



*Original paper*



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## **Catholic Unia in the Antiochian Church in the Second Half of the 19th Century: A Regional Approach**

### **Abstract**

One of the dramatic episodes in the life of the Antiochian Church in the 18th–19th centuries, traditionally attracting scholarly attention both in Russian and international historiography, is the issue of the Catholic Unia. Without delving into the well-studied questions of the formation of the Uniate community, the author seeks to go beyond the myth of total Greek dominance as the cause of the schism. Drawing extensively on archival materials (Archive of foreign policy of the Russian empire, State Archive of the Russian Federation, Russian State Historical Archive, Archive of orientologists of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences), the article reconsiders the traditionally passive portrayal of the Christian community as merely the object of proselytizing efforts by missionaries. By examining numerous documented conversions from Orthodoxy and back over a span of fifty years, the article aims to test both regional and national approaches. The main conclusion is that the dominant reason for leaving Orthodoxy was the internal struggle among the well-established socio-cultural and economic regions and the related groups of the Christian elite, for whom alternative forms of conflict resolution were unavailable. The author emphasizes the long-term historical development of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the research shifts its focus from the external causes of the genesis of the Uniate movement to the internal aspects of the devel-

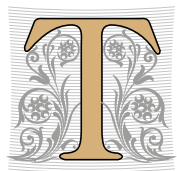
opment of the Antiochian Church in the 19th century. Paradoxically, this leads to a different interpretation of Russia's role — one equally applicable to France, England, Germany, or the USA — during this period. External factors, while significant, played only a supportive role against the backdrop of the society's internal development.

**Keywords:**

Patriarchate of Antioch, the Orthodox Arabs, Russia and the Orthodox East, Syria, Lebanon, Melkites, Uniates

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The history of the Catholic Unia in the Antiochian Church, which marked its tricentennial in 2024, remains one of the most actively studied topics among scholars of modern Middle Eastern Christianity. In addition to material factors<sup>1</sup> and cultural-religious motivations — most notably missionary activity, including among women<sup>2</sup> — the dominant explanatory model for the success of the Uniate movement has long rested on the notion of Greek *xenocracy* within the

<sup>1</sup> See: *Haddad R.* On Melkite Passage to the Unia: the Case of Patriarch Cyril al-Za'im (1672– 1720), in *B. Braude, B. Lewis* (eds.) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Holmes & Meier Publ. Vol. 2. P. 67–90. *Haddad R.* *Syrian Christians in Muslim Society: An Interpretation*. Princeton, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> See: *Heyberger B.* *Les Chretiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la reforme catholique*. Rome, 1994.

Antiochian Church during the Ottoman period<sup>3</sup>. Significant contributions to overcoming this historiographical framework have been made by C.-M. Walbiner and K.A. Panchenko<sup>4</sup> in both Western European and Russian scholarship.

Without disregarding the multiplicity of factors that gave rise to the Unia, a fruitful line of inquiry appears to be the regional approach, which seeks to understand the development of the Uniate movement within the Antiochian Church as a phenomenon embedded in the *longue durée*.

One of the prevailing interpretations of the Unia's origins in contemporary historiography is the concept of regional rivalry between the major centers of 18th-century Orthodox Syria — Aleppo and Damascus — as well as between the provincial city of Damascus and the imperial capital, Constantinople. According to Thomas Philipp, if Arab Christians in Aleppo and Damascus embraced Catholicism, it was primarily a symbolic expression of their demand for local communal autonomy, aligned with their recently attained socio-economic status. Local autonomy, Philipp argues, was a key factor in the formation of the Greek Catholic community<sup>5</sup>. This concept, initially advanced by Philipp, has been substantially supported by K.A. Panchenko, who noted that it “does not contradict the obvious absence of national consciousness among the 18th-century Christians of Syria”<sup>6</sup> while also helping to explain the support shown by Aleppines in 1726 for the Orthodox Greek

<sup>3</sup> See: Лебедев А.П. История Греко-Восточной церкви под властью турок: От падения Константинополя (в 1453 г.) до настоящего времени. СПб.: Изд-во Олега Абышко, 2012. Лисовой Н.Н. Русское духовное и политическое присутствие в Святой земле и на Ближнем Востоке в XIX — начале XX в. М., 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See: Walbiner C.-M. Bishops and Metropolitans of the Antiochean Patriarchate in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century // ARAM. №9–10 (1997–1998). P. 577–587. Walbiner C.-M. The split of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (1724) and the Emergence of a New Identity in the Bilad al-Sham as Reflected by some Melkite Historians of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries // Chronos. 2003. №7. P. 9–36 Пanchenko К.А. Ближневосточное Православие под османским владычеством. Первые три столетия. 1516–1831. М., 2012. С. 423–472.

<sup>5</sup> Philipp T. Syrians in Egypt: 1725–1975. Stuttgart, 1985. P. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Пanchenko К.А. Ближневосточное Православие под османским владычеством. Первые три столетия. 1516–1831. М., 2012. С. 470.

Sylvester. Agreeing with the interpretations of both Philipp and B. Masters<sup>7</sup>, Panchenko highlights the historical paradox that “the most pro-Catholic city in Syria willingly accepted a Greek Patriarch appointed by the Phanar. Once again, the same regional rivalry between Syria’s two major urban centers came into play: Aleppines refused to submit to a Patriarch from Damascus, elected by the Damascenes”<sup>8</sup>. By the end of the 19th century, the Russian Consul General in Beirut, K.D. Petkovich,<sup>9</sup> offered a somewhat different interpretation that nonetheless aligned with the same regionalist model of the Unia’s genesis. In 1889, he reported that “the present Uniate Church in Syria originated [...] due to Patriarch Athanasius of Antioch’s desire to relocate from Damascus to Aleppo and appoint Metropolitan Gerasimos<sup>10</sup> of that city as his vicar in Damascus. [...] At that time, the Aleppo [...] diocese was considered the wealthiest and most prosperous in Syria”<sup>11</sup>.

A.E. Krymsky, drawing on the *Concise History of the Bishops Elevated to the High Office of the City of Beirut*, also reinforced the

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<sup>7</sup> Masters argues that as an alternative to the claim that the schism was the result of ethnic tensions, we should remember that the antagonism had a distinctly regional character. Although there were still supporters of the Catholics among the laity and clergy in Damascus, they remained a minority among the city’s Christians, at least until the twentieth century. *Masters B. Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World. The Roots of Sectarianism*. Cambridge, 2001. P. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Панченко К.А. Ближневосточное Православие... С. 446.

<sup>9</sup> Konstantin D. Petkovich (1827–1897) — Russian Consul General in Beirut from 1869 to 1896.

<sup>10</sup> “It should be noted that, according to authoritative opinion, the story about Gerasimos is rather marginal within the larger context of the formation of the Catholic Unia. Even Arab authors of the 18th century did not assign any special role to this person. Catholic propaganda in Syria had begun long before, and in various cities — by the time Gerasimos appeared on the historical stage, a strong pro-Catholic lobby already existed in the Church of Antioch. It is more likely that the agenda relevant to late-19th-century Beirut was retrojected: it is curious why the dragomans of the Beirut consulate attributed such importance to Gerasimos. Perhaps they were skimming Trad’s chronicle (through which A. E. Krymsky later gained access to the text?), but overlooked most of it — they extracted the Gerasimos episode and presented it to K. D. Petkovich in a convenient form”. / From personal correspondence with K.A. Panchenko. 21.06.2022.

<sup>11</sup> Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (АВПРИ). Ф. 180 Оп. 517/2. Д. 1337. ЛЛ. 77–77 об.

regionalist paradigm (alongside a nationalist interpretation): “In 1724, Sylvester, a Holy Sepulchre monk appointed to the Antiochian patriarchate by the Constantinopolitan Synod, arrived in Syria and, without ceremony, decided that it was more advantageous to live not in Damascus but in Aleppo, where the Orthodox flock was wealthy. Through his excessive extortion, despotism (he would beat and torture Arab clergy), and attempts to exclude Arabs from church offices while installing his predatory and debauched Greeks, Sylvester enraged the people of Aleppo to the point that they attacked him in a garden, and the Greek Patriarch escaped only by swimming across a river”<sup>12</sup>.

