

Citizen Chawich: Arabs, Islam and Rights in the French Revolution

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On the evening of 19 June 1790, an “Arab” delivered a speech at the bar of the National Assembly for the first time in French history. He expressed, according to the *procès verbale*, “the sentiments of respect and admiration inspired in him by a Constitution destined to bring happiness to the entire universe.”¹ Dom Denis Chawich spoke on behalf of the members of a deputation from the foreign communities in Paris who were seeking permission to participate in the first great festival of the Revolution, the grand “Festival of the Federation” to celebrate the imminent anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. The actual words of his speech have been lost. The *Moniteur* recorded simply, “Un Turc prend la parole. La difficulté avec laquelle il prononce le français ne permet pas de retenir son discours.” (A Turk took the floor. The difficulty of his French pronunciation did not permit us to retain his speech.)² However, the *Mercure de France* went further, reporting, “an Asiatic made his personal compliments half in French and half in Arabic, such that he could be understood only by experts.”³ However, the President of the Assembly, the Baron de Menou, declared grandiloquently in response, “It was Arabia that once gave philosophy lessons to Europe.. today France wishes to acquit that debt by giving lessons in Liberty.”⁴ He recommended that these foreigners should return to their *patrie* to inform their monarchs of the enlightened actions of Louis

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¹*Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée nationale* (Paris, 1791) XXII: 22.

² *Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur: seule histoire authentique et inaltérée de la Révolution française depuis la réunion des Etats-Généraux jusqu'au Consulat*, ed. M.-A. Ray, 31 vols. (Paris, 1863), IV: 675.

³ *Mercure de France* (1790), 310.

⁴ *Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée nationale*, XXII: 22. Ironically perhaps, the Baron de Menou would later convert to Islam while in Egypt, becoming Jacques-Abdallah Menou.

XVI. But Menou was as mistaken in his interpretation of this embassy as he was about the revolutionary credentials of the French king: these were not innocent visitors goggling at the wonders of France, but radicals of various kinds from beyond France's borders who were making a key demand of the revolution. Their participation in the Revolution would help to shape its course.

This deputation is most familiarly associated with the figure of Anacharsis Cloots, the self-styled "Orator of the Human Race," still at this time a relatively unknown foreign journalist named Jean-Baptiste Clootz, born in Prussia of Dutch extraction. Certainly, Cloots' resounding speech, recorded in the revolutionary newspapers and reprinted en masse at his own expense, struck a powerful chord with the gathered assembly. In 1792 he would be awarded not only French citizenship but a place in the Assembly as a Deputy, although his fame finally brought him disaster at the hands of the Revolutionary Tribunal in 1794. But in many ways it was the deputation that launched Cloots from unknown to radical rising star, and its impact cannot be accounted for without understanding the potency of its universal claim. That claim emerged not simply from words, and not simply from theatre, but also from the political agency of the members of the delegation.

Since the incomplete detective work of John Goldsworth Alger in the late nineteenth century, no historian has attempted in a serious way to trace the itineraries of the members of this delegation.⁵ Perhaps their very "foreignness" has made them seem irrelevant or suspect. Certainly the elements of apparent exoticism and the rumours spread by counter-revolutionary newspapers at the time have often scuttled serious enquiry with an uninformed or dismissive comment. In fact, these imputations of charlatantry or corruption that have dogged the deputation have centred largely around the conspicuous presence of the "Turk" Chawich. Even the highly sympathetic biographer of Zalkind Hourwitz, a key member of the delegation, has relayed these insinuations without seeking to determine their veracity.⁶ Such presentations have helped to make Cloots into a tragicomic symbol of the failure of Revolutionary idealism, whether as the apotheosis of buffoonery or the martyr of cosmopolitanism. But Cloots was neither of these things. Nor was he a lone voice crying in the wilderness. This paper will seek to demonstrate in a small way the nature of this important deputation through the other, far less well-known yet in certain ways more critical figure of Dom Denis Chawich, the Arab Jacobin.

