10 March 1933.

²⁶As for Chaim Weizmann, he had long denounced the activities of the French, who "have always interfered with the population and tried to impose upon them the '*esprit français*'." "The Alternatives for Palestine", London, 25 April 1917, interview with Lord Cecil, in Barnett Litvinoff, ed., *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Papers, vol. I, series B, August 1898-July 1931 (Jerusalem: Transaction Publishers, 1983), 146 sq.

²⁷MAE, Nantes, SOFE, 369 Palestine, letter from the French Consulate general in Jerusalem (27) to MAE-SOFE, 28 March 1934, d'Aumale.

THE CENTRE DE CULTURE FRANÇAISE

Quickly France and the MLF became more ambitious again and arrived at the idea of a Centre for French Culture (*Centre de Culture française*, CCF), “accessible to the Arabs as well as to the Jews [*Israélites*]”.²⁸ Nevertheless, if the previous ideas, the French *lycée* or the mere courses for French, gave the impression of wishing to stay neutral, in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Mission, the new project mostly focused on the Jewish aspects of the new Palestine. The main motivation leading to the creation of a CCF lay in the growing Jewish population²⁹: aiming at a first branch in Jerusalem, the idea of an extension to Tel Aviv quickly arose. Therefore, after negotiations between all parties, the CCF opened in the very heart of the Jewish part of Jerusalem in October 1935.³⁰

The CCF quickly became a success story, offering courses for adults and Hebrew University students, a library (and a travelling one, with a bus driven through Palestine), exhibitions, concerts, film screenings and encounters with French writers and scientists. The latter were representatives of their time; if some of them such as André Siegfried can be considered as neutral, others are well-known today rather as being hostile towards the Jews, like the author Paul Morand, or more benevolent towards the Arabs, like Louis Massignon.³¹ Remembering the fundamental neutrality of the MLF, and after having established a balance between the lectures in order to address the various communities of the Holy City, the head of the new CCF, Jean Thibault-Chambault (previously a French and English teacher at the MLF secondary school in Beirut), turned his attention to the Arab population. He did so, even if doubts existed regarding such an orientation. As he himself expressed upon his arrival in Jerusalem: “there is, as it appears, nothing to do there, and this is wasted time”.³² And even if this negative opinion was shared by the contemporary Consul-General, Jacques d’Aumale: “Only on the Arab side will your hopes not be fulfilled; it appears increasingly to me that here at least,

²⁸ *Bulletin de la Mission Laïque française*, année scolaire 1934–35, 2.

²⁹ MAE, Nantes, 369 Palestine, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (31) to the MAE-SOFE, 11 May 1935, d’Aumale.

³⁰ Ibid., letter of the Mission laïque to the French Consulate in Jerusalem, 13 February 1935, Besnard. The CCF is located on Ben Yehuda street, one of the main streets of the developing Jewish side of Jerusalem.

³¹ Ibid., MLF, Paris, Établissement de Jérusalem, rapports mensuels du 1^{er} au 30 mars 1936 (Morand) et du 1^{er} au 28 février 1937 (Massignon). Also AN, 60 AJ 142 Lycée français de Jérusalem 1936–1939, letter from the CCF to the MLF, 21 February 1937, Thibault-Chambault, describing Massignon’s satisfaction concerning the perspective of the opening of the Arab branch.

³² MLF, Paris, dossier Jean Thibault-Chambault, letter from Thibault-Chambault to the MLF, 1 December 1935.

intimacies belong to fantasy [*chimères*]"³³ Overcoming his own reluctance, if not to say prejudice, having cleared the question of the identity of the teacher (with the designation of an Arab, with French and Lebanese citizenship), Thibault-Chambault announced very proudly in April 1937 that a "French Centre for Arabs" had just opened in the New City, on Mamilla Road – then the main commercial hub of Jerusalem, with a very promising perspective: "I have the impression that the Arabs [...] will welcome us in a positive way and try to compete with the Jews in the cultural field".³⁴

After the first year and a half of existence for the Jewish branch, and shortly after the opening of the Arab one, Thibault-Chambault wrote to the MLF headquarters in Paris, describing his position within the political and cultural landscape of Jerusalem:

