

Egypte-sur-Seine: The Making of an Arabic Community in Paris 1800-1830

Ian Collier

“Arab Paris” is today evident to the most transient visitor to the capital, thanks to the many hundreds of thousands of Parisians who draw their origins from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere; even the most Francophile tourist must be struck by the proliferation of Arabic restaurants, cafés, bookstores, cultural centers and religious establishments. It is curious to note then, that until very recently historians have paid almost no attention to the historical origins of this Arabic population and culture. For the most part, they have assumed it to be a very recent phenomenon, implicitly belonging to the domain of the sociologist rather than that of the historian. Thus, the history of an “Arab Paris” in the nineteenth century is an almost entirely blank space. The earliest reference available is the visit to Paris of the Egyptian Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, and his account of his five year stay in Paris from 1826 to 1831, entitled *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*.¹ Tahtawi was, of course, only the first in a long series of Arab visitors to Paris throughout the century, many of whom had a significant influence on the cultural, scientific and political development of their homelands.² In terms of the history of Paris and its population, however, such “visitors” represent in themselves only a relatively temporary and evanescent phenomenon: a handful of students, diplomats and travelers spending a few brief moments in Paris before returning to their homelands. In this sense, “Arab Paris” in the nineteenth century has been considered no more than an interesting sidelight,

Ian Collier is completing a doctoral thesis on the Arabic presence in early nineteenth-century Paris in the History Department of the University of Melbourne. The author would like to thank Peter McPhee for his unflagging enthusiasm for this project, which has given me that rare space in which my research could develop in quite unexpected ways. Chips Sowerwine has lent his vast knowledge to inspire me with new directions in interpreting the material, and David Garrioch’s incisive and encouraging comments have been invaluable in helping me to refine and extend the paper. I would like to thank, too, all those who offered valuable comments and suggestions at the conference. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

¹ Tahtawi’s account was recently translated into English for the first time by Daniel L. Newman as *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-31)* (London, 2004).

² For a comprehensive list, see Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters* (Princeton, N.J., 1963). Albert Hourani provides the fullest account of the influence of many of these figures in *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London and New York, 1970). For a more detailed account of the North African dimension of this encounter, see Béchir Tlili, *Les rapports culturels et idéologiques entre l’Orient et l’Occident, en Tunisie au XIXème siècle, (1830-1880)* (Tunis, 1974).

bearing only a marginal relation to the arrival of later, more numerous, Arabic populations.³

Contrary to most expectations, however, Tahtawi described his arrival in France in 1826 both as an encounter with the strange and as a meeting with the familiar. “In the city of Marseille,” he wrote, “there are many Christians from Egypt and Syria, who accompanied the French during their retreat from Egypt.”⁴ Scholars have certainly noted on occasion this unexpected description of an “Egyptian” community in Marseille.⁵ Yet no historian has attempted to describe or account for this population in any detail.⁶ The only substantial description of this community was written in 1866 by Léon Gozlan, a journalist who had grown up in Marseille:

Not wanting to separate, because to separate is to be destroyed, and they wanted to remain Egyptians of Alexandria, Egyptians of Cairo, Syrians of Jaffa and Aleppo, they searched for, and found, in this admirable city of Marseille, a predestined spot, a stretch of plain, half green, half browned, which recalled for them at once the banks of the Nile and the sands of Giza, and there they built, to the left and to the right, small white houses of two stories at most.⁷

Between Gozlan’s childhood memories of the 1810s and the mid 1820s, this diverse Arabic community in Marseille had undergone a significant transformation, from a very visible and clustered population around the Cours Gouffé in the centre of the city, to the more scattered, and apparently assimilated group whom Tahtawi encountered in 1826. The most prevalent assumption, whether overt or unstated, has been that these people simply evaporated at the close of the Napoleonic period, through some odd combination of assimilation, assassination and repatriation. At most, they have been understood as a dwindling remnant of the Empire, confined to the Mediterranean littoral. This picture is in urgent need of revision. Indeed, I would suggest that this community continued to be a vibrant and diverse French-Arabic community, the first of its kind, throughout the century. Moreover, this picture is not simply a Marseillais one, but to a significant extent a Parisian one, also.