It is impossible to determine whether there was in fact any Arabic in Chawich's speech. It may in fact have been the mixed "Lingua Franca" of the Levant, or, equally, an unfamiliar accent, and the noise of the excited assembly may have rendered a purer French incomprehensible. In fact, as I will suggest, the intelligibility of the speech was beside the point. But the bemused responses of the press betray also a difficulty in defining the position *from which* Chawich was speaking – was he a citizen, a foreigner, a "Turk" (a term used generally to denote Muslims), an "Asiatic" or an "Arabian"? Chawich himself signed the petition in French, following his name with a simple appellation – "Chawich, arabe" – but also in Arabic as "qass shawish" – foregrounding his title as priest, "qass."

These confusions over Chawich's role are constitutive of his political agency in the delegation. Though signing himself "arabe", he also identified himself in some sense

⁵ John Goldsworth Alger, *Paris in 1789-94: Farewell Letters of Victims of the Guillotine* (London, 1902).

⁶ Frances Malino, *A Jew in the French Revolution: The Life of Zalkind Hourwitz* (Oxford, 1996), 104.

as the representative of the Muslim world, as we will see. Indeed, the signatures on the petition demonstrate clearly that he was accompanied by other Arab representatives, including two Muslims, Hage Monakmeti from Tunis and Si Hamed from Tripoli. The identities of these individuals are difficult to establish: they neither spoke in the Assembly nor published in France. Chawich seems to have taken on the role of speaking on their behalf, identifying himself in some sense with Islam as a powerful vector of revolutionary universalism.

The Making of an Arab Jacobin

Al-Kahin Diyunysius Shawish, known in France as Dom Denis Chawich (or Chavis) was a Melkite Arab from Acre in Palestine, as he explained in the colophon to an Arabic manuscript he left in the Bibliothèque Nationale. The title Dom/al-Kahin emphasise his origins as a monk in the Congregation of Saint Basil, a Melkite Catholic order based in Saida in southern Lebanon. Chawich studied at the College of St Athanasius in Rome and was apparently brought to France in 1783 by the Baron de Breteuil, former French ambassador in Stockholm, Vienna and Naples, who was ultimately appointed Prime Minister by Louis XVI just two days before the storming of the Bastille. In his colophon, Chawich claimed to have “taught Arabic at the library of the Sultan, King of France.”⁷ Certainly he retained a curatorial role there and may have offered lessons as well. But his career in France was launched by a novel collection of tales from the “Arabian Nights” which he translated, we are told, into a mixture of French and Italian – most probably the “Lingua Franca” used in Mediterranean ports of the Ottoman Empire. However, as Muhsin Mahdi shows, Chawich’s activity was much more complex. He retranscribed Galland’s original folios, added new stories, translated some from French back into Arabic, and then passed the results off as valuable new manuscripts in order to make a living. His partner in publishing the “Continuation” of the Arabian Nights was the fantasy writer and mystic Jacques Cazotte, one of the infamous self-styled “illuminati.” Cazotte reported in his correspondence how he and Chawich had fallen out in the process of translation over Cazotte’s insistence upon retooling the tales for what he considered to be French literary taste: “Since my Arab knows nothing of our tastes, our customs or our morals, he sees fit to get into a rage against me.”⁸ In a telling turn of phrase, Cazotte joked that Chawich found him guilty of “*lèse-Arabie*” – an offence against the dignity of Arab culture. The editor of these letters remarked on Cazotte’s curious unwillingness to call Chawich by his name, constantly referring to him as “my Arab” or “the poor little monk” or even just “the man.”⁹

Cazotte’s letters are mostly devoted to the financial wranglings of the relationship, but they demonstrate several important things about Chawich in this first period of his residence in Paris: his struggle for some measure of financial independence, his association with other Arabic speakers in Paris, and his near-total break with Cazotte shortly after the outbreak of the Revolution. Cazotte states, “I have split entirely with my Arab, who has taken all the money and left me to pay for all the supplies ... after delivering a number of unfavourable opinions about my way of thinking and acting to the

⁷ Muhsin Mahdī, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden, 1995).