Philipp’s methodological approach to the genesis of the Unia in 1724 deserves attention. To answer this question, he proposes examining the socio-economic development of the communities (of Damascus and Aleppo. — *Author*) during the century preceding the formation of the Uniate community, as well as the new economic opportunities provided by the early 18th-century French commercial presence<sup>13</sup>. Though Philipp does not explicitly use the term in this context, his approach closely parallels Fernand Braudel’s idea of the *long-term trend* (*trend séculaire*). In our view, this research strategy, with some modifications, also proves productive for later periods<sup>14</sup>.

While the rivalry between Aleppo and Damascus, so salient in the 18th and early 19th centuries, gradually faded<sup>15</sup> following Aleppo’s decline, regional competition retained its significance. From the mid-19th century onward, Beirut (and to a lesser extent, Tripoli) emerged as a new center of gravity. The migration of Christians from inland regions to coastal cities under the protection of European consulates — particularly accelerated after

<sup>12</sup> Крымский А.Е. История новой арабской литературы. М., 1971. С. 118.

<sup>13</sup> Philipp T. Syrians... P. 16.

<sup>14</sup> The scholarly focus is uneven — most studies concentrate on the early phase of the Uniate movement. The 19th century has been much less examined, though conversions remained among the era’s most sensitive issues.

<sup>15</sup> In 1822 the city was devastated by an earthquake; in 1827 by plague; in 1832 by cholera —leading to a population decline of more than four-fold.



View of Beirut. Artist Jules Coignet.  
1844. *Metropolitan Museum*

the Damascus Massacre of 1860 — led to a more than tenfold increase in Beirut’s population between 1830 and 1900<sup>16</sup>. In 1910, Russian diplomat N.V. Kokhmansky wrote: “Beirut is the largest city in Syria<sup>17</sup>, serving as its main port and geographical center. All inland trade passes through Beirut to the key parts of Lebanon, Damascus, and, recently, Aleppo, following the construction of the railway”<sup>18</sup>. A century and a half after the beginning of the Uniate schism, regional rivalry continued to fuel conflict within the Antiochian Patriarchate. The difference, however, was that by the latter half of the 19th century, Damascus had found itself competing for primacy not with Aleppo, but with a new center (Beirut) and in some cases, with the entire Patriarchate.

<sup>16</sup> Up to 120,000 by the outbreak of World War I. (*Kassir S. Beirut*. London, 2010. P. 124.)

<sup>17</sup> While the entire vilayet had 533,000 inhabitants in 1895, the capital alone exceeded 100,000.

<sup>18</sup> Archive of Orientalists at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (АВ ИВР РАН). Ф.120. Оп. 1. Д, 178. Л. 2 об.

## Regionalism as a source of conflict: Damascus versus the Antiochian Patriarchate

To grasp the overall framework of authority within the Antiochian Church, several observations are necessary regarding the limits of patriarchal power in this local church. The authority of the Antiochian Patriarch did not resemble that of an absolute monarch. As noted in a 1957 report from the head of a Moscow Patriarchate delegation to Patriarch Alexy I (Simansky): “The internal ecclesiastical life of the Antiochian Patriarchate is highly complex. This complexity is exacerbated by the absence of centralized spiritual authority in the person of the Patriarch. In essence, the Antiochian Patriarch is the ruling bishop of the Damascus diocese. [...] In each metropolis, the Metropolitan acts as the full administrator, operating according to his own judgment and without seeking sanction from the Patriarch”<sup>19</sup>. The delegate’s observation was echoed by Archpriest Boris Davydov: “The condition of the Antiochian Church is most unenviable. Patriarchal directives are ignored, and each Metropolitan sees himself as an independent and autonomous authority”<sup>20</sup>. These assessments are credible. The patriarchal administration — already largely confined to the bounds of the Damascus diocese — was further constrained by the existence of a diocesan council responsible for managing financial and economic affairs<sup>21</sup>.

While these characterizations applied to the mid-20th century, they were even more accurate for the 19th century, when the head of the Church could rule for decades without convening a synod. The Patriarch exercised limited control over the metropolises and struggled to maintain authority over Damascus itself.

Thus, regionalism as a source of conflict manifested itself first and foremost in the Patriarch’s own seat — Damascus. Paradoxically, the capital region set the tone for separatist aspirations. The

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<sup>19</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation (ГА РФ). Ф. Р-6991. Оп. 2. Д. 212. Л. 54.

<sup>20</sup> ГА РФ. Ф. Р-6991. Оп. 2. Д. 212. Л. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Л. 24.

Damascus lay community demanded independence from the central authority of the Patriarchate (represented by the head of the Church and the bishops of the Synod) and sought to enshrine its own preferential — primarily financial — rights. In this context, T.Yu. Kobishchanov's observation is particularly apt: "It would be fundamentally incorrect to view the laity of Middle Eastern churches as a passive mass of believers wholly dependent on their spiritual shepherds"<sup>22</sup>.

The first act in the Damascus community and its notables' struggle for its privileges occurred in 1850 following the death of Patriarch Methodius (1823–1850) on June 24. The ruling hierarchs of the Antiochian Church, representing the Patriarchate as a whole, opposed the ambitions of the Damascus elite. As N.N. Demerik reported to the Russian embassy in Constantinople in 1885: "Among the notable laymen of Damascus, as well as the Arab priests of the Damascus parish, strong opposition arose to the candidacies of local Bishops and their attempt to usurp the exclusive right to patriarchal elections, excluding community participation. Matters escalated to the point where Damascus elders appealed directly to the Ecumenical Throne, requesting the appointment of former Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory to the Antiochian See — or, failing that, another member of the Constantinopolitan Church at its discretion"<sup>23</sup> In response, five bishops of the See elected the Metropolitan of Beirut, Hierotheos, as their candidate and reported this to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for ratification by the Ottoman authorities. Demerik wrote: "The conflict threatened to bring serious harm to local Orthodoxy, but its escalation was averted by a circular letter from the Ecumenical Patriarch, who called both sides to peace and reconciliation, suggesting that the election be referred to the Constantinopolitan Synod and citing the procedure established in 1766 during the height of the Alpine Unia. The patriarchal encyclical had a calming effect, and

<sup>22</sup> *Кобищанов Т.Ю.* Христианские общины в арабо-османском мире (XVII — первая треть XIX в.) М., 2003. С. 40.

<sup>23</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1333. Л. 65–65 об.

the rival parties agreed on the Constantinopolitan candidate”<sup>24</sup>.

Notably, while ceding the autocephalous rights of the Antiochian Church to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Damascus community imposed specific conditions: “The future Patriarch shall not retain for his own use even the smallest portion of alms and charitable donations given for the benefit of churches, schools, and the poor of the Antiochian flock from Russia and other countries, nor from revenues assigned to the Antiochian See. These funds must be distributed through a specially designated *epitropia* (board of trustees), with the knowledge of certain clergy and elders of the city, as is proper”<sup>25</sup>. Clearly, under this scheme, all patriarchal revenues were to be redirected to the Damascus *epitropia*. In this way, the Damascus elders positioned themselves as the true custodians of the Antiochian Patriarchate, bargaining for economic privileges from the Phanar in exchange for the illusion of autocephalous rights.

The Patriarch elected under such circumstances in 1850 — Hierotheos (1850–1885) — faced the ambitions of the Damascus community again in 1874.

