

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MELKITE CATHOLIC *MILLET*  
IN 1848 AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY  
IN TANZIMAT SYRIA

BRUCE MASTERS

In 1848, Sultan Abdülmecid granted the Melkite Catholic community official status as an 'autonomous religious community' (*millet*) by adding his seal to an imperial patent (*berat*) naming Maksimus Mazlum 'Patriarch of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria and wherever else Melkite Catholics reside in the sultan's protected realms'. The patent further stated that although the Chaldean, Syrian, Melkite, and Maronite Catholic priests had been under the authority of the 'Catholic Patriarch of Istanbul', they constituted separate communities and would henceforth be recognized as such.<sup>1</sup> With Mazlum's elevation, the Melkite Catholic Church joined the ranks of the Orthodox (the *Rum* in Ottoman Turkish) and the Apostolic Armenian Churches that had long enjoyed *de facto* recognition and the rather more recently legitimated Catholic, later to be known as the Armenian Catholic, (1830) and Jewish (1835) communities. Mazlum's victory came in the face of resistance on the part of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul who claimed that the Melkite Catholics were both heretics and traitors, disloyal both to their Mother Church and their sultan. Having recognized the Melkites, the sultan opened a floodgate of repressed aspirations for autonomy from the empire's myriad Christian denominations, with the result that the list of officially sanctioned Christian *millets* had expanded to twelve by 1900.

Although the various *millets* within the Ottoman Empire were officially constituted as religious communities, a particular community's own sense of distinctiveness, and hence the need for recognition, arose more often out of a nascent 'proto-nationalism' (to borrow Eric Hobsbawm's term)<sup>2</sup> than from questions of religious dogma. The

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<sup>1</sup> Istanbul, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Gayri Müslim Defterleri, 6, pp. 11–12.

<sup>2</sup> '[C]ertain variants of feelings of collective belonging which already existed and which...could fit in with modern states and nations'. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and*

insistence of the Melkite Catholics for a *millet* of their own, rather than being subsumed into the pan-Catholic one as the sultan had envisioned in 1830, is indicative of a nascent ethnic identity that was prevalent among the community's elite, both clerical and lay. Key to this was their assertion that they, unlike the Armenian Catholics, were not converts to a new religious dispensation that had been brought into the empire by the Franks. Rather, they were the proud heirs of an unbroken religious tradition founded by St. Peter the Apostle and indigenous to Syria.

Yet the Melkite Catholics did not identify themselves explicitly as a 'national' church in the same way as those Orthodox faithful who spoke Bulgarian and who would gain recognition from the sultan for their own *millet* in 1872. The Melkite Catholics never identified themselves as Arabs, although Arabic was often the language in which their petitions to the Porte were written. Furthermore, they only rarely referred to their place of origin as Syria (*Suriya* in their discourse, never *bilad al-Sham*). Rather they chose to define the boundaries of their imagined homeland in their petitions to the sultan either by listing its principal cities, or more commonly, as in the case of Mazlum's imperial patent, by invoking the traditional Patriarchal sees of the East: Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria.

Nonetheless, their identity as both Arabic-speakers and Syrians was an implicit sub-text of their historical arguments for recognition as a religious community. They were, simply put, the *Rum* of Syria. That designation should not be confused, they wrote in the years following the Greek War for Independence, with either the *Rum* of Anatolia or the *Rum* of Greece (*Yunanistan*). For unlike their reputed coreligionists in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, the representatives of the Melkites wrote that their community had never broken faith with the Pope in Rome, nor, more importantly, with their sultan. This was the necessary strategic moral high ground that they sought to establish for themselves in order to turn the long-standing Orthodox claim on its head that loyalty to the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch was synonymous with loyalty to the sultan.