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Catholic Missionaries of the ‘Holy Land’ and the *Nahda*

The Case of the Salesian Society (1904–1920)

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, some Palestinian and Lebanese Salesians, influenced by the Arab Renaissance movement, began to claim the right to oppose the ‘directorships’ of the institutes of the Don Bosco Society in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. They also began to request better recognition of their native language, in schools and within the religious community. They clashed with their superiors who, in the meantime, had signed an agreement with the Salesian government in Rome, committing them to developing the Italian language in their teaching institutes. The struggle became particularly fierce after the Holy See rebuked the Palestinian religious congregations for teaching the catechism and explaining the Sunday Gospel to people in a foreign language and urged them to do so in Arabic. The clash caused a serious disturbance within the Salesian community. Finally, after the First World War, the most turbulent Arab religious were removed from the Society of Don Bosco. All converged in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, where they continued forcefully (but in vain) to put forward their national demands. This article is based on several unpublished sources.

Résumé

Au début du *xxe* siècle, des salésiens palestiniens et libanais, influencés par le mouvement de la Renaissance arabe, revendiquent le droit de s’opposer à leur direction, celle des instituts de la Société de Don Bosco à Bethléem et dans les environs. Ils requièrent une reconnaissance plus effective de leur langue maternelle, dans les écoles et au sein de leur communauté religieuse. Ils s’affrontent avec leurs supérieurs qui ont, entre-temps, signé un accord avec les Salésiens à Rome les engageant à promouvoir davantage

la langue italienne au sein de leurs instituts d'enseignement. La lutte s'envenime à la suite des reproches que le Saint-Siège formule à l'encontre des congrégations religieuses enseignant le catéchisme et prêchant l'évangile dans une langue étrangère, les pressant de le faire en arabe. L'affrontement ébranle la communauté salésienne. Après la Première Guerre mondiale, les religieux arabes palestiniens les plus revendicatifs sont transférés de la Société de Don Bosco au Patriarcat latin de Jérusalem, où ils continuent avec force (mais en vain) à faire valoir leurs demandes à caractère national. Cet article s'appuie sur plusieurs archives non publiées.

Keywords

Nahda – Religious Protectorate – Salesians – Italian Government – Holy See – Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

Mots-clés

Nahda – protectorat religieux – Salésiens – gouvernement italien – Saint Siège – Patriarcat latin de Jérusalem

1 Introduction

This article shows how the ideals of the *Nahda*, the Arab revival movement of the 19th Century, reached sections of Palestinian Catholic ecclesiastical circles and impacted the Palestinian Arab public opinion. This is largely understudied in the recent publications on Christianity in Ottoman and Mandate Palestine and on Arab language and identity studies,¹ despite its importance within the *Nahda* movement² and its consequences in the complex entanglements of colonial cities and institutions in Palestine. A cross analysis of unexplored local religious and diplomatic archives reveals that the inclination to embrace *Nahda* ideals emerged at the beginning of the 20th Century among a

1 Sheehi (2004); Robson (2011); Haiduc-Dale (2015), De Dreuz (2016); Suleiman (1994, 2003, 2004, 2006).

2 The revival of Arabic language that took place from the second half of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century caused a massive increase in production of Arabic texts, a renewed interest in the classical language and an adoption of western genres and mediums, such as journals; Cf Sheehi (2004) and Hanssen and Weiss (2016).

group of local priests in the Salesian Society in Bethlehem and its surrounds. This phenomenon remained marginal in other Catholic congregations of the region. Indeed, many of these congregations refrained from recruiting indigenous staff or else received such staff in insufficient numbers to permit such a phenomenon to manifest openly.

The Salesians arrived in Palestine in 1891, during years of important economic, social, political and diplomatic changes and accentuated rivalries between European Christian powers in the Holy places as well as in the missionary sphere. Italy and Germany challenged the French religious protectorate by sending missionaries to create educational and charitable institutions. They also competed to take the protection of the Catholic ecclesiastics already present in the Ottoman Empire, who, according to the directives of the Holy See, were to remain under the French religious protectorate. France continued its influence in the region via its cultural institutions and educative policy.³

The educational network created by Germany and Italy was less consistent. The Italian government promoted secular as well as confessional schools run by Italian religious staff.⁴ In these institutions, national culture, history and languages of the diverse European states were encouraged. The Arab Palestinian priests, the subject of the present study, tried to oppose this identification, reinforcing the Arab nationalist feelings of the pupils at the Salesian schools.

Situated within the broader context of *Arabism*⁵ local intellectuals founded schools of a secular nature, open to students of all confessions. For them, the local idiom and culture, conveniently undergoing a process of renewal, were the means to affirm national identity.⁶ In Palestine, Khalil Sakakini had been instrumental in prosecuting a similar, specifically Orthodox, renewal which sat alongside his extensive educational endeavours.⁷ Some of the Arab Palestinian Salesians, trained by their Italian brethren in the seminaries, adopted some of the *Nahda* claims to Palestinian religious, social, political and diplomatic contexts, as well as to their own personal ambitions.

3 Sanchez (2009).

4 Turiano (2016).

5 Cloarec & Laurens (2002, 18). In Beirut, Protestants and Jesuits introduced printing houses with Arabic characters and sponsored Arabic translations of the Bible, thanks to the collaboration of some local Christian writers, especially Maronites and Greek Catholics. The indigenous intellectuals promoted the revival of the Arabic language and nation by printing books, newspapers and magazines, writing novels, essays of a political nature, scholastic texts, dictionaries and encyclopaedias in local idiom.

6 Murre-van den Berg (2016).

7 Bawalsa (2010).

During the first decade of the 20th Century, in the context of an increasing politicisation of the Don Bosco institutions, some Arab priests rose up against their Italian superiors, reinforcing their claims after 1908, that crucial year for the revival of the Arab national consciousness in the region; the abolition of censorship during the Young Turk Revolution facilitated a rapid development of the press in Palestine as it did elsewhere.⁸ The battle intensified, reaching a peak during the First World War when the position of the ecclesiastical hierarchies of the Latin Church of the Holy Land – all of Italian origin – became increasingly fragile.⁹ The dispute between Arab Salesians and their Italian superiors became further complicated at the end of the First World War. New actors entered the scene: the British, more in favour of Arabic, the replacement of the Latin Patriarch by a more Arabic and locally-oriented bishop, supported by some Vatican circles. However, not even the emergence of all these elements allowed the Arab Salesians to affirm their national claims.

2 From a Private Initiative to an Italian Institution (1863–1893)

2.1 *A Private Initiative in the Holy Land*

Antonio Belloni, an Italian priest from Liguria, of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, founded an orphanage in Bethlehem (1863). Immediately, the problem arose of how to guarantee adequate religious instruction to the pupils, all of whom were of local origin, since Belloni did not have a sufficient grasp of Arabic. The Ligurian priest resolved to entrust the task for the moment to some indigenous priests of the Latin Patriarchate, and later, to a salaried Maronite priest.¹⁰ In the spring of 1874, subject to patriarchal authorisation, Belloni founded the religious congregation of the Brothers of the Holy Family. The first three aspirants to the priesthood were young Arabs from the orphanage. Waiting for the consecration of the first of the local clergy, Belloni secured the collaboration of five European priests. Two years later, in December – when the

8 The most influential journals emerged on the initiative of some non-Catholic Christian intellectuals, mostly Protestants and Greek Orthodox, representatives of the urban middle class who had become more active with the second decisive phase of the Ottoman Tanzimat Reforms (1856–1878); Dakhli (2018).

9 Mazza (2011).

10 Belloni's educational activity in Palestine has not been studied yet. ASC (Central Salesian Archives hereafter)/ C350; *Œuvre de la Propagation de la Foi* (AOPF), Fonds de Lyon, Série E, Jerusalem, E20, Bethlem orphanage (1873–1910); archives of the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*, Cf. *infra*.

Bethlehem orphanage was already housing about seventy youth – a theoretical-practical school of agriculture was established at Beit Jamal, with fifteen students.

In 1889, burdened with debts, Belloni wished to guarantee a solid future for the institutions to which he was so committed. He decided that the best solution would be to merge with the Salesian Society, founded a few years before by Fr. (*Fra*, Brother, hereafter) Giovanni Bosco (1859). It had the same purpose (helping poor and abandoned children), and it was already rich in means and rapidly expanding, even outside Italy. Finally, on May 26 1891, Belloni was able to sign the Act of Cession to the Sons of Fr. Bosco. Between June and December 1891, twenty-eight of the Salesian priests, clerics, and nuns arrived in the Holy Land. They joined the staff of the Holy Family, which comprised seven priests, seven seminarians, and 28 postulants, several of them Arabs. The Salesian clerics, who were to apply themselves to the study of Arabic, were given the task of replacing the salaried staff in charge of education.