That July, the Damascus lay council demanded he pay 300,000 piastres and relinquish the exclusive ownership of a house in Beirut that had been purchased using Ottoman compensation funds following the Massacre of 1860<sup>26</sup>. It was further proposed that interest income from this sum be used solely for the needs of Damascus Orthodox Christians<sup>27</sup>. Soon after, the financial demands rose by another 100,000 piastres, and dissatisfied members began attending Protestant services. In the autumn of 1874, three Arab metropolitans<sup>28</sup> — Gabriel (Shatila) of Beirut, Sophronius (Najjar)

<sup>24</sup> АВПРИ Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1333. Л. 65–65 об.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Оп. 517/1. Д. 743. Л. 142 об. –143.

<sup>26</sup> The massacre of Christians in Damascus, 9–18 July 1860. (See: Кобищанов Т.Ю. Дамасская резня // Православная энциклопедия. М., 2006. Т. 13. С. 699–700).

<sup>27</sup> Russian State Historical Archive (РГИА). Ф. 797. Оп. 44. Д. 228. Л. 8 об.

<sup>28</sup> This is important to emphasize in view of Greco-Arab antagonism, which some researchers simplistically use as the main explanatory model for life in the Antiochian Church in the 19th century.

of Tripoli, and Meletios (Doumani)<sup>29</sup> of Latakia —issued an appeal for reconciliation, insisting that “the notables of the community use their good influence to eliminate discord and bring the discontented back into the fold of the Church”<sup>30</sup>. The Damascus community, invoking its capital status, insisted on using patriarchal income for its exclusive benefit. The Arab diocesan hierarchs, who sided with the Greek Patriarch Hierotheos, understood this well. The Damascus Ayans<sup>31</sup> consistently sought to replace the entire church with themselves. The final reconciliation was reached only in December 1874, following the Patriarch’s full concession to the demands of the notables — effectively marking the victory of the laity over the Primate. Temporary conversion to Protestantism was one of the tools employed to achieve this.

A similar conflict unfolded in the 1890s. After the six-year reign of Patriarch Gerasimos (Protopapas)<sup>32</sup>, who transferred to the Jerusalem Patriarchate in 1891, the Holy Sepulchre monk Spyridon (Euthymiou)<sup>33</sup> was elected to the Antiochian See. His final confirmation hinged on a promise to transfer 10,000 Turkish lira (100,000 rubles) to the Patriarchate, placing the funds under the control of the lay commission of the notables of Damascus<sup>34</sup>. However, Spyridon was later reluctant to part with such a large sum, setting the stage for a long confrontation. Despite being recognized by all diocesan bishops — including those of Arab origin — the Damascus elite spent the next five years (1892–1897) staging protests against the Primate. Demanding the promised funds, the community boycotted Orthodox services and attended Anglican ones. In response, Spyridon forbade Orthodox priests from conducting funeral rites, depriving them of their income. The conflict continued until his deposition in 1898. In other words, despite

<sup>29</sup> РГИА. Ф. 797. Оп. 44. Д. 228. Л. 23 об.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Local notables.

<sup>32</sup> Gerasimos (Protopapas) (1839/41–1897) – Patriarch of Antioch (1885–1891) and Patriarch of Jerusalem (1891–1897).

<sup>33</sup> Spyridon (Euphimiou) (1839–1921) – Patriarch of Antioch (1891–1898).

<sup>34</sup> АВГПР. Ф. 208. Оп. 819. Д. 323. ЛЛ. 90–93.

unanimous episcopal support, Spyridon could not maintain control over his own diocese. As this case demonstrates, “lay Christian leaders played an active role in church life, influencing the appointment and removal not only of metropolitans and bishops, but at times even of Patriarchs themselves”<sup>35</sup>.

While the behavior of the Damascus community could, within the traditional framework, be attributed to the Holy Sepulchre origins of the Primate, subsequent events ultimately dispel these assumptions.

The life of Patriarch Meletios II (Doumani), who ascended to the Antiochian throne following Spyridon (Euthymiou), ended — according to Russian diplomatic sources — with his poisoning by the Damascene elite in 1906 via morphine. The motive, it was believed, stemmed from suspicions that the Patriarch was either withholding incoming funds or using them for the general needs of the Patriarchate rather than for the exclusive benefit of the Damascus community<sup>36</sup>. This episode may be considered at least the fourth act in a protracted, half-century-long conflict between the Orthodox laity of Damascus and the higher clergy of the Antiochian Church. It is important to emphasize that, within this framework, the ethnic background of the Patriarch played no decisive role. This tragic end marked the culmination of an extraordinarily difficult reign — the first in a century and a half by an Arab Patriarch on the Antiochian throne. During his brief patriarchate (1899–1906), Meletios sought “to liberate himself from the guardianship not only of the bishops, but especially of his immediate flock”<sup>37</sup>. The underlying causes remained the same as during the reigns of Greek Patriarchs Hierotheos, Gerasimos, and Spyridon.

<sup>35</sup> Кобищанов Т.Ю. Христианские общины в арабо-османском мире (XVII–первая треть XIX в.) М., 2003. С. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Quoting Consul in Damascus Prince B. N. Shakhovskoy: the Patriarch “was respected by all, but loved by no one, since he acted alone, listened to no one, and was very stubborn and persistent — so much so that eventually he was poisoned with morphine”. (АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 3439. Л. 175.)

<sup>37</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1712. Л. 17.



Meletius II (Doumani), Patriarch of Antioch and All the East (1899–1906).  
*Russian Institutions in the Holy Land and Deceased Figures  
of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. XXV. 1882–1907.*  
*St. Petersburg, Kirschbaum Publishing House. 1907*

As reported in a confidential dispatch by A.P. Belyaev<sup>38</sup>, the Russian consul in Damascus, to the embassy in Constantinople: “The Orthodox Damascenes have a national commission at the Patriarchate, whose responsibility is to deliberate on various current community affairs with the Patriarch. In reality, however, both the aforementioned bishops and the Commission focus primarily on the financial affairs of the Patriarchate. The Commission, in particular, makes broad use of a right it has assumed for itself – not only to supervise but even to veto any of the Patriarch’s decisions”<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> *Alexei P. Belyaev* (1859–1906) – graduate of the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages; Consul in Damascus, 1893–1903.

<sup>39</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1712. Л. 16 об.

Undoubtedly, these structures and dynamics have deep historical roots. As noted by Archpriest Boris Davydov, a member of a Moscow Patriarchate delegation that visited Damascus in 1957: “The Patriarch is accompanied by a Patriarchal Council composed of laymen, who also do not always carry out the Patriarch’s will. Upon learning that the Moscow Patriarchate might provide assistance to the Antiochian Church, the Council decided that such aid should be directed to the Patriarchal Council, not to the Patriarch himself”<sup>40</sup>. As we can see, a century after the election of Patriarch Hierotheos, little changed: the interests of the Damascus epitropia continued to override those of the wider Patriarchate.

It is worth noting that while in 1850 the Damascus community limited itself to veiled references to the conflicts leading to the Aleppine Unia, by 1874 and again in 1897, its struggle against the Patriarchate involved actual conversions of parts of the community to heterodox denominations (namely, Anglicanism). Thus, typologically, the Catholic Unia — or later, Anglicanism — functioned merely as a conventional form of protest, one that veiled the financial and political ambitions of the regional Christian elite in the familiar language of doctrinal divergence<sup>41</sup>.

### Beirut versus Damascus

The death of Metropolitan Gabriel (Shatila)<sup>42</sup> of Beirut brought into sharp relief the reality that the newly elected Arab patriarch from Damascus, Meletios II (Doumani, 1899–1906), was unable to appoint a new Metropolitan to one of the most important sees of the Patriarchate. The local elite, led by the Sursuq family, refused to accept any candidate other than their own — Gerasimos (Msarrah). In their confrontation with the Patriarch, the notables once again

<sup>40</sup> ΓΑ ΡΦ. Φ. Ρ-6991. Οπ. 2. Δ, 212. Α. 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Philipp T. Syrians...* . P. 19.

