

Jean Eïd (1819–1878): From Levantine Dragoman to Godfather of a Belgian-Egyptian Dynasty

Para-diplomatic Personnel and the History of Belgium's Diplomatic Entanglements with Egypt

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Abstract

As a young, but ambitious state that aspired to acquire a respected position in the nineteenth-century European concert, one of the institutions Belgium relied on was its diplomatic corps. Whereas the capitals of Europe quickly became the new home of career diplomats, Belgium gradually developed a consular apparatus that was staffed by locally recruited agents in more faraway areas. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the position of dragoman, who served as translator to the diplomatic representatives, was especially relevant in a setting where language barriers hindered the expansion of Belgium's diplomatic and commercial interests. This essay unravels the history of the Belgian dragomanate in Egypt and focusses on one dragoman in particular: Jean Eïd. Addressing his term in Belgian service from the perspective of subalternity, I will demonstrate how the social, professional and legal status of these actors who roamed the increasingly entangled Levantine sphere in this period, is particularly challenging to grasp, while also recognizing the potential his position had for the next generations that succeeded him.

Keywords

diplomacy – entangled history – modern history of Egypt – foreign affairs of Belgium – dragomans – Levantines – subalternity – consuls – para-diplomatic personnel – new diplomatic history

1 Introduction

Upon its publication in 1909, the red leather bound *Twentieth Century Impressions of Egypt. Its history, people, commerce, industries, and resources* was ought to capture all facets of Egypt at the beginning of the new century. Indeed, browsing through the book, one is introduced to the Egyptian monarchy, the various ministries, courts, economy and most other top echelons of the Egyptian society. On one of the many abundantly decorated pages, the foreign consular corps in Cairo is portrayed and remarkably, the Belgian consular corps is represented by both its consul, Georges-Alphonse Eid (2) as well as its vice-consul Alfred Eid (12) (see Fig. 1).¹ In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Eids were one of the few non-Greek or non-Jew families in Egypt able to successfully transform from modest merchant families or retailers into full-fledged agro-capitalists that had ties with the Belgian-Egyptian

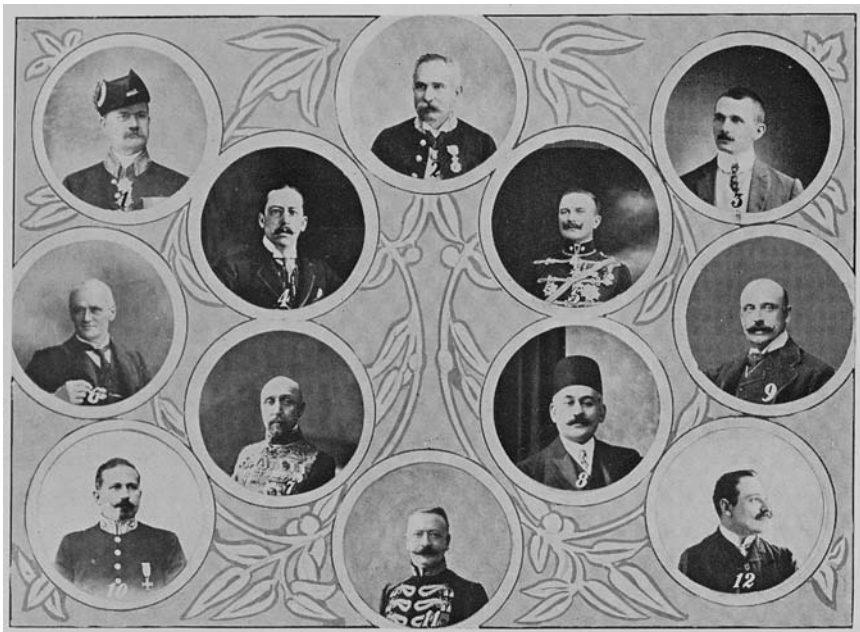


FIGURE 1 Belgian consular corps with its consul, Georges-Alphonse Eid (2) and vice-consul Alfred Eid (12)

WRIGHT AND CARTWRIGHT 1909, 116

¹ Wright and Cartwright 1909, 116.

entrepreneurial complex of the belle époque.² Where did the Eïds come from and how did they gain a position that justifies them to be featured so prominently in the collage?

In accordance with the premises of global microhistory and global biographies, this essay closely tracked down the paper trail Georges-Alphonse Eïd's father Jean Eïd left in the archives and thus retraces the rise of the Eïds towards prominence in the Egyptian society.³ Entangled history offers in this regard a solid foundation to reimagine diplomacy with an analysis of the field's entanglements with other societal forces at play.⁴ In the past, historians with similar ideas have drawn their inspiration from *Transfergeschichte* or *histoire croisée*, but the entangled history approach that is used in this essay stands out because of its attention for 'mutual influencing, reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions, and intertwined processes'.⁵ Drawing on the non-comparative framework constructed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, this essay puts attention for relations on the forefront through the strong empirical method of so-called pragmatic induction.⁶ As Angelika Epple has remarked, entangled history thus allows an actor-centered approach as pursued in micro-history. In combination with an increased recognition of the subaltern perspective – in the present essay pursued by the integration of locally-recruited translating personnel into the narrative – entangled history can show how studying the local can help us understand the global.⁷

In this quest, special attention goes to the need in the foreign diplomatic corps in Egypt for actors able to bridge the language barrier and how this allowed local elites to reap the rewards of nineteenth-century processes of globalization.⁸ The dragomanate, the multifaceted institution summarizing the presence of members of the transnational, often Levantine and or Christian, families in the Eastern Mediterranean that acted as translators, will be at the center of the narrative. Dragomans, also called drogman, translated commercial negotiations for merchants, they were active in state administration, and they helped to translate military orders in the multi-ethnic armies of the Orient. Next to these terrains of action, two areas allowed them to show their mastery of native languages in particular: travelling and later tourism, on one side and diplomacy on the other.