The passage of Belloni's institutions to the Sons of Fr. Bosco turned out to be anything but smooth. Firstly, the Ligurian priest had to deal with the strong but momentary hostility of the Latin Patriarch Lodovico Piavi toward his initiative.¹¹ Belloni also experienced serious antagonism from *Propaganda Fide* and the authoritarian attitude of the Sons of Fr. Bosco. One of the most stigmatised shortcomings of the Salesians was their ignorance of the Arabic language. Not only were they incapable of preaching in Arabic, they *expected* to administer confession and teach catechism to the students in Italian. The religious redemption of the abandoned youth was among the principal motives that had driven Belloni to become involved in his charitable works. Therefore, this attitude seemed to him so problematic as 'not to be believed'.¹²

This problem, which Belloni thought could be overcome with time, did not prevent him from joining forces with Piavi to induce *Propaganda Fide* to accept the *fait accompli*. They finally succeeded on 28th August 1892, the day that the agreement was signed on the "project of aggregation" between his association and the Salesian Society. However, in the next month, *Propaganda Fide* forbade the Salesians to open a novitiate¹³ to educate "good masters and assis-

11 Lodovico Piavi, former missionary of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and Vicar and Apostolic delegate of Syria, considered the Salesians as mere administrators of the institutions founded by Fr. Belloni, in the name of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

12 ASC, B212, *Salesiani Defuncti: Belloni A.*, fasc. 4/E, Belloni to Barberis, Bethlehem, June 5, 1892.

13 ASC, F403, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, lett. 4346, Ledóchowski to Rua, Rome, October 26, 1892.

tants and then zealous missionaries and preachers practiced in the language and customs [...] of the Orient.”¹⁴ This new difficulty exasperated the Salesian leaders in Turin, who decided to recall all their members from the Holy Land. On hearing of this, Fr. Belloni and Piavi coordinated their actions and induced *Propaganda Fide* to reverse the decision. The Ligurian priest pointed out that if the Salesians were to withdraw from Palestine, he would be forced to put an end to his association. And this would mean returning “about 150 [...] poor orphan boys to the ways of vice and the hands of the Protestants”.¹⁵ He added that the Salesian clerics had arrived in Palestine at his request, “to learn quickly and easily the Arabic language, which was crucial to the [Catholic missions that worked] for the benefit of poor youth”. He declared, from the vantage point of his great experience, that it was impossible “to do real good and on a large scale” in the Holy Land without knowledge of the Arabic language.¹⁶ It is probable that Belloni’s threat to withdraw from Palestine – with the risk of the charitable works being bankrupted and the enormous financial burden that would fall on *Propaganda Fide* if it were to try to avert that failure – were the determining factors in softening the *Propaganda Fide*’s attitude.

Once all the questions had been resolved, Fr. Rua sent another prestigious Salesian to visit the Palestine houses, Fr. Giovanni Marengo. Marengo thought it urgent to recruit new vocations amongst the Arabs. He thought it impossible to continue to use Maronite priests for the training and religious education of the students. His appeal was clear: “*We need Arabs, but Arab Salesians.*” It would be necessary to recruit a sizeable number. However, it was suggested that seminarians of local origins be educated in Italy, so that they would absorb the true spirit of Fr. Bosco.¹⁷ Marengo’s suggestions were only followed halfway: the Arab seminarians were numerous, drawn not only from the Catholic community following the Latin rite, but also from the Melchites and the Maronites. But almost all of them, taken for the most part from the orphanage itself, were educated in Palestine. In this way, aside from the Salesian spirit, they absorbed many ideas that were beginning to circulate among the Syro-Palestinian intellectual elites of the period, those who advocated for the rehabilitation of the local language as an instrument of instruction and cultural affirmation for the population, in view of the national renaissance of the Arab people.

14 ASC, G336, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Durando to Cagliari, Turin (via Cottolengo 32), October 13, 1892.

15 ASC, F403, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Belloni to Ledóchowski, Bethlehem, November 22, 1892.

16 ASC, F403, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Belloni to Ledóchowski, Bethlehem, November 29, 1892.

17 ASC, F036, Marengo to Barberis, Bethlehem, July 26, 1893.

2.2 *Religious Protection and French Language*

The financial problems faced by the Salesians continued to be serious, despite some assistance from the government of Paris in return for teaching in the French language.¹⁸ The institutions of the Sons of Fr. Bosco constituted a reality that could not be ignored, considering that they were attended by more than 250 pupils in 1895.

Belloni expressed gratitude for the financial aid received from France, assuring the French consul Ledoulx that it would increase the Salesian presence in France. Furthermore, since the teaching staff was mostly composed of Arab and Italian priests, who preached and communicated among themselves and with their pupils only in those languages, the Ligurian priest established a new regulation giving precedence to French, especially in the Bethlehem house.¹⁹

Until the late 1920s, France continued indeed its cultural dominance in the Palestine.²⁰ France was able to develop such influence by multiplying educational institutions, in which the teaching language was invariably French, eventually replacing Italian as *lingua franca* in the East²¹ and becoming indispensable for gaining access to the most remunerative professions. As the French consul in Jerusalem Charles Ledoulx stated to his government in Paris – “the education received by the pupils contributes [...] to the development of our influence” in the region.²² At the beginning of the 20th Century, French schools in Palestine were managed mainly by French missionaries under the supervision and protection of the French consuls and generously funded by the government of Paris. They were attended by almost twenty thousand students: Christians for the most part, but also Muslim children of Turkish officials and local Arab notables. The vast majority of the pupils were thus Arabophone.²³ Contrary to other more cosmopolitan cities in the Levant at that time, like Cairo or Alexandria, several cities of Ottoman Palestine were provincial with small numbers of European nationals, and thus very few European children attending schools.

One of the few French Salesians present in the Holy Land, Fr. Adrian Nèple, employed convincing arguments to overcome opposition from the clergy who

18 Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (AMAEF hereafter), *Correspondence Politique et Commerciale* (1896–1918), *Nouvelle Série, Turquie*, vol. 129, 3,500 francs per year from 1895.

19 Desramaut (1986).

20 Trimbur (2002).

21 Sanchez and Frijhoff (2017).

22 AMAEF, *Correspondence Politique et Commerciale* (1896–1918), *Nouvelle Série, Turquie*, vol. 129, disp. n. 585, Ledoulx to Hanotaux, Jerusalem, January 8, 1896.

23 Sanchez (2016).

aimed to prioritise education in Italian language and culture: he claimed to have always heard the superiors affirm that “for ourselves, we are not Italians, nor Spaniards, nor English, nor French.” The Basque Ignatius of Loyola had never claimed “to make Spaniards of all his sons,” nor did he impose his language on them; “every Jesuit knows his own language and the language of the country where he is called to work”.²⁴

Six years later in the summer of 1902, Fr. Belloni was relieved of the position of superior of the Salesian houses for health reasons. The regulation giving precedence to the French language was still in force in the Bethlehem house at the time. In a kind of spiritual testament, the Ligurian priest recommended that the Salesians create “a more serious novitiate and oblige all the clerics and young priests to study Arabic well”.²⁵

2.3 *The Salesian Institutions of Palestine under the Italian Protectorate*

During the final phase of Belloni's tenure, a period that could be defined as the “Salesian” phase (1891–1903), Arab clergy became quite numerous due to systematic recruitment of novices from among the local population. Most of them were young, well tutored and imbued with patriotic ideals, but they increasingly chafed against their subordination to Italian superiors who were ever-ready to implement the nationalistic plans of the Italian government of Rome. Their ill humour came to a head when the superiors in Turin agreed that the institutions in Palestine should be placed under the Italian protectorate. Here, the protagonists were the rector major Michele Rua (1888–1910), the first successor of Fr. Giovanni Bosco, and Ernesto Schiaparelli, the energetic secretary of the *Associazione Nazionale per Soccorrere i Missionari Cattolici Italiani* (ANSMI). ANSMI was founded in 1886 as a private society with religious and patriotic goals. Its remit was to safeguard missions, disseminate Catholicism and, at the same time, propagate the Italian language and culture abroad.²⁶ The agreement between Schiaparelli and Rua, sealed on September 9, 1904, removed the institutions in Bethlehem, Cremisan, and Beit Jamal from the French religious protectorate; the institutions of Fr. Belloni, which had passed to the ownership of “various private individuals, all of them Italian subjects,” were to be “politically positioned under the natural and direct protectorate of the Consul of Italy”. Italian was to be the official language used “by the pupils conversationally and [...] in the teaching of all the school subjects.” ANSMI