I am honoured to tell you that in the current state of things the Centre continues not doing politics and not interfering in anything. This is so true that it is considered by the Arabs and the Germans as pro-Jewish, by the Jews as pro-Arab, by the French as not pro-Arab enough; as for the English, they seem not to care about our image and they go on letting us work in peace.³⁵

This first satisfying report led the head of the young institution to express new ambitions, since he saw in the success in Jerusalem a solution which could be introduced in other parts of the Middle East, especially those places also affected by nationalist upheavals. Quoting the founding values of the *Mission laïque*, he considered that France could play a role in the new Middle East:

The formula of the *Centre de Culture française* seems to be achieving success in the Orient and maybe in other parts. So it is necessary to settle some principles and to try to apply them as quickly as possible and in the best way. Confronted with aggressive nationalisms, the intense propaganda from the dictatorial states, propaganda that is contrary to the free French spirit, one has to adapt and look for new means in order to sow everywhere the directing ideas of the *Révolution*, of the declaration of the Rights, as well as the more modern ideas.³⁶

Thibault-Chambault's idealism also illustrates what he perceived as a necessity for France to be loyal to her own "mission civilisatrice"; more than ever, this mission had to break with the French Catholic tradition until then prevalent

³³MAE, Nantes, 207 Centre de Culture Française, letter from d'Aumale to Besnard, 1 February 1936. Some months later d'Aumale has harsh words against Arab students, "very much less developed than the Jews" (ibid., 214 Université hébraïque, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem to the MAE-SOFE, 25 May 1937, d'Aumale).

³⁴AN, 60 AJ 142 Lycée français de Jérusalem 1936–1939, letter from the CCF to the MLF, 21 April 1937, Thibault-Chambault.

³⁵Ibid., letter from the CCF to the MLF, 22 March 1937, Thibault-Chambault.

³⁶Ibid., "Le Centre de Culture Française – Jérusalem", 27 February 1937, Thibault-Chambault.

in the area. By doing so, it would be possible to control the young, rising nationalisms and to win them over to the French cause, against every other (German and Italian) influence.

After some hesitation at first, the two successive French Consuls General, Jacques d'Aumale and Amédée Outrey, supported the CCF, all the more so as the institution registered a greater success than comparable entities, like the Italian cultural centre.³⁷ France officially recognised the success, and in May 1938 the very secular French politician Edouard Herriot, head of the French parliament and of the MLF, came to Jerusalem and visited the institution, while inspecting the MLF network in the area.³⁸ For their part, some traditional French representatives in Palestine were benevolent towards the new institution, like the Dominicans of the famous École biblique, acknowledging the CCF's merits in improving the French position in Palestine. Known today as pro-Palestinian, they nevertheless considered with some disdain, or even racism, the talks given by Arab students at the Mamilla branch of the CCF. On 20 May 1938 for instance, such a lecture was considered as "superficial and wrong in many points. On the reciprocal influence of French and Arab cultures. Luckily Ch. Martel [the Frank king who halted the Arab invasion in France in 732] has freed us from this breed".³⁹

As for their colleagues at the AIU, they perceived the CCF as an ally in the project of penetrating the Palestinian Jewish community with French ideas.⁴⁰ Others remained suspicious, keeping in mind the obvious contradiction between the CCF and the French tradition in Palestine, like the White Fathers, themselves heading an important tool for French cultural policy among the Arab population, the Greek-Catholic seminary established at the French national domain of Sainte-Anne⁴¹:

This is an establishment where members of the *Mission Laïque* provide French courses, in the evening, to foreigners, who are almost all Jews. Lectures are also given there, either by teachers of the Centre, or by outside personalities. [...] the global spirit of the Centre is not what it should be: so the director has naively told us that, in order to teach French and specifically in order to transmit the French spirit to the people attending the courses, he explained to them *Candide* by Voltaire and *Émile* by Rousseau; as well as these, the lectures given during the last three months dealt with: [...] Idealist and *dreyfusard*,

³⁷MAE, Nantes, SOFE, D, 372 Palestine, université de Jérusalem 1936/1940, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (11) to the MAE-SOFE, 1 February 1936, d'Aumale.

