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Socio-political changes, confessionalization, and inter-confessional relations in Ottoman Damascus from 1760 to 1860

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CHAPTER 9: JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS : COMPETITION, BLOOD LIBELS AND MONEY-LENDING

In 1860, the Christian quarter of the city of Damascus was attacked. Houses were plundered and many Christians lost their lives.¹ This attack was underlined by inter-confessional tensions between Christians and Muslims but also revealed the deteriorating relationship between Greek Catholics and Jews in the city. Indeed, Jews were accused of participating or at least benefiting from the violence against Christians.² The themes present in the accusations each reveals a specific aspect of the Damascene Jews social and economic position. It also points to the development of sectarian narratives and reveals the increasing confessional consciousness of Jews and Christians.

This chapter seeks to analyse the relationship between Christians and Jews in Damascus in the first part of the 19th century through the accusations against them in 1860 and inscribe them in the larger confessionalization of the society. First, we will analyse the accusations against the Jews in the aftermath of the violence of 1860. Second, this chapter will delve into the interpersonal competition between some Jewish and Greek Catholic families in the Ottoman administration which affected inter-confessional relations. Third, it will explore the financial role of the Jewish Damascene elite especially after the Crimean War and the accusations of blood libels which followed.

1. Accusations against the Jews in 1860

In the aftermath of the violence, Christians were asked by Fuad Paşa, the Ottoman foreign minister dispatched to Damascus, to denounce their attackers who were immediately arrested and punished without a serious judgement. These arbitrary proceedings encouraged

¹ For a detailed account of the events see Fawaz, *An Occasion for War*.

² F.O., 195/601, Brant-Russell, November 8th 1860; F.O. 195/601, Brant-Bulwer, October 8th 1860.

some individuals to take advantage of the situation to settle old scores, get rid of competitors or ransom accused parties for funds. Some Christians accused Jews which led to their imprisonment. The accusations against the Jews and the difficulty with which their innocence was proven, shows a dysfunction of the extraordinary tribunal set up by Fuad Paşa to punish the guilty parties. The simple denunciation of a Christian was enough to lead to the arrest of the accused party, then the latter would be brought in front of the tribunal and the plaintiff would have to bring proofs of his allegations. However many plaintiffs did not show up so the prisoner was kept in jail until proofs could be brought.³ These long trials were an occasion for bribes and financial exaction. The French consul even remarked that a non-eyewitness testimony was enough to get someone arrested. While foreign powers agreed to this system of arrest on simple denunciation when it came to judge Muslims, they protested that it was unfair when it came to the Jews.⁴

One month after the violence, the British consul James Brant reported that Jews were harassed by Christians who attempted to obtain money from them under threat of violence.⁵ A Jewish man was blackmailed by two Christians who threatened to accuse him of having participated in the massacres unless he gave them a bribe. He had no other choice than to give them a small amount of money to save himself.⁶ When Fuad Paşa left Damascus to Beirut in the winter of 1860, Jews were accused by some Christians of participating on a larger scale in the plunder and massacres of 1860. Many of them were arrested by the government in the absence of the foreign minister.⁷

The accusations and arrests of Jews involved specific Greek Catholic government employees whose actions reveal the competition between members of the two communities for administrative posts. One of the Christians behind these accusations was Ibrāhīm Karamī,

³ BOA, HR.SFR.3.55.21, December 22nd 1860; F.O., 195/601, Brant-Russell, November 8th 1860.

⁴ A.E., CPC, 50.MD, vol. 122, Minutes of the Beirut commission, November 14th 1860.

⁵ F.O., 195/601, Brant-Bulwer, July 25th 1860.

⁶ F.O., 195/601, Brant-Russell, November 8th 1860.

⁷ F.O., 195/601, Brant-Russell, November 8th 1860; F.O. 195/601, Brant-Bulwer, October 8th 1860.

an employee of Fuad Paşa. Ibrāhīm Karamī was the son of the secretary of Emir Bašīr Šihāb, Buṭrus Karamī, a Greek Catholic from Homs who resided in Sidon.⁸ He was related to the Baḥrī family and had important positions as advisor of governors or emirs. He and his sons were thus part of the traditional Greek Catholic elite.⁹

Ibrāhīm Karamī was previously employed in the office of translation in Beirut. When the Foreign Minister Fuad Paşa arrived to Beirut after the violence of 1860, he took Ibrāhīm to Damascus and employed him as a secretary and Arabic interpreter. Fuad Paşa set out to punish the guilty parties and financially help Christians who had lost their belongings. He imposed an extraordinary tax on the Muslim population to give reparations to Christians, and he put Ibrāhīm Karamī in charge of distributing the revenue of the tax among Christians. When Fuad Paşa left, Ibrāhīm Karamī presented himself falsely as his delegate in front of the consuls, and pretended to be in charge of all the affairs of the Christians. However, according to the British consul, he soon started to take bribes to give retributions, creating discontent among Christians. The British consul accused him of embezzling a certain amount of the exemption tax, freeing prisoners on his own will, stealing the money of consuls and not listening to the governor.¹⁰ He was also instrumental in imprisoning Jews for their alleged participation in the violence of 1860 and made sure they were not freed. He refused to accept witnesses other than Christians and thus Jews had no opportunity to defend themselves.¹¹ He also didn't allow Jews to have official representatives who would be present during the investigations.¹²

After Fuad Paşa returned to Damascus from Beirut in November 1860, he was called upon by the British consul James Brant who asked him to look into the matter of the

⁸ Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 108.

⁹ Mazlūm, *Nubḍa*, 288- 290; Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 170; Farah, *Politics of Interventionism*, 118; Mazlūm, *Nubḍa*, 288- 290; F.O. 196/601, Brant-Russel, October 8th 1860, November 8th 1860; Richard Edwards, *La Syrie 1840–1862, histoire, politique, administration, population, religion et moeurs, évènements de 1860 d'après des actes officiels et des documents authentiques* (Paris, Amyot, 1862), 251.

¹⁰ F.O., 195/601, Brant-Russell, October 8th 1860; Wrench-Bulwer, November 5th 1860.

¹¹ F.O., 195/601, Brant-Russell, November 8th 1860; F.O. 195/601, Brant-Bulwer, October 8th 1860.

¹² A.E. CPC, Alexandria, Laurin-Vice Roy, May 15th 1840.

imprisoned Jews. A few days after almost all the Jews were freed. Five Jews had been kept in jail for weeks because of these accusations, and one had passed away.¹³ This release points to the political power held by the British consul as well as to the intrinsic dysfunction of the tribunal. Subsequently, Ibrāhīm Karamī's accounts were examined, and he was arrested in Damascus and then sent to Beirut. In his luggage some 130 000 piasters were found¹⁴ and in his house stolen objects and money was also discovered.¹⁵ To be sure, he was probably not the only member of the tribunal to engage in such acts.

The accusations against the Jews in 1860 were either of direct involvement or more generally of benefiting indirectly from the violence. These accusations were present in the chronicles written by Christians. The Christian chronicler Mīḥā'il Mišāqa argued that the Jews had stayed safe in 1860 because they bribed the *'ayān*.¹⁶ Indeed, Jews were not attacked during the violence, the only Jewish house which was destroyed was the one of David Piccioto because it was located in the Christian quarter.¹⁷ The fact that they were not bothered by the attackers, although many of them were very wealthy, made them suspicious in the eyes of some Christians who accused them of connivance with the attackers.¹⁸ In Aleppo, during the attack of the Christian quarter in 1850, there were also rumors accusing Jews of participating in the violence.¹⁹ However, even if Jews were not targeted by the crowd in 1860, many of them fled, including all the last members of the Karaite Jewish community who settled in Cairo or Istanbul.²⁰

Mīḥā'il Mišāqa mentioned that only Jews benefited from the violence because Muslims had to pay a very heavy tax which ultimately was used to pay back the Jewish

¹³ F.O. 78/1520, Brant-Russell, October 11th 1860.

¹⁴ F.O. 195/601, Wrench-Bulwer, November 5th 1860.

¹⁵ Edwards, *La Syrie*, 251.

¹⁶ Mishaqāh, *Murder, Mayhem*, 252.

¹⁷ Yaron Harel, *Syrian Jewry in Transition, 1840-1880*, trans. Dena Ordan, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 176.

¹⁸ F.O., 78/1520, Brant-Russell, 16 June 1860.