24 ASC, F403, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Nèple a Rua, s.l. e s.d.

25 ASC, B212, *Salesiani Defunti: Belloni A.*, fasc. 11/B, Belloni to Durando, Bethlehem, August 25, 1902.

26 Pellegrino Confessore (1976).

had financed these institutions with 12,000 lire per year and supplied "Italian scholastic materials" at no cost. The directors of these institutions would be subject to periodic inspection by delegates of Schiaparelli's association and to the intervention of the consul "in solemn circumstances".²⁷

For the Italian government, this accord was a clear politico-diplomatic success. The Salesian institutions held a reasonable importance in Palestine at that time, a region enduring a bitter struggle for influence between the great powers. In Bethlehem, there were multiple institutions: an orphanage with 94 children, a college with 35 boarding and day students, and schools of arts and crafts with 196 students. The teaching and supervisory staff comprised 37 clergy. At the agricultural school of Beit Jamal, twelve clergy supervised 44 pupils, who learned to cultivate an area of about 600 hectares. In the novitiate at Cremisan, six clergy were charged with the care of pupils aspiring to take the vows.²⁸

Opposition to the appropriation came from many sides, including from a few young, but influential Italian Salesian priests who held leadership positions inside the local institutions of the Sons of Fr. Bosco. However, the strongest reaction came from the Salesian Arab clergy, who accused the superiors of "Italian fanaticism, [and] of slavery to the orders of Schiaparelli", as well as the open violation of the "spirit of Fr. Bosco".²⁹ It was probably at their instigation that various pupils revolted. Some wrote "most injurious comments about Italy" in their notebooks, others defaced the portrait of King Vittorio Emanuele III that hung in the Salesian houses. The main point of contention by the Salesian Arab priests was the use of Italian in education, religious activities and among the community's members.

3 The Vatican and the Pastoral in Arabic

3.1 *The Challenge of Arabic Institutions*

Tensions became heightened following a visit by Fr. M. Rua to the Salesian institutions of Palestine (March–April 1908). One of the rector-major's desired provisions involved the extension of Italian language use, established in Beit

²⁷ ASC, Fo40.

²⁸ Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAEI), *Ambasciata italiana in Turchia* (AIT), 1829–1938, pc. 205, disp. 640/63, Gavotti to Tittoni, Jerusalem, December 10, 1904.

²⁹ ASC, Fo39, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, 70-page manuscript report with some appendices, prepared by Fr. Mario Rosin, s.d. (presumably dating to 1919, after his return from prison in Turkey), 6.

Jamal in 1899, to Bethlehem. This left Arabic only in a sermon during the festive morning mass, morning prayers for the pupils and the 'sacred song of praise' three days a week.³⁰ In the meantime, at Cremisan, the site of the novitiate where both indigenous and European pupils studied, the virtually exclusive use of Italian was introduced. Only the teaching of the catechism and the sacred history remained in Arabic, and only for the Arab aspirants to the priesthood.

The Young Turks Revolution took place five months later, in which the Arab Salesians joined enthusiastically. Like many supporters of the nascent Palestinian nationalism – both Christian and Muslim³¹ – they believed in the guarantees of freedom and equality broadcast by this modernising movement. The hostility toward Europeans manifested by the Young Turks also seemed to correspond to their own patriotic claims. And thus, the Nahda ideals that were in favour of the new regime began to grow amongst the pupils.

The frictions between the European priests and those of local origins were heightened three years later in September 1911, following the outbreak of war between Italy and Turkey for control of Libya. The Arab Salesian priests strongly blamed Italy for its colonial undertaking to the detriment of the Arab Libyan population, equating this with the Italian superiors by whom they themselves felt oppressed. They even came to hope that the expulsion of Italian civilians from the territories of the Ottoman Empire following the outbreak of conflict would be followed by removal of ecclesiastical personnel.³² Instead, to their great disappointment, not only did Italy emerge victorious from the war, but, in the following months, more Salesians from the Italian Peninsula arrived in Palestine.

While the conflict was at its height, something occurred that crucially exacerbated the dispute: the arrival in Jerusalem of a letter from the prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, Cardinal Girolamo Gotti, addressed to the Latin Patriarch Filippino Camassei:

It has come to the notice of this Sacred Congregation that in some villages under the jurisdiction of the Latin Patriarchate, foreign clergy entrusted with the education of the youth have been teaching the Catechism in a foreign language, and at the same time, it is said that this occurs in the Sunday explication of the Gospel to the people. If this is so, [they] are

30 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, "Memoriale" from the inspectorial council to the Superior Chapter in Turin, Bethlehem, December 8, 1916, 2.

31 Eric Freas (2016).

32 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, "Riassunto cronologico della questione arabo-sales [iana] nella Ispettoria Orientale", 15–16.

thwart[ing] the intentions of the Church, which wishes that the bread of the divine word be imparted to everyone fruitfully, especially by adapting such teaching to the capability of those to whom it is given.³³

The archive of *Propaganda Fide* does not elucidate why the Cardinal produced this document. At the time, Fr. Luigi Sutera, the head of the Oriental Salesian Inspection,³⁴ declared that this was the result of a claim sent to Rome by Salesian Arab priests.³⁵ In 1919, the visitor of the Oriental *Ispettorìa*, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, claimed to have identified concrete proof of the role performed by these clergy in the archive of the Latin Patriarchate.³⁶ Not even examination of this latter archive has given us decisive proof in support of his statement. Three Arab Salesian priests Issa Salman, Stefan Talhami, and Khalil Shounnar³⁷ expressed great pleasure in the fact that the *Propaganda Fide* had finally decided on the question of preaching and prayer in Arabic. They thought that it fully accorded with their claims. Above all, they accused their Italian brothers of having “entered politics in the Church to the detriment [...] of souls”. The Patriarch had to act, for the good of his flock and against “the raging of the modern error (i.e. masonry)³⁸ against these young souls [who constitute] the hopes of future days”.

Salman, Talhami, and Shounnar recognised that pandering to the ANSMI in its fervour to mandate that the students speak Italian “in every context” would

33 Archive of the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* (APF), *Nuova Serie* (NS), vol. 658, lett. 542/12, Gotti to Camassei, Rome, April 15, 1912 (attachment n. 3 to the report “sulla vertenza tra i Sacerdoti Salesiani arabi ed i loro superiori locali in Palestina”, presented to *Propaganda Fide* by the procurator general of the Salesians in Rome on behalf of Fr. Albera, Rome, February 19 1920), 91.

34 The “*Ispettorìa*” is a Salesian religious province. The Oriental *Ispettorìa* was formed by the three Palestinian houses (Bethleem, Cremisan and Beit Jamal) and the houses of Constantinople and Alexandria (Egypt).

35 ASC, Fo36, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Sutera to Gusmano, Bethlehem, September 28, 1912.

36 ASC, Fo38, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, report of the inspectorial council, fourth session, 8.

37 Fr. Salman (1879–1946), native of Jaffa in the Galilee, entered the Salesian congregation at a very young age and was ordained priest September 22, 1906. Fr. Talhami (1875–1960), born into a Greco-Catholic family at St. John of Acre, entered the Brothers of the Holy Family of Fr. Belloni in 1886 and then the Salesian Society upon their merger; he was ordained priest on September 29, 1907. Fr. Shounnar (1879–1932), a native of Ramallah, was ordained priest January 8, 1911.