³⁸See his *Sanctuaires*, the volume he published after his journey through the Middle East (Paris: Hachette, 1938).

³⁹Archives of the Saint-Étienne convent in Jerusalem (Ecole biblique), diary of the convent, notice 20 May 1938.

⁴⁰Guy Cohen, "L'Institut français de Jérusalem," *L'Univers israélite*, 28 June 1935, 657.

⁴¹See the chapter by Charbel Nassif in the volume for more on French cultural diplomacy towards Palestine's Melkite communities.

Zola; André Gide or on the pursuit of his own soul; Jaurès [...] the attendance is mostly Jewish and in a very narrow room; [...] to go there would be to seem, to Catholic people [Arabs], to approve of a Center whose spirit we disapprove of".⁴²

As for the Zionists, while accepting the CCF and the participation of Hebrew University students at French courses given there, they refused any further step towards a French secondary school in Jerusalem and did not recognise the Arab branch of the CCF.

THE FATE OF THE CCF

Early Days

After promising beginnings, the CCF was directly affected by the violent political situation which prevailed in Palestine at the very same period as its opening, like many French and other foreign institutions. With the 1936–1939 uprising, the Arab General Strike, the CCF, focusing on evening courses for adults, encountered huge difficulties due to the regular curfew imposed on Palestine and the Holy City and forbidding any circulation in the evenings. Beyond the regular financial difficulties of the MLF itself, the activity of the CCF quickly reached a very low level. This peculiarly affected the attempt to have a Jewish and an Arab branch existing simultaneously. The “ecumenical” experiment suffered the same dramatic destiny as Palestine itself. The French Consul general said of the idealistic director of the Centre that: “He would like to swallow everything at once; he would like the Jews and Arabs to adore France without hesitation. This is a difficult aim to be reached”.⁴³

This affected specifically the cultural perspectives which existed concerning the Arab side. The same French Consul, himself a collector of traditional oriental clothes, quickly described his own feelings: “on this side, there was, there is and there will never be anything to do. Do not consider me as systematically anti-Arab. This judgement is but the fruit of the experience of no few years spent in the Orient”. This assessment was confirmed by his successor as French representative, Amédée Outrey.⁴⁴ Focusing from then onwards on the Jewish side, France and the MLF forgot the dream of neutrality in the Palestinian context of the times and chose efficiency, also in order to

⁴²Archives de la Société des Pères blancs, Rome, quatrième période: Birraux 1936–1947, dossier 255, Ste Anne, letter from P. Portier (superior of *Sainte-Anne de Jérusalem*) to Mgr. Birraux (superior-general of the White fathers), 12 January 1937.

⁴³MAE, Nantes, correspondance de Jérusalem, B, 187 Français en Palestine, letter from d'Aumale to Marx, 4 May 1937.

⁴⁴Ibid., SOFE, D, 207 Centre de Culture Française, letter from the French Consulate general in Jerusalem (254) to the MAE-SOFE, 6 August 1938, Outrey, confidential.

avoid the growth of German influence.⁴⁵ Beside the CCF, a chair for French Culture was then inaugurated at the Hebrew University in November 1938.⁴⁶

With the worsening of the situation over the ensuing months (the mobile library not being able to get to its readers due to the regular closure of roads in the context of the Arab General Strike), the Arab branch was provisionally closed by the beginning of 1939, confirming early negative assessments. Convinced of his own ideas and initiatives, Thibault-Chambault's enthusiasm was indeed not shared by other observers. In a report written after some months of activity by the Arab branch, the MLF's inspector was already more skeptical: "We have opened in the Arab city a special course for the people of the neighbourhood, a maximum of 10 people have gathered; the attempt does not really meet with success".⁴⁷ The closure of the Arab branch, decided by the MLF headquarters in Paris, considering financial constraints, occurred even though Thibault-Chambault had previously warned against such a step:

In the case of the Arab Centre not being maintained, we would not have one Arab in our establishment anymore: we then would be immediately considered as only conducting a Jewish policy. At this point I allow myself to remind you of the very sane words you pronounced regarding solidarity among the establishments. The closure of the Arab location will be known in Egypt as well as in Syria, and I think it will make a bad impression. Nevertheless, the idea of the closure may be the idea of *Monsieur le Consul Général*, who until today, to my knowledge, has done nothing for the benefit of the Arabs. It seems to me that, even if there be no other reason than this, we should not entirely "bet" on the Jews.⁴⁸

On the Jewish side, meanwhile, the level of activity remained very low.