⁸ Georges Décote, ed., *Correspondance de Jacques Cazotte: édition critique* (Paris, 1982), 100-1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

nègre called Chamay who has decided to take him on.”¹⁰ In another letter, Cazotte revealed this to be only a racial slur based (presumably) on the darker skin of “Chamay,” since he explained elsewhere that they were both Arabs. Elsewhere, he uses the name Chamass, and these two may well be the same person, given Cazotte’s unstable orthography. What is clear is that Cazotte tied Chawich’s closer involvement with other Arabs to his growing “unfavourable opinions” of Cazotte’s behaviour, and most particularly after the beginning of the Revolution. Indeed, the writer’s fulminations against the course of the Revolution had already brought him into considerable unpopularity. After the “second revolution” of 10 August 1792 he was arrested for his ferociously counter-revolutionary writings, and despite a miraculous release from prison during the *journées* of the following month, he was finally executed by guillotine on 25 September.

By this time, Cazotte had long ago lost touch with his erstwhile collaborator, expressing his doubts that his “Arab” was even in France. In fact, Chawich had taken a very different political course. He had not left France, but had instead joined the ranks of the radical party among the revolutionaries. On 21 December 1790, the newly formed Society of the Friends of the Constitution, which met in the former convent of the Jacobins, printed a list of its members and included “Chaviche, rue du Petit Lion 7” alongside Chénier, Desmoulins and Robespierre.¹¹ No addition or notation was made to suggest that his membership was anything less than full, despite his foreign birth. Thus, it seems, to be an Arab and Jacobin was not at all contradictory in 1790.

Indeed, on the assumption that Chawich employed his membership to attend the meetings of the club with any frequency – for the relatively considerable expense of joining would be otherwise wasted – we may imagine here a kind of political apprenticeship that helped to prepare him for the role he would play on 19 June. Rather than a simple foreigner gathered from off the streets of Paris to appear in front of the assembly, Chawich was an informed and proficient political agent.

Islam and the Delegation of 1790

According to the *procès verbale*, the delegation of 19 June included, “Arabs, Chaldeans, Prussians, Poles, English, Swiss, Germans, Dutchmen, Swedes, Italians, Spaniards, Americans, Syrians, Indians, Brabançons, Liégeois, Avignonnais, Genevans, etc.”¹² The apparently haphazard and kaleidoscopic nature of this list should not blind us to its larger significance. In fact, these men represented in quite calculated ways the vectors of revolutionary universalism. This global claim has hitherto been restricted by most historians within European or Atlantic boundaries. But the nature and composition of this deputation suggests that revolutionary universalism was in fact much wider in its aspirations than we have imagined, taking in Asia and Africa as well as Europe and the Americas.

The Delegation of June 19 offered a kind of mental map for the vectors along which the Revolution might become not simply a national but a global struggle. France’s

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143

¹¹ *La Société des Jacobins: Recueil de documents pour l'histoire du Club des Jacobins de Paris*, ed. F.-A. Aulard, 6 vols. (Paris, 1889-97), 1: xlii.

¹² *Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée nationale*, XXII: 22.

allies – Swedes and Poles – stood alongside the “Americans,” who were in fact free men of colour from France’s Caribbean colonies. The new revolutionary republics in Liège and Brabant were represented, along with the insurgent Dutch, sympathetic English and Russians (but notably not Austrians), the Prussians and Swiss from France’s borders. Even the Papal enclave of Avignon, which would be annexed in 1792, was there to present its “foreign” claim. But among these important vectors of revolutionary alignment and aspiration, none attracted more attention than the delegation from the further shores of the Mediterranean, from Turkey, Syria, Tunis and Tripoli. Their oriental dress was more than mere exoticism. It offered a kind of *gestalt* in which the global reach of the Revolution could be *felt* and not simply imagined.