38 The accusation of masonry lay in the fact that – according to the Salesian Arab priests – their Italian brothers made themselves instruments of the Italian foreign policy. This policy was drawn up by a government formed by anticlerical politicians – several of them freemasons – who had subtracted the temporal power to the Church of Rome.

be an inevitable price to be paid for their financial assistance. But this practice could not be extended to religious instruction. For the two Arab Salesians, using Italian in a Palestinian church made no sense:

In the Church, it is necessary to instruct the heart, and who could deny that the best language is that understood since childhood and imbibed with the mother's milk, and that this is the most suitable one to touch the fibres of his tender heart.³⁹

The Oriental Salesian province had indigenous priests in sufficient numbers for Arabic to be used in the "practices of piety":

But since the primary goal of preaching [of the Italian Salesians] has become [...] not yet to insinuate the word of God into the hearts of their youths but instead the propaganda of their own language, not only have they rendered their Arab priests inert, removing from them the opportunity to practice the [...] ministry amid their compatriots, but they now mean to compel their subjects to preach, these Arabs, in an Arab country, to Arab youth, in a foreign language [...] and one not understood by the hearers, thus making the word of God not only useless but even tiresome.⁴⁰

The pupils had to spend long years just to attain an acceptable level of Italian comprehension. To argue that the language of the peninsula was employed for the sake of the brethren who did not understand Arabic was incredulous for the Palestinian Salesians. They envisaged the Italian members of their religious order had many other opportunities, especially the daily religious readings:

The youth have only this one Sunday sermon, and this is supposed to make of them true Christians and good fathers of family in this corrupt century. But how [...] can it do this, if it is spoken in a foreign language that they do not understand?⁴¹

The provision by *Propaganda Fide* was to be enforced not only among the Salesians, but in all the foreign congregations. Camassei was to oblige them to

39 Archive of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem (APLG hereafter), *GV-LB, 1.8, Salésiens* (1863–1929).

40 APLG, *GV-LB, 1.8, Salésiens* (1863–1929).

41 APLG, *GV-LB, 1.8, Salésiens* (1863–1929).

explain the word of God in the language of the listeners, and to make them say the prayers in Arabic in their schools in conformity with the prescriptions of the Holy See.⁴²

This protest was followed by a long discussion between Msgr. Camassei and the Salesian Inspector Fr. Sutura, who observed "how much was done in the Salesian houses of Palestine to provide religious instruction to the youth and to nurture their piety".⁴³ The Patriarch emerged from the meeting convinced by the reasoning of the Salesian superiors, reinforcing their determination to apply the method for the use of their language adopted in 1908.

3.2 *Exacerbation of the Dispute during the First World War*

From this point on, the language battle centred on the exact interpretation of the letter from *Propaganda Fide* of April 15, 1912. The Salesian Arab priests and Italian superiors continued sending letters and memoranda to Camassei for years. They often went to meet with him too, hoping to bring him to recognise their claims. The attitude of the Patriarch was hesitant. This contributed to an intensification of the dispute, since the conflicting parties both felt justified in declaring that the diocesan authority had supported their cause.

The most motivated Salesian Arab priests took advantage of Italy's entry in the First World War alongside France and Great Britain. This event weakened the position of the Salesian hierarchy, citizens of an enemy nation to the Ottoman Empire, leading to serious acts of disobedience towards the Italian superiors, despite the threats of canonical suspension, *a divinis*. Gathered in the Bethlehem house like an independent community, George Shalhub,⁴⁴ Shoukri Srour,⁴⁵ Issa Salman, Khalil Shounnar, Jubrail Soeidan,⁴⁶ and Atallah Ja'anin, convinced that they were acting in full respect of the Holy See's direc-

42 APLG, GV-LB, 1.8, *Salésiens* (1863–1929), Salman, Talhami, and Shounnar to Camassei, Beit Jamal, May 21 1912. Copy of document in ASC, F039, Ispettorie: Medio Oriente.

43 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, lettera of Camassei to Fr. Sutura (Jerusalem, October 25, 1916), reproduced in "Estratto della cronaca della casa salesiana di Betlemme" prepared by Fr. Rosin (August 2, 1916–November 19, 1917), fasc. 1.

44 About Fr. Shalhub, we are only able to ascertain that he came from a Greco-Catholic family, but we do not know from what region. He was Fr. Belloni's secretary for two years and lived with him in the Bethlehem house for about ten years. Shalhub (1955, 6).

45 Fr. Srour (†1953), born in Beirut July 15 1883 to Maronite parents, ordained priest September 14, 1910 (in September 1907, *Propaganda Fide* gave him the opportunity to transfer to the Latin rite). ASC, Necrology.

46 Fr. Soeidan (†1948), born March 21, 1885 in Hosson (Transjordan), the first newborn Catholic of the Latin rite to be baptized in a parish of this country. He was ordained priest March 30, 1913. ASC, Necrology.

tives, looked for every possible way to enforce their claims. The interruption of all communication from the mother house at Turin because of the war worsened the situation.

At the end of summer 1916, Shalhub stated that oppression by the superiors had been heightened by the fact that most of the preaching and catechistic instruction at Bethlehem was in Italian. He looked to the Patriarch to employ the “energy necessary to resolve [...] the difficulty”.⁴⁷ On 25th October 1916, the Patriarch exhorted the Salesian Arab clergy to be obedient, telling them that the question could be reviewed once the situation had returned to normal and the Salesian works were reactivated.⁴⁸

Seeing that the Patriarch had allowed for a glimpse of the possibility that the issue could be reopened at the end of the war, Fr. Sutera tried to convince him of the goodness of the methods adopted by the Salesian superiors in Palestine, pointing out the instruction of *Propaganda Fide* in April 1912, that condemned the teaching of the catechism to pupils in a foreign language:

Or when is [...] *the teaching of the catechism* ever presented by us to our pupils *except in Arabic*? And when is the Sunday explication of the Gospel made to the *people* in our church in Bethlehem [...] except in Arabic?

The local superiors underlined their Arab fellows’ misunderstanding of the text:

[in it] there is reference not to the *teaching* of the *catechism* but to the catechistic instruction, that is [...] a more general matter and such as is also included in ours that [...] is done in the afternoon on Sundays for the whole community; [...] Further, there is reference to the Sunday explanation of the Gospel, but they take care to suppress the words “to the people” to cause the belief that the Most Eminent [Cardinal Gotti] condemns the explanation of the Gospel that we hold in the community in Italian.⁴⁹

47 APLG, GV-LB, 1.8, *Salésiens* (1863–1929), Shalhub to Camassei, Bethlehem, August 18, 1916.

48 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, letter from Camassei to Sutera, reproduced in an untitled “memorandum” (July 1915–April 1918), prepared by Sutera himself and countersigned by his three brethren Eugenio Bianchi, Alessandro Pasero, and Carlo Vercauteren, Jerusalem, April 21, 1918.

49 APLG, GV-LB, 1.8, *Salésiens* (1863–1929) e ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, report from Sutera to Camassei “circa l’insegnamento religioso impartito nelle Case Salesiane [...]”, Bethlehem, November 15, 1916.

The Arab Salesians presented Palestine to the Vatican as “without language, without nation, and without homeland⁵⁰ a land of conquest by all the nations [...] and had thus rendered the Arabs devoid of any rights”.⁵¹ On July 7, 1917, Camassei assured Sutera of the correctness of his behaviour and invited the Arab priests to obey their superiors, if they did not wish to “meet with harmful consequences”.⁵² That same day, the Arab priests lamented that the local superiors not only prevented them from preaching and speaking in their own language, but even from confessing to one another.⁵³

3.3 *Vicissitude of an Arabic National Oriented Education during the British Occupation*

The months between August and November 1917 saw the arrest, deportation, and death of some Italian Salesians; tragic events that the local superiors attributed to specific denunciations forwarded to the Turkish authorities by the Arab priests.⁵⁴ These weighty accusations did nothing to dampen the population of Bethlehem's sympathies for the religious ‘rebels’. In fact, the occupation of central-western Palestine by the British gave various authoritative members of some important families in the country the opportunity to express themselves openly. Fr. Issa Bandak and Ibrahim Qattan emerged as their patron.⁵⁵ In the days immediately after the expulsion of the Turks from Palestine, Issa Bandak, priest of the Latin Patriarchate, continually incited them to action, giving open support to their effort to convince the indigenous nuns of various female congregations of the importance of fighting for the Arab national cause.

The British occupation of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area in December 1917 effectively opened a new chapter in this grave dispute. The Arab Salesians began to fraternise with various British army officials and to inundate the Holy

50 APLG, GV-LB, 1.8, *Salésiens* (1863–1929), Shunnar to Camassei, Bethlehem, January 13, 1917.

51 APF, NS, vol. 630, letter from the priests Shalhub, Srou, Shounnar, Salman, Atallah Ja'anîn, and Soeidan to van Rossum, Bethlehem, December 20, 1917, 183–186.

52 APLG, GV-LB, 1.8, *Salésiens* (1863–1929), Camassei to Sutera, July 7, 1917 (manuscript draft).

53 APLG, GV-LB, 1.8, *Salésiens* (1863–1929), letter from the priests Shalhub, Srou, Shounnar, Salman, Atallah Ja'anîn, and Soeidan to Camassei, Bethlehem, July 7, 1917.