<sup>42</sup> *Gabriel (Jirji) Shatila* (1825–1901) — Secretary to Patriarch Hierotheos of Antioch; from 1861–1870 head of the Antiochian Metochion in Moscow; from September 1870 Metropolitan of Beirut.

resorted to the threat of conversion to Anglicanism. It is worth noting that by the second half of the 19th century, Anglicanism had often replaced Catholicism as a more “neutral” and socially acceptable form of confessional protest, being viewed as a less odious alternative to Roman Catholicism.

As reported by the Russian consulate in Damascus: “The Sur-suqs did not hesitate to threaten the Patriarch, suggesting that if he did not yield to their demands, he might meet the same fate as the late Patriarch Spyridon, or that the majority of the Orthodox community in Beirut would convert to Anglicanism”<sup>43</sup>. To reinforce their threat, in early 1902 around 300 members of the Orthodox population submitted a petition to the Beirut pastor, requesting admission into the Anglican Church. Although neither the Pastor nor the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem fully trusted the sincerity of the conversion, they nevertheless allowed the applicants a contact with the Church of England. As the Russian Consul General in Beirut summarized: “The British General Consulate does not intervene in this matter officially, but unofficially it expresses approval of the Orthodox who now attend the local Anglican church”<sup>44</sup>.

This situation made it abundantly clear that neither a Greek nor even an Arab patriarch could exercise effective control over what had become, in practice, an autocephalous Beirut. It is important to note that developments within the church mirrored broader regional transformations — especially following Beirut’s designation as the center of a separate vilayet in 1888. In February 1902, K.N. Lishin emphasized this regional sentiment among the Orthodox protestors, who had come to view Patriarch Meletios as “allegedly persecuting the people of Beirut while showing exclusive favor to the residents of Damascus”<sup>45</sup>. The threat of confessional defection had become a standard motif in both interregional and intra-elite struggles — a tactic that was, it must

<sup>43</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1713. Л. 24 об.

<sup>44</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 3438. Л. 70.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Л. 69–69 об.



Beirut Archdiocese located opposite the Sursuq Palace  
in the Achrafieh district.

*Photo by the author*

be admitted, often effective. This confrontation ultimately ended in Beirut's victory and the appointment of Gerasimos (Msarrah) as Metropolitan in 1902. In retaliation, the Patriarchate decided to fragment the Beirut diocese by creating a new Metropolis of the Mountains of Lebanon through a synodal decision dated December 22, 1901. Interestingly, the Greek Catholic community experienced similar jurisdictional transformations: in the final years of the patriarchate of Maximos III Mazloum (1833–1855), tensions emerged with Metropolitan Agapios (Riachi) of Beirut, from whose jurisdiction the patriarch attempted to remove the region of Jbeil (Byblos).

It is crucial to emphasize the internal nature of the forces driving these shifts in ecclesial allegiance, as well as the limited capacity of external actors to reverse or contain them. It is difficult to imagine any Russian consular agent capable of influencing the overall course of Beirut's development or of successfully issuing

orders to the powerful Sursuq, Trad, and other prominent families<sup>46</sup>. Consequently, the recommendation of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to its consular agents in the Middle East seems both prudent and realistic. As stated in a memorandum from Deputy Foreign Minister D.I. Vestman to the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod, Count D.A. Tolstoy, “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not intend to issue any special instructions concerning the disputes that have arisen between the Antiochian Patriarch and the Orthodox Community of Beirut<sup>47</sup> [...] It does not allow our agents in the East to intervene in the religious affairs of our co-religionists, but instructs them to act with the utmost caution in all such matters, limiting themselves to an observational stance and, where possible, using moral influence to help eliminate certain unfortunate phenomena which, regrettably, are all too common among our co-religionists in the East<sup>48</sup>”.

### The Akkar–Tripoli alliance against Damascus

Parallel to Beirut’s struggle for autonomy, another power center emerged in the northern region of Lebanon in opposition to Damascus. Upon the death of Metropolitan Nicodemus (Zographopoulos)<sup>49</sup> of Arcadia (Akkar) on October 4, 1901, the question arose of filling the vacant See. Archimandrite Ephrem (Dibbs) was temporarily appointed as vicar to oversee the diocese, but was soon recalled to Damascus due to protests from the local population. Following Ephrem’s removal, Patriarch Meletios proposed that the Akkar faithful select a candidate for Metropolitan. Gathering at the Monastery of St. George in Humeira, the elders and local rep-

<sup>46</sup> Example: the scandalous yet fruitless attempts by V.N. Khitrovo, secretary of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, to intervene in the election of the Metropolitan of Beirut in 1901.

<sup>47</sup> Conflict between Patriarch Hierotheos and his Beirut flock over filling the metropolitan see occurred in 1865–1869.

<sup>48</sup> РГИА. Ф. 797. Оп. 39. 3 ст. 2 отд. А, 67. Л. 11–11 об.

<sup>49</sup> The only Greek hierarch remaining in the Patriarchate after 1899.

representatives unanimously nominated Archimandrite Germanos (Shehadeh), who at that time was in Brazil. Nevertheless, on April 22, 1902, the Synod of Bishops in Damascus — disregarding both the will of the laity and of Patriarch Meletios — confirmed Ephrem (Dibbs) as the candidate for the Arcadian See. This outcome was largely due to pressure from Metropolitan Gregory (Haddad) of Tripoli, who was preparing his own bid for the patriarchal throne and promoted his former deacon to the episcopacy<sup>50</sup>. The population of Akkar was outraged and split into two factions. In November 1902, a delegation of Ephrem’s opponents traveled to the Russian General Consulate in Beirut to file complaints about the illegitimacy of his synodal election and about alleged “bribery by the Tripolitans, who wielded significant influence in Akkar through lines of trade credit extended to certain local notables. The deputies, claiming to represent the majority of the population, did not hesitate to reinforce their grievances with threats of conversion to Protestantism”<sup>51</sup>. In this dispatch, Russian diplomat N.N. Demerik drew attention to both the close economic ties between one segment of Akkar’s elite and Tripoli (operating as junior partners),

<sup>50</sup> Biographical details on Ephrem (Basil) Dibbs provided by Consul General N.N. Demerik in Beirut: “His Grace Basil is 35 years old; born in Beirut. In his youth, having no means of his own, he worked in his uncle’s shop, then became a typesetter in the Orthodox printing house in Beirut. About thirteen years ago, defending himself against several Muslim rowdies, he stabbed one of them with a knife and was jailed for a day. Following that incident, he entered Balamand Monastery in Lebanon and took monastic vows. Later he served as deacon under Archbishop Gregory of Tripoli; about seven years ago he was ordained priest, and last year elevated to archimandrite. In between he spent two years in the United States, but returned to Syria after quarreling with the local abbot Raphael Hawawini. By the time of his return, Bishop Nicodemus of Akkar had died; he presented his candidacy and was elected at the last session of the Damascus Synod thanks to support from Archbishop Gregory and the Tripolitans. He is not distinguished by education; aside from Arabic he knows Turkish and Greek. He is of a very determined character”. (АВПРИ. Ф. 180 Оп. 517/2.Д. 1351. ЛЛ. 11–11 об.). Slightly different details about the start of Ephrem Dibbs’s ecclesiastical career were provided in 1906 by Consul General A. A. Gagarin in Beirut: “In his youth, when he was still working in the printing house, the court tried him for involvement in a street fight that ended in the death of one of the participants; he escaped punishment by becoming a monk”. (АВПРИ. Ф. 180 Оп. 517/2.Д. 1353. Л. 68 об.)