When Jean-François Champollion arrived in Paris from Grenoble in 1807, as a young and avid student of Oriental languages, he discovered there what he called in a letter to his brother a “colonie Egypto-Orientale”⁸ into which he was introduced through the graces of Dom Raphaël de Monachis. This Melkite (or Greek Catholic) priest was born Rufa’il Zakkur in Egypt: he had accompanied Napoleon from Rome, where he was studying in 1799, to become the only Arabic member of the *Institut*

³ Cf. Pascal Blanchard, Eric Deroo, Driss El Yazami, Pierre Fournié and Gilles Manceron, *Le Paris Arabe. Deux siècles de présence des Orientaux et des Maghrébins* (Paris, 2003).

⁴ Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, 154.

⁵ Anouar Louca, *Voyageurs et écrivains égyptiens en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris 1970), 58; idem, “Les cinquante jours à Marseille de Rifa’a al-Tahtawi,” in *L’Orient des Provençaux dans l’histoire* (Marseille, 1984), 325-9. Alain Silvera, “The First Egyptian Student Mission to France under Muhammad Ali,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 16.2 (1980): 1-22.

⁶ Pierre Echinard and Emile Témime devoted a few pages to the “Egyptian Refugees” in their history of migrations to Marseille, *Migrance. Histoire des migrations à Marseille. Tome 1. La préhistoire de la migration (1482-1830)* (La Calade, Aix-en-Provence, 1989), 111-121, and the catalogue of an exhibition mounted in Marseille in 1983 added some additional information drawn from the Departmental archives, and those of the Chamber of Commerce.

⁷ Léon Gozlan, “Les réfugiés égyptiens à Marseille,” *Revue contemporaine* 149 (1866): 31-47.

⁸ Cited in Pierre Labrousse, *Langues d’O, 1795-1995. Deux siècles d’histoire de l’Ecole nationale des langues orientales* (Paris, 1995), 62.

d’Egypte.⁹ After migrating to France in 1803, he was appointed by imperial mandate to the post of *professeur-adjoint* at the *Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes*. Champollion owed much of his fluency, not only in Arabic, but also in Coptic—a skill to which he attributed his success in comprehending the system of hieroglyphics—to his experience amongst this group of native speakers.¹⁰ As one of the few outsiders who could cross the barrier of culture and language, it is unfortunate that Champollion did not remain in Paris long enough to offer any further observation on this population in the later years of the Empire and the early Restoration. Still, his remarks provide us with an indication that even in this very early period, the Arabic population in Paris, although relatively small, was numerous enough, and sufficiently permanent, to be considered a “colony” rather than simply a collection of disparate individuals. Still, this description does not give us a sense either of the precise numbers involved, nor of the mode of “community,” if any, which characterized this population.

We may perhaps draw a more meaningful picture from a letter which appears among the correspondence of the “Egyptian Refugees” conserved at the archive of the Ministry of War at Vincennes. In July of 1811, Georges Aïdé wrote to the Ministry to complain of the behavior of a young man, Joubran Mehenna, who had insulted and threatened him in the Tuileries Gardens.

Recently, taking an afternoon walk in the Tuileries, I saw this young man seated next to Mr. C., and on my passing by chance behind him he took it into his head to utter a number of inanities full of rude and contemptuous expressions, to which Your Servant did not deign to respond for fear that it might lead to troublesome and unpremeditated extremities.

That same evening he met with M. Elias Pharaon, who asked him to explain the motive for the vulgar things he had said about me, to which he made no reply. ... This young man is known to be very quick-tempered, and, to add to his offences, he took the liberty to make evil remarks to one Michel Sabbagh, and to one Joseph Athaya, and also to Antoine Sioufi, who was violently beaten and duped by him. He even went so far as to beat a woman, followed by several equally wicked acts.¹¹

Aïdé, born in Mount Lebanon, had been living in Cairo at the time of Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt, and served the French administration as a customs official. He was aboard the first boat carrying hundreds of soldiers, civilians and their families from the port of Aboukir in Egypt to Marseille, where they formed what the French henceforth referred to as the “Depot of Egyptian Refugees.” This Arabic population in Marseille numbered at first in the hundreds, and continued to increase through births and later arrivals throughout this period: in 1817, it has been estimated at around one thousand, or 1 percent of the city’s total population.¹² While the bulk of this population had certainly arrived from the ports of Egypt, their designation as

⁹ Charles Bachatly, “Un membre orientale du premier institut d’Egypte, Don Raphaël,” *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Egypte* XVII (1935), 237-60.