54 Cfr. APF, *Nuova Serie*, vol. 630, Sutera a Albera, Jerusalem, 3 November 1917, 222 e ASC, *Ispettorie Salesiane*, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, “Riassunto cronologico della questione arabo-sales[iana] nella Ispettoria Orientale”, 57–65.

55 Issa Bandak, born in Jerusalem March 30, 1881, entered the patriarchal seminary in Beit Jalah on December 15, 1893 and was ordained priest on October 28, 1905. He stayed at the seminary for some years as a music teacher (1905–1911) before becoming chaplain to the nuns at the Hortus Conclusus near Bethlehem, a position in which he remained until his death (June 20, 1970). He belonged to one of Bethlehem prominent who controlled the manufacture of souvenirs and religious articles.

See with petitions. One of the strategies they adopted was to dissuade the youth and their parents from enrolling in the Salesian institutions and to cancel the enrolments of those who already attended. In order to do this, they cast doubts on the quality of the free schools operated by the Sons of Fr. Bosco and on the utility of studying Italian compared to languages like English or French.⁵⁶

When communication with Europe was re-established, the Salesian curia general, the Italian government, and ANSMI realised the true scale of the controversy. The Rector Major Paolo Albera (1910–1921) took the opportunity to reconfirm Fr. Luigi Sutera as inspector general of the Salesian institutions in the East. The indigenous clergy received this news with disdain. Once more, they had been excluded from ambitions to rise to higher positions. They redoubled their contacts with influential lay members of the Christian community in Bethlehem and succeeded in recruiting more indigenous clergy to their side.

At the end of December 1917, six Arab Salesians sent an appeal to *Propaganda Fide*: their Italian brothers continued to refuse to obey the directives of Cardinal Gotti on the use of Arab language. They accused the Italian Salesians of being always ‘soldiers of the King’ of Italy.⁵⁷ In those years, in which the conflict between Church and State persisted in the Peninsula, these were major accusations.

The Salesian Rector Major, Fr. Albera, found himself in a difficult position in those weeks, with requests for his intervention coming not only from *Propaganda Fide* and the Italian brethren, but also from the indigenous brethren, and even from the Italian government and ANSMI. In spring 1918, while Sutera called for the expulsion of the ‘rebellious’ indigenous priests,⁵⁸ these same six priests denounced the excessive nationalism of the Italian brethren and the damage this attitude perpetrated on the Salesian work; the people needed missionaries and clergy, not diplomats and militiamen dressed up as clerics.⁵⁹

Around that same time, about twenty of Bethlehem’s notables, including the magistrate George Qattan and the city’s mayor Saleh Giries Jaqaman, sent a petition to the Pope criticising the vilification of the indigenous Sons of Fr. Bosco, unanimously praised for their zeal whereas the ‘fanaticism’ of the Italian superiors offended the sentiments and national traditions of the Arab people.

56 Cfr. ASC, *Ispettorie Salesiane*, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*.

57 APF, NS, vol. 630, letter from the priests Shalhub, Srour, Shounnar, Salman, Atallah Ja’anin, and Soeidan to Van Rossum, Bethlehem, December 20, 1917, 183–186.

58 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Sutera to Albera, Jerusalem, May 2, 1918 (letter countersigned by Fr. Bianchi).

59 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, letter from the priests Shalhub, Srour, Shounnar, Salman, Atallah Ja’anin, and Soeidan to Albera, Bethlehem, June 4 1918.

The Salesian works had become ineffective. The pupils, obliged to attend their schools because of their families' poverty, were taught only Italian, which had become even less useful after the British occupation of Palestine. The youth in the Salesian schools learned religious principles in a very imperfect manner, "without ever being able to appreciate [...] the power that inspires their mother tongue". The petition, which was probably prepared under supervision of the Arab priests, ended by joining in the accusation that all the European religious congregations were involved in political missionization. They depicted the Catholic convents of Palestine as outright military barracks, where clerics unscrupulously used religion as a privileged tool to favour the political influence of the great powers.⁶⁰

4 Multiplied Dynamism of the Arab Salesians

4.1 *A Linguistic Battle*

Between the end of July and the beginning of August 1918, while the issue was being discussed in depth in Turin, the Arab Salesian clergy continued their activist efforts. For its part, the Holy See was preparing to nominate a new auxiliary bishop to the Patriarchate. The indigenous Salesians circulated a petition among the Catholic population in support of the election of an Arab priest. The Italian superiors alerted the Italian military authorities present in Palestine, and the alert reached the Italian Government and the Vatican via different channels. The response came that the Arab priests' initiative would not have the desired effect. About twenty days previously, in fact, the Holy See had elected an Italian to the post of auxiliary bishop of the Patriarchate: Msgr. Luigi Barlassina (August 9).⁶¹

While the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sonnino received this answer, five Arab priests who had hitherto stayed out of the centre of the dispute sent a report to the mother house in Turin. Resuming the language theme, they advanced some new arguments: their superiors had gone far beyond what had been established by the Rector Major M. Rua in 1908 and conceded the outright "supremacy" of the Italian language. The Salesian constitutions certainly did not provide for the ardent mania to serve Italy's interests, nor did they impose "the obligation to renounce" the "natural sentiments" of the Arab homeland and language:

60 APF, NS, vol. 630, 266–268.

61 ASMAEI, *Archivio Politico Ordinario e di Gabinetto (APOG)*, 1915–1918, Siria, pc. 185, Monti to Sonnino, Rome, August 27, 1918.

The will to minimise and despise the language of the [...] Arab brethren, to oppress them, [...] to threaten them with the staff and be unwilling to give them superior positions only because they do not wish to [...] give in to the boundless patriotic fanaticism of the Italian brethren is one of the most unworthy oppressions and most infamous cowardice.

They objected that Fr. Rua had sent the youngest of the clergy to Palestine so that they would learn the language of the country and be capable of doing “good” for the indigenous youth “with the preaching and with the school”. Fr. Bosco himself, in his oratory at Turin, “mandated and himself performed for several years the preaching in Piedmontese dialect to the youth [...] [and] learned German in order to provide spiritual support to the imprisoned Austrian soldiers”. One of the five signatories to the letter (Ishaq Ja’anîn⁶²) had met in Turin the counsellor of the Salesian schools and authoritative member of the Superior Chapter, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, who was shocked that so few European brethren in Palestine had learned Arabic. He had cited his own example when, as director in Seville and then head of the province of Spain, he had studied the language of the country in order to preach to the people. This was the same principle that the Arab priests were requesting for Palestine:

In our own countries, where our ancestors live, where we opened our eyes to the light, where we grew up in the shade of our fatherland and our language, that we should renounce it [...] is an unheard of thing. [...] From disdain for a language it is an easy thing to pass to disdain for the individuals. Therefore, this is a sign of much villainy and injuries [...] [perpetrated by] Italian priests, clerics, [and] coadjutors.⁶³

Meanwhile, the conflict continued to alarm the Italian government. On August 26, 1918, Sonnino telegraphed Monti and Schiaparelli to inform them that the Arab priests were preventing the pupils from attending [the Salesian] schools. To prevent them disrupting things further would require their “imme-

62 Ishaq Ja’anîn (1878–1967), a Latin from Beit Jalah, was ordained priest in Jerusalem September 21, 1901. He became one of the first indigenous priests to be recognized by the Salesians with a supervisory position. After being director of the new founded school in Jerusalem (1904–1906), he was called to direct the house in Beit Jamal (1908).