¹⁹ Yaron Harel, "Jewish-Christian Relations in Aleppo." *IJMES* 30 (1998):89, 91.

²⁰ Frédéric Abécassis and Jean-François Faü, "Les Karaïtes. Une communauté cairote à l'heure de l'État-nation," *Égypte/Monde arabe*, Première Serie, 11 (1992): 4.

money-lenders what the government had borrowed from them.²¹ Mišāqa also gave them a direct role in the violence by narrating that Jews were giving fresh water and lemonade to the attackers. Then, both the author of *Kitāb al-Āḥzān* and Mišāqa reported that firefighters came to turn off the fire affecting Jewish houses but not Christians'.²²

Mišāqa then accused Jews of benefiting from the misery of Christians in the aftermath of the violence by speculating on the plundered items. He stated that the real winners of this conflict were the Jews because when Fuad Paşa ordered all stolen goods to be restored, Muslims' houses were searched and thus people threw the stolen objects into the streets, which were then taken by Jews. According to him, they were also able to buy expensive items at a very low price and then resell them to their owners at an exorbitant price. He also said that Muslim attackers deposited their plunder with Jews to safeguard them. The historian Baptistin Poujoulat also made such claims.²³ Then, Mišāqa mentioned that vouchers were given by the government to Christians in order to recover their stolen properties but the Christians who wanted to get money fast rather than wait until their goods were found sold these vouchers to the Jews at a lower price.²⁴ It is not improbable that Jews were indeed involved in reselling looted property.²⁵ Rabbis of the city made a declaration forbidding such a speculation on stolen items, which demonstrates that at least some Jews were involved in this trade.²⁶

The author of *Kitāb al-Āḥzān* also included Jews in his accounts of the events of 1860. He narrated that the crosses that were hung on the neck of dogs right before the violence were fabricated by the Jews.²⁷ He also accused Jews of slaughtering Christians and taking part in the plunder.²⁸ He mentioned that they threw Christians who were still alive in the Baradā

²¹ Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 263.

²² *Ibid*, 252; *Kitāb al-Āḥzān*, 33.

²³ Poujoulat, *La vérité sur la Syrie*, 112; Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 263.

²⁴ Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 263.

²⁵ Harel, *Syrian Jewry*, 182.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ *Kitāb al-Āḥzān*, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 51.

river together with Muslim attackers.²⁹ This accusation can be seen as a reference to the prevalent anecdote which narrated that some Jews had thrown the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory V into the Bosphorus after he was hung for allegedly supporting the Greek revolt in 1821. Mr. Spartalis, the Greek consul of Damascus also made similar accusations. He said that all the murdered Christian priests were thrown into the fire by the Jews. He also accused them of hiding many Christian children to sell them as slaves.³⁰ Finally, the Muslim notable ‘Abd al-S‘ūd al-Ḥasībī also accused the Jews together with Gipsies, Bedouins, Shias and Kurds of being the actors of the violence.³¹

Such accusations built on the conflictual relationships between Jews and Greek Catholics over the first part of the 19th century, which were marked by local events such as accusations of blood libels and competition for positions for power, but also by larger developments in the empire such as the Greek revolt and the beginning of proto-Zionsim. It also points to the specific relationship developed between Jewish *ṣarrāf* and the local government.

2. Competition between Jews and Christians in the Administration

2.1 Competition for Patronage in the Beginning of the 19th century

Non-Muslims were often employed in the administration of the provinces as scribes, translators and financial administrators. They spoke European languages which was an asset in the 19th century because of European consuls’ interventions in the daily affairs of the provinces. These employees could play an important role in the relation between the governors and consuls but also in the policies adopted towards religious communities. They could use their influence with the governors to favor their own religious group at the expense

²⁹ Ibid, 37.

³⁰ Baron, “The Jews”, 7.

³¹ Salibi, “The 1860 Upheaval”, 187.

of others. Christian and Jews who had connections with influential figures in Istanbul could even be important intermediaries between governors and the Ottoman court.³²

As Linda T. Darling argues in her study of the financial department in the 17th century, the decision-making process in the Ottoman administration should be seen as a process in which multiple actors had a say. The orders drafted in Istanbul often resulted from local initiatives through the forms of petitions. Then, the application of the orders also involved various actors in the administration and often led to prolonged negotiations with the concerned parties. Some orders were not applied at all. In this process the province and the centre were dependent on each other for information gathering and law enforcement.³³ Similarly, Marc Aymes challenges the dichotomy between center/periphery and the perception of the reforms as a top-down process. The reforms were rather a result of negotiation between the local actors and the central state.³⁴ Christians and Jews employed in the administration and especially the finance department had the opportunity to intervene in this process.

Christians and Jews involved in the administration sought upon the patronage of military leaders, governors and emirs, especially when they had a strong local power base.³⁵ If they became part of the governor's household, they were expected to show a certain level of loyalty.³⁶ In exchange, they could be exempted from the *ğizya* or from other restrictions of the *dimma* status, by virtue of the privileges granted to them by the sultan or governor.³⁷

The downside of these reciprocal relationships between elite non-Muslims and governors is that they often shared the fate of their patrons if they didn't have the wisdom to

³² Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 105.

³³ Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-raising and legitimacy: Tax collection and finance administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560-1660* (Leiden, Brill, 1996) 97, 98; See also Caesar Farah, *Decision-making and change in the Ottoman Empire* (Kirksvile: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1993).

³⁴ Aymes, *A Provincial History*, 6.

³⁵ al-Dimašqī, *Tārīḥ*, 79.

³⁶ See for example how the governor of Acre, Cezzar Ahmed Paşa, accused his Greek Catholic secretary Ḥanā al-ʿAwra of disloyalty after finding that he wrote letters for his rival, ʿAwra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 113.

³⁷ See for example the exemptions of clothing restrictions and *ğizyā* for Ḥanā Baḥrī in Maḥlūm, *Nubḍa*, 319.

escape before their downfall or to contract the protection of another patron in time.³⁸ In these cases, the whole community could suffer from the downfall of their elite. For example, in 1795 the tax-collector of Damascus, Muḥammad Āġā Urfa Āmīnī, was fired from his position and imprisoned in the castle after one of his rivals plotted against him. His Jewish *ṣarrāf*³⁹ and advisers Yūsuf, Manahim, Rufa'īl and Salomon Farḥī were also imprisoned. While looking for one of these *ṣarrāf* who had escaped, the troops ransacked the Jewish quarter and hung the butcher in front of his own door.⁴⁰

In *Bilād al-Šām*, among the employees of the governors, two families competed for power and influence. The Greek Catholic Baḥrī and the Jewish Farḥī family alternatively obtained the most sought-upon positions in the administration. Their competition went beyond interpersonal issues and came to represent the power relation between the Jewish and Greek Catholic elite. It informed sectarian discourses presenting the relation between Christians and Jews as based upon innate enmity.⁴¹ The most famous *ṣarrāf* of this period was Ḥāyīm Farḥī. He is remembered because of his great power but also because his nose and ear were mutilated by the governor Cezzar Ahmed Paşa. He has become the symbol of Cezzar's persecution of non-Muslims and barbarism. Yet, Farḥī had also reached a position of unequal power under Cezzar Ahmed Paşa and was associated with his household. Both Farḥī and Cezzar Ahmed Paşa were disliked by French businessmen and consuls for they frustrated the integration of *Bilād al-Šām* into the world market.⁴² They strengthened monopolies and limited foreigners' ability to obtain land in *Bilād al-Šām*.⁴³ Cezzar Ahmed Paşa had a particularly conflictual relationship with the French diplomatic representatives, who resented

³⁸ For example, Ibrāhīm Baḥrī was employed as the writer of the *mutassalim* of the governor in 1819, but when his patron was fired he was followed and assassinated in the streets, al-Dimašqī, *Tārīḥ ḥawādiṯ*, 158.

³⁹ Money changers/ Money lenders.

⁴⁰ Al-Dimašqī, *Tārīḥ ḥawādiṯ*, 79.

⁴¹ 'Awra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 90.

⁴² Henry Laurens, *L'expédition d'Egypte* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1997), 262.