¹⁰ “I am going to visit a Coptic priest at Saint-Roch, rue Saint-Honoré, who celebrates Mass ... and who will instruct me in Coptic names, and the pronunciation of Coptic letters.” Champollion was referring to Yuhanna Chiftichi: Anouar Louca “Yuhanna Chiftichi,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York and Toronto, 1991), 519.

¹¹ Archives du Ministère de la Guerre, Vincennes (henceforth AMG) XL/37d.

¹² Edouard Saman, “L’église Saint-Nicolas de Myre de Marseille et les collaborateurs orientaux de Bonaparte,” *Marseille* (1981); and Georges Reynaud, “Les données de l’état civil et du cadastre (1801-1833),” in *L’orient des Provençaux*, 368-70.

“Egyptian” was effectively an administrative fiction. In fact, like Aïdé himself, the largest group amongst these arrivals were not Egyptians, but Syrians, many from the region around Acre in Palestine. Alongside the majority of Egyptians and Syrians were individuals drawing their origins from Armenia, Greece, the Ionic Islands, the Sudan, Ethiopia, the Maghreb and the Arabian Peninsula. However, such regional identities functioned alongside other identifications, and particularly religious groupings. Melkite Catholics, Arabic by language and rite, formed the largest group, but the colony also included many Copts, some Greek Orthodox, and a small number of Muslims. If the identity of “Egyptian” is thus difficult to sustain, the status of “refugee” needs a similar re-evaluation. The reasons for Aïdé’s decision to leave for France appear to be far more complex than the simple designation of “refugee” might imply. In his file is included a correspondence with the princely rulers of Mount Lebanon, who encouraged him to return to Syria, now that political changes had removed the reasons for his exile: in this correspondence they refer to him consistently as an “expatriate” and an “émigré,” never as a “refugee.”¹³ Indeed, Aïdé, by including this correspondence in 1806, was emphasizing to the authorities that he had remained in France by *choice* rather than through fear. This was important, as he based his claim to the continuance of his state pension on the considerable losses he had suffered and not simply on his penury. Thus, while identifying himself as a “refugee” in administrative terms, Aïdé considered his claim on the government to be more in the way of restitution than charity: and indeed, the pensions administration awarded him well over five thousand francs per year, testifying to some considerable degree of approval for these claims in the right channels. Later, in 1810, a change in the pension regulations significantly increased the income of large families such as Aïdé’s by providing pensions for those children born in France from Egyptian parents. This gave the Aïdé family (including his wife, five children and a servant) a total annual income of over ten thousand francs, and the wherewithal to contemplate a shift to the capital.

On his arrival in Paris, Aïdé installed his family in the Rue St-Honoré, close to a number of other earlier arrivals from Marseille, including priests such as Yuhanna Chiftichi, who had been given permission to provide religious services to his countrymen at St Roch,¹⁴ and the Melkite Catholic priest Isa Carus, who had come to Paris from Italy in 1801.¹⁵ Near St-Germain l’Auxerrois, one of those Aïdé mentions in his letter, a young man from a prominent Palestinian family, Mikhail Sabbagh, had been living in a *hôtel garni* for almost a decade, working as a copyist of manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Impériale.¹⁶ Addresses provided in the correspondence of the refugees cluster particularly around the Rue St-Honoré and the church of St-Roch, in the districts of the Tuileries and the Palais Royal: many were clearly drawn, like Aïdé, to live close to others who shared language, culture, and often family ties. Frequently, several families lived at the same address: at number 355, for example, Aïdé’s family

¹³ AMG XL/371. The political, cultural and economic dimensions of the Arabic migration are considered in detail in my thesis, *Arab Paris: The Making of a Community 1800-1830* (University of Melbourne, forthcoming). Cf. Thomas Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt, 1725-1975* (Stuttgart, 1985).