63 ASC, F039, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, letter sent to Albera by the priests Ishaq Ja’anîn, Boutros Sarkis, Auad Atallah, Spiridion Rouman, and the coadjutor George Harouni, Beit Jamal, August 19, 1918.

diate removal" from Palestine.⁶⁴ The higher superiors in Turin tried to calm the government in Rome, assuring that they were continuing to do everything possible to keep faith with the ANSMI accords.⁶⁵ Then, with the agreement of *Propaganda Fide*, they decided to summon the most rebellious clergy to Turin.⁶⁶ The task of convincing them to leave for Italy was assigned to Msgr. Barlassina. The Salesian directorship also requested the unequivocal cooperation of the Italian authorities in this plan.⁶⁷

In those same days, Captain Antonio Meli Lupi di Soragna arrived in Jerusalem, entrusted by the Italian government with the care of its interests in Palestine. Fr. Eugenio Bianchi, an Italian Salesian of a great influence in Palestine, focused on the need to summon the three leaders of the revolt, George Shallhub, Shoukri Srouf, and Jubrail Soeidan, to Turin as soon as possible. Reporting to Sonnino, Soragna confirmed that "the situation was unsustainable for Italian interests". The English authorities had grasped what was really at stake in the situation. It would have been easy to secure from them the removal of the Salesian Arab clergy as "dangerous persons, promoters of disorder" in the already precarious situation of Palestine.⁶⁸ At Sonnino's request, Monti stated to Fr. Albera and Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum, a prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, that the Italian government had promised to help in any way to facilitate the arrival in Italy of the three "turbulent" priests.⁶⁹ The Arab clergy, for their part, refused to obey and sought protection with the French military mission. When they did not receive support there, they turned to the military governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs. They claimed that once they arrived in Italy their superiors would certainly incarcerate them. Storrs asserted that the British government had no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of a religious congregation and advised them to obey the orders of their superiors.⁷⁰

The indigenous priests were frenetically active in those weeks. Their residence was frequented by many Bethlehem notables. Several Greek-Catholic and Orthodox priests also joined them in solidarity. Fr. Bianchi and Soragna thought the situation was particularly urgent and they asked Sonnino and Schi-

64 ASMAEI, *APOG (1915–1918)*, *Siria*, pc. 185, tg. 12325, Sonnino to Schiaparelli and Monti, Rome, August 26 1918.

65 ASMAEI, *APOG (1915–1918)*, *Siria*, pc. 185, Monti to Sonnino, Rome, August 27, 1918.

66 APF, NS, vol. 630, "Pro memoria" for the internal use of *Propaganda Fide*, s.d. e s.f., 299–300.

67 ASMAEI, *APOG (1915–1918)*, *Siria*, pc. 185, Monti to Sonnino, Rome, August 27, 1918.

68 ASMAEI, *Ambasciata Italiana in Egitto (1864–1940)*, b. 166/1, Soragna to Lazzaro Negrotto Cambiaso, disp. s.n., Jerusalem, August 29, 1918.

69 ASMAEI, *APOG (1915–1918)*, *Siria*, pc. 185, Monti to Sonnino, Rome, September 3, 1918.

70 APF, NS, vol. 658, Sacchetti to Albera, Beit Jamal, September 26, 1918 (attachment n. 8 to the report of February 19, 1920), 105–106.

aparelli to put pressure on Fr. Albera to send the three Arab Salesians a “new immediate order to leave”. On 5th October, the rector major complied. As usual, it was Soragna who sent the telegram to Fr. Bianchi. In an excess of zeal, the Captain decided to attach a “confidential” letter to be shown to Shalhub, Srour, and Soeidan, in the hope of convincing them to leave Palestine. In it he noted the Italian government’s readiness to “facilitate their departure” and made it known that, if they did not comply with the order, a “most grave provision” would be implemented “for their charge on the part of the Superior Authority.”⁷¹

The three priests, annoyed by this latest “intrusion of politics into the religious arena”, took the opportunity to declare that an order from the Major Superiors, “communicated through this channel and in this form,” was null and void. The document gave them the opportunity to show the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* proof of the validity of their accusations regarding political and religious permeation in the Salesian province of the East and, more generally, of the legitimacy of their fight for the rights of the Salesian Arab clergy and population. They also wrote a letter of protest to Soragna and Fr. Bianchi, deploring the fact that “in a purely religious and internal cause they made recourse to the civil authority to make injunctions and threats on their behalf.” Then, they protested to van Rossum.⁷²

4.2 *The Establishment of Educational Institutions of National Character*

In the second half of 1918, the Arab priests made efforts to found some Arab-national schools, to be open to pupils of all faiths in the Bethlehem area. They were supported in this work by the Sisters of the Rosary, indigenous nuns of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.⁷³ Many of these nuns had heeded the invitation to oppose missionaries from Europe on many occasions during this period and had become very diligent in going to the homes of the most influential personages in the city to carry out their messages.

To better pursue their objectives, the Arab priests created a new religious congregation called “Daughters of the Sacred Heart.” They were also immedi-

71 APF, NS, vol. 630, Soragna to Bianchi, Jerusalem, October 5, 1918, 415–416.

72 APF, NS, vol. 630, from the priests Shalhub, Srour, Shounnar, Salman, Atallah Ja'anin, and Soeidan to van Rossum, Bethlehem, October 14, 1918, 417–418.

73 The congregation of the Sisters of the Rosary was created in 1880 by an important priest of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem Y. Tannous and approved by the patriarch Vincenzo Bracco seven years later. Their activity in the parishes was much appreciated even by Msgr. Piavi, who had no sympathy for the native clergy. Cf. AOPF, Fonds Lyon, Série E, Jérusalem, E 19, Rapports of Mgr Piavi to the Président du Conseil Central de la Propagation de la Foi à Lyon, 6 Décembre 1891 and 21 octobre 1897 (doc. E07384 and doc. E07452).

ately able to count on the support of an educational-literary circle called *Nadi el-Adabi*, a typical product of *Nahda*, modelled on the circles that had begun to form in Lebanon in the mid-19th Century and founded at the end of 1918 by Yuhanna Khalil Dakkarat and Issa Basil Bandak.⁷⁴ The two young intellectuals whose mentor was a fine Salesian linguist and man of letters, Fr. Yusuf Kalis,⁷⁵ had remained on the sidelines of his Arab brethren's militancy until the British occupation. In September 1919, this man (a Maronite originally from Beirut) also helped them establish a journal to complement the circle's activities, to be called *Bayt Lahm*. This monthly publication was short lived. However, its publishers were very active in their condemnation of antiquated customs and the traditional tribal and religious loyalties of the population. They supported the birth of secular national schools open to members of all religions, and their stigmatisation of the hegemony of the ecclesiastical hierarchies by foreigners at the heads of the Latin and Orthodox Patriarchates. Further, from a political perspective, they demanded the birth of a great Arab state with Damascus as its capital, which should also include Palestine.

One of the most determined opponents of the initiatives of the Salesian 'rebels' was an Arab Jerusalemite Franciscan, Anton Khalil-Hanna, from the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, a parish priest of Bethlehem. He alerted Barlassina that the Sisters of the Rosary had opened an orphanage and were disposed to inaugurate a laboratory, an external house, and a hostel. This was an ambitious project presented as prospering at the expenses of the parish school and the other local Latin-Catholic institutions. A good number of these were managed directly by the Custody of the Holy Land or were entrusted by the Custody itself to the Sisters of St. Joseph. The Sisters of the Rosary could not act without the consent of their priest. With his opposition, the parish priest of Bethlehem attracted the hostility of the *Nadi el-Adabi* circle, composed of "people of all colours and all religions".⁷⁶ The members of the circle began to

74 Issa Basil Bandak (1891–1984), a homonym and a relative of Issa Bandak, priest of the Latin Patriarchate, was a Greek Orthodox. In the early twenties, he was representative of the Bethlehem District in the Muslim-Christian Association and in the Arab Executive Committee. In 1935 was co-founder of the Reform Party of the mayor of Jerusalem, Husayn al-Khalidi. Bandak was mayor of Bethlehem (1933–1938; 1946–1951), ambassador of Jordan to Spain (1951–1954) and Chile (1954–1957). Albul Hadi, (2005), 47.

75 Yusuf Kalis (1880–1954) arrived in Cremisan in 1896 for the novitiate and was ordained priest on June 17, 1905. Caputa, G., "I primi undici anni del teologato salesiano in Terra Santa 1929–1940", in *Ricerche Storiche salesiane*, 45 (1905) 377.

76 APF, NS, vol. 658, letter from the priest Anton Khalil-Hanna to Barlassina, Bethlehem, November 22, 1918 (attachment n. 11 to the report of February 19, 1920), 114–116.

work to convince the local Catholic population to send their pupils to the sisters' school instead of that of the Franciscan parish. Father Khalil-Hanna was accused of anti-national conduct. His greatest misdeed was his opposition to the opening of a school where the education would be conducted exclusively in Arabic

4.3 *Resolution of the Conflict*

Finally, it was decided at Turin that the situation would most easily be resolved by sending Fr. Pietro Ricaldone to Palestine with the power to "set up courts, [...] to initiate trials, and to pronounce sentence of expulsion." Over half of the Salesian Arab clergy rejected the formula of "solemn reconciliation".⁷⁷ Ricaldone thought it would be necessary in the very near future to take much more serious measures than these. At the same time, it would be necessary to make some concessions to the more docile Arab priests. They could constitute a resource for the congregation. Furthermore, the Arabic language should be more privileged.