<sup>51</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1350. ЛЛ. 109 об.

and the tactical use of threatened apostasy as a means of exerting pressure. At the end of November 1902, Demerik received “private notification from Patriarch Meletios stating that it had taken considerable effort to convince the delegation to withdraw their petition to the Anglicans, and that he had to personally guarantee he would not proceed with any decisions without the unanimous consent of the diocesan faithful”<sup>52</sup>. Nevertheless, Gregory (Haddad), “defending the inviolability of the Synod’s decisions”<sup>53</sup> (which he himself had orchestrated), pledged that no conversions would occur if the 1902 Antiochian Synod’s resolution was firmly upheld. Without delay, Patriarch Meletios instructed the Metropolitans of Tripoli, Epiphany (Hama), and Emesa (Homs) to proceed with Ephrem’s consecration. “The ceremony, due to quarantine restrictions, took place in Homs on February 2, 1903, where the new Bishop assumed the name Basil”<sup>54</sup>.

The consecration sparked an immediate and severe escalation in the conflict. Leaders of the anti-Bishop Basil faction “promptly transitioned from threats to action, submitting requests for affiliation and support to representatives of the Greek Catholic and papal clergy. The latter, in turn, had already communicated with the Holy See in Rome, requesting financial aid to secure the loyalty of the secessionists. In a telegram to the Pope, Greek Catholic Bishop Joseph Doumani of Tripoli estimated the number of potential converts at 15,000 souls”<sup>55</sup>.

According to Demerik, the Greek Catholic Bishop’s program of action followed a well-established pattern: he would “celebrate Mass upon the villagers’ request, appoint priests, advocate for his parishioners in property disputes with Orthodox neighbors, distribute loans secured by personal debt contracts for church and school construction, and so forth. His first task would be to tour the defecting villages to register the neo-Catholics in official Otto-

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. АА. 109 об. –110.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. А. 1351. А. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> АВГПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. А. 1351. А. 13 об. –14.

man population rolls (*nüfus*)”<sup>56</sup>. In response, the Russian General Consulate prepared to discreetly “impede the activities of Catholic proselytism by enlisting the cooperation of Ottoman authorities”<sup>57</sup>. Demerik’s plan proved successful, and the Beirut vali, Reshid Pasha, instructed the Tripoli mutesarrif “to prevent Bishop Doumani’s tour of the dissenting villages and to halt any revisions to the population registers”<sup>58</sup>. Despite the Patriarch’s orders to delay his entry into the diocese, Bishop Basil (Al-Debs) departed for Akkar in early March. By late May, after prolonged negotiations and the mediation of consular dragoman S. Shehadeh, events took a favorable turn. Russian diplomats reported optimism for a peaceful resolution: “Of the opposition, initially numbering 15,000 — constituting one-third of the Orthodox population of the three Akkar districts — the majority have come to their senses and recognized the Bishop, cutting all ties with representatives of the Catholic Church. Only a handful of dissidents remain — 20 individuals according to supporters of His Grace Basil, or 140 according to the Greek Catholic Episcopate in Tripoli”<sup>59</sup>. According to the Consulate, the core of the pro-Catholic party “centered around the Yazigi family — powerful notables in the Hosn district — who continued their obstinate resistance despite the example set by other influential families formerly leading the movement”<sup>60</sup>. The efforts of Russian diplomacy received additional support from the Beirut Governor-General: “The mass applications for conversion to Catholicism submitted to the Tripoli Greek Catholic Bishop promised a bountiful harvest for the Unia. It might have succeeded under different circumstances, but the local vali from the outset promised me he would restrain the movement and, remaining true to his word, instructed the Tripoli mutesarrif not to permit wholesale revision of the population registers — the very purpose for

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. A. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. A. 14 о6.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. A. 22 о6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. A. 44–44 о6.

<sup>60</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1351. А. 44 о6.

which Monsignor Doumani undertook his tour of the dissident villages”<sup>61</sup>.

This episode is marked by tensions in both vertical and horizontal dimensions. On one hand, the movement toward a unia with Rome may be interpreted as an attempt by segments of the Akkar elite (notably those from Hosn) to resist the growing influence of the geographically proximate Tripolitans. On the other, it also reflects their willingness to challenge the synodal authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Damascus.

### Tripoli as an epicenter

Though the theoretical threat of a unia with Rome did not always translate into concrete conversions, the mere possibility — especially as a political tactic — sheds critical light on the mechanisms underlying confessional realignment. One such illustrative case was the crisis in the Tripoli diocese between 1887 and 1889. For three years, a fierce struggle took place between the coastal (al-Mina), including the Koura region<sup>62</sup>, and inland factions of Tripoli, over the succession of the aging Metropolitan Sophronios (Najjar). The coastal district of al-Mina, where Sophronios resided, became the stronghold of his supporters. This ecclesiastical conflict reflected an internal elite rivalry within Tripoli’s Orthodox community, directed largely by the Non-Staff Russian Vice-Consul in Tripoli, the Greek Alexander Katseflis, and his father-in-law, Nicolas Nofal. Katseflis’s hostility toward Metropolitan Sophronios<sup>63</sup> had long-standing personal roots: “Sophronios excommunicated him nearly 25 years earli-

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Koura — the Orthodox kaymakamlik in the northwest end of Lebanon, one of seven administrative districts established by the international commission for the autonomous Mount Lebanon Governorship in 1861. The district governor (kaymakam) and two of the three mudirs (sub-district heads) represented the Orthodox community. See: *Петкович К.Д. Ливан и ливанцы*. СПб., 1885. P. 106–111.

<sup>63</sup> Even after the death of Metropolitan Sophronios in 1889, hostility remained with Katseflis not attending his funeral.

er for marrying the sister of his deceased wife”<sup>64</sup>. The opposing faction, hailing from the inland areas, was led by Metropolitan Agapios (Stavros) of Edessa, an Arab.

This geographical division of loyalties reveals how the struggle extended beyond individual antagonisms into a broader elite contest between historically distinct zones of Tripoli over influence in civil and ecclesiastical affairs. The Metropolitan controlled the epitropia, which managed the substantial *waqf* (endowed) properties of the diocese – amounting to approximately 40,000 francs by the turn of the 20th century<sup>65</sup>. The inland faction aimed to shift the balance of power, repeatedly launching offensive efforts. Meanwhile, al-Mina and Koura, unwilling to relinquish their privileged positions (most financial resources came from Koura), even sought, according to Katseflis and Nofal’s followers, to secede and establish a separate metropolis. This economic and geographic autonomy of Al-Mina was institutionalized in 1882 when the Ottoman authorities established it as a separate municipality. The climax of the conflict came with Katseflis’s telegram to the Russian General Consulate in Beirut, warning that “the churches would be closed, and half the Orthodox community was prepared to convert to the Uniate Church if the Patriarch insisted on removing Agapios from Tripoli”<sup>66</sup>. The context led K.D. Petkovich to observe that the message was somewhere between a report and a threat – especially since Katseflis was not only a Russian diplomatic representative but also an active participant in the conflict. The crisis was resolved only with third-party intervention by the Russian General Consulate in Beirut. On May 2, 1890, Gregory (Haddad), the candidate backed by Petkovich (and likely more so by the consular dragoon S. Shehadeh), was elected Metropolitan of Tripoli<sup>67</sup>. On May 10, 1890, Patriarch Gerasimos consecrated him as the Archbishop<sup>68</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1336. Л. 66 об.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Л. 42 об.

<sup>66</sup> АВПРИ Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1336. Л. 219 об.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Ф. 208. Оп. 819. Д. 322. Л. 65.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Л. 70 а) об.

In the end, the Beirut contender triumphed over the patriarchal creature from Damascus.

This resolution ended the Tripoli dispute — which nearly triggered a mass conversion to the Unia — but also set the stage for the ecclesiastical career of Gregory IV (Haddad), who would go on to serve as Antiochian Patriarch from 1906 to 1928<sup>69</sup>.