2 Beniamin 2019, 145.

3 Bertrand and Calafat 2018, 3–17; Almagor, Ikononou and Simonsen 2022.

4 Firges et al. 2014.

5 Gould 2007, 3; Conrad 2016, 124–129

6 Werner and Zimmermann 2003; Werner and Zimmermann 2006.

7 Epple 2012, 155–175.

8 Roland 1999.

So far, the practices of dragomans and the dynasties they formed in the early modern and late early modern Ottoman Empire have been scrutinized by Antoine Gautier and Marie de Testa, E. Natalie Rothman and Alistair Hamilton.⁹ In regard to the nineteenth century, Geoffrey R. Berridge has shown how failed attempts to send translators educated in the metropole shaped the reliance on locally-rooted actors, whereas Frank Castiglione has provided insights on subjecthood and Levantinism in the dragomanate.¹⁰ Jörg Ulbert in his turn has used a normative approach to distinguish what chancellors, secretaries and dragomans were expected to do, what their respective differences were and what legal status they had.¹¹ Rare and inspiring exceptions to the neglect of Egypt is the work of Rachel Mairs and Maya Muratov on the connection between the foreign archaeology in Egypt and the services of dragomans, but also dragomans in French service in the age of Napoleon have received attention.¹² In the footsteps of S. G. Marghetitch, long-time drogman at the Belgian legation in Istanbul who reflected on his own position, Jan Anckaer and Houssine Alloul, have paid attention to the careers of dragomans working at the Belgian diplomatic postings in their respective studies on Belgian-Ottoman Empire relations, but have left Egypt out of their scope.¹³ To conclude, Marie Bossaert's work on the dragomanate of the Italian diplomatic corps in the second half of the nineteenth century shows that the perspective of secondary powers in the Ottoman sphere is increasing in importance as well.¹⁴

By using the case of Belgium in nineteenth-century Egypt, this essay pleads for an extension towards peripheral regions of the Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean as well as secondary Western powers connecting with this area. Moreover, it investigates what the integration of dragomans, as para-diplomatic actors, into the research on diplomacy can contribute to our understanding of diplomacy as a gateway for local elites to enlarge and consolidate their networks and affirm their position within society. This essay thus repositions some of the boundaries of the research on the dragomanate that and integrates it in the so-called 'new diplomatic history' that aspires to recognize the importance of para-diplomatic personnel as well as that of consuls in the

9 Groot 2000; Gautier and de Testa 2003, 205–213; Rothman 2009; Rothman 2012; Gautier 2015; Rothman 2021.

10 Davison 1997, 271–280; Berridge 2003; Berridge 2007; Berridge 2009; Castiglione 2016; Skalweit 2017, 107–134.

11 Ulbert 2016.

12 Kimpton 2004; Jasanoff 2005; Nuzzolo 2014; Mairs and Muratov 2015; Mais 2016; Bevilacqua 2022.

13 Marghetitch 1898; Anckaer 2013, 50–53; 160–170; Alloul 2017.

14 Bossaert 2020.

history of diplomacy.¹⁵ In general, I will examine whether the concept of subalternity is applicable to this socio-professional group. In contemporaneous sources, these actors often resorted under the term ‘subaltern personnel’ but do their trajectories correspond with the concept of subalternity as used in contemporary research as well? The biographical approach used in the present study adheres in this sense to the ambition of subaltern studies to introduce new actors into the historical narrative, but equally aligns with the attention for global microhistories in the field of entangled history.

The subaltern angle will be used in this context ‘to refer to the perspectives of a broader group of overlooked actors [...] who occupied both a position of relative privilege whilst also being marginally positioned within international historical accounts’.¹⁶ As Natalie Rothman has already stated in her study on the early-modern Venetian dragomanate, it is after all misleading to depart from an ‘a priori subalternity’ of these actors, despite being considered as such by the institutions recruiting them.¹⁷ The case of Eïd and his rise to consulship in mid-nineteenth century Egypt based on his ability to speak and write multiple languages is perfectly fit to further test the limits of the concept in this context. Instead of presenting the dragomanate as an institution channeling knowledge and information, the transformative character of the dragomanate as a force enabling someone to transcend their specific position within a society, the institution will be assessed from a much more dynamic perspective. As a result, we will get a more encompassing view of how the dragomanate was not merely an administrative machine that allowed to broker relations, create interpersonal ties and establish networks on a diplomatic level, but contributed to much more structural connections on other domains as well.¹⁸

2 Haphazard Entanglements

Even though the distinction between the amalgam of tasks, the administrative aides and thus their definition as either secretary, chancellor or dragoman was not yet set in stone, the need for a consul or consul-general’s para-diplomatic personnel traces back to the very beginning of Belgian-Eastern Mediterranean diplomacy. From the moment the Belgian Ministry for Foreign Affairs showed interest in the Ottoman Empire, they also recognized the need to recruit

¹⁵ Auwers and Alloul 2019; Otte 2020.

¹⁶ Hodder, Heffernan and Legg 2021, 4.

¹⁷ Rothman 2021, 85.

¹⁸ Gelder and Krstić 2015.