Italians in Palestine are almost non-existent [...]. There are no Italian families, industries, businesses, or interests. Further, Italian offers no practical advantage as long as it is impossible to create a different environment, either through immigration or the establishment of commercial and industrial centres; it is necessary to recognise that our language is nearly no use.⁷⁸

This seemed like a defeat for the Superiors in Turin and of the ANSMI strategy, considered in Rome as one of the most effective instruments for disseminating Italian language and culture abroad.

77 Shukri Srour agreed to be transferred out of Palestine. Ishaq Ja'anin too declared himself ready to leave for Italy, with the dream of pursuing a degree in theology. Shalhub and Soeidan resisted their removal from Bethlehem. ASC, Fo38, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Ricaldone to Albera, Jerusalem, January 5, 1919. Spiridion Rouman was born into a Maronite family in Beirut on November 23 1886. After his father died, he was received by Fr. Belloni into his Beit Jamal orphanage in 1898. He took the Salesian vows in 1905 and was ordained priest in 1913. Eventually, George Shalhub was sent to Nazareth, Atallah Ja'anin to Jerusalem, Issa Salman to Jaffa, Khalil Shunnar to Cremisan, Spiridion Rouman to Beit Jamal, Auad Atallah and Yusuf Kalis to Bethlehem.

78 ASC, Fo38, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Ricaldone to Albera, Jerusalem, January 20, 1919. Srour and Jubrail Soeidan were the last to leave Palestine (mid-March 1919). Once arriving in Turin, both refused obedience to the houses they were assigned to in Italy and demanded to return home as soon as possible.

The “most necessary” language in Palestine was Arabic, maintained Ricaldone. Next came English and French. The agreement with Schiaparelli obliged the Salesians to teach Italian also, but it was not possible to disregard these other three languages. Arabic should have the “upper hand,” especially in religious education. Pupils should attend the local churches. Above all the recommendations of the Holy See were “insistent and clear.” In practice, Ricaldone recognised one of the Arab priests’ basic arguments:

The Salesians, wherever they are sent, hasten to learn the language of their host country: indeed, this is the key to our many successes.⁷⁹

The visitor considered it necessary to adopt some “radical provisions” regarding language. Some Italian brethren had to be sent back home to avoid a re-escalation of the conflict. To replace them, it was necessary to send out clerics or priests who were willing to spend a long time in the country in order to study and later teach in Arabic. In the meantime, to avoid allowing the indigenous clergy to stay in the Eastern province, the Salesians would have to employ paid external instructors in Palestine. This was the only solution that would recover some of the good reputation of the Salesians themselves, to ensure religious discipline in the various houses, and to guarantee their development.

While waiting for the last indigenous clergy to leave, Fr. Ricaldone found time to preside over a meeting of the directors of the Salesian houses of Palestine. Discussing what could be done for “the spiritual good of the youth by means of the Arabic language,” the session decided that the explanation of the Gospel should take place in that language along with the Sunday religious instruction, preaching, and morning and evening prayers. Praise would be sung “promiscuously” in Arabic and Italian, and the afternoon sermons would continue to be pronounced in Italian. In schools, Arabic would take first place, followed by Italian and English.

A concern arose: ANSMI and the Italian government would refuse to provide further subsidies, once they learned of the Salesians’ decision to make Arabic the primary language of education.

First of all, we must not believe that we are bound to the Association [of Schiaparelli] in such a way. [...] The moral and material assistance of

79 ASC, F038, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, Ricaldone to Albera, Jerusalem, January 20, 1919. Srour and Jubrail Soeidan were the last to leave Palestine (mid-March 1919). Once arriving in Turin, both refused obedience to the houses they were assigned to in Italy and demanded to return home as soon as possible.

the government does not mandate the fettering of our work as religious educators. Indeed, in the area of religious education we should consider ourselves free agents [...]: the just demands of the government are amply satisfied by doing as much as has been established in Italian. Granted that a little more be conce[ded] regarding the necessity of Arabic, the Government will understand our hypercritical situation in these times. For the rest, we should never forget the Salesian watchword: *‘Da mihi animas, cetera tolle’* (*Give me souls, the rest, take away*). Thus, if the government should somehow hinder our work as religious educators, we should act alone anyway.⁸⁰

When the transfers had been concluded, the Arab Salesians organised a tight network of clandestine correspondence, encouraging one another to resist. Srour and Soeidan stayed in constant contact from Italy with their brethren in Palestine, encouraging them to remain “true sons of the fatherland” and to “persevere in the defence of their sacred cause and their rights that had been trampled upon.”⁸¹ The two priests wrote repeatedly to van Rossum. Their letter of June 1919 was a strong and clear criticism of the missionary mentality that the Holy See itself had recently condemned. They laid heavy accusations on the European congregations: the religious instruction had been all but neglected, being done in a foreign language and it was not well understood by the pupils, who were also prevented from confessing in Arabic. They pointed out the fact that Protestants were inclined towards Arabic. They evoked the disdain of Catholic orders for Arabic language and culture as one of the reasons of alienation of many Catholics, as well as maintaining the condition of inferiority to which the local clergy was relegated. They requested an urgent action by the Holy See, the sending an “extraordinary apostolic visitor [...] who is politically disinterested” and capable of understanding the language of the people.⁸²

At Rome, Srour and Soeidan had the opportunity to meet with many prelates, especially those of the Congregation for the Oriental Church. They were even received by Cardinal van Rossum and the Pope. They left these encounters with the impression that various sectors of the Roman curia were sensitive to their claims, from which they drew high hopes of a good outcome to the conflict they had triggered. They judged van Rossum – perhaps a little too optimisti-

80 ASC, F038, *Ispettorie: Medio Oriente*, “Adunanze dei direttori a Beit Jamal” (15-page manuscript report written on March 6, 1919).

81 APF, NS, vol. 658, report of February 19, 1920 “sulla vertenza tra i salesiani arabi e superiori locali in Palestina”, 85.

82 APF, NS, vol. 630, Fr. Soeidan and Fr. Srour to van Rossum, Rome, June 17 1919, 492^r–493^{r+v}.

cally – as a “man of great courtesy and possessed with zeal for our country”. Benedict xv, according to them, heard them with “great affability,” listening attentively to their accounts. Then he addressed a senior member of the Congregation and ordered him to get to work immediately to “rectify” a problem he judged one of the “most important”.

Such favourable happenings allowed Srou and Soeidan to announce truly sensational news to their brethren:

Have faith that [in] the Vatican there are [...] distinguished men [...] who [...] do not avert their attention from the offences done to us in the East and to the trampling upon our rights. And it is not only Orientals who are endowed with such merits and lavish their [efforts] in service of the Orientals and their benefits; in fact these include many Westerners. Those of most superior intelligence and strong influence are angered at these events in the Holy Land that are incompatible with the spirit of the Church. And we have seen with our own eyes what is being done in Rome to revive the spirit of faith in the Orient and to divert the party chiefs of the missionaries from their aberration and false paths. [...] [Th]e Church of God does not desire any line of conduct other than that which we have outlined [...]. [The] spiritual authority desires with all its heart that the people of the Orient follow only thi[s] line, which will guarantee good outcomes for both religion and civil society, so that there may be one Oriental Church and one Oriental people in every sense of the word.⁸³

Srou and Soeidan's optimism was comforted by the changing Vatican attitudes of numerous clerics in the service of the Oriental Church (Cardinal Niccolò Marini, Msgr. Eugène Tisserant, Father Antoine Delpuch, and Fr. Cyrille Korolevskij, to name but a few).⁸⁴ Their activism had produced tangible effects, notably the establishment of the Congregation for the Oriental Church and the Oriental Pontifical Institute in 1919, followed 2 months later by the Encyclic Letter *Maximum illud*. Pope Benedict xv exalted the role of the indigenous priests and deemed “deplorable” the presence of missionaries who, “forgetting their own dignity,” had thought “more of their earthly fatherland than of the heav-

83 APF, NS, vol. 658, letter from the priests Srou and Soeidan to their brother Salman Issa, Turin (Oratorio S. Francesco di Sales, via del Cottolengo, 32), July 7, 1919 (attachment n. 15 to the report of February 19, 1920), 121.