⁴³ BOA, C.HR.159.7926, November 13th 1792.

his policies against them.⁴⁴ Foreign merchants had to escape to Jaffa to avoid the policies of Cezzar in Acre.⁴⁵ The French consuls were also particularly critical of Ḥāyīm.⁴⁶ Ḥāyīm Farḥī's popularity among the governors derived from his talents as an administrator but also on the fact that he could have access to large resources, especially through his links with bankers in Istanbul such as the Kamondo and Gabbay families. He could also obtain the appointment of his allies to the post of governor.⁴⁷ The Farḥī family benefited from their alliance with the 'Azm family who ruled *Bilād al-Šām* for an extensive amount of time.⁴⁸ After the death of Cezzar Ahmed Paşa, the Farḥī family found employment with the governor of Sidon Sulayman Paşa al-Adil (1805-1819).

In the beginning of the 19th century, members of the Greek Catholic Baḥrī family also shined in their influence over governors, especially the aforementioned governor of Damascus Yusuf Genç Paşa. Indeed, the Kurdish mütesellim, Yusuf Genç Paşa al Dali formed a relationship with the influential Greek Catholic 'Ābūd Baḥrī, probably based on loans and debts. Thanks to his help, Yusuf Genç Paşa managed to make a name for himself among the 'ayān of Istanbul and thus to secure his appointment as the governor of Damascus in 1807.⁴⁹ Non-Muslim advisers, *şarrāfs* and clerks, by virtue of their widespread networks reaching Istanbul, could be tools of access for less wealthy ambitious officers who wished to be named governors. In this case, Baḥrī can be seen as the patron and Yusuf Genç as the protégé. The relationship between governors and their non-Muslim advisers was two sided and based on inter-dependency. 'Ābūd Baḥrī got extensive power and seemed to win the

⁴⁴ A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 1, Chaboceau- French Ambassador, October 12th 1796; A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 1, Chaboceau- French Ambassador, May 19th 1795. A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 1, Chaboceau-French Ambassador, July 9th 1796.

⁴⁵ A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 1, Chaboceau- French Ambassador, July 9th 1796.

⁴⁶ Thomas Philipp, *Acre: The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian City, 1730-1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 87; Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 63.

⁴⁷ Such as the governor 'Abdallah Paşa al-Azm; Ibid, 105.

⁴⁸ 'Awra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 90.

⁴⁹ al-Dimašqī, *Tārīḥ ḥawādit*, 109.

competition with the Farḥī family.⁵⁰ The Farḥī family on the other hand is described as using bribes to counter the attacks of the Baḥrī against them.⁵¹ The two strong governors of the southern Bilād al-Shām, Sulaymān Paşa al-‘Ādil and Yusuf Genç Paşa entertained a competition for power and territorial gains, matched by the competition between the Farḥī and the Baḥrī family.⁵²

This enmity between the Baḥrī and Farḥī families was interpersonal but also came to influence perceptions of the relationship between Greek Catholics and Jews, which can be found in chronicles written by Christians. Both Ibrāhīm al-‘Awra, a Greek Catholic, and Miḥā’īl Mišāqa, a Greek Catholic who converted to Protestantism, wrote chronicles in this period. They mentioned the enmity between the Greek Catholics and the Jews, albeit in different terms.

Ibrāhīm ‘Awra was the son of the Greek Catholic Ḥanā al-‘Awra. He had been in the service of al-Cezzar who had arrested and tortured him.⁵³ He then worked for Hāyīm Farḥī in the service of Sulaymān Paşa, and had a good position as chief writer of the treasury.⁵⁴ Al-‘Awra depicted Hāyīm Farḥī as the competitor of the Greek Catholics. Some level of resentment towards his higher position in comparison to his father is observable in his account. But he also had good words for him, and presents him as an exception among the Jews, which points to the otherwise bad image of Jews among Greek Catholics. He describes the competition between Farḥī and Baḥrī as a consequence of their professional competition but also because of the enmity between Jews and Christians in religious and mundane matters.⁵⁵ Mišāqa on the other hand, described Hāyīm Farḥī in flattering terms, without even mentioning that he was Jewish. He mentioned that Hāyīm had nothing against Greek Catholics and

⁵⁰ ‘Awra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 93.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 63, 90, 93.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113-144.

⁵⁴ Philipp, *Acre*, 165.

⁵⁵ ‘Awra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 90.

employed them but had an issue with the Greek Catholics of Damascus who followed the Baḥrī family.⁵⁶

Eventually, Yusuf Genc Paşa was fired for embezzlement and died in 1810.⁵⁷ His rival, Sulayman Paşa al-‘Ādil was awarded the governorship of Damascus until 1812. He installed the Farḥī family in power in that city and sidelined the Baḥrī family who fled to Egypt.⁵⁸ The Farḥī family managed to keep the upper hand until the Egyptian rule of Damascus in 1831. The Damascene balance of power between Jewish and Greek Catholics families mirrors larger competition between Jewish and Armenian families in Istanbul, which contributed to shaping a sectarian discourse which posited Christians and Jews as enemies. While in the 16th century Jewish notables monopolized all the financial posts, in the 17th century some Armenians started to take the upper hand in the financial administration. A strong competition developed therein. Jewish money-lenders were gradually replaced by Armenians and Christians in the 18th century.⁵⁹ Yet, the famous Jewish *ṣarrāf* of the government, Ezekiel Gabbay, managed to exile important Armenian bankers, including the famous *amira*⁶⁰ Kazaz Artin, albeit temporarily. The competition between *ṣarrāf* for access to resources and patronage was presented as a question of sectarian hatred, constructing the Jewish and Christian identities in opposition to one another.⁶¹

The events around the Greek revolt of 1821 explain many aspects of the Christian/Jewish relationship in the following years and the development of sectarian discourses. Indeed, the birth of the nationalist movements in the Balkans was accompanied by tensions with Jews. Jews participated in the Ottoman retaliations against Greeks in northern Greece and in the plunder of villages. It led to a backlash against Jewish communities of the

⁵⁶ Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 54, 58.

⁵⁷ al-Dimašqī, *Tārīḥ ḥawādiṯ*, 126.

⁵⁸ Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 70.

⁵⁹ Levy, *The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire*, 96.

⁶⁰ Armenians notables, leaders of the community.

⁶¹ Moise Franco, *Essai sur l'histoire des Israélites de l'Empire ottoman depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris : Alliance israélite universelle-Éd. du Nadir ; Gordes : la Lettre sépharade, 2007), 133.

region.⁶² Then, the hanging of the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical patriarch Gregory V in Istanbul, who was accused of connivance with the rebels,⁶³ also created tensions between Greeks and Jews.⁶⁴ After being hanged and left in plain sight for a few days, an Ottoman representative gave the patriarch's body to three Jews to get rid of. It is unknown whether they were forced to do so or not. They threw his body into the Bosphorous.⁶⁵ This account, which circulated widely, started a rumor that the Jews had been behind the murder of the patriarch, which triggered violence against the Jewish community of Morea (Peloponnese) which led to the death of 5000 of them.⁶⁶ In Tripolis, the capital of the Peloponnese, the whole Jewish population was killed.⁶⁷ These events of violence reinforced sectarian discourses across the empire and helped politicize Christian and Jewish religious identities.

In the first part of the 19th century, important Jewish families had been dominating the imperial financial administration as bankers and *şarrāf*. But successive events led to their loss of power, including the execution of the Janissaries in 1826. Following this event, some Armenian money-lenders, led by Kazaz Artin, denounced the financial links between the Janissaries and the Jewish money-lenders such as Isahiah Aciman, Behor Isaac David Carmona and Ezekiel ben Joseph Gabbay. Subsequently, they were killed on account of corruption and for opposing the reforms.⁶⁸ The murder of these important *şarrāf* and community leaders remained in the collective memory.⁶⁹ Following these events, the financial department was only composed of Armenians. This execution marks the temporary end of Jewish influence in the administration.⁷⁰

2.2 Egyptian Rule and Accusations of Blood Libel

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ K.E. Fleming, *Greece--a Jewish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 16.

⁶⁴ Shaw, *Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, 198; Franco, *Essai*, 132.

⁶⁵ Fleming, *Greece*, 16.

⁶⁶ Shaw, *Jews of Ottoman Empire*, 190; Fleming, *Greece*, 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 16, 17.

⁶⁸ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 148.

⁶⁹ Franco, *Essai*, 135.

⁷⁰ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 148-149.