'subaltern personnel' such as dragomans and *kawasses*, who were diplomatic translators and honorary guards in the Ottoman tradition (see Fig. 2). Together with the knowledge they had about King William I's consular system in the era of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a report by Belgium's consul in Smyrna in 1838, Joseph Partoes, underscored the importance of these native and locally rooted actors. He even suggested creating a system with no less than four dragomans: one for the future consul's day-to-day relations with the local authorities, a second with a merely honorary status, a third for all the 'ordinary affairs' and a fourth 'plague dragoman' who was to be in charge of communications when the port faced an epidemic outbreak.¹⁹

Despite these ambitious schemes to create a full-fledged diplomatic corps representing Belgium in the Orient, Belgium's first years of diplomatic presence in Egypt were in reality far less structured. Belgium's initial consul-general in

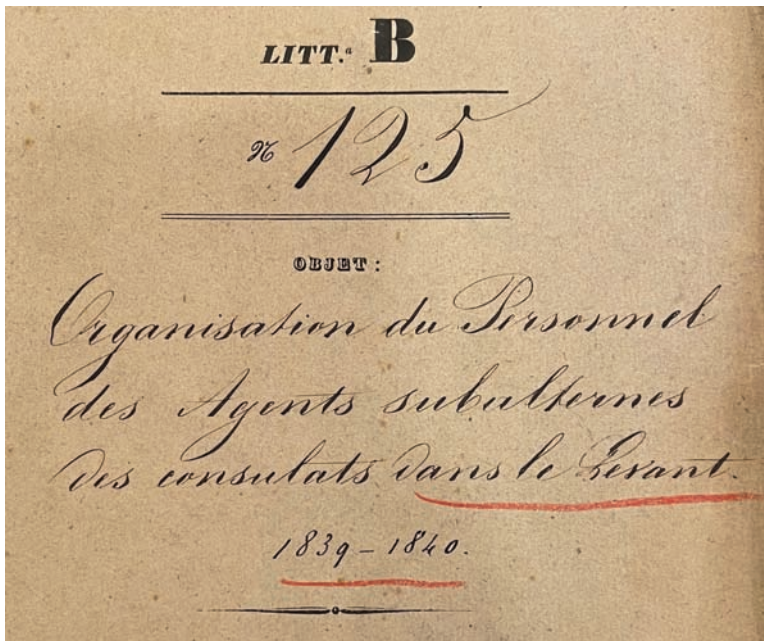


FIGURE 2 File of the 'Subaltern agents of the consulates in the Levant' at the Belgian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Brussels, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Pers Ext. 1507 Organisation consulaire

¹⁹ Brussels, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, P. EXT 1507 Organisation consulaire, report by Joseph Partoes, 9 May 1838; Anckaer 2013, *passim*.

Alexandria until 1844, Edouard Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck had great difficulty obtaining the financial means to pay the salaries of these agents. Although Belgium's special envoy to Constantinople, Alphonse O'Sullivan de Grass de Séovaud, had called these agents 'indispensable', Minister for Foreign Affairs Barthelemy de Theux de Meylandt allocated a yearly budget of only 12.000 Belgian francs to the Alexandria consulate.²⁰ The minister also demanded Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck limit his expenses as much as possible and kicked the appointment of a dragoman into the long grass.²¹ In the meantime, a small-scale experiment, set up by O'Sullivan de Grass de Séovaud, to start a Belgian variant of the Parisian *École des jeunes de langues* failed miserably, so an influx of Belgian translators or diplomats able to fill in this gap could not be expected either.²² Similar to the British diplomatic posting in Constantinople, the inability to raise homegrown translators for a diplomatic career in the Orient resulted in the influx of people already present in Egypt into the Western diplomatic corps.²³ Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Westerners in Egypt or locally-rooted subaltern agents with a specific knowledge of both local and foreign languages remained the only people among whom most of the foreign powers could recruit their dragomans.

In the first two decades of Belgium's diplomatic presence in Egypt, the integration of dragomans into the consular apparatus had a dominantly haphazard and superficial character. Only when Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck undertook a scientific-expansionist voyage to Abyssinia in 1840–1842, a dragoman officially rendered his services to the Belgian diplomatic corps. Thanks to an additional governmental subsidy of 15,000 francs, the Belgian consul-general could hire Venice-born trader Carlo Teofilo Contarini as his dragoman for the course of his travels.²⁴ Moreover, the consul-general's absence during his Abyssinian travels implied that he had to look for a replacement at the chancellery, which had to continue its operations. In this context, he suggested the installation of Alexandre Arnoldi as chancellor and de facto caretaker to Minister for Foreign Affairs Joseph Lebeau on June 5, 1840.²⁵ Because of the persistence of Italian as one of the languages used Alexandria next to Greek, Arabic, Maltese, English,

20 BMFA, P. EXT 1507, Alphonse O'Sullivan de Grass de Séovaud to Barthélemy de Theux de Meylandt, 1838.

21 BMFA, AFRI (434) 696. November 1837–1840, minute of de Theux de Meylandt to Edouard Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck, 8 January 1838.

22 Anckaer 2013, 160–166.

23 Berridge 2003.

24 BMFA, AFRI (434), minute of Joseph Lebeau to Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck, 16 June 1840; Duchesne 1953, 95; Hill 1967, 104; Fantusati 2010, 3–6.