WWII

With the declaration of war, the Palestinian Muslim-Christian violent moments came to an end, and the new climate offered the possibility of returning to normal cultural activity, dealing again with both sides: in November 1939, it was again envisaged to open French courses on the Arab side of the city.⁴⁹ But the French institutions, specifically the CCF, were

⁴⁵Ibid., SOFE, D, 372 Palestine, université de Jérusalem 1936/1940, dossier Palestine établissements d'enseignement, letter from Thibault-Chambault to Marx, 12 November 1937.

⁴⁶Dominique Trimbur, "La création de la chaire de civilisation française de l'Université hébraïque de Jérusalem," *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah-Le Monde Juif* no. 167 (September–December 1999): 161–179.

⁴⁷MLF, Paris, Dossier Jean Thibault-Chambault, rapport d'inspection, 6 December 1937.

⁴⁸AN, 60 AJ 142 Lycée français de Jérusalem 1936–1939, Sous-dossier 152, letter from the MLF to the CCF, 6 October, and letter from the CCF to the MLF, 18 October 1938, Thibault-Chambault.

⁴⁹MAE, Nantes, SOFE, D, 207 Centre de Culture Française, letter from Outrey to Besnard, 27 November 1939.

obviously affected by the conflict. The heads of the Centre left Jerusalem, joining the French army or other activities, leaving the French Consul general, Amédée Outrey, to devote himself all the more to the survival of what remained of the new, but declining, body. After the end of the fighting in France, in June 1940, and the new political regime placed under the authority of Maréchal Pétain, a bizarre situation prevailed. This was the rupture between Palestine and metropolitan France (France entering into collaboration with Germany, and so not on good terms, even if not at war, with Great Britain), hindering the circulation of money from France towards French institutions in Palestine. Beyond that, the CCF, an initiative of the secular MLE, now depended on a France which was placed under the traditional, Catholic-leaning, Vichy regime, itself hostile to freemasons, among whom were many members of the MLE. In this situation, solutions were found in order to maintain some of the Centre's activities.⁵⁰

The international cultural landscape brought new problems. After the end of the Italian presence (Italy being at war with Great Britain), the United Kingdom opened a branch of the British Council in 1941 in Jerusalem. The competition was perceived as a danger by the representative of Vichy France, Amédée Outrey, who remained in post until July 1941, as well as by the Free French representative who replaced him after his expulsion from Palestine, comte du Chaylard:

All these signs, as well as the material difficulties encountered by the schools of the *Alliance Israélite*, administered since the armistice by the Palestine Education Department, do not leave any doubt about the intense activity of the "British Council", efficiently supported by the [British] Government, aiming at not only developing English cultural influence, but also at stopping ours, not only in Palestine, but also in the entire Middle-East.⁵¹

Likewise, Outrey had commented some time before that:

... this is still the best answer we may give to the insidious propaganda with which they are confronted. [...] the Mission Laïque [...] possesses [...] a

⁵⁰In the same way that the *Alliance israélite universelle*, like the Hebrew University, still received funds from Vichy France, the *Centre de culture française* still received money transfers from the *État français*. MAE, Paris, PAAP 130 Outrey, 31, Jérusalem Correspondance (télégrammes) 1940, telegram from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (130–131) to the MAE, Vichy, 16 October 1940. Regarding the AIU, Laurent Grison, "Diplomatie culturelle et paradoxes sous Vichy: l'exemple de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle," *L'information historique* 58 (1996): 163–166; by the same author, "Le Service des Œuvres françaises à l'Étranger et les juifs sous Vichy," in *Entre rayonnement et réciprocité*, *op. cit.*, 73–84. Regarding the continued money transfers to the chair for French culture at the Hebrew University, my paper: "La création de la chaire de civilisation française ...", *op. cit.*

⁵¹MAE, Paris, Guerre 1939–1945, Londres(-Alger), 423, Œuvres françaises, dossier général, août 1940-septembre 1943, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (61) to the Free French authorities in London, 24 December 1942, du Chaylard.