In Damascus, the competition between the Farḥī and the Baḥrī families followed the dynamics in the imperial center. Upon the *sarraḥ* Ḥāyīm Farḥī's death in 1820, his brothers succeeded him in the leadership of the community. In the 1820's, Mūsā Farḥī was the main intermediary between the state and the Jewish community. Together with his brother Ḥāyīm, he had been a *ṣarrāf* in the treasury of Sulaymān Paşa.⁷¹ Like Ḥāyīm, he was described by a travelling rabbi as more powerful than the governor himself.⁷² He was then succeeded by his brother Rufa'īl Farḥī, who provided funds to the *āḡāwāt* during the revolt of 1831, which ended with the death of the governor Salim Paşa. However, in 1831 when the Egyptians took over the city of Damascus, the balance of power shifted in favor of Greek Catholics. Ḥanā Baḥrī was awarded the post of financial administrator, which had previously been in the hands of the Farḥī family.⁷³ The house of the mufti of Damascus was made into Ḥanā Baḥrī's residence.⁷⁴

In this context of Greek Catholic alliance with the Egyptian rule and of the development of sectarian discourses regarding the relation between Jews and Christians in the empire, Jews were accused of blood libel in 1840. Father Thomas, a Capucin Franciscan priest of French citizenship, disappeared together with his assistant Ibrāhīm 'Amāra after visiting the Jewish neighborhood of Damascus around Passover. The French consul Benoit Ulysse de Ratti-Menton accused the Jews of his murder and argued that it was committed for religious purposes related to Passover. In retribution, the governor Şerif Paşa, under the Egyptian rule, arrested eight Jewish notables and tortured them. Among them were members of the leading Harārī and Farḥī family. The event took an international dimension when the Austrian consul in Aleppo called upon the international community to intervene. Jewish

⁷¹ 'Awra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 160.

⁷² Fischel, *Unknown Jews*, 66, 67.

⁷³ *Muḍakkirāt tāriḥīya*, 59.

⁷⁴ Ḥālid Banī Hānī, *Tārīḥ Dimaşq wa 'ulamā'uhā ḥilāl al- ḥukm al-Mis'ri, 1831-1840* (Damas, Dār Safah'āt, 2007), 157.

communities in many countries were outraged by the event and called on their government to interfere for the release of the prisoners. Eventually the prisoners were released.⁷⁵ The arrest or execution of some of the important members of their community during the blood libel curtailed further the power of the Jews in the city, already threatened by the Egyptian rule.⁷⁶ It also marked the involvement of the international community in the affairs of the Jewish community of the city, creating a sense of commonness with European Jewry. It contributed a heightened confessional consciousness of Damascene Jews.

Accusations of blood libels, originating in medieval Europe, were not a new occurrence and had already taken place under previous sultans. These accusations were countered by various orders from the sultans forbidding such libels. Jewish lay leaders in the 16th and 17th centuries had been in charge of repressing them as well.⁷⁷ The blood libel incident of Damascus in 1840 triggered such an international response that it is often singled out. Yet it is not the only accusation of blood libel that occurred in the Ottoman lands in this period and rather is part of a larger dynamic of inter-confessional tensions and anti-semitism. In the same year, another accusation of blood libel took place in Rhodes. On the background of an economic and commercial competition between Christians and Jews in the city,⁷⁸ a Jewish sponge merchant, newcomer to the city, was seen as a threat to the other sponge merchants. As a consequence, they accused him of a blood libel. He was arrested and under torture, admitted the charge. The *mutaşarrif* of the city thus condemned him and another nine

⁷⁵ Jonathan Frankel, “‘Ritual Murder’ In the Modern Era: The Damascus Affair of 1840,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 2 (1997): 8-10.

⁷⁶ For a description of the accusation of blood libel, see Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷⁷ Bornstein-Makovetsky, “Jewish Lay Leadership”, 96.

⁷⁸ Mary Margaroni, “The Blood Libel on Greek Islands in the Nineteenth Century,” in: R. Nemes & D. Unowsky (eds), *Sites of European Antisemitism in the Age of Mass Politics, 1880-1918* (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 2014), 182-183.

Jews as well as the grand rabbi. However, when the central government heard about this event, it freed the Jews and fired the *mutaşarrif*.⁷⁹

The accusations of blood libel were believed by a large part of the population. Arabic chronicles are valuable sources of information regarding the persistence of this belief and the proofs used to sustain it. Ibrāhīm ‘Awra in his chronicle used very harsh words against the Jews in general, and claimed that the Talmud allows them to kill and steal from non-Jews. He also accused them of claiming for themselves the kingship on earth awarded to them by God, which allows them to hurt people and take things from them on the account that they are to inherit everything on earth. ‘Awra claimed that, on the contrary, they were cursed by the Prophets and that their prayers were not accepted.⁸⁰ He wrote his chronicle after the blood libel of 1840 between 1848 and 1853. The citation of proofs from the Talmud of the legality of killing non-Jews was current after 1840 because during the accusation of blood libel a converted Jew had shown the Talmud to the governor and explained that it contained such verses. The French consul of Alexandria also sent to his superiors an interpretation of the Talmud in which it is stated that Jews had a religious duty to take the wealth of Christians and to curse them three times a day. According to the French consul, while they should remain neutral to Muslims, Jews should do everything to destroy Christians, including destroying their places of worship.⁸¹ ‘Awra thus presented the religious beliefs of Jews a threat to Christians, participating in the construction of a sectarian discourse in Damascus.

On the other hand, Miḥā’il Mišāqa stated that the Talmud had to be respected because of the detailed religious discussions that it contains. Yet, he mentioned that Jews treat gentiles differently than they treat each other.⁸² Mišāqa also refuted the accusations of blood libel by

⁷⁹ Julia Cohen and Sarah Stein, *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 109- 115; Margaroni, “ The Blood Libel”, 184.

⁸⁰ ‘Awra, *Tārīḥ wilāyā*, 90.

⁸¹ A.E. CPC, Alexandria, Consul Alexandria-Consul Damascus, August 30th 1840.

⁸² Mišāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 197.

saying that the Talmud forbids Jews to drink blood, and thus inferred that they could obviously not drink human blood for Passover.⁸³ This exact argument is found in the *ferman* promulgated in 1840 by the sultan in order to forbid accusations of blood libels. The *ferman* stated that after an exploration of Jewish holy books by Muslim ulema it was found that the accusations could only be slanderous because Jews were forbidden from eating both animal and human blood.⁸⁴

Mišāqa, narrating the events of 1840, stated that the Jewish notable Harārī's servant simply killed Father Thomas out of greed. The involvement of the Jewish community to defend him was counterproductive in his eyes. Yet, Mišāqa, in his medical capacity, was called upon by the government to identify the belongings of Father Tomas and the human bones found in a river near the Jewish neighborhood.⁸⁵ He concluded that it was undeniably the belongings of Father Thomas and that the bones were indeed human bones, leaving no doubt that Father Thomas was murdered.⁸⁶ Mišāqa was thus instrumental in the accusations brought against the Jews, even if he did not believe in the religious motive of the blood libel. He did provide another discourse which emphasized coexistence rather than deep-rooted antagonism between the two communities. The two chroniclers represent two different groups of Greek Catholics of the city. While Mišāqa was involved in trade and took advantage of foreign protection to increase his socioeconomic and political position, 'Awra rather belongs to the old elite, whose influence declined in the first part of the 19th century.

In 1840, the French consul Ratti-Menton and his agent Jean-Baptiste Beaudin were convinced of the guilt of the Jews in this murder. They were instrumental in convincing the Ottoman government of their guilt.⁸⁷ In France, while the Jewish community was mobilized to free their coreligionists, various newspapers engaged in an anti-Jewish campaign and

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Shaw, *Jews of Ottoman Empire*, 200.

⁸⁵ Mišāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 199.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 199, 200, 197.

⁸⁷ Frankel, *Damascus Affair*, 58.

revived the accusations of blood libels. The development of the press in the 19th century favored the diffusion of such accusations to a wider international audience. Rina Cohen sees in the discourses against the Jews during the affair of Damascus a prelude to modern antisemitism and to the Dreyfus Affair which was to take place some fifty years later.⁸⁸

The French consuls of the city had always been quite critical of the Jews and especially of the Farḥī family.⁸⁹ The credit given to blood libels among the population was influenced by the circulation of written material. For example, French consuls in Alexandria and Damascus apparently spread stories of blood libels in these cities, which intended to instill fear among the population.⁹⁰ As in the case of the relation between Muslim and Christians, and in the divisions between the Greek Catholics in the affair of the calendar, the press was used to diffuse sectarian discourses, polarizing the population along religious lines.