84 Croce (2007).

only one” and were preoccupied with “expanding their influence and seeing their own name and glory celebrated always and above all else”.⁸⁵

The most fruitful action to re-establish a calm situation was the granting of permission to several Arab priests to join the clergy of the Latin Patriarchate. Contrary to what their Italian brethren maintained at the time, it does not seem that the Latin Patriarch Barlassina had vainly objected to this. He probably did not realise how much trouble these clergy would cause him in the future or else he was forced to make the best of a bad situation, given that Patriarch Camassei – in Italy since 1919 – had already given an assent that was difficult to argue with. Besides, the war had decimated the diocese's priests. The Patriarchate was in great need for well-trained ecclesiastical staff with mastery of the local language to send to the abandoned missions and those seriously damaged during the conflict. For his part, Fr. Issa Bandak – a great supporter of these new gains – was glad to continue to have capable and determined allies to pursue his own ideals. Furthermore, these were all part of the same ecclesiastical institution, by far the most important of the Catholic institutions in the Holy Land.⁸⁶

The Holy See sent Father Paschal Robinson on a mission to address the innumerable institutional and politico-diplomatic problems that had arisen since the British occupation of the region. One of the tasks entrusted to this Irish Franciscan was to look into the dispute between the Arab and Italian Salesians. Robinson recognised that many of the Arab priests' laments were well founded and judged the neglect of the Arabic language in particular a “serious drawback”. They aimed “only to ensure [...] the influence of the nation to which they belo[n]ged,” rather than to “the spiritual good of the souls”:

In the many schools opened for the indigenous, the education is carried out in French, Italian, English, German, and not in Arabic, for which language the missionaries and religious teaching staff display negligent disdain and in general show no willingness to learn it.⁸⁷

85 *Maximum Illud*, Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict xv to the Patrairchs, Proimates, Archbishops and Bishops of the Catholic World on the Propagation of the faith throughout the world, 30 November 1919.

86 Aside from Fr. Srour and Fr. Soeidan – who were sent respectively to the patriarchal missions of Smakieh and Rameh – entered the ranks of the Latin Patriarchate also Khalil Shounnar (parish of Kerak), Istephane Talhami (Jaffa of Galilee), and Issa Salman (Tulkarem); these priests kept the movement alive for seven years, although they were separated from one another by great distances in service to their parishes.

87 APF, NS, vol. 755, report by Robinson to the Congregation for the Oriental Church, Rome, December 23, 1919, 114–120.

The fact that the “nationalist spirit” was “implicated” in questions of religious character gave rise to serious disadvantages. Most of the European religious institutions had appropriated the patriotic spirit, “more or less targeting the growth of their respective national prestige by means of the schools and charitable works”:

This tendency has also imperceptibly infiltrated individuals who, instead of aiming for the common good of the mission, look to the good of their respective nations. [...] It is truly lamentable that so much good work in the missions is b[eing] neglected because of such nationalist aspirations as have been occurring not only among various congregations but also in the bosom of the same community.⁸⁸

Robinson had observed that the study of Arabic was “generally kept in a secondary position” in the Catholic schools. Various European languages were employed for the catechism, for religious instruction, and for confession, “to the great detriment of the indigenous boys being educated.” The situation was unchanged with respect to the pre-war years, when Msgr. Camassei had encouraged the congregations present in the diocese to use Arabic systematically in the schools. The Patriarch had virtually been ignored:

More than one European cleric charged with the care of souls has an imperfect knowledge of Arabic. In general, those charged with the direction of schools or occupied with education are completely ignorant of this language. What is even more grievous, in the Protestant schools which are becoming ever more numerous in Palestine, the Arabic language holds a place of honour. How many of these disadvantages would cease if, on the one hand, the European missionaries would seriously study the Arabic language and on the other hand, the recruitment of religious staff of both sexes from those among the indigenous who show signs of a true vocation were to be intensified?⁸⁹

For Robinson, the nomination of a cleric of local origin to the position of inspector of schools of the Patriarchal diocese was a praiseworthy innovation. In his view, Barlassina had made the right choice. What Fr. Emmanuel

88 APF, NS, vol. 755, report by Robinson to the Congregation for the Oriental Church, Rome, December 23, 1919, 114–120.

89 APF, NS, vol. 755, report by Robinson to the Congregation for the Oriental Church, Rome, December 23, 1919, 114–120.

Habasch – the priest designated to this position – confessed to him was symptomatic. He had been educated by the *frères des écoles chrétiennes*. He was thus much more inclined toward French than Arabic, given that that organisation considered Arabic merely a “second language”.⁹⁰

5 Conclusion

Like many other young Palestinian Arabs, Fr. Habasch had certainly been induced to study and respect the language and culture of the homeland of the clergy who had educated him, more so than those of his own land. This was the umpteenth proof of the fact that the indigenous Salesian claims were well founded. The problem was that they had brought it to light too precipitously and in a disorderly and hostile fashion. It is also useful to observe that, in the final part of his report, Father Robinson referred to the more general problem of the neglect in the use of Arabic among the Catholic congregations of the Holy Land. Among the Salesians, the use of Arabic was not disregarded. It was merely not in general use as demanded by the indigenous priests. If the Italian superiors had to face such an intense internal war it was perhaps because, unlike most of the French male congregations of Palestine, they had recruited many more indigenous clergy and provided them with cultural instruments that enabled them to effectively plead the national cause that they had embraced.

During their battle, the Arab Salesians did not oppose their own Salesian congregation as such. They did not disdain the religious, educational and charitable activities developed by the sons of Fr. Bosco in Palestine, but only the manner in which these were performed. They aspired to transform the Salesian Society of the Holy Land into an institution that was entirely local in character, shaped and directed by Arab personnel, suitable to promote the identity and progress of the Arab nation, primary through the education of students.⁹¹

We can also observe that the disputes analysed here – unleashed by what might be termed a “Salesian-Palestinian *nahda*” – did not reach the intensity of those aroused by the Arab Orthodox clergy and faithful against their ecclesiastical hierarchy, especially those unleashed during the years 1908–1913.⁹² For

90 APF, NS, vol. 755, report by Robinson to the Congregation for the Oriental Church, Rome, December 23, 1919, 114–120; Sanchez (2009).

91 Almost all the pupils of the Salesian schools of Palestine were of the local origin.

92 The ecclesiastical hierarchy of their Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate, all of whom were Greek in origin, was not overly concerned with the wellbeing of their congregants. The number and level of charitable and educational institutions was very low, and the liturgy was

most of the time the Arab Salesians, unlike the Greek Orthodox, were left alone to conduct their battle: Arab Salesians could not benefit from the outside help of some great power. On the contrary, they were severely opposed precisely by the nation that exercised the religious protectorate over the congregation to which they themselves belonged (Italy), which considered itself damaged from their militancy. After the British occupation of Palestine, they did not get the support (explicitly requested by them) from the powers that opposed the political-diplomatic aspirations of the government of Rome: France and Great Britain. They did not even enjoy the unconditional support of the Palestinian Catholic population, with the exception of part of that of Bethlehem in the last part of the dispute (1917–1920).

The Salesian Arabs reiterated their claims from 1921 to 1927, when they passed to the service of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, joining other militant priests of this Catholic institution, by far the most important of the Holy Land. At the time, the Vatican considered it necessary to stifle the somewhat disorganised activism of these priests. This did not prevent them from remaining constantly devoted to the Catholic Church, as shown by the long and considerable pastoral work developed by them over the long years that followed, at the service of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

After Vatican II, the Holy See recognized the use of local language in the liturgies and the arabised clergy. This was a natural and direct consequence of a line of conduct already laid out by the Catholic Church, often reaffirmed to missionaries. In particular, an instruction contained in *Propaganda Fide* – the *Neminem profecto* of 1846 – called for the multiplication of local churches, the election to the episcopate of local clergy and the prohibition of embroilment in questions of a political-diplomatic character. These issues were reiterated with even more force after the First World War, by Popes Benedict XV and Pius XI. However, this orientation proved difficult to implement, because of continuing

celebrated almost exclusively in Greek. The Arab priests were barred from ascending to the rank of bishop, let alone that of patriarch, the clergy was not permitted to participate in elections of the ecclesiastical hierarchy or to exercise control over the goods of their Church. Issues became extraordinarily pressing in light of the growing desire of the local population to affirm their own identity and independence. Through their struggle, local Orthodox clergy and faithful birthed a strong sense of national belonging within the region's most substantial Christian community and, with the progressive heightening of the controversy, in Palestinian-Arab society in general. In fact, the Muslim elite of Palestine also supported this battle at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century when they recognized this latest resurgence as part of a campaign against the appropriation by foreigners of Arab possessions, territories, and religious and cultural heritage. Hopwood (1969), Papastathis (2016).

resistance in certain Vatican quarters and among much of the Western missionary clergy, who had for too long been inclined to favour the politico-diplomatic demands of the great powers.

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