### **Koura as a bastion of local autonomy within the Tripoli Diocese**

Following the election of Metropolitan Gregory (Haddad) of Tripoli as Patriarch of Antioch in 1906, he delayed the appointment of a successor to the vacant Episcopal See. As had occurred nearly two decades earlier under similar circumstances, the issue of Koura resurfaced with renewed intensity in 1907. Conditions were ripe for a new phase of intra-regional conflict: “The absence of a Metropolitan led to the formation of a faction in Koura, a district within this diocese, that persistently demanded the creation of a separate diocese for their qaza”<sup>70</sup>. As explained by the Russian Consul General A.A. Gagarin, “The people of Koura do not want Tripolitans interfering in their affairs and insist that the Metropolitan reside in Koura for part of the year. [...] All diocesan income is generated in Koura, from which the Metropolis in Tripoli is financially supported”<sup>71</sup>. However, this autonomist

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<sup>69</sup> The relationship between the family of Vice-Consul Katseflis and the new Metropolitan were also tense. Katseflis’s son entered Russian service and was excommunicated by Metropolitan Gregory for marrying his cousin. Before the arrival of Patriarch Meletios (Doumani) in Tripoli, he had to request instructions from Beirut on how to “behave toward Patriarch Meletios and Metropolitan Gregory, as Russian Vice-Consul or as an excommunicated Greek. From Beirut he received instructions to receive the Patriarch with kawases (honor guards used with ambassadors and diplomatic agents. — *Author*) and to act as though the excommunication had not occurred”. See: АВПРИ. Ф. Российское Императорское Православное Палестинское Общество. Оп. 873/1. Д. 434. Л. 35 об.

<sup>70</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1353. Л. 69.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Д. 1354. Л. 346–346 об.

movement was soon eclipsed by a new internal conflict within Koura itself. The trigger was the 1907 election to the Lebanese Administrative Council.

During the electoral contest in the Koura District, Orthodox sheikhs — joined by the Maronite and some Muslim ones — gave 23 out of 33 votes to Sheikh George (Jurjus) Azar. His opponent, Dr. Khalil Hayek, received only ten. After his defeat, Hayek and his supporters sought to convert to Anglicanism, hoping thereby to secure the patronage of the British Consul General, Sir Robert Hay Drummond-Hay. Hayek and Ibrahim al-Aswad emerged as protest leaders. Sir Robert Hay assured them that if a sufficient number of Anglicans were found in Koura in the near future, he would ensure they received equal rights with other confessions under the Lebanese Regulations. He even implied that it might be possible to appoint an Anglican kaymakam in place of the current Orthodox one and secure several lower posts for the converts<sup>72</sup>. Simultaneously, an intermediary acting on behalf of Hayek informed the Russian Consul General Gagarin that Hayek would remain Orthodox if the current kaymakam of Koura were removed and replaced by himself with consular support. As Gagarin reported, this revealed “the true nature of the turn toward Anglicanism”<sup>73</sup>. He continued: “All these promises, of course, greatly agitate the population, which remains attached to its faith only insofar as its observance is tied to certain advantages but is always ready, at least outwardly, to trade it for any other confession if such a change offers material benefits”<sup>74</sup>. Only part of the village of Bishmezin, Hayek’s native village, demonstrated a serious inclination to convert. Their agenda was unmistakably secular: “The Bishmezinites wish for certain lands currently taxed at one-seventh of their income to be taxed at only one-tenth”<sup>75</sup>. They also demanded that “the quarter-medjidieh per capita levy for the maintenance of Lebanese roads be removed and

<sup>72</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1354. Л. 73 об. –74.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Л. 62 об.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Л. 74.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Л. 164.



Gerasimus (Yared), Metropolitan of Seleucia (Zahle).  
*Russian Institutions in the Holy Land and Deceased Figures  
of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. XXV. 1882–1907.*  
*St. Petersburg, Kirschbaum Publishing House. 1907*

that they be allowed to use the funds exclusively for roads leading to Bishmezin<sup>76</sup>. A third demand was the reinstatement of the mudir in Enfeh, recently dismissed by Muzaffar Pasha<sup>77 78</sup>.

Nonetheless, the Anglican clergy did not respond favorably to the appeal from some inhabitants of Koura, and failing to receive support from the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, George Blyth (1887–

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. А. 164 об.

<sup>77</sup> *Muzaffer Pasha (Vladislav Chaikovsky, 1843–1907)* — Governor-General of the autonomous Mutasarrifiyya of Mount Lebanon from 1902 to 1907. Son of a Polish émigré aristocrat and independence fighter who entered Ottoman service and converted to Islam. Educated in France (Saint-Cyr Military School); participated in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. Married the daughter of the dragoman of the Russian embassy in Istanbul. (*Akarli E. The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon, 1861–1920. Berkeley, 1993. P.197–198.*)

<sup>78</sup> АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1354. А. 164 об.



Tomb of the Bustros and Sursuq-Cochrane family.

*Photo by the author*

1914)<sup>79</sup>, Dr. Hayek and his party traveled to Tripoli to request that the Catholic Bishop authorize their joining the Unia. As Gagarin reported to the embassy: “Our Vice-Consul Katseflis tried to dissuade them from their intention; they promised to remain Orthodox, but nevertheless resumed negotiations with the Uniates”<sup>80</sup>.

At the request of the Russian consulate in Damascus, Patriarch Gregory (Haddad) sent two senior hierarchs of the Antiochian Church to Koura — namely, the Metropolitans of Homs and Hama — who were “universally respected and tasked with restoring reason to the discontented faction”<sup>81</sup>. Thanks to the efforts of the

<sup>79</sup> The position of Bishop Blyth diverged from that of his predecessor, Samuel Gobat: “Until recently, Bishop Blyth reproached his twenty-four missionaries for not proselytizing among Muslims and for acting against Orthodoxy — an approach he firmly disapproved”. (Суворин А.А. Палестина. СПб., 1898. С. 116).

<sup>80</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1354. Л.279 об.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Д. 3439. Л. 180 об.



General view of St. Demetrius Cemetery.  
*Photo by the author*

two Russian consulates and the mediating Metropolitans, reconciliation between the opposing parties was achieved, and plans for a unia with Rome were abandoned.

This case illustrates how political conflict, unable to find adequate expression within the Ottoman social framework, often assumed a confessional form.

### **From regional to local dynamics**

Local elections of a far more modest scope had similar effects. In 1892, for instance, “three-quarters of the Orthodox inhabitants of the village of Bloudan (around 600 people)”, which belonged to the Seleucia (Zahle) Diocese, joined the Unia<sup>82</sup>. As reported by

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<sup>82</sup> АВГПРИ. Ф. 208. Оп. 819. Д. 322. Л. 338 об.



Villa of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursuq on the street of the same name,  
now the Sursuq Museum in Beirut.

*Photo by the author*

K.D. Petkovich to the embassy in Constantinople: “The cause was a trivial dispute between two factions over the appointment of a village headman. The Metropolitan of Zahle, Gerasimos Yared, supported one faction’s candidate, while the other party, more numerous and influential, appealed to the Patriarch. Rather than proposing a neutral candidate to reconcile both sides, the Patriarch sided with Gerasimos, seeking to please him. Dissatisfied with this decision by Patriarch Spyridon, the Orthodox villagers turned to the Uniate Patriarch, expressing their readiness to join his flock”<sup>83</sup>. Once again, it is clear that local political struggles, lacking institutional outlets, took the form of religious conversions.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. A. 338 о6. –339.