Greek Catholics, close to France, tended to side with the French consul. However, some of them opposed the consul. There was a division among Greek Catholics between a pro-French and a pro-British/Austrian faction. Indeed, the Austrian consul Caspar Merlatto defended the Jews and proclaimed their innocence to his superiors and the Egyptian authorities.⁹¹ The British consul Werry initially circulated the reports of the French consul Ratti-Menton giving credit to the accusations of blood libel. When Lord Palmerston, his foreign minister, heard the news, he sent a reprimand to his consul who then turned to defend the Jews.⁹² Greek Catholics who were employed or benefited from the protection of the Austrian consul were very critical of the French consul's actions and took the side of the Jews. The most prominent members of this group were the aforementioned Yūsuf 'Ayrūt and Ḥanā Frayḡ which we encountered as main actors in the divisions of the Greek Catholic Church.

⁸⁸ Rina Cohen, "L'affaire de Damas et les prémices de l'antisémitisme moderne," *Archives Juives* 34, no. 1, (2001): 120.

⁸⁹ Philipp, *Acre*, 87; Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem*, 63.

⁹⁰ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 199.

⁹¹ Cohen, "L'affaire de Damas," 160.

⁹² Alan Dundes, *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 141.

They were both very close to the Austrian consul Merlatto.⁹³ ‘Ayrūt was also employed in the provincial administration. The French consul Ratti-Menton was angered by Frayğ and ‘Ayrūt’s opposition. He ordered to search Yūsuf ‘Ayrūt house’s to look for the Jews allegedly involved in the murder of Father Thomas.⁹⁴ The animosity between these two individuals and the French consul continued with his successors, who accuse them of threatening French influence in the city.⁹⁵

In Damascus, prominent Jews were also found in the employment of consul or agent of Austria and Prussia. For example, Hillel Piccioto, the nephew of Elija de Piccioto, consul of Aleppo, was the Prussian consul in Damascus until 1846. Yūsuf Ilyās was the consular representative of Austria in 1839 and then his official agent in 1847. He also had a British citizenship.⁹⁶ The Angel, Farḥī and Lisbona families had Austrian protection from early on. The Romanov, Ḥakīm and Matalon families were Prussian protégés.⁹⁷ Similar to Yūsuf ‘Ayrūt and Ḥanā Frayğ they were often involved in trade.⁹⁸

The new Greek Catholic commercial elite had various partnerships with Jews. The opponents of the patriarch from among the Greek Catholics, and especially their leader Ḥanā Frayğ, had close relations with the Jews, not only because of their closeness to the Austrian consul during the events of 1840, but also because of commercial ties. Indeed Ḥanā Frayğ was close to the Jewish merchants who had British protection, they often signed petitions together. Frayğ did not belong to the established notable Greek Catholic families of Damascus such as the Baḥrī family. He built his fortune in the 19th century which brought him closer to other Jews involved in trade. Yet, in Damascus in the beginning of the 19th century there were distinctions in the commercial strategies of Christians and Jewish merchants. Christians

⁹³ Frankel, *Damascus affair*, 97.

⁹⁴ A.E., CPC, Alexandria, French Consul-Thiers, April 24th 1840.

⁹⁵ A.E. 67/CPC, vol. 1, Baron de Bourquency-Guizot, February 3rd 1842.

⁹⁶ Harel, *Syrian Jewry*, 203, 210.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 214.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 204.

involved in trade usually represented foreign companies while Jews were autonomous merchants.⁹⁹

This period was characterized by some commercial alliances contracted across religious groups. Indeed, these Jews and Greek Catholics came to form an elite who was close to foreign powers and benefited from their entrance in the region's economy. These commercial alliances also had political consequences. This development is visible in the chronicles written in this period, which differ from former literature. These authors developed a similar world view beyond their religious groups, and identified more and more with the unit of Syria.¹⁰⁰ The fact that these heightened inter-confessional tensions occurred in a period of more social interactions across religious groups and commercial cooperation among a certain part of the Jewish and Christian population, who also benefited from foreign statuses, points to a certain fear of the fading of borders between communities. It is indeed in periods of increasing social mixture and interaction that community leaders usually attempt to reinforce social divisions.¹⁰¹

After the return of Ottoman rule to Damascus, relations between Jews and Greek Catholics close to France were tense. France, which had supported Muḥammad 'Alī, lost its influence in the empire, which affected negatively Catholics. The Baḥrī family, associated with the Egyptians, fell in disfavor.¹⁰² After the return of Ottoman rule, Rūfā'īl Farḥī was initially reinstated in his position of *ṣarrāf*, and assumed a dominant role in the financial administration. He was able to replace some Greek Catholic employees with Jews.¹⁰³ He came to represent the community and had extensive powers in the city and powerful relations

⁹⁹ F.O., 195/601, Brant-Bulwer, December 18th 1858.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Philipp, "Class, Community, and Arab Historiography in the Early Nineteenth Century. The Dawn of a New Era." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 2 (1984): 163.

¹⁰¹ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference. The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 119.

¹⁰² Harel, *Syrian Jewry*, 119.

¹⁰³ F.O., 78 /447, Werry-Palmeaton, August 21st 1841.

in Istanbul.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the balance of power between foreign consuls tilted in favour of Great Britain, who had participated in the Ottoman recovery of the region. Its preeminence also benefited some Jewish merchants who were increasingly placing themselves under British protection after the blood libel of 1840.¹⁰⁵

After the Egyptian retreat from Syria, the different powers attempted to take advantage of the political confusion to create zones of interests. While in the case of France and Russia it naturally passed through the protection of Maronites and Greek Orthodox, in the case of the British it was more versatile. After failed attempts at gaining the loyalty of Maronites of Mount Lebanon, Great Britain saw more fitting to use Jews as a gateway to Syria. Already in 1838 missionaries had bought land on the Mount Sinai in Jerusalem to build a church and named a British consul to Jerusalem. Then, the Anglo-Prussian bishopric was created in Jerusalem in 1842, and the converted Jew Michael Alexander was named bishop.¹⁰⁶

The different British decision-makers, be it consuls, missionaries or parliament members, considered this policy towards the Jews as beneficial, but they all had different objectives. For some, it was just a pragmatic goal to increase the influence of Great Britain or reinforce the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire in front of Egypt. For others, such as the British politician Lord Ashley, it was rather part of an ideological/religious plan of settlement of Jews in Palestine. Publications circulating in this period, such as ‘Memorandum to Protestant Monarchs of Europe for the restoration of the Jews to Palestine’ called for programs of settlement of Palestine by Jews in order to fulfil Protestant Zionist beliefs, together with offering a gateway to Britain in order to carve out a sphere of influence in *Bilād al-Šām*. It was also an opportunity to give a space to Great Britain for the development of its

¹⁰⁴ A.E., ADP/75, vol. 4, Ratti Menton-Thiers, April 17th 1840.

¹⁰⁵ F.O., 78 /447, Werry-Palmerston, August 21st 1841.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Hajjar, *L'Europe et les destinées du Proche-Orient*, Bibliothèque de l'histoire de l'église, (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1970), 324, 332.

growing economy.¹⁰⁷ Some supported this policy with the view to internationalize Palestine.¹⁰⁸ Finally, Montefiore argued that it would allow Jews to live free of restrictions over the practice of their religion, which was impossible in Great Britain.¹⁰⁹ The aforementioned Lord Ashley was convinced of the necessity to settle Jews in Palestine under the protection of Great Britain. He was not alone in this mindset, for soon the newspaper *The Times* presented a narrative which attributed to Jews the right to settle in their ‘homeland’.¹¹⁰ There was thus in Great Britain a general understanding of the necessity of settling Jews in Palestine both to foster British influence and for religious reasons.¹¹¹

Jews in Damascus took advantage of this new interest of British decision-makers towards Jews. However, even with the support of the British consul, the centralization policies of the Ottoman government threatened the position of the Farhī family. Indeed, with the arrival of the *defterdar* sent by the central government, Rūfā’īl had to resign.¹¹² When the provisional governor Ali Paşa arrived in February 1841,¹¹³ he was welcomed by a procession organized by the Jews who hoped to recover their former status. However he did not favor them and instead divided the public offices among the different religious groups, thus curtailing the influence of the Farhī family. The following governor, Necip Paşa, who arrived in April 1841,¹¹⁴ was accompanied by his own employees, including a Jewish and an Armenian *şarrāf*, who were ordered to take care of the finances of the region.¹¹⁵ The central government was in the process of centralizing the fiscal administration of the provinces, as

¹⁰⁷ Hajjar, *L’Europe*, 327.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 323.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 330.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 329.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 330.