beautiful library in Jerusalem, a gift from the French government, which should be rescued at any cost. I ask the Mission to assume at least the rent [...], the salary of the librarian [...] and the low maintenance costs... I think that under the current circumstances the only policy we should have in these countries would be to preserve, at any price, all the means to act and to influence for the day, I hope not too far off, on which we will be able once more to occupy the traditional position that is ours, and that we have, despite everything, occupied in not too bad a way.⁵²

Despite the general good will, the CCF had then to reduce its own activity further to a very low level, focusing on French courses, which had been the very first option, some years before.⁵³ From spring 1941 onwards, the Centre de Culture française belonging to the very secular Mission laïque française, established in the Holy City, came to be put under the responsibility of ... a French friar, the Dominican Roland de Vaux, at the time head of the Ecole biblique.⁵⁴

Financed by Free France, based in London, then Algiers, from July 1941 onwards, the CCF was visited by the Free French Commissioner for Education, René Cassin, travelling through the Middle East at the turn of 1941–1942, in order to underline the attachment of Charles de Gaulle to all the French institutions in the area, of whatever kind.⁵⁵ The claim also aimed at proving that France still existed, and was still preserving its traditional position in the area, despite any English contradictory thoughts and efforts.⁵⁶ The maintenance of a French presence appeared all the more necessary in a period which, it was foreseen, might lead to a definitive settlement of the status of Palestine, in which France could regain its previous, dominant situation.

Benefiting again from regular money transfers, the CCF relaunched its pedagogical activities; in June 1944 a diploma in French language was inaugurated.⁵⁷

⁵²MAE, Paris, 1940–1944 Vichy, 57 Enseignement, Palestine, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (80) to Lagarde, 13 December 1940, Outrey.

⁵³MAE, Nantes, SOFE, Jérusalem B, 207 Centre de Culture Française, letter from the CCF to Outrey, 4 March 1941, Kraft (the author being an interim secretary of the CCF).

⁵⁴Ibid., letter from Outrey to P. de Vaux, 26 May 1941.

⁵⁵Archives nationales, Paris, 382 AP R. Cassin, 382 AP 59 dossier 2 préparation voyage au Proche-Orient, dossier 3 Syrie, Liban, Palestine et dossier 6 Conclusions générales du voyage.

⁵⁶MAE, Paris, Guerre 1939–1945, Londres(-Alger), 1029, Questions nord-africaines, musulmanes et du Levant, Personnel administratif de la Délégation générale, Œuvres françaises au Levant, dossier général: juillet 1943 - septembre 1944, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (503) to Beirut, 29 July 1943, du Chaylard.

⁵⁷Ibid., 765, Département des Affaires étrangères, Service des Œuvres françaises à l'étranger, dossier général: mai - juin 1944, letter from the Commissariat aux Affaires étrangères-SOFE (265) to Ottawa, 27 June 1944, attached a letter from the Délégation de la France Combattante en Palestine et Transjordanie (108) to the Commissaire aux Affaires étrangères, 2 May 1944, du Chaylard.

CONCLUSION: AFTER WWII

After the end of the Second World War, in 1945, assessments regarding the fate of the CCF in previous years were globally negative, even if its direction by the head of the Ecole biblique somewhat limited the damage.⁵⁸ For France, the end of WWII nevertheless offered possibilities to regain its position. The activities of the Catholic institutions were renewed, as well as those of the CCF, under the auspices of the new, very Catholic and traditional French Consul general, René Neuville. In the latter's opinion, the CCF could even have a central position within the future Palestine. It could become the central pillar of a "maison de France", within a real, relaunched cultural policy.⁵⁹ The CCF could then be withdrawn from the sole control of the MLF, becoming an intellectual centre, with an academic at its head. By doing this, "the Centre would become [...] the cell for a cultural influence that would later grow. The way it has been understood and functioned until today, and through force of circumstance since the war, one has to recognise that its influence, in this respect, has been close to nil".⁶⁰