Such regional conflicts frequently penetrated deep into the fabric of urban communal life. In Beirut in 1906, a segment of the Orthodox community dissatisfied with the bishop's decision concerning the "trivial", according to the Russian consulate, issue of "the placement of graves in the courtyard of St. Demetrius Church", declared to Metropolitan Gerasimos (Msarrah) their intention to convert to Anglicanism. After the Metropolitan's appeal to the Russian consul A.A. Gagarin, the conflict was resolved: "The matter was settled with the help of our dragomans, and peace was restored"<sup>84</sup>. However, Gagarin's dismissal of the issue as "trivial" seems questionable. The Church of St. Demetrius and its cemetery were the burial site not only of Metropolitan Gabriel (Shatila) but also of leading figures of the Beirut Orthodox community — whose family mausoleums are striking even to modern observers. Burial in this cemetery symbolized elite status within the community. The placement of graves likely held social significance as well, thus creating the conflict. Converting to another faith at an Orthodox cemetery by the tomb of a deceased may seem aphoristic, but not impossible within the passion-driven Levantine social environment.

To sum up, it can be noted that the wave of conversions to Catholicism (or Anglicanism) intensified in regions already characterized by internal contradictions — Damascus, the traditional patriarchal center; Beirut, undergoing rapid development; the prosperous Koura kaymakamlik; Tripoli's internal factions; and the localities of Bishmezin and Akkar within Koura. Typically, Uniate conversion movements were catalyzed by contentious episcopal elections (e.g., Sophronios [Najjar], Gregory [Haddad] in Tripoli; Basil [Al-Debs] in Akkar; Gerasimos [Msarrah] in Beirut) and changes in the composition of diocesan councils managing the *waqf* property. These tensions were further aggravated during patriarchal successions — Spyridon (Euthymiou), Meletios (Doumani), and Gregory (Haddad). In Lebanon, the 1907 crisis stemmed in part from the region's autonomous status within the Ottoman Empire and the

<sup>84</sup> АВГПИИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1353. Л. 76.

regular elections of Orthodox representatives. Appeals to Catholic authorities were usually preceded by threats to convert to Anglicanism — a less provocative form of protest. In every case, conversion was a collective act by an entire community (or a significant segment thereof), driven not by doctrinal concerns but by socio-economic motivations. Importantly, in nearly all these conflict situations, the main actors were Arabs — significantly undermining the 19th-century narrative that framed the Uniate movement as a product of Greek-Arab antagonism.

Strikingly, threats of conversion centered on the triangle of the most economically and politically influential centers of the Patriarchate. Its base consisted of the coastal cities of Tripoli (along with Koura and Akkar) and Beirut, both transformed by new economic conditions. Its apex was the traditional Damascus, oriented eastward. Tensions between Beirut and Damascus steadily escalated, ultimately culminating in a formal schism in 1928.

Clearly, economic activity contributed to the prosperity of the coastal regions. However, the integration into global trade networks and the rise in conversions to other Christian denominations were not synchronous phenomena. The effect was indirect: economic and cultural development fostered elite self-awareness and a desire for increased control over ecclesiastical affairs (e.g., episcopal appointments, composition of the waqf board), which challenged the prerogatives of older centers like Damascus. Thus, uneven economic development only heightened the overall level of conflict, while a unia with Rome — or conversion to Anglicanism — provided a ready means of expressing protest.

### **Two communities, one people: Uniate parallels**

Interestingly, typologically similar patterns of regional conflict occurred within the Greek Catholic (Melkite) community — despite the absence of any “Greek dominance” in the traditional Holy Sepulchre or Phanariot sense. Melkite conflicts unfolded along two axes: “between the Shami (Damascene) and Baladi (non-Dama-

scene) factions”<sup>85</sup>, and in opposition to the Papacy (mirroring to some extent the Orthodox opposition to the Ecumenical and later Jerusalem Patriarchates)<sup>86</sup>.

Following the long reign of Patriarch Gregory II (Youssef) (1865–1897), the Melkite Synod elected Bishop Peter (Butros) Geraigiry of Caesarea as Patriarch on 12 February 1898 in Lebanon. As a native of Zahle, he led the non-Damascene faction, drawing support from Beirut, Lebanon, and Egypt. His election met resistance from both the Papacy and the Ottoman authorities. The Damascene community favored Bishop Cyril (Geha) of Aleppo or Nicholas Kadi of Hauran<sup>87</sup>. The newly elected Patriarch attempted to sharply limit the powers of the National Commission in Damascus. Immediately after his election, Peter abolished the office of Chief Patriarchal Vicar — held by Bishop Nicholas, a popular figure in Damascus<sup>88</sup> — and sought to fill vacant dioceses with fellow Zahle natives, often bypassing synodal consultation. This provoked a protest movement among the episcopate: eight bishops lodged a collective complaint with Rome. Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) supported the dissidents. Thus, fearing loss of influence, the Shami faction turned to external support — just as Orthodox dissidents (in 1850 and later) had once appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

After Peter IV Geraigiry died on 12 April 1902 in Beirut, the Melkite Synod met in June at the Ain-Tiraz Monastery and elected Cyril VIII (Geha) as Patriarch (1902–1916)<sup>89</sup>. He was described as “weak and incapable, burdened by age and illness”<sup>90</sup>, and functioned as an instrument of Vatican policy — satisfactory to the Damascene faction.

<sup>85</sup> АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1350. Л. 90.

<sup>86</sup> Similar dynamics occurred in the Maronite community, where the leadership of the patriarchate was contested by regional parties from Kesrouan and Batroun in Lebanon.

<sup>87</sup> АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1713. Л. 5 об.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. ЛЛ. 7–7 об.

<sup>89</sup> Cyril VIII (Geha) (November 26, 1840 — January 11, 1916) — born in Aleppo; Melkite Archbishop of Aleppo (1885–1902); Patriarch (1902–1916).

<sup>90</sup> АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1350. Л. 91.

## Greek Uniates and Orthodox Christians of Yabroud: there and back again

Similar internal processes in both the Orthodox and Uniate communities led to analogous outward manifestations. Conversions from Orthodoxy to Catholicism were not a one-way street — as might sometimes appear from traditional historiography<sup>91</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the election of Peter IV (Geraigiry) encountered opposition from both the Papal See and the Ottoman government. The anti-Damascene (Baladi) faction, under pressure from the Vatican and the French consulate (which supported Bishop Cyril [Geha] of Aleppo), began threatening a “return to the bosom of the Orthodox Church should their preferred candidate not be elected”<sup>92</sup>. The idea of converting back to Orthodoxy arose following the deposition of the last Greek Patriarch of Antioch, Spyridon, in early 1898 and the subsequent campaign to fill the vacant patriarchal seat in Damascus: “The thought of returning to the Orthodox Church emerged among many Greek Uniates in view of the simultaneous elections being prepared for both the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Patriarchates and in the hope of seeing Geraigiry on the Orthodox throne of Antioch”<sup>93</sup>. Just as the similarity of liturgical rites had previously facilitated conversions to Uniatism, that same ritual proximity made reverse conversion easier: “Despite all efforts, the Vatican has not succeeded in achieving among the Syrian Greek Uniates the gradual, almost imperceptible, yet inevitably complete unia with Latinism that it managed to secure in other Uniate churches through changes in rites and ecclesiastical structures”<sup>94</sup>. In 1902, the secretary of the Russian Consulate General in Beirut, B.K. Arseniev, reported: “Deeply attached to the Orthodox liturgical

<sup>91</sup> See: *Хитрово В.Н. Православие в Св. Земле. Православный Палестинский сборник. Т. I. Вып. 1. СПб., 1881.*

<sup>92</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1350. Л. 28.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. Л. 30–30 об.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Л. 31.

tradition, which they have preserved almost intact since entering into the Unia, the Greek Catholics remain partly misguided due to the material support they continue to receive abundantly from Rome and France”<sup>95</sup>.