¹¹² Ibid, 120.

¹¹³ F.O., 78/447, Werry Ponsonby, February 4th 1841.

¹¹⁴ F.O., 78/447, Werry-Posonby, March 22nd 1841.

¹¹⁵ F.O., 78 /447, Werry Palmestone, August 21st 1841.

part of the *Tanzimat* reforms, sidelining traditional intermediaries. Rufa'īl Farḥī complained about his replacement and did all that he could to remain in power.¹¹⁶

In this period, Jews were accused of mistreating Christians.¹¹⁷ There were even claims that they attacked Algerians because of their French protégé status.¹¹⁸ Christians petitioned the authorities in order to protect them from the Jews.¹¹⁹ The discourse of persecution was increasingly used as a way to obtain resources, not only from foreign charity networks but from the Ottoman State itself. Colonel Charles Henry Churchill confirmed this tense relationship as he mentioned that Jews had more complaints against Christians than against Muslims.¹²⁰ In this context of change in the balance of power, accusations of blood libels continued to occur in Damascus in the following years.¹²¹ These accusations often took place when the balance of power between Jewish and Christian money-lenders and advisors in the provincial administration shifted. It points to the instrumentalization of blood libels as tool of delegitimization in political and economic competition between elites.

A series of accusations of blood libels took place in 1847. In March, a Muslim went missing in the city and the Christians reported to the authorities that the Jews killed him. He was later found, and it was discovered that his disappearance was caused by an extra-conjugal affair. Later in April, a young Christian man from Baalbek who worked for a French protégé disappeared in the market of the Christian quarter of Damascus. At the request of the boy's employers, Beaudin, the French agent in charge of the consulate who had already been instrumental in the accusation of blood libel of 1840, sent a letter to the governor asking for an investigation stating that the Jews have already been suspected of such crimes beforehand.¹²² Beaudin even informed the governor that the Jewish practice of stealing

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ F.O., 78/447, Werry-PalmeStone, August 21st 1841.

¹¹⁸ A.E., CPC Alexandria., Mourad Ali- French consul, April 24th 1840.

¹¹⁹ F.O., 78/447, Werry-PalmeStone, August 21st 1841.

¹²⁰ F.O., 226/72, Damascus: Colonel Churchill on the state of the Country, 1841.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² F.O., 195/291, Timoni-Wellesley, April 28th 1847.

children had increased.¹²³ The governor thus called the chiefs of the Jewish quarter of Damascus, who were shocked to be again under suspicion of this type of crime.¹²⁴ These accusations furthered the increasing political involvement of British Jews on behalf of their Damascene coreligionists, both contributing to British interventionism in the region and to the politicization of the Jewish Damascene community. In September 1847, the Jewish British Philanthropist Moses Montefiore went to Paris and met with Foreign Minister François Guizot and the King Louis Philippe I showing them the letter that Beaudin had addressed to the governor. They both ensured Montefiore that their agent's actions were not in accordance to their wishes. They told him that Jews should be protected by the French consulate just as Christians were.¹²⁵

However, a month later another accusation of blood libel occurred. A dispute between a Jewish peddler of used clothes and a Muslim from Maydān took place. The former called two soldiers to arrest the Muslim who had attacked him but the latter accused the Jewish peddler of stealing a baby by putting him in his bag while he had entered the house to sell old clothes. The mother testified that she saw the crime from her window. Another fight occurred and both parties were brought to the seraglio. On their way, some passers-by who learned of the dispute insulted the Jewish man. A crowd composed of Muslims and Christians was formed, and they attacked random Jews in the streets. British and Prussian Jewish protégés were scared to go in the streets for fear of being attacked.¹²⁶ The fact that the accusations focused on the profession of antiquarian is not a surprise. In various accusations of blood libels which took place during the first part of the 19th century, the accusations fell on antiquarians or sellers of second hand objects, which was an occupation dominated by Jews. In 1860 it was again the sellers of second hand objects which were accused of taking

¹²³ A.E., 67/CPC, vol. 3, 4, Beaudin-Safveti Pasha, April 22nd 1847.

¹²⁴ F.O., 195/291, Timoni-Wellesley, April 28th 1847.

¹²⁵ F.O., 195/291, Timony-Cowley, September 1st 1847.

¹²⁶ F.O., 195/291, Timoni- Wellesley, May 19th 1847.

advantage of the massacre to enrich themselves. As demonstrated by these events, accusations of blood libels contributed to popular mobilization and violence in the public sphere between members of both communities.

The Jewish leadership asked the British consul for help in this affair. He called upon the governor asking him to protect the Jews. The governor called the involved parties and asked the Muslim man and his relatives to testify to the crime. When the Muslim and his relatives obliged, the governor accused them of lying and sent four of them to be taken as soldiers. The rioters who had attacked Jews in the streets, including Christians, were arrested. Then, soldiers were sent to protect the Jewish quarter. It was announced publicly that anyone who slandered the Jews or bothered them would be punished.¹²⁷ Safveti Paşa, the governor, told the British consul that Muslims considered that he had betrayed them in the way he dealt with this issue by siding with the Jews.¹²⁸ The blood libel accusation, which was previously predominantly supported by the French consuls and Christians, had thus also entered the imagination of Muslims inhabitants of Damascus because of the publicity given to the affair in 1840.¹²⁹

In 1847, various accusations of blood libels took place in other parts of *Bilād al-Šām*. For example, in Dayr al-Qamar, composed of Maronites, Greek Catholics, Druzes and Jews, the latter were accused of committing ritual murders in 1847 and 1849, which led to a pillage of their shops and residences.¹³⁰ In Jerusalem, a skirmish between a Greek and Jewish boy during pilgrimage season led to a public agitation and ended in an accusation of blood libel against the Jewish boy. Then, the grand rabbi of the city was accused of the murder of a Muslim man.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ F.O., 196/291, Timony-Wellesley, May 29th 1847.

¹²⁹ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 202.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 202.

¹³¹ James Finn and Elizabeth Anne McCaul Finn, *Stirring Times: Or, Records From Jerusalem Consular Chronicles of 1853 to 1856* (London: C. K. Paul & Co., 1878), 107-115.

The multiplication of accusations of blood libels turned them into effective tools of delegitimization of Jewish Damascenes used in cases of interpersonal disputes. For example, in 1850 during Ramadan, three Jews were arrested for mistreating a Muslim man. According to one version of the story, related by the French consul, they did so with the purpose of doing a religious sacrifice.¹³² The British consul presented another version, in which the Muslim man was a thief who had repeatedly robbed the house of Mr. Romanov, a Jew under Prussian protection. One night, together with two of his neighbors he managed to catch the thief. However when the police arrived to his house, one of the guards accused Mr. Romanov and his neighbors of attempting to murder him in order to use his blood for a religious ritual.¹³³ They were arrested and punished by lashes in the absence of the governor Mehmed Said Damad Paşa. Mr. Romanov's foreign protection did not exempt him from the authorities' punishment. On the contrary, upon presenting his *tezkere* as a proof of his protégé status, his punishment was apparently doubled.¹³⁴ This reaction from the part of the *kahiya* Hassan Effendi can be understood by looking at the affair of the Prussian and Austrian conscripts which occurred right before this event. Indeed, the military reinforcements arriving from Beirut contained Prussian and Austrian subjects who then claimed to have been recruited by force at Varna and Bucarest and forced to convert.¹³⁵ They escaped and took refuge in the Austrian and Prussian consulate, leading to a diplomatic conflict with the Ottoman governor.¹³⁶ The dispute with Romanov took place just after this diplomatic issue, which might explain the harsh treatment he received as a Prussian protégé. Romanov died soon after his arrest, but not from the wounds of the lashes.¹³⁷ Indeed, after being freed from jail, he asked to be cured by a native barber who actually infected him with tetanus. Because of this

¹³² A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 3, Valbergy-French Minister in Istanbul, August 18th 1850.