¹⁴ See AMG XL/37j, and Anouar Louca, “Champollion entre Bartholdi et Chiftichi,” in *Rivages et déserts. Hommages à Jacques Berque* (Paris, 1988), 209-25.

¹⁵ AMG XL/37j. Isa Carus published a pamphlet recounting his misadventures during the Revolution: *Isa-Carus, prélat du rit grec catholique aux âmes sensibles* (Paris, 1804).

¹⁶ AMG XL/37j; see also the note on Michel Sabbagh in Jean Pierre Louis Humbert, *Anthologie arabe, ou Choix de poésies arabes inédites, traduites en français, avec le texte en regard, et accompagnées d’une version latine littérale* (Paris, 1819).

shared a roof with Lotfi Nemr, another Egyptian notable from the exodus of 1801, and Joseph Ataïa (whom he mentions in his letter), soon to be married to the daughter of Gabriel Sakakini, one of the heads of a large family engaged in commerce in Marseille, Livorno and Egypt. Yet this was not always the case—indeed, a second group of addresses clustered around the Hôtel des Invalides, where a number of former soldiers (several of them sustaining terrible wounds) were located close to the military hospital. In the poorer districts of the Left Bank, close to the old Rue de la Harpe, what seems to have been a more disparate and less affluent population was scattered: once again, however, a number of these men and women frequently occupied rooms in the same building. Thus, the population could be said to be clustered around main centers, but not concentrated in any one location: indeed, addresses are given in the Faubourg St-Germain, in the Marais, and as far distant as Passy and Charenton.

In the absence of any reliable census information, it is difficult to establish any truly definitive numbers for this population. According to the register of refugee pensions drawn up by the War Ministry in 1811, twenty-seven individuals were paid at Paris, in contrast to the 431 refugees paid at Marseille.¹⁷ However, it is quite evident that a number of individuals resided in Paris while making arrangements for the collection of their pension at Marseille. Others did not appear on the pension list, either through ineligibility, or because they had other means of support. Further, this list precedes the significant increase in movement toward Paris which can be observed after 1811. A more comprehensive, if still incomplete, estimation can be made on the basis of the correspondence of the Pensions Bureau, which provides more than one hundred addresses in Paris, many representing families of up to ten. This at least provides a firm base for the projection of a potential population figure in the low hundreds: a relatively tiny proportion of the population of the capital, but still a far more significant presence than has been previously imagined. Moreover, and most importantly perhaps, there is no evidence of a significant drop in the population over the period between 1815 and 1830. Indeed, if any movement can be observed, it is a tendency to congregate more heavily in the St-Roch/Palais Royal districts, suggesting rather a consolidation of the population than its dispersal or reduction.¹⁸ Thus, it seems clear from the documents that a small but significant Arabic population was present in Paris throughout these early decades of the nineteenth century, and that this population continued to grow slowly across the period.

The difficulty of generalizing from this evidence is compounded by a factor which quickly becomes evident from the hundreds of letters which request permission for travel to and from Paris, either for short periods or as an official change of residency status. At first, it might seem from this correspondence that the majority of the Arabic population in Paris at this time was relatively transitory, arriving frequently for brief visits, and departing again just as precipitately. The documents themselves may heighten this impression, since the “refugees” did not write routinely, but rather in cases where issues arose with the regular payment of their pension, where they (extremely frequently) desired an augmentation, or where they required permission to alter their status. Still, these factors notwithstanding, a survey across the range of correspondence cannot but communicate a remarkable sense of mobility throughout the period. Yet this should not be taken to indicate a rootlessness or impermanence;

¹⁷ AMG X^{ab} 35.