As we have seen, the president of the Assembly, the Baron de Menou, received the deputation as ambassadors of foreign nations, whose *patrie* lay elsewhere. But Cloots explicitly rejected the concept of ambassadors and the reciprocal rights of diplomacy. He presented them not as the representatives of foreign monarchs, but as the deputies of the “oppressed sovereigns” of the world.

The response of the National Assembly was rapturous, an outpouring of fraternal emotion that seems to rival Robert Darnton’s famous “Kiss of Lamourette.” This emotion provoked an extraordinary sequence of events. After Menou had concluded his response granting the earnest wishes of the foreign deputation, a deputy stood to propose that “by respect for the foreign nations, all the symbols of servitude, and the arrogant inscriptions on the public monuments... should be destroyed.” The success of this motion then inspired another deputy to propose the abolition of the hereditary nobility. A long and noisy discussion ensued, from which it was decided, largely at the behest of the aristocratic members themselves, that all titles except for that of the King would be abolished, and henceforth everyone would be known only by their simple family name. Cloots, now no longer a Baron in France, would eventually go a step further, abandoning his “Christian” name also and taking the name of the Scythian philosopher Anacharsis.

This was an extraordinary outcome and far beyond the effect that Cloots could ever have imagined. It demonstrates just how significant were the forces pushing the claims of the Revolution beyond the national, and in particular how Islam, in reality or discursively, could be a powerful symbol of that global impact through its obvious and visible difference. The members of the delegation coded as “Oriental” played a particularly significant role in its pageantry. Their costumes were the most striking aspect of the delegation, so much so that they became the subject of furious journalistic debate in the days that followed. Royalist critics accused Cloots of recruiting performers for payment and clothing them in costumes from the Paris Opera. This rumour, although unfounded, was repeated and refined by German and British critics of the revolution such as Edmund Burke, and historians even today repeat the story on the strength of such hearsay.

In response to these allegations, a letter appeared a few months later in the *Chronique de Paris* signed by Chawich:

I am the Turk who appeared at the bar of the National Assembly, under the banner of M. de Cloots. I knew this Prussian only from his writings on Muslims and Jews, before the Abbé Delaunay, my colleague at the Royal Library introduced him to

me personally. I admired the great thoughts of this orator of humankind, and I acted in consequence.¹³

Chawich invoked the revolutionary importance of the delegation, which he called “The celebrated embassy of the 19 June, which gave rise to the famous decree of the same day ... one of those great events that good citizens approve and the aristocrats curse.” He sought to scuttle the legend that he had gone to one of the members of the Assembly to request a promised payment. If he had wanted money, he argued, he could have addressed himself to one of the “millionaires” in the delegation, among which were important figures in the *Compagnie des Indes*. Sadly these were the very names that would be produced at Cloots’s trial in 1794 to prove his guilt by association. Finally, Chawich closed his letter:

I bear no grudge, I swear by Muhammad and all the prophets. The Occident will soon tire of the impostures of this Genevan scribbler [Mallet du Pan] – the Orient will be the refuge of the apologist for despotism. Let him pass by my house at 65 Rue Mauconseil on the day of his departure, and I will cover his nakedness with an ancient dolman and an old turban, so he may see if my wardrobe is borrowed from the opera.¹⁴

Chawich corrected one misconception, but produced another – this time, it seems, a more deliberate counterfeit. While rightfully repudiating the allegations of imposture made against the delegation, Chawich indulged in a certain imposture of his own. In calling himself a “Turk” and invoking “Muhammad and all the prophets, he made an unmistakable claim to Islam – one that is not easy to explain. Chawich’s invocation of Islam might seem purely ornamental if it were not for the fact that, as we have seen, Chawich was not only a Christian Arab, but had signed himself in Arabic as “qass” or priest.