¹³³ F.O., 195/291, Calvert- Canning, August 28th 1850.

¹³⁴ A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 3, Valbergy-French Minister in Istanbul, August 18th 1850 .

¹³⁵ A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 3, Valbergy-French Minister in Istanbul, July 25th 1850.

¹³⁶ F.O., 195/291, Calvert-Canning, July 31st 1850.

¹³⁷ F.O., 195/291, Calvert-Canning, September 7th 1850.

death and the intervention of the Prussian consul, the governor Mehmed Said Damad, was demoted.¹³⁸

Accusations of blood libels contributed to the confessionalization of Jews and Greek Catholics in Damascus. There were part of the wider development of sectarian narratives presenting Christians and Jews as enemies. While these discourses were fostered by events in the imperial scale, they were reinforced in Damascus by the competition between the Jewish Farḥī and the Greek Catholic Baḥrī family in the provincial administration. The accusations of blood libel also point to the increasing influence of consuls, not only in political terms but also in shaping perceptions of in and out-groups among Damascenes.

3. Crimean War, Money-lending and Accusations of Blood Libels

In the aftermath of the violence in 1860, Jews of Damascus were accused of connivance with the government and irregular troops leaders who were engaged in the violence. These accusations are related to the money-lending activities of the Jewish elite. In Aleppo, the Piccioto family was also the target of resentment for the money-lending activities of its members. Popular rumors held that the Jewish foreign consuls owned their fortunes and positions to dishonest financial activities based on speculation and debt enhancement done in cooperation either with the governor or the *mağlis* members.¹³⁹

In 1860, some Jewish *ṣarrāfs* were accused of connivance with Ahmed Paşa, the governor of Damascus, because of their financial relationships. Fuad Paşa strengthened the rumor which stated that Jews held a great amount of the governor Ahmed Paşa's fortune and that Jacob Levy, a merchant who had British nationality, had given Ahmed Paşa bills on Istanbul. He was accused of lending him money personally and thus of having a great influence over him. However, the British consul Brant denied these accusations as senseless. He talked to Jacob Levy who denied all the charges, and he explained that he had good

¹³⁸ A.E. 67/CPC, vol. 2, Vallegue-de la Hitte, September 6th 1850 and August 18th 1850; al-Uṣṭwānī, *Mašāhid*, 580; BOA, I.MVL.212.6956, June 9th 1851.

¹³⁹ Harel, *Syrian Jewry*, 230.

relations with Ahmed Paşa solely because he lent money for the treasury.¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, while the influence of some Greek Catholics on the governor of Damascus under Egyptian rule had led to resentments on the part of the Muslim population, the influence of some Jewish money-lenders on the governors also led to tensions with Christians, revealing the perception of a zero-sum game, in which the political influence of a member of one community meant a loss for other groups.

The accusations of closeness with the governor were related to the financial role of Jews. They were particularly called upon by the government for loans.¹⁴¹ The government was not balancing its incomes and spending, mostly because of bad management, economic issues and because of the costs of conducting the pilgrimage to Mecca which fell upon the governor of Damascus.¹⁴² Borrowing from rich Damascenes, be it Jews, Christians or Muslims was an easy way to get access to funds, and since the governors didn't stay long, they could not be forced to repay, leaving their successors to deal with the problem. The *defterdarlar* were often accused of corruption and fired from their office, which was a convenient way not to refund loans.¹⁴³ In Egypt, there were very few Muslim money-lenders and thus this activity was monopolized by Jews and Copts.¹⁴⁴ In areas where Muslim money-lending institutions developed, Jews played a less important role in that sector, while in areas such as *Bilād al-Šām*, where money-lending was not institutionalized, Jews stepped in.¹⁴⁵

The figure of the Jewish banker who takes loans with exorbitant interests forms an integral part of European antisemitism. However, while Jews were singled out in these accusations, in *Bilād al-Šām*, Muslims, Christians and Jews were all involved in

¹⁴⁰ F.O, 195/601, Brant-Russel, November 8th 1860.

¹⁴¹ A.E., CCC, vol. 1, Ratti-Menton-Marechal Sault, March 4th 1842.

¹⁴² A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 3, Lalberg-Minister of France in Istanbul, March 27th 1850; F.O, Wood-Canning, July 25th 1849.

¹⁴³ A.E., 189/PO, vol. 9, Outrey-Thouvenel, February 12th 1857; BOA, I.MMS.20.887, January 26th 1861.

¹⁴⁴ Gerber, *Crossing Borders*, 155.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 155.

money-lending with interests. They had to wait until the second part of the 19th century for the establishment of the Ottoman bank. The whole system of tax-collection was based on loans with interests in which were engaged all segments of Ottoman society, both foreigners and Ottoman subjects.

Then, in addition to connivance with the governor, Jews were accused of being close to the *āgāwāt* who had a role to play in the violence. These accusations can be explained by the fact that loans were contracted by the state from Jewish *šarrāf* to pay for the salary of military and paramilitary officials. The army had years of arrears of payment and thus the government was under the threat of mutiny. When the governors would receive the orders to pay the soldiers, if they did not have the funds in the treasury, which was quite common in this period, they would borrow from a *šarrāf* who would pay in one lump. The governor was then indebted to the *šarrāf*.¹⁴⁶

A loan mentioned in the Ottoman archives sheds light on the technicalities of money-lending. It is mentioned that in April 1857, an order from Istanbul arrived for the payment by the treasury of the loan of three Jewish merchants under Austrian protection by the name of David Piccioto,¹⁴⁷ Yasef Kazci and Lazar. A closer examination of these orders shows that a part of these loans had been used to pay the salaries of the imperial army and other *yuzbaşılar* or emirs (Sa‘īd Āgā and Ḥassan Šamdīn Āgā for Piccioto, Emir ‘Assāf and Malḥam Āgā for Kazcin). In the same documents, a loan given by Āzār Šamāya includes, in addition to the payment of waqf and *timar* taxes, the salary of Sulaymān Āgā Ḥarfūš and Da‘as Āgā, both guilty of violence against Christians in 1860.¹⁴⁸ Loans were not only made to the government but also directly to *āgāwāt* to pay for their troops and expenses.¹⁴⁹ The fact that most of these loans concerns the salary of irregular troops leaders is noteworthy. Indeed it

¹⁴⁶ Gerber, *Crossing Borders*, 141.

¹⁴⁷ Harel, *Jewish-Christians*, 81.

¹⁴⁸ BOA, HR.MKT.186.46, April 13th 1857.

¹⁴⁹ BOA, A.MKT.DV 199/75 August 24th 1861.

created a relationship of dependency between the debtors and lenders.¹⁵⁰ It was used as a proof of their connivance with the attackers.

The link between the Jewish *ṣarrāf* and the military is clear in these loans. Jews represented the main pool of resource for the salaries of the military. This was the case in most of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵¹ In the case of the Jews of Damascus, the fact that important members of the community were involved in money-lending which ensured the payment of the regular and irregular troops, actually bought the safety of the community during the events of 1860.

Accusations of connivance with the government were strengthened by the new role of Jewish *ṣarrāf* in Istanbul after the Crimean War which allowed them to recover their dominant position lost after the abolition of the Janissaries. The Ottoman government borrowed extensively from abroad and from bankers in the years after the Crimean War. After the war, foreign banking companies were introduced in the empire. Local *ṣarrāf* also set up their own local banks.¹⁵² In 1856, the French consul remarked the proliferation of houses of commerce which changed currencies.¹⁵³ While the government had already borrowed important sums before the war, it found a new stratagem to have access to more funds, which was to issue bonds with very high interest rates. Jewish bankers of Damascus principally took advantage of the opportunity and bought these bonds in mass.¹⁵⁴

Together with the development of external debt, the government relied on loans from Abraham Salomon Kamondo.¹⁵⁵ Kamondo was an important Jewish banker who survived the elimination of the Jewish elite in 1826. He inherited the bank created by his brother with

¹⁵⁰ F.O, 195/458, Wood-Redcliffe, May 13th 1857.

¹⁵¹ Gerber, *Crossing Borders*, 91.