¹⁸ These observations are based on my own analysis of the distribution by *quartiers* of addresses drawn from the correspondence of the Pensions Bureau.

very few are the dossiers which suggest any degree of wandering or vagrancy. Instead, the mobility of these men and women remained firmly fixed between the two poles of Marseille and Paris. The refusal of the pension bureau to sanction payments elsewhere had a natural tendency to concentrate the population in these two cities. Moreover, I would suggest that this initial “refugee” population quite rapidly reconstructed itself as a migrant community, reconstituting elites which served to maintain the coherence and continuity of the community—a process in which Marseille and Paris played equally important roles.

The formation of these elites was actively sponsored by the Napoleonic bureaucracy, both through the formation of the “Council of Egyptian Refugees” at Marseille, and through the creation of a new military corps from the remains of the Coptic, Syrian and Greek battalions which had fought alongside the French in the campaigns of Egypt and Syria.¹⁹ These soldiers, officially designated “Mamelouks”—despite the negligible presence among them of members of the slave-caste of elite soldiers known by that name in Egypt—played a conspicuous role in the orientaling iconography of the Napoleonic propaganda machine. Their officers, retired or in active service, tended to remain in Melun, although they often had close family ties with the larger population in Marseille. They were in constant communication with the capital, only some fifty kilometers away. From 1802 onwards, they appeared regularly in military parades in the capital, and visited frequently, as the registers of foreigners in the period record.²⁰ Priests such as Mikhail Sabbagh’s brother Yusuf traveled regularly to Melun from Paris in the exercise of their functions.²¹ From 1806 onwards, an increasing number of these men retired on army pensions, significantly higher than those of the “refugees,” and many of them moved to Paris, alone or with their families. There, they joined the small colony of Arabic-speakers, most of whom were priests or young intellectuals sponsored by the influence of functionaries whom they had they served as interpreters in Egypt.

Joubran Mehenna, the rambunctious young man described in Aïdé’s letter, arrived in Paris at this time, accompanied by several other former soldiers from Egypt who shared the same address in the newly-built market area of St-Honoré (built over the demolished convent where the famous Jacobin club had met in the revolutionary years). Joubran’s progress to Paris can tell us much about the gradual accretion of this presence in the capital: in a letter to the Minister of Police in 1811, he claims to have been living in Paris for seven years, thus dating his arrival to 1804.²² His earliest correspondence begins in 1807, when he was requested to provide an account of the reasons for his presence in the capital to the War Ministry, and he writes:

I received the letter which Your Highness did me the honor of addressing me and in which he asked the reason for my stay in Paris. I undertake to respond to this question by assuring Your Most Serene Highness that my first arrival in Paris was with the aim of accompanying from Marseille Madame Rennot [Renno] who had come from Acre to see her son, and that was by the order of the Inspector and Commandant Valliant. Invited by our chiefs, as stated in the certificates which I had the honor of transmitting to you, I accompanied her to Melun and from there returned to Marseille where I stayed for a short time. But wanting to learn the French language and not at all

¹⁹ G. Guémard, “Les auxiliaires de l’armée de Bonaparte en Egypte (1798-1801),” *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Egypte* 9 (1927): 1-17. Jean Savant, *Les Mamelouks de Napoléon* (Paris, 1949).

²⁰ AN F/7/2249.

²¹ AMG XL/37j.

²² AN F/7/6475.

desirous of acquiring either the language or the accent of Marseille, I was forced to come to Paris to continue my instruction. According to orders, I send every month my *certificat de vie* and another to my language teacher at Marseille, orders given to me so that I should be in accordance with the laws of this country.²³

Thus, it seems that Joubran took the opportunity of a commission allowing him to travel to Paris in order to familiarize himself with the capital. He appears to have been drawn immediately to the life and culture—and perhaps the freedom—of Parisian life, and returned without permission. From other documents it appears that in 1808 he followed the army to Spain as a *vivandier*, then returned to Paris with no real means of support. In the atmosphere of largesse which succeeded the marriage of the Emperor and Marie-Louise, and the birth of an Imperial heir, Joubran succeeded in gaining admission to the pension list. Still, he seems to have struggled to support himself in the capital: there is no clear evidence of how he managed to survive.