Following the death of the first Greek Catholic Archbishop of Hama, Homs and Yabroud, Gregory Atta (1849–1899), on December 3, 1899, a new ecclesiastical crisis erupted over succession. Dissatisfied with the patriarchal Vicar sent to temporarily govern the diocese, the people of Yabroud<sup>96</sup> filed complaints to Patriarch Peter IV (Geraigiry). In an attempt to appease the local community, the Patriarch sent his secretary, Father Michael Allouf — “a talented and educated cleric” — promising the community representatives that Allouf would soon be consecrated Metropolitan”<sup>97</sup>. Shortly thereafter, the community unanimously petitioned the Patriarch to consecrate Michael Allouf as Metropolitan of Hama, Homs, and Yabroud.

However, the ongoing “cold war” between Patriarch Geraigiry and the Melkite episcopate quickly manifested itself. When Peter IV brought Allouf’s candidacy to the Synod for approval, the bishops categorically refused. The Patriarch was thus forced to withdraw Allouf from Yabroud and replace him with a Synod-backed candidate, Flavian (Kfoury).

Outraged by this disregard for their wishes, the Yabroud community declared its intention to convert to Orthodoxy and petitioned Patriarch Meletios II (Doumani). Recognizing this as part of the traditional tensions surrounding episcopal succession, he “initially rejected their appeals. However, when the requests became more insistent — and after the Yabroud Melkites swore a solemn oath to remain faithful to the Orthodox Church — he agreed to their reintegration. Patriarch Meletios dispatched a second Ortho-

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<sup>95</sup> АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1350. Л. 30 об.

<sup>96</sup> One of the largest villages on the Kalamun Plateau (elev. 1,500 m east of the Anti-Lebanon range). Подробнее: Панченко К.А. Христианская сакральная география плато Каламун в Средневековье и Новое время // Исторический вестник. 2024. Т. 48. С. 112–131.

<sup>97</sup> АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1715. Л. 48 об.–49.

dox priest to Yabroud to assist the resident parish priest and soon after sent Metropolitan Paul of Mount Lebanon”<sup>98</sup>. The Patriarch’s envoys were warmly welcomed by the local population. In spite of opposition from the Catholic clergy, the majority of Melkites were soon inscribed in the Orthodox community’s official registries. The Patriarchate allocated funds to support the newly converted: a new school was built, and the local church was expanded.

As reported by S.L. Zuev from Damascus to Constantinople<sup>99</sup>: “Everything appeared to be going well: the new flock was content with their return to Orthodoxy; the number of Orthodox faithful continued to grow”<sup>100</sup>. Melkite Metropolitan Flavian (Kfoury) was left with only a small number of supporters. Everything changed with the election of Metropolitan Cyril VIII (Geha) of Aleppo to the patriarchal throne on June 29, 1902. He authorized the anti-Flavian faction to disregard Kfoury’s authority and placed them under his direct patriarchal jurisdiction. As a result, the newly converted Melkites reverted to Catholicism. In Yabroud, two Catholic churches emerged: “In one, Monsignor Flavian is still commemorated as Metropolitan of Yabroud; in the other, he is not recognized, and the name of Patriarch Cyril VIII is commemorated during the liturgy”<sup>101</sup>.

Thus, within just three years, the Melkite community of the Diocese of Hama, Homs, and Yabroud had returned to Orthodoxy and reverted again to Catholicism – mirroring the broader regional struggle between Damascene and anti-Damascene factions within the Melkite Church.

The examples above, spanning a significant historical period, call into question conventional historiographical interpretations of Uniatism as either a product of Catholic proselytism or a reaction to Greek ecclesiastical domination. Clearly, the dynamics

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. А. 49 о6. –50.

<sup>99</sup> Sergey L. Zuev – Secretary of the Russian consulate in Damascus (January 8 (21), 1903 – January 8 (21), 1905).

<sup>100</sup> АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1715. А. 50.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. А. 50–50 о6.

of uniate movements far exceeded the bounds of purely religious questions. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these processes did not originate in theological or dogmatic debates. Here, one can readily agree with K.A. Panchenko: “The history of Arab Orthodoxy is not merely a chronicle of ecclesiastical life or a collection of theological treatises penned by scholarly monks. The history of every Middle Eastern Church is, in fact, 90% the history of the people it unites”<sup>102</sup>.

The absence of political mechanisms for Orthodox self-organization within the Ottoman framework turned the religious sphere into a repository of protest — absorbing both interregional and intra-communal tensions: “in the absence of a native statehood and aristocracy among the Orthodox communities of the Levant, the Church assumed the role of cultural, sociopolitical, and to some extent economic center of Arab Christian life”<sup>103</sup>. Conversion — or the threat thereof — to Uniatism (or sometimes Anglicanism) thus often reflected underlying socio-economic struggles between declining regional centers and emerging power contenders — all complex processes of intra-community evolution.

This internal causality casts doubt on the ability of external actors, including Russia, to meaningfully shape the nature of these conflicts. Russian diplomacy, having encountered these limitations in practice, proved most effective in its mediatory role — serving as a neutral arbitrator across the map of the Patriarchate of Antioch. Indeed, the conversion dynamics (in both directions) resist the explanatory framework favored by certain strands of Russian historiography (e.g., V.N. Khitrovo, N.N. Lisovoy), which portrayed Uniatism as a byproduct of Western Catholic interference in a socially degraded Levant under Greek ecclesiastical rule. This case affirms the “inadequacy of the ‘nationalist’ myth in Uniate historiography”<sup>104</sup>.

<sup>102</sup> Панченко К.А. Ближневосточное Православие... С. 14.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Панченко К.А. Арабо-христианские исследования в современной зарубежной науке // Вестник Московского университета. Серия 13. Востоковедение. М., 2010. № 2. С. 33.

Echoing Thomas Philipp’s argument that missionary activity merely created the conditions for conversions without predetermining them, we must avoid seeking direct causality. Instead, we should examine typologically similar factors that made departures from the Orthodox Church more or less likely — depending on geographic and socio-economic conditions. (After all, both the Uniates and Protestants of Greater Syria were originally part of the flock of the Antiochian Church.)

A recurrent source of conflict leading to conversion was the economic development of the Levantine coast (Beirut, Tripoli), which had been integrated into the global economic system, in contrast to the stagnating interior regions during the latter half of the 19th century. These growing disparities exacerbated the already mosaic-like structure of Syria and Lebanon.

If the Orthodox *millet*<sup>105</sup> has often been described as a “state within a state”, then another key conflict driver was the decentralized nature of the Patriarch of Antioch’s authority within that political-religious space. Factional struggles within this complex system often involved the search for external allies<sup>106</sup>. Looking over more than half a century of internal conflict within the Patriarchate, one sees something akin to a fragile confederation of perpetually rivalrous entities — seemingly incapable of existing in any other form.

The deeply embedded ecclesiastical organization provided the social arena for elite rivalries among established economic and geographic blocs. These tensions were intensified by patriarchal and episcopal elections and the formation of waqf epitropies. Of particular importance were elections to the Administrative Council of the Lebanese Mutasarrifiyya after 1861, conducted on a confessional basis.

In a context where societal life was expressed in religious forms, and where political mechanisms for resolving conflict were

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<sup>105</sup> Millet (*tur.*) — in Ottoman tradition, the term for a religiously defined community recognized by the imperial administration and granted internal self-governance.

<sup>106</sup> These communities operated within a multi-layered field of influence spanning Phanar and Rome, Moscow and Paris.

absent, competing social interests were inevitably cloaked in traditional “garments of doctrinal deviation”, though they had no real theological basis. Long-term statistical trends (though admittedly approximate) confirm these conclusions: conversion movements declined sharply<sup>107</sup> and nearly ceased with the advent of political pluralism in the 20th century, beginning with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908–1909, which integrated the Orthodox Christians of Syria into the secular political space of the Ottoman Empire.

### Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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<sup>107</sup> Statistical proportions throughout the 20th century: Orthodox about 66%, Uniates about 30%, Protestants about 4%. See: Панченко К.А. В.Н. Хитрово и кризис ближневосточного православия: взгляд через столетие / Православные арабы. Путь через века: сб. статей. М., 2013. С. 434.

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