It is possible of course that this letter was written by Cloots, but given how much was riding on the denial of the imposture, it seems hardly in Cloots’s interest to create a new one. In the letter Chawich aligns his own political “action” with that of Cloots but insists that he came to know the latter through a common interest in “Muslims and Jews”: the two major non-Christian religions represented in Europe. We know that both Cloots and Chawich were members of the Jacobin club at the same time and that Chawich ferociously argued with Cazotte about the latter’s attempts to tamper with Chawich’s words, even in a work of fiction.

Regardless of the real author, the question remains as to why such a subterfuge was necessary. I would suggest that this expedient emerged from the fundamental significance of Islam in the meaning of the delegation. Without its reference to the Muslim world, the global aspirations of this “embassy of the human race,” which had apparently inspired the transformative changes in French society, would be null. Europe was not enough. Dutch, Swedes and Poles did not carry this overwhelming sense of a *world* in transformation. Cloots would later suggest that Muslims, instead of praying to

¹³ *Chronique de Paris* 257 (14 September 1790): 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Mecca, would now begin praying to Paris. Muslims were a kind of test case for the applicability of the Revolution on a much larger scale. From early in the Revolution they figured in discussions of religious liberty and universal rights.

Muslims and the Discourse of Rights

In recent decades more light has been shed on the revolutionary participation of groups outside the traditional circles of Parisian or even provincial politics. The debates over extending “universal” rights beyond Catholic Frenchmen to Protestants, women, people of colour and Jews have been explored in detail, revealing a much more complex and piecemeal unfolding of juridical realities. However, in raising questions around the admission of non-Catholics to the rights prescribed by the Revolution, historians have rarely paid attention to the discussion of the rights of Muslims and of the subjects of Muslim powers across the course of the revolutionary years.

In fact, the question of Muslim participation in the rights accorded by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen arose quite quickly in the debates of 1789. In theory, these rights extended to all French citizens regardless of their religion. In practice, of course, serious questions arose about the application of such rights, particularly when they changed the nature of access to what were previously privileges, properties that had significant monetary value, and therefore could not be easily abrogated without reparation to their owners. The denial of rights to non-Catholics was a major tenet of the absolutist regimes since Louis XIV and was therefore one of the most immediate targets of early revolutionary attacks. But a question immediately arose as to whether these rights applied only to non-Catholic Christians, to all French subjects of all religions or in a universal fashion untrammelled by boundaries of religion or territory.

Under the Ancien Régime, Muslims, while not admitted to full residence or civic status in France, were nonetheless accorded a limited form of reciprocal privilege by the treaties with the Sultan in Istanbul and with the ruling groups in North Africa. Given the large populations of French subjects and protégés living in Ottoman port cities, who were accorded freedom of worship and a limited degree of internal autonomy by these treaties, Muslim and other subjects of the Sultan could demand reciprocal protection in France. In Marseille in particular, they exercised the right to bury their dead according to Muslim rites. A small building was used for these purposes and also, it seems, for prayer, particularly during the period when the Arsenal contained a large number of Muslim galley slaves. Voltaire made much of exaggerating this hut into a “Mosque” that François I was said to have tolerated “while Christians were being burned in Paris and the Provinces.”¹⁵ In this sense, the structures of reciprocal obligation were retooled as tolerance in order to press for greater toleration of Protestants and later of Jews.

The “tolerance” emerging in the late Ancien Régime, and particularly after the Edict of Toleration in 1787, was rejected by many revolutionaries as an inadequate or even insulting basis for the discussion of rights. Surprisingly it was Muslims who were accorded equal rights before the law in 1789, and Jews who found their status under suspension because of a deeply-rooted ambivalence regarding their quasi-extraterritorial corporate status. The arguments for according these rights to Muslims did not, however,

¹⁵ Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Charles Lahure, 35 vols. (Paris, 1860), 10: 40.