The sudden arrival of a new, wealthier elite in Paris in 1810 and 1811, in the wake of the alteration to the pension system, seems to have stirred considerable resentment amongst those men who had come to Paris in the preceding years, alone or with their families. Jean-Louis Clément, for example, a merchant of French origin born in Syria, wrote to the ministry:

In truth, Your Excellence can rest assured that since we have been in France we have not had any enjoyments, whether those of the Theatres big or small, Public Balls, Caffés, going out in a carriage or other pleasures that one permits oneself from time to time for recreation. And all through an economy of the most severe kind, unlike that of a certain favored refugee who enjoys between himself and his wife and two very young children around ten thousand francs.²⁴

Although he does not mention Aïdé by name, this description of the family of the “favored refugee” fits Aïdé’s circumstances very convincingly. Indeed, by 1815, after the birth of another child in Paris, the Aïdé family was receiving 10,413 francs 45 centimes, according to George’s own estimate.²⁵ One may infer from Clément’s complaints that at least some of these new arrivals did have the resources to enjoy the pleasures of the capital (something one would never deduce from their own protestations of penury in their petitions to the ministry).

Aïdé’s denunciation of Joubran Mehenna also makes it clear that the Arabic community living in and around Paris was in close and frequent contact—the list of his misdeeds includes violent confrontations with Youssef Ataïa and Mikhail Sabbagh, whom I have mentioned earlier, and with Antun Sioufi, an armorer who was at this time living in the Rue des Brodeurs, near the Invalides, after spending a period of sickness, lying on a mattress in a corner at the Persian Embassy.²⁶ On the same street was living at the same time a young woman, Louise Virginie, one of the numerous African women from Egypt who had been brought to France as domestic servants or mistresses of the French officers.²⁷ At about this time, she moved to live with Joubran in the Rue du Four St-Germain, having lived previously at an address close to that of Antun Sioufi. It is irresistible to speculate from these facts on the

²³ AMG XL/37d.

²⁴ AMG XL/37j.

²⁵ AMG XL/37l.

²⁶ AMG XL/37k.

²⁷ AMG XL/37m.

possible motive behind Joubran's violent encounter with Antun Sioufi, which George Aidé described in his letter. At any event, Joubran's relationship with Louise-Virginie did not last: the following year he married a young woman from the Yvelines, Anne-Victoire Précieux. In 1816 he moved with his young family to her small village of Montainville, returning to Paris only after her death in 1825.²⁸ By then, George Aidé, his pension reduced to a considerably more modest degree by the Restoration, had returned to Marseille, where he could live more cheaply, and marry his daughters within the community.

Neither George Aidé nor Joubran Mehenna succeeded in carving out a settled life for themselves in Paris: the difficulties of the capital were manifold, and the expenses ever multiplying. Yet there were those who did succeed: Yusuf 'Atiya married a daughter of the wealthy Sakakini family from Marseille, and her father moved to Paris along with his daughter, followed by several other members of the family.²⁹ Throughout the 1830s they lived in the Rue du Four Germain, an address which would certainly suggest a relative degree of affluence. It is unfortunate, however, that as individuals succeeded in French society, their traces became far more widely dispersed and difficult to discover. Still, the pension accorded to the refugees, far from being a stigma to be avoided, seems to have functioned for most as an important and prestigious sign of belonging to this "Egyptian" group, an identity which continued to carry considerable symbolic importance well beyond the fall of the Napoleonic regime. The factors sustaining this ongoing maintenance of Arabic identity and culture are too complex to analyze here.³⁰ However, it is crucial to recognize that this community continued to exist, albeit in changed form, through the Restoration and into the July Monarchy.