25 BMFA, P. EXT 1507, Van Cuelebroeck to Lebeau, 5 June 1840; BMFA, P. EXT 1507, Lebeau to Étienne Zizinia, 1 July 1840.

and French, someone with an Italian background could be an important administrative asset.²⁶ While Belgium's consul-general was away from his posting, Arnoldi acted as a check on Belgium's recently installed merchant-consul in Alexandria Étienne Zizinia. The latter was perceived as 'too much a man of the local government' and even after Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck left Egypt in 1844, Arnoldi directly updated the former consul-general on Egyptian affairs.²⁷

When Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck left his position in Alexandria in 1844, Zizinia no longer had to walk on the tightrope between his own ambitions and those of his superior, the consul-general. As he privately salaried these aides, he had all the freedom to select his own administrative assistants.²⁸ At the very least, the opportunity to possibly gain some sort of consular protection that Zizinia was able to give and thus resort under the advantageous system of the capitulatory treaties that exempted them from local jurisdiction rather than local jurisdiction, must have been an incentive for these actors.²⁹ First, chancellor ad interim 'M. Ruepprecht' acted as Zizinia's clerk when the latter was not in town. This Ruepprecht belonged to the Alexandrian trading house 'Ruepprecht & Fritz' with whom Zizinia had collaborated in the context of setting up a trade in Belgian luxury and hunting arms of Liège arms trader Eugène Loneux.³⁰ A second name that pops up in the final days before his promotion to consul-general in 1847, is that of John Ninet. Between 1846 and 1848, the signature of this Swiss-born cotton agent and adventurer appears under the letters Zizinia wrote to Belgium.³¹ From the mid-1850s until 1862, Frenchman Alexis Blondel subsequently wore the title of 'chancellor of the consulate-general of Belgium' pops up for the first time.³² To conclude, at the very end of Étienne Zizinia's term, a man named Alfred Rieder is mentioned as his chancellor, but he disappears from the archives after only one year and so far no

26 Hanley 2007, 54.

27 BMFA, AFRI (444) 706. 1834, 1836–1846, Alexandre Arnoldi to Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck, 6 February 1845; Brussels, Belgian State Archives, BE-A0510 I 225 Expansion belge d'Outre-Mer, 3. ETHIOPIE Rapport d'Edouard Blondeel van Cuelenbroeck, letter of Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck to de Theux de Meylandt, 6 April 1840, 99.

28 *Parliamentary proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, 28 November 1844, 504.

29 Fahmy 2013; Shlala 2018; Todd 2018.

30 BMFA, AFRI (444bis) 706bis. 1847–1855, 1861–1863, 1867–1869, 1871-août 1883, Eugène Loneux to Henri de Brouckère, 20 November 1852; BMFA, AFRI (444bis), Zizinia to de Brouckère, 5 October 1853.

31 Louca and Louca 2010.

32 Stacquez 1865, 53; BMFA, 10.322 Voyages de souverains et des princes V. Voyage du Duc de Brabant en Espagne, au Portugal, en Egypte (1862) et en Chine (1865), Blondel to Henri de Brouckère, 10 May 1855; *L'Indépendance*, 360 and 361 (32), 26 December 1862, 1.

details about his life have been found.³³ Instead of the integration of subaltern actors, that had been the core of Partoes' earliest plea of 1838, Europeans that resided in Egypt were given administrative positions in Belgium's consular corps. This would however change in the middle of the nineteenth century.

3 Establishing Careers

Contrary to the ephemeral appointments or limited influence of some of the para-diplomatic agents with European linkages, there was one man who was able to leave a mark on Belgian-Egyptian diplomatic history, based on his knowledge of different languages: Jean Eïd (see Fig. 3). The little we know about his life before he entered Belgian service is that this man, born as Hanna Fadlallah Eïd in the Lebanese town of Zouk Mikael on 7 February 1819, was a member of the Syro-Lebanese elite of the Nile Delta whose grandfather Cheikh Guirgis Eïd was active in the silk and cereal business of eighteenth-century Damascus. Jean Eïd's father, Fadlallah Eïd grew up near Sidon in current-day Lebanon and belonged to the city's local elite after his marriage with Mariam Debanne.³⁴ Even though references to his position as a 'rich merchant established in Cairo', the vast farmlands he possessed in the Nile Delta, his residence in Cairo and 'one of his houses' near Mansourah date from the period he held this consular office, we should consider his strong economic position in Egypt as a fundament for his later consular activities, rather than a consequence.³⁵ His economic activities as cotton merchant in the Nile delta as well his family roots do hint at the limited applicability of the label of subaltern, as he clearly had a privileged position in early nineteenth-century Egypt.

The first traces of Eïd in service of Belgian interests, can be found in early 1851, when he is mentioned as personal dragoman of Étienne Zizinia.³⁶ Arguably, the two of them were trading partners in the cotton business and decided to connect their commercial interests via a shared and beneficial office in Belgian consular service. Not much later, on 30 September 1852 Zizinia used

33 BMFA, AFRI (435), Ruepprecht to d'Hoffschmidt, 13 November 1848; BMFA (AFRI 435a), Ruepprecht to d'Hoffschmidt, 19 October 1850; BMFA, AFRI (444bis), de Brouckère to Lonnew, 3 March 1854 ; BMFA, P. EXT. 572 Rodocanachi agence consulaire Zagazig (Egypte), Alfred Rieder to Jules Vander Stichelen, 9 September 1867; BMFA, P. EXT 563, Rieder to Vanderstichelen, 15 May 1868.

34 Eïd 1989, 61–65.

35 Stacquez 1865, 282–283.

36 BMFA, P. EXT 565 Salamé consulat Damiette (Egypte), Zizinia to d'Hoffschmidt, 30 December 1851; *Parliamentary proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, 19 November 1856, 52.