result from the principle of universalism, but rather from the structures of reciprocity that characterized the Ancien Regime. For example, in the debate on the admission of non-Catholics to municipal and provincial offices and civil and military employment, the reciprocity of the relationship between the French King and the Ottoman Sultan, as well as the considerable presence of French subjects in the Ottoman domains, assured the swift passage of the bill of 24 December 1789 which stated:

The National Assembly, considering the good understanding and friendship that has extended for more than a century between France and the Sublime Porte [ie. the Ottoman State], and desiring to continue its existence, has decreed and decrees that all Muslims, particularly the subjects of the Turkish Emperor, in Europe as in all other parts of the world, will enjoy all the rights, honours and advantages that French citizens enjoy in every part of the Empire of the French.¹⁶

Jews, by contrast, had no such reciprocal guarantor of their rights. Indeed, their status was assured by the King himself in the form of letters patent to particular communities that provided exceptions to the general exclusion of non-Catholics from the Kingdom after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. This complex fabric of privileges and disabilities presented a particular difficulty for the Constituent Assembly in its attempts to establish constitutional equality between French subjects and left considerable space for conservative forces to leverage traditional anti-Jewish sentiments, both inside and outside the Assembly, in their quest to inflict defeats on the new regime. The piecemeal process of according rights to Jews emerged at least in part from the non-recognition of these populations as fully French, despite their long and well-established residence in the Kingdom. The fictions which had been used to mask their presence as Jews, in order to accord certain groups of Jews a measure of privilege which would otherwise have been denied them, presented an obstacle to their inclusion within the new fabric of citizenship, which was not in fact accorded until September 1791. Nonetheless, I would suggest that this decision to accept the reciprocal nature of relationships with Muslim rulers as the basis for according rights not only to non-Catholic Christians, but also to non-Christians formed an important precedent in the piecemeal construction of the case for Jewish rights.

But for Muslims, the results of this participation were more problematic. Muslims had been explicitly *included* in the structures of rights elaborated in 1789; however, those rights arose not from their recognition and inclusion as French subjects, but from the reciprocal relationship between sovereigns. They were explicitly accorded rights *as Muslims*, and particularly as subjects of the Sultan, who was both a political and a religious figure. Yet this explicit inclusion helped to make Muslims a surprisingly powerful symbol for those espousing radical universalism in the early years of the Revolution.

Reciprocity or Rights? Citizen Chawich's Revolution

In a series of letters written to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and kept in his personnel file, Chawich makes quite clear the complexity of the space he was attempting to carve

¹⁶ *Histoire Parlementaire de la Révolution Française*, ed. B.J.B. Buchez and F.-C. Roux, 40 vols. (Paris, 1834-1838), 3: 461.

out for himself within revolutionary politics through a simultaneous appeal to externality and internality, to his ideological alignment with, and service to the Revolution, and at the same time to his quality as subject of the Sultan. What is remarkable about this complex negotiation is just how successful it was. It not only provided Chawich with a degree of protection as a foreign subject, but also won him a pension as a French official who had served the administration.

In 1792, the Minister of the Interior, Jean-Marie Roland, reorganized the structures of the King's Library, now the National Library. Chawich was sacked from his post as interpreter of Oriental languages. He began immediately to seek political patronage in order to gain restitution. Madame Roland even mentioned his suit as espoused by Lanthénas in her correspondence.¹⁷ But Roland did not offer a solution, and so Chawich sought other avenues to press his case.

In a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chawich recounted the story of his arrival in France, the disgrace of Breteuil and his association with Réveillon, the key figure in the riot that immediately preceded the Revolution. He consoled himself, he wrote, with the "principles of this Revolution, which put all men at the same level and which seemed made to bring happiness to all mankind."¹⁸ And yet, he lamented, "the very moment when I believed France to be my *patrie* was the cruellest moment of all." He continued:

I ask the French to consider their position in our country. They are received with hospitality, their security is guaranteed, they are given privileges that they never possessed in their own country... Now consider my position in your country. Not only the peoples around you but even the savages of Africa would be outraged by it. Do you wish therefore that I go before the Divan and paint you as the most barbaric people, the most unjust toward Orientals, while the Ottoman nation is the most humane and the most just toward you?¹⁹

Chawich simultaneously sought to establish his claim on the grounds of reciprocity and rights: on his status as foreigner and on his own revolutionary participation. Indeed, he suggested that he was a major cause for the destitution of the royalist ambassador in Istanbul, Choiseul-Gouffier, whom he had denounced to a North African ambassador passing through Paris on his way to Holland, explaining to him the double-dealing of the royal government with the Ottoman empire. He also insisted that he had been instrumental in proposing North Africa, Romania and Syria as possible sources of grain supply after the outbreak of continental war, when France was desperately in need of food. Finally, he brought these ideas together in a single appeal:

¹⁷ Jeanne-Marie Roland, *Lettres de madame Roland [1780-1793]*, ed. Claude Perroud, 2 vols. (Paris, 1900-1902), 2: 452.

¹⁸ Chawich to Min, AE 20 June 1793, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères [Hereafter AMAE] Dossiers Personnel, 1er Série, Vol 16 (mic. 6284)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

After such proofs of constant zeal, why am I not worthy to be employed in the service of the Republic? Am I not capable of great services? Can I not turn the powers of Algiers, Morocco, Tunis and Tripoli against the English?

Chawich thus sought to draw upon his usefulness to the revolution as a basis for asserting his rights, but precisely through his capacity to serve as a conduit for Muslim participation and support, much as he had done in the delegation of 1790. Yet the precariousness of his position was betrayed in a coda, where he turned to the older claim of reciprocal treaty obligation as a safety position: “Even if the French nation owed me nothing, a treaty obliges her to assist me, at least with the necessities of a journey to return to my own country.”

In the event this is not what transpired. Another letter of 21 pluviôse of the Year II reveals that the Committee did indeed find the action of Roland to be unjustified – although just as probably because of the displacement of Girondin power in the intervening period. They revoked the order for Chawich to return to his own country. But this apparent triumph was quickly followed by disaster. Chawich explained that he had been arrested and placed in the prison of the Luxembourg. He was at pains to explain that this was the result of an error on the part of his revolutionary Section. The section had seized his papers wrongly on the basis of the decree against enemy foreigners, which was not applicable to him because he was a subject of a neutral power:

The Citizen Chawich is registered in the prison as a former foreign interpreter, and a suspect under the law, but everyone knows that the intrigues of the Allied Powers have not succeeded in forcing the Ottomans to renounce their system of neutrality and their connections to the French Republic. If the Revolutionary Committee of my section was more aware of political affairs, it would know that Citizen Chawich subject of the Sultan, is not liable to the law against foreigners. Therefore he should not much longer be the victim of a mistake which causes him an even greater unhappiness in that he has always served the Cause of Liberty with all his might.²⁰

In this sense, Chawich was protected neither by the rights accorded to him as a citizen, nor by the reciprocity accorded by France’s treaties with the Ottomans. He invoked his intimate connection to the Muslim world, and his revolutionary practice was deeply inflected by the significance of Islam in the shifting geopolitical and local balance of power. Because of the traces he left behind we are able to see some hints of the way that these complex questions of rights played out in relation to Muslims, just as they did for Jews. But the very reciprocity that assured such rights for Muslims at the beginning of the Revolution undermined them later on, if not in the official discourses of the Assembly, then in the way that they were put into practice by the Revolutionary sections of Paris. In the radical atmosphere of 1794, the conception of rights assured by a foreign power became in itself suspect, but it was not yet replaced by anything durable enough for

²⁰ Chawich to Min, AE 21 pluviôse an II, AMAE Dossiers Personnel, 1er Série, Vol 16 (mic. 6284)

Chawich to call upon as a poor and friendless foreigner, despite his very deep and evident attachment to the principles of the revolution and the “cause of Liberty.”