¹⁵² Joseph Glass and Ruth Kark, *Sephardic Entrepreneurs and the Valero Family in Eretz-Israel during the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2013), 88; On this topic see Philip L. Cottrell, Monika Pohle Fraser and Iain L. Fraser, eds., *East Meets West: Banking, Commerce and Investment in the Ottoman Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

¹⁵³ A.E., 189/PO, vol. 9, Outrey-Thouvenel, March 7th 1856, April 7th 1856.

¹⁵⁴ Yaron Harel, *Zionism in Damascus, Ideology and Activity in the Jewish Community at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, trans. D. Gershon (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ipek, *Selanik ve İstanbul*, 248.

branches in Vienna, Paris and London.¹⁵⁶ He is referred to as the ‘Rothschild of the East’. He held Austrian citizenship and was the first foreigner to legally hold real-estate in Istanbul.¹⁵⁷ His bank financed the British and French army operations during the Crimean War. Then, after the war, he benefited from the full protection of Reşid Paşa, the Sadrazam Ali Paşa and the finance minister Fuad Paşa.¹⁵⁸ Kamondo was indeed the personal *şarrāf* of Fuad Paşa.¹⁵⁹ This protection also allowed Jews to gain access to more positions in the Ottoman financial administration.¹⁶⁰

The loans made from Jewish bankers in Istanbul after the Crimean War marked their return on the front scene of the Ottoman financial administration. In Damascus, this change in the power balance translated in a new bargaining power for Jewish *şarrāf* in front of the local treasury. From the time of the Crimean War, Jews easily obtained orders of payment from Istanbul for the loans they had given to the local government.¹⁶¹ The new reliance of the government on Jewish bankers to ensure the day to day functioning of the local administration created resentment from Christians which are reflected in the accusations of 1860. Already during the accusation of blood libel in 1840, some Christians considered that the imprisoned Jews had been freed from jail as a consequence of their influence on the government, not because of their innocence.¹⁶²

In Damascus, this change of influence is also observable. In 1855 and 1856, a *ferman* arrived to the *defterdar* and governor of Damascus to facilitate the work of the banker ‘Azrā Šamāya.¹⁶³ Šamāya functioned as an agent of Kamondo in Damascus.¹⁶⁴ He apparently rendered great services to the government for he received on November 18th 1857 ancient

¹⁵⁶ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 160.

¹⁵⁷ Shaw, “Ottoman Tax Reform,” 109.

¹⁵⁸ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 160.

¹⁵⁹ Ipek, *Selanik ve Istanbul*, 248

¹⁶⁰ Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 160.

¹⁶¹ FO.195/458, Misk-Redcliffe, May 13th 1857.

¹⁶² Harel, “Jewish-Christian”, 82.

¹⁶³ BOA, A.MKT.UM.216.84, November 26th 1855; BOA, A.MKT.UM.177.33, January 8th 1855.

¹⁶⁴ Lütfi Efendi, *Vak'a-nüvis Ahmed Lütfi Efendi Tarihi*, Abridged by Münir Aktepe, vol.10 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1988), 18.

Islamic coins and a very valuable box. He was awarded in 1858 a *Mecdiye Nişan* of the 5th level for his good service, especially for his help in meeting the expenses of the pilgrimage through his loans.¹⁶⁵ He became an important notable of the city and his son used his influence to protect the Jews during the violence of 1860 by obtaining guards sent by the governor.¹⁶⁶

In this context of a changing power balance after the Crimean War, Damascene Jews were again subjected to an accusation of blood libel in Damascus. In June 1856, inhabitants of the Maydān accused again a Jewish antiquarian of stealing a baby and putting him in his bag. He was dragged by a crowd of inhabitants from the Maydān to the governor Mahmud Paşa, and on their way they harassed other Jews. The British acting-consul Mr. Misk complained to the Paşa, who arrested all those who insulted or hurt the Jews. He also sent soldiers to guard the Jewish neighborhood. In this affair the Jews protected by Britain feared an attack but none of them was bothered.¹⁶⁷ The accusation of blood libel corresponded to the time of Aid, just as the attacks against the Christian quarter in 1860.¹⁶⁸ It was a time prone to conflict as the city flowed with strangers and the police was overwhelmed. A month later a *ferman* was published to forbid the accusations of blood libels against the Jews in Damascus.¹⁶⁹

Again in the same year, an argument took place in the Maydān between a Greek Catholic man and the son of the Jewish grand rabbi Aaron Jacob. The former publicly insulted the Jewish religion and accused them of committing murders for religious rituals. The Jews were so fed up with this issue that they wanted to send an envoy to Istanbul to obtain again an official condemnation of these accusations. The governor Mahmud Paşa brought the case to the tribunal of investigation, but one of its members, probably the Greek Catholic Ğibrān

¹⁶⁵ BOA, A.DVN.133.40. August 9th 1858; BOA, I.DH.409.27103, July 13th 1858; BOA, A.AMD.81.55, November 20th 1857; BOA, A.MKT.MHM.758.46, July 31st 1858.

¹⁶⁶ Franco, *Essai*, 210.

¹⁶⁷ FO.195/458, Misk-Redcliffe, July 29th 1856.

¹⁶⁸ FO.195/458, Misk-Redcliffe, June 9th 1856.

¹⁶⁹ BOA, HR.MKT.16.6 August 24th 1856; HR.MKT.156.6 August 24th 1856.

Bahrī who represented Catholics, interfered against the Jews.¹⁷⁰ After the intervention of the British vice-consul, the Greek Catholic man was imprisoned. The Greek Catholic patriarch promised that he would warn his flock during the mass against accusations of blood libels. Satisfied with the punishment and promises of the patriarch, the grand rabbi Aaron Jacob forgave the Christian attacker who was freed.¹⁷¹

In two of these cases, the initial fight occurred in the Maydān, similarly to the accusation blood libel of 1847. Given that the pro-patriarch party from among the Greek Catholics, close to the French consul, lived in the Maydān, it can be supposed that they had a hand in the repeated accusations against the Jews from 1847 to 1856. Solidarity between Christians and Muslims in the neighborhood of the Maydān was strong, which could explain the involvement of Muslims in these blood libels. Then, the popular nature of the neighborhood, inhabited by less wealthy Greek Catholics, also points to the increasing involvement of the commoners of all communities in inter-confessional conflicts.

The timing of the blood libels can also be linked to the political activities of European Jews in the Ottoman Empire. In December 1850, the French banker Gustav de Rothschild had come to Damascus to erase the inscription on the tomb of the Father Thomas that read : “Here rests the bones of Father Thomas da Sardegna, Mgr Capucin murdered by the Jews on the 5th of June 1840.” He also had an official request for this purpose by Lord Normansby, the British ambassador to France. However Rothschild’s visit was to no avail. Indeed, rather than finding an agreement, his visit and the ways in which Jews welcomed him rather displeased the Christians.¹⁷² In April 1856, Moses Montefiore, who had been instrumental in giving publicity in Europe to the blood libel of 1840, came to Damascus and demanded again to change the tombstone of Father Thomas.¹⁷³ In the aftermath of this visit, the accusation of

¹⁷⁰ F.O, 195/458, Misk- Redcliffe, October 29th 1856.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² A.E., 166/PO-Serie D/20, vol. 3, De Segur-Lavalette, December 5th 1850.

¹⁷³ A.E., 67/CPC, vol 5, 6, Outrey- Compte Walewski, April 20th 1856.

blood libel took place. Such accusations often took place when the balance of power between the Jewish and Greek Catholic elites shifted.

In conclusion, the accusations against the Jews in the aftermath of the violence of 1860 point to the tense relationship between some Jews and Greek Catholics in Damascus and the development of sectarian discourses based upon the assumed enmity between the two religious communities. These tensions were heightened by the competition between notables of both communities in the provincial administration, which affected larger inter-confessional relations. The repeated accusations of blood libel took place during shifts in the balance of power between the elite of the two communities either on the imperial scale or locally. The accusations were used as tools to delegitimize opponents or gain access to resources, yet they affected how both communities perceived each other, contributing to the confessionalization of the society. These accusations led to a sense of togetherness among Ottoman Jews and encouraged solidarity between European Jews and their coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire, reinforcing the political strength of religious identifications. The financial activities of the Jewish elite and the increasing reliance of the local treasury on their loans made them susceptible to accusations of connivance with the governor and with the irregular military. These links were used against them in the aftermath of the violence of 1860. The relation between Jews and Christians in the first part of the 19th century confirm the general societal development of the increasing confessionalization of Ottoman society, inter-confessional tensions and violence.