FIGURE 3 Portrait of Jean Eïd
EïD 1989, 65

his mandate to appoint subordinate consular representatives and installed Eïd as consular agent in Cairo, something that inspired the newly-appointed diplomat in Belgian service to send a circular to his colleague-consular agents.³⁷ The first indication of an initiative towards the creation of this agency traces back to 1845 when secretary at the Alexandria consulate Alexander Arnoldi had been suggested as the future consul for Belgium in Cairo by Minister of Foreign Affairs Goblet d'Alviella. Zizinia, however, seems to have stayed in control in Cairo himself and used his personal prerogative to have a consular

37 Cairo, Dar al-watha'iq al-qawmiya, 0075 Majlis al-Nuzzar wa-l-Wuzara, 0075-030815-2-28-2, unknown to Eïd, 25 October 1852; Cairo, Dar al-watha'iq al-qawmiya, 0075 Majlis al-Nuzzar wa-l-Wuzara, 0075-030815-2-28-2,? To Zizinia, 25 October 1852; The Hague, Dutch National Archives, 2.05.133 Archieven van het Nederlandse Consulaat te Caïro (Egypte), 11-55 Ingekomen stukken. 1850-1911, 11 1850-1853, Eïd to Charles Bargigli, 29 October 1852.

agent installed.³⁸ In this sense, Jean Eïd was at first a relay of Zizinia's interests. Because of the absence of a metropolitan system to feed the Belgian diplomatic corps with Belgium-trained translators, as there was in Paris, Vienna, and, at the end of the century, Berlin, as well as the reliance of Belgium on locally-recruited consuls, Eïd could thus take his chance in the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁹

The combination of his consulship with his roots in the Syro-Lebanese, and thus Christian, community of Egypt, makes Eïd qualify as what Cole has described as the 'compradors' of the European presence in Egypt. 'As merchants of great property, money-lenders, bureaucrats, and intellectuals' members of the local foreign minorities further improved their already disproportionately privileged position in Egyptian society by associating themselves with the Western interests in Egypt.⁴⁰ Eïd, and actors with a similar profile in Egypt, but also for instance the Ottoman Christian Phanariotes of Constantinople that were integrated into foreign diplomatic corps, were already immersed in the local indigenous, in this case khedivial, structures. Thus, they combined their status as brokers in service of Western encroachment with strong local ties.⁴¹ At the same time, however, their collaboration with the Western powers that gradually colonized the region also made them appear as profiteers, acting at the expense of the interest of the nation hosting them.⁴² Especially as part of a wider Marxist concept labelled 'comprador bourgeoisie', these actors were seen as emblems of local collaboration with oppressive imperial powers. These negative connotations and the extent to which they actually were harmful to local economic interests have however been put under scrutiny since the 1990s, especially by Robert Vitalis, and remain a point of debate in the economic history of Egypt.⁴³

In Eïd's case, this local embedment was rooted in his established position of landowner who was a member of a regional Syro-Lebanese elite, but the acts of profiteering that are associated with compradors are hard to prove. Surely, Eïd profited from the assistance he got from Zizinia – for instance when parts of the cotton yield he traded via the company of Zizinia were burned during a train accidents in 1856 and 1860 – but one cannot simply conclude this harmed

38 BMFA, P. EXT 564 Eïd, Franquet CAIRE consulat honoraire, Goblet d'Alviella to Arnoldi, 17 July 1845.

39 Skalweit 2017, 23–103.

40 Deeb 1978; Cole 1992, 44.

41 Philliou, 2009; Mondjian 2020.

42 Lockman 1984; Cole 1992, 46–52.

43 Vitalis 1990; Keyder, Özveren, and Quataert 1993.

the Egyptian economy.⁴⁴ Even though they were regarded as subaltern by the Westerners that recruited them, the membership of men like Eid of the local elite thus stands in sharp contrast with this image. In this sense, it is hard to resort them under traditional conceptualization of the subaltern as actors that contribute to society 'on their own, that is, independently of the elite'.⁴⁵ The present case-study further de-antagonizes our understanding of the intermediate roles local minorities played. The life and career of Eid is in this context the perfect testing ground to attempt to provide a non-partisan view which recognizes the complexity of their position and activities.

The absolute turning-point in Eids career in Belgian service was the visit of Duke of Brabant and Crown Prince of Belgium, later King Leopold II, to Egypt in 1854–1855.⁴⁶ When Étienne Zizinia returned to Alexandria shortly before Leopold and his suite left for Upper-Egypt in February 1855, Jean Eid replaced the consul-general and joined the reshuffled group, which now also included engineer and founder of the Suez Canal Company Louis Maurice Adolphe Linant de Bellefonds.⁴⁷ As Eid had mastered, next to his mother tongue Arabic, Turkish, French and Italian, he was especially useful as the Duke's private translator, but he also proved his worth in other domains.⁴⁸ Together with employee at the Alexandria consulate-general George Goussio, Eid was used as some kind of a baton carrier in a royal relay race. He tirelessly ran errands between Egypt and Europe when the entourage continued their trip towards the coasts of the Holy Land, Asia Minor and the Greek isles. One of his main tasks in this context was to make sure Leopold had the jewels, pins and decorations. In order to comply with the practices of diplomatic gift-giving that were customary in the Orient, these were desperately needed by the young Duke.⁴⁹

44 Cairo, Dar al-watha'iq al-qawmiya, 5013 Usrat Muhammed Ali, 5013-000916-8-59-2, Stéphan bey to Ménandre Zizinia, 12 June 1856; Cairo, Dar al-watha'iq al-qawmiya, 5013 Usrat Muhammed Ali, 5013-000926-8-59-2, Chérif Pasha to Étienne Zizinia, 20 March 1861.

45 Guha 1982.

46 This reconstruction would have never been possible without the assistance and generosity of dr. Jan Vandersmissen who shared not only his transcriptions of most of the material from the Belgian Royal Palace Archives cited in the following pages, but also his profound knowledge of Leopold II when he was still only *Duc de Brabant*; Brussels, Belgian Royal Palace Archives, Papiers Conway 79, Zizinia to Edward Conway, 21 April 1855; BRPA, PC 79, O'Sullivan de Grass to Conway, Vienna, 31 March 1855; BRPA, PC 79, Zizinia to Conway, 22 May 1855; BRPA, PC 79, O'Sullivan de Grass to Conway, 31 March 1855.