The failure to trace the existence of this early Arabic community beyond the limits of the Empire is in part due to the events of July 1815, and a widespread misinterpretation of their consequences. With the onset of the White Terror in the Midi, the large and visible Arabic community of Marseille was targeted by Royalist militias for their allegedly "fanatical" devotion to the Emperor. People of color, particularly women, were attacked first, and the bulk of the community was forced to flee into the mountains for safety. Those few historians who have reported these events at all have made the assumption that this effectively closed the "Egyptian" chapter in the history of Marseille, leaving only a remnant of a devastated population to melt away into the social fabric, or return to their countries of origin. The bloody events of 1815 did no doubt result in a diminution of the Arabic population of Marseille, although this was in some part reversed by the arrival of Melkite Catholics fleeing Greek Orthodox persecution in the Levant from 1817 onwards.³¹ Significantly, the exodus from Marseille did not inspire, for the bulk of the Arabic population, any desire to return to those countries from which they had departed more than a decade earlier. In 1816, the new government offered the enticement of a full year's pension to those among the refugees who would return voluntarily. While a number of the poorer members of the community did take up this offer, it is notable that a majority of them returned to France, either immediately or over the succeeding years, and several were actually re-admitted to the pension lists, particularly after the change of regime in

²⁸ Arch. Dep. Yvelines, AMG XL/37D, *Etat Civil, Table Décennale 1823-1833*, 15.

²⁹ Abdallah Naaman provides an account of the Sakakini family (and several other families from this early period) in his *Histoire des orientaux de France du Ier au XXe siècle* (Paris, 2004), 474-6.

³⁰ This question is explored at length in my doctoral thesis.

³¹ Joseph Haijar, *L'Europe et les destinées du Proche-Orient (1815-1848)* (Paris, 1970); Saman, "L'église Saint-Nicolas de Myre."

1830. Thus, beyond the immediate violence and death which struck the community in Marseille, the events of 1815 had two important consequences for the Arabic presence in France, and in Paris in particular. It is evident from the archives of correspondence that many of the refugees chose to follow the well-worn path to the capital, joining relatives and associates, or blending less visibly into the *population flottante* of a vastly larger urban fabric. At the same time, however, the violence visited upon the highly conspicuous population of Marseille must have promoted a far greater degree of discretion, indeed, invisibility even, as a corporate group of “foreign” citizens within the French nation. It was this fact which struck Rifa’ a al-Tahtawi in Marseille in 1826: he noted that all of the Egyptians and Syrians wore French clothes, that the few Muslims among them had converted to Christianity, and that many no longer spoke or understood Arabic.³² Yet in Paris, Tahtawi was taught by two key figures from the second generation of French Arabs, Joanny Pharaon (the son of that Elias Fir’aun who was mentioned in George Aïdé’s letter) and Joseph Agoub, a successful writer and teacher whose “orientalizing” poetry would influence both Lamartine and Tahtawi: the latter, founder of the translation movement in modern Egypt, chose Agoub’s *La Lyre Brisée* as his first task of French-Arabic translation, published in Paris in 1827.³³

The importance of France and French culture in the Arab world is abundantly evident even today: conversely, Arabic culture and the Arab world play an obvious—if not yet fully accepted—role within contemporary France. This shared, plural cultural space has a history which reaches back two centuries and more: indeed, the history of the Arabic community in France is only one of many elements of cultural interconnectedness which may reveal a far looser and more porous boundary between “Europe” and the Arabo-Muslim Mediterranean in cultural, political and human terms. In examining this history without imposing the more rigid framework of national boundaries and identities, a very different picture begins to emerge, not only of this small community whose existence has hardly been suspected. The existence of an Arabic-speaking population in Paris at this early period sheds a new light on the ever-increasing flow towards Paris of students, travelers, writers, exiles and others from the Arabic-speaking world throughout the nineteenth century. After 1830, this increasingly includes Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians, in addition to Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and Egyptians. I would argue that the interaction between these groups within an Arabic-speaking milieu in the French capital were an important source for the evolution of a common Arabic—if not yet fully Arab—identity in the nineteenth century, and thus a neglected ground for understanding the emergence of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century. At the very least, the interaction between second and third generation Arabic migrants, a steady flow of new arrivals, and a passing stream of visitors from the Arab world, contributed to the vibrancy of a Paris which has been—at least in some part—Arab Paris, for more than two centuries.

³² Tahtawi and Newman, *An Imam in Paris*, 154.

³³ Joseph Agoub/Rifa’ a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi, *Nazm al-’uqud fi kasr al-’ud. La Lyre brisée, dithyrambe de M. Agoub, traduit en vers arabes par le cheykh Réfaha* (Paris, 1242/1826).