Nevertheless, once again, ideas had to confront reality: financial difficulties,⁶¹ but above all political ones. As had happened before, objections appeared quickly. Everything that would make France have to choose one population rather than the other should be avoided. If once again efficiency concerns orientated plans towards the Jewish side, this did not mean that the Arab side should be neglected, be it in Palestine or elsewhere, at a time when France was entering its own decolonisation process, with the risk of the Middle-Eastern developments of the time (the independence of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria) having consequences for North Africa, for instance. Under the circumstances, once again, the evolution of the local context brought all plans to a halt, in addition to the strong wish of the French Consul general, René Neuville, to be the only one in charge and to avoid any favouritism towards one or another institution, at a time when some clerics representing French interests were thinking of leaving the area:

it seems to me that at a time when our troops are evacuating the Levant we should not let our works in Palestine collapse. On the contrary, I think that [...]

⁵⁸The consul writes of him: "I owe to the activity and the devotion of this Dominican a deserved tribute. One may say that he has rescued the institution which was declining, and whose activity has almost tripled since he has been heading it" (ibid., *Levant, 1944–1960, Palestine*, 430, *Œuvres françaises, dossier général*, 1er décembre 1944–31 décembre 1947, letter from the French Consulate in Jerusalem [25] to the MAE, 30 April 1945, du Chaylard).

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., telegram from the MAE-RC (91) to the French Consulate general in Jerusalem, 3 March 1946, Laugier (head of the new Department for cultural relations at the French Foreign ministry).

the evacuation should have, as a counterpart, the strengthening of our cultural activity in the entire Levant.⁶²

Despite all reflections and plans, the years 1946–1948 led to no real reactivation of the CCF.⁶³ With the division of Jerusalem, following the first Israeli–Arab war, the situation could only become even more delicate. One may nevertheless say that the new situation allowed a new French cultural investment in what had become Arab East Jerusalem. The CCF was at the time able to organise cultural activities on the Israeli as well as on the Jordanian side of Jerusalem with, for instance, in the 1950s, lectures held in the premises of the Ecole biblique; lectures given by Consular personnel, some clerics (on religious topics) or Louis Massignon.⁶⁴ But such activities could not make something really viable out of the CCF. Local circumstances, with less French activities in East Jerusalem following the rupture of French–Jordan diplomatic relations after the Suez crisis, a real disaffection for the French language, as well as the evolution of local populations towards their cultural autonomy or independence, meant the end of the attempt. The CCF, and its Arab branch, bore in any event the seeds of its own destruction, in its aims of the flourishing of peoples, the rights of the peoples to be their own masters.⁶⁵ Apparently a secular answer to the problems of Palestine, the CCF failed for being what it was: a tool of French foreign, imperialistic policy; in the 1930s as well as after WWII, it was not adapted to the local context.

⁶²Ibid., from the French Consulate general in Jerusalem (228/AL) to the MAE, 5 August 1946, Neuville.

⁶³Ibid., letter from the French Consulate general in Jerusalem (111/RC) to the MAE, 11 October 1946, Neuville; Ibid., Palestine, 371, Représentation française (consulat de Jérusalem), 6 août 1945–31 décembre 1952, telegram from the French Consulate in Jerusalem (1515) to the MAE, 21 October 1948, Neuville.

⁶⁴Archives of the Saint-Étienne convent in Jerusalem (Ecole biblique), diary of the convent, notices of 23 November 1953, 10 December 1953, 7 January 1954, 18 February 1954, 1 April 1954, 10 June 1954, 20 January 1955, 24 February 1955, 30 April 1955, 15 February 1956, 22 March 1956, 18 May 1956. The shared activity between West and East Jerusalem prefigures the current situation, with two French Cultural centres in Jerusalem, the centre Romain Gary (West), and the centre Chateaubriand (East).

⁶⁵The same evolution is valid for the 1930s, then the 1950s–1960s, for Syria and Egypt (see above the contributions by Randi Deguilhem and Frédéric Abécassis). It is not only the case for the establishments of the MLE, since some Catholic institutions, specifically educational ones, closed in the same period (Jérôme Bocquet, *Missionnaires français en terre d'Islam – Damas 1860–1914* [Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005], and *La France, l'Église et le Baas: un siècle de présence française en Syrie, de 1918 à nos jours* [Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2008]).

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