47 BMFA, 10.322, Zizinia to de Brouckère, 16 February 1855.

48 BRPA, Fonds Goffinet 117, Ferdinand Jolly to Adrien Goffinet, at sea, 7 June 1855.

49 Alloul 2017, 299–334; BRPA, PC, inv. N° 79, Letter 16 (n° 72/16), O'Sullivan de Grass to Conway, 25 January 1855; BRPA, FG 117, Léopold to Adrien Goffinet, 3 June 1855; BRPA, FG 117, Léopold to Goffinet, 3 July 1855; BRPA, PC 79, Jacques Mislin to Conway, 7 June 1855; BRPA FG 117, minute of Goffinet to Prince Philippe, Count of Flanders, 26 July 1855.

Thanks to a letter Leopold wrote from the Greek port of Piraeus, long after he had left Egypt, we get a glance at the duke's appreciation of the man. Leopold wrote: 'he has accompanied me during my entire voyage from the first day until the last. He knows everything, he has seen everything, arranged everything, settled everything. He's a document, a living history. This little man has rendered me the greatest services'. Despite having to admit that Eïd, at times, was the laughing stock of the group as Leopold confessed that 'We have [...] the habit to make fun of him', the duke could however not neglect his usefulness. Based on these remarks, it appears that Leopold did not expect the same values or behavior from the subaltern members of the diplomatic corps, and could interact with him in a manner that did not align with the protocolary customs of European diplomatic culture. In the context of Leopold's expectations and prejudices about the subaltern actors in the Belgian diplomatic corps actors, Eïd was 'subalternized' by the prince for whom he worked his fingers to the bone.⁵⁰ By actively flouting him, Leopold underscored the social distance between the two of them and stressed his non-European character.

Nevertheless, Leopold's assessment of Eïd, conversely, opened the door for Eïd to leave his status of a subaltern and profit from the social promotion his contacts with these members of Europe's elite rendered him. In his diary, Leopold continued: 'Yet, nobody can do without him. He is the only one who has never caused a moment of displeasure and he is the only one who has never lost his head. Good for everything, ready for everything, useful for everything, this is who I send to you'. Concluding his eulogy of Eïd with the order to Goffinet to treat him the best way he could, obtain a Leopold's Cross for him, have him presented to the count of Flanders and make sure he would be received by the King. In short, Leopold wanted to make sure Eïd would feel appreciated in Belgium.⁵¹ As he left the travelling party a few weeks later, when they had arrived in Malta, and made his way to Brussels, Eïd could soon start to pick the fruits from his hard work.⁵²

4 Syro-Lebanese, Ottoman, Egyptian, and Belgian

The most important sign of appreciation the Belgian government could give to the consular agent, in recognition of his services to the Belgian monarchy, was to grant him the Belgian nationality. Thus being set free from the confinement

⁵⁰ Constantinou 2015, 26.

⁵¹ BRPA, FG 117, Prince Léopold to Goffinet, 3 June 1855.

⁵² BRPA, FG 117, minute of Adrien Goffinet to Prince Léopold, 23 June 1855.

of Egypt's local jurisdiction, this was the highest possible award Eid could have hoped for. Upon Eid's arrival in Brussels in the midst of June 1855, he was first introduced to Leopold's brother, the Count of Flanders, by Adrien Goffinet, ordonnance officer of Leopold.⁵³ Two days later, and much to his own pleasure, Eid was received by King Leopold I and shortly after, Philippe, Count of Flanders, had a meeting with his brother's loyal servant as well.⁵⁴ Whereas Leopold had only suggested to bequest Eid with the Leopold Cross, the idea to naturalize him started to gain ground quickly. In his report to Leopold about how he had facilitated Eid's stay in Brussels, Goffinet first mentioned the idea to grant Eid the Belgian nationality in the following terms: 'I have particularly recommended him to V[iscoun]t Vilain XIIII who is charged to initiate his naturalization request'.⁵⁵ Only a year after the Duke had returned to Belgium, his naturalization passed in the Belgian Chamber of Deputies and, following the approval of the Senate two years later, Jean Eid was officially naturalized on March 11, 1858.⁵⁶ Next to Syro-Lebanese, Ottoman and Egyptian, the label of Belgian was from then onwards also applicable to him (see Fig. 4).

As the reports of the parliamentary Committee of Naturalization prove, this decision was rooted in the government's ambition to enlarge its consular apparatus in the Mediterranean. More specifically, Alphonse Nothomb and Charles-Ghislain Villain XIIII, respectively Ministers of Justice and Foreign Affairs referred to the previous naturalization of Edouard Ernest Keun. Member of the consular Keun dynasty in the Ottoman Empire, his roots were retraceable to Dutch trader Gerard Keun, who had settled in Smyrna in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵⁷ Similar to the preference in the British diplomatic service for Anglo-Levantine families, as the prime suppliers of translating personnel in this period, Keun's naturalization was not merely based on his merits, but also on his ancestry.⁵⁸ Eid could not make similar claims to some sort of distant ethnic Belgianness in any regard. The fact that he was naturalized so easily is therefore only more surprising, as it was solely retraceable to his knowledge of local and foreign languages, professional actions and the network he built based on these qualities. The above case-study confirms in this sense

53 BRPA, FG 117, minute of Adrien Goffinet to Prince Philippe, 16 June 1855.

54 BRPA, FG 117, minute of Jean Eid to Adrien Goffinet, 16 June 1855; RPA, FG 117, minute of Adrien Goffinet to a colleague, 17 June 1855.

55 BRPA, FG 117, minute of Goffinet to Prince Léopold, 23 June 1855.

56 *Parliamentary proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, 19 November 1856, 52; *Committee Report of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, report 146, 29 February 1856, 81; *Parliamentary proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, 11 March 1858, 136.

57 Anckaer 2013, 99; *Committee Report of the Belgian Senate*, report 126, 20 August 1851; *Committee Report of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, 29 November 1856.

58 Berridge 2007, 411–413.

(N° 146.)

Chambre des Représentants.

SÉANCE DU 29 FÉVRIER 1856.

Naturalisation ordinaire du sieur Jean Fadlalla Eid, agent consulaire de
Belgique au Caire.

EXPOSÉ DES MOTIFS.

FIGURE 4 Excerpt of the report on the naturalization of Jean Eid. *Committee Report of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies*, report 146, 29 February 1856

Alexander H. de Groot's statements that it is 'historically meaningless to try to establish their [Levantine dragomans] single national standing and to define them as foreigners, westerners or orientals, or as native Ottomans' and aligns with Will Hanley's work on late-nineteenth century Alexandria that demonstrates the messiness of nationality as a coherent label for identification.⁵⁹

The Belgian nationality Eid obtained secured his further career in Belgian service. Only a few months after he was naturalized, he filed a request to be promoted to vice-consul, which did not meet any opposition at the Belgian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Étienne Zizinia forwarded the matter to Belgium at the end of 1859 and by 16 November 1859 Eid's request was approved by Minister Adolphe de Vrière.⁶⁰ In less than ten years, he had climbed the ranks of Belgium's consular hierarchy, obtained foreign citizenship and thus protection. This remarkable rise to success might have been a talking point when the two of them met a final time during Leopold's second visit of Egypt in 1862. Similarly to the first *voyage en Orient* of the crown prince, Eïd assisted Leopold's

59 Groot 2000, 246; Castiglione 2014, 171–173; Hanley 2017.

60 BMFA, P. EXT 564, royal decree by King Leopold II, Brussels, 16 November 1859 ; MFA, P. EXT 564, Eid to Adolphe de Vrière, 26 December 1860.

physician Stacquez during his visits to the Cairene bazars, the city's Necropolis and Mameluke tombs. He introduced the travelling party to some of his Syro-Lebanese friends; and equally catered to the Orientalist needs of the Staquez and other members of the Duke's suite by introducing them to snake charmers and hosting an Oriental fantasia, including bare-chested Almeh dancers at his own place near Mansourah.⁶¹

At another instance, on 27 December 1862, the Duke and the vice-consul, respectively on horseback and riding a donkey, made a small excursion to the outskirts of Cairo. In his diary, using a wordplay, Leopold compared Eid to the donkey, thus proving he still saw the vice-consul as an easy victim for his condescending view of the subaltern members of his diplomatic corps.⁶² For the Duke, Eid's Belgian citizenship was only a thin layer covering his true subaltern core. Yet, on a governmental level, dragomans did receive recognition for their work. In 1857, a new law on Belgium's diplomatic organization passed, which mentioned – for the first time – the dragomanate as a salaried office at the Constantinople legation.⁶³ Despite this general increase of respect for these para-diplomatic aides, Eid's blitz career remains remarkable in the history of Belgium's diplomatic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Undoubtedly, his Belgian citizenship bolstered Eid's professional ambitions. When Zizinia passed away in 1868, the vice-consul even expressed his ambition to succeed him as consul or consul-general. The signature he put on this letter to Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jules Vander Stichelen was even '*Vice Consul de Belgique au Caire, sujet Belge*' and shows how Eid wanted to cast off his subaltern status (see Fig. 5).⁶⁴ The case of Eid therefore illustrates that the members of the dragomanate were, as Rothmann wrote, only relatively subaltern.⁶⁵

Inspired by the geographic expansion and the reorganization of the consulates in the Nile Delta and along the Suez Canal during the term of Marie Charles Hector de Noidans Calf, the Belgian career diplomat that was installed as consul-general in April 1871, Eid saw his chance to improve his own position as well.⁶⁶ Although De Noidans Calf acknowledged that most of Eid's colleagues in Cairo were consuls, the behavior of his vice-consul was not convincing to

61 Stacquez 1865, 76, 82, 89, 269–271, 281–283.

62 BRPA, FG 122. En France, Algérie, Tunisie, Égypte, Italie, Portugal et Espagne. 1862, 1863, transcription by Bernard Van Rinsveld, f° 53 a, diary entry, Saturday 27 December 1862.

63 *Moniteur belge*, (27) 59, 28 February 1857, 713–716; Anckaer 213, 166–170.

64 BMFA, P. EXT 563, Eid to Vander Stichelen, 30 May 1868; BMFA P. EXT 563, Eid to Leopold II, 30 May 1868.

65 Rothman 2021, 112.

66 BMFA, P. EXT 234 Charles Hector de Noidans Calf 1857–1903, note, 3 April 1871; BMFA P. EXT 234, royal decree by King Leopold II, 3 April 1871.

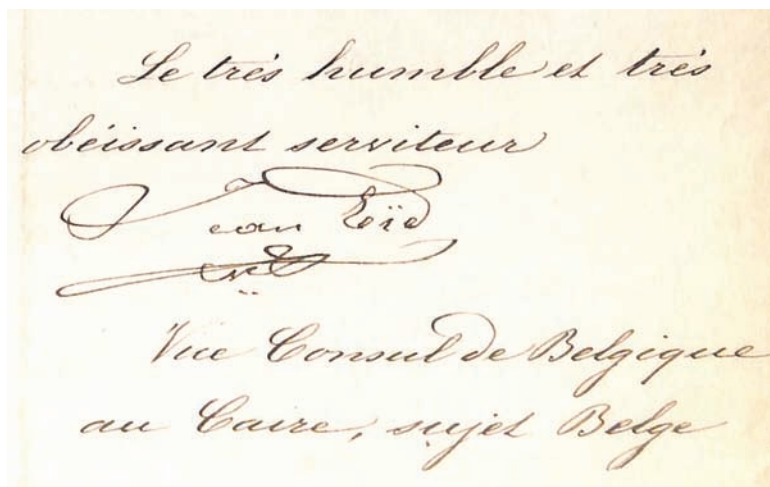


FIGURE 5 Signature of Jean Eïd, including the mention 'sujet Belge'. Brussels, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Pers Ext. 563, Jean Eïd to Jules Vander Stichelen, 30 May 1868

promote him. This wariness of the consul-general was rooted in Eïd's response to the succession of his brother Joseph Eïd, who had also worked from time to time as a dragoman at the vice-consulate. After Joseph's death, Jean Eïd had done every effort not to sell his brother's real estate to cover the debts he had with more than twenty creditors. Instead, Eïd had tried to conserve the patrimony of his brother for his sister in law and her nine children. Moreover, Eïd had bypassed De Noidans Calf when he had applied for a promotion. De Noidans Calf expected from his vice-consul 'a little more zeal to help, at the very least, the consulate-general escape' from a situation as harmful as the Eïd succession case.⁶⁷ Eventually, Eïd nevertheless got the promotion he had been striving towards. On 28 October 1873 Leopold II signed off the royal arrest by which he was granted the title of consul in Cairo.⁶⁸ When De Noidans Calf visited Cairo to attend the Bâïram festivities, things were smoothed over and all he saw was Eïd 'who was full of joy'.⁶⁹ For almost five more years, Eïd could enjoy the privileges of being Belgium's consul in Cairo until he passed away at the age of 58 on 10 September 1878.⁷⁰

67 BMFA, P. EXT 564, de Noidans Calf to Guillaume d'Aspremont Lynden, 14 December 1872.

68 BMFA, P. EXT 564, royal decree by King Leopold II, 28 October 1873.

69 BMFA, P. EXT 564, de Noidans Calf to d'Aspremont Lynden, 26 November 1873.

70 BMFA, P. EXT 564, note, September 1878.

Even if one would consider him subaltern before he entangled himself with the Belgian diplomatic corps, his ability to speak, write and translate made him transcend this status. Thus, Jean Eid's descendants could profit from the doors he had opened with his lingual capabilities. Jean Eid's oldest son Georges-Alphonse Eid succeeded his father at the Belgian consulate in Cairo after the intermediate term of Belgian banker and trader Léon Franquet between 1878 and 1888.⁷¹ George-Alphonse Eid first fulfilled the role of vice-consul from 1888 onwards and was later promoted to consul in 1893.⁷² At the same time, he became a kingpin in a myriad of Belgian-Egyptian companies and banks in both agricultural and urban real estate.⁷³ Alfred Eid, the youngest son of Jean Eid, first was trained as doctor, introducing X-rays into Egypt, later became vice-consul for Belgium and extensively published influential theoretical analyses of Egypt's booming agricultural sector.⁷⁴ Neguib Eid, a cousin of Georges-Alphonse and Alfred, became a distinguished lawyer at the Mixed Courts and *The General Land Corporation* and was usually active as second honorary dragoman at the Belgian consulate-general in Cairo.

The next generation continued to be active in this sector as Raymond Eid was administrator-director at the *Crédit Foncier d'Orient* and director at the *Caisse Hypothécaire d'Égypte* in the 1930s, while Emile G. Eid roamed the circles of the *Union des Agriculteurs d'Égypte* as director of *La Société des Grands Moulins d'Égypte*.⁷⁵ Edgar Maxime Eid in his turn was a representative of Belgian automobile manufacturer *Minerva*, whereas Albert Eid became a notorious antiquities dealer involved in the dispersal of the Nag Hammadi codices.⁷⁶ Until fairly recently, the Eids continued to render their services to the Belgian diplomatic corps in the region as Guy Eid even stepped in his ancestor Jean Eids's footsteps as Belgium's *chargé d'affaires* in Sudan. Tragically, he was assassinated during a terrorist attack of the Black September group on the Saudi Embassy in Khartoum in 1973.

71 BMFA, P. EXT 564, Eid to Jules Joseph d'Anethan, 18 November 1870; P. EXT 564, royal decree by King Leopold II, 10 January 1878; P. EXT 564, royal decree by King Leopold II, 27 January 1879; BMFA, P. EXT 564, de Noidans Calf to Walthère Frère-Orban, 3 December 1879.

72 BMFAA, P. EXT 1575, royal decree by King Leopold II, 27 February 1889; BMFA, P. EXT 1575, royal decree by King Leopold II, 20 March 1893.

73 Vandersmissen and Verbruggen, forthcoming.

74 Wright and Cartwright 1909, 115–116; Eid 1907; Jakes 2020, 110–111.

75 *L'Égypte agricole* 31 (238), January 1933.

76 Dawson and Bierbrier 2019, 175.

5 Conclusion

The times when research into history of diplomacy drowned in nostalgia and mainly heralded the contributions of diplomats like the Prince of Talleyrand, Clemens von Metternich and, in the case of Belgium, Sylvain Van de Weyer or Jean-Baptiste Nothomb, is over. In the wake of the inclusion of non-European diplomatic contacts and prosopographic interpretations into the historiography of Belgium's diplomatic history, this essay looked at one distinctive group: the para-diplomatic personnel of Belgium in mid-nineteenth century Egypt.⁷⁷ These actors were indispensable cogs in the diplomatic machinery thanks to which international contact was made possible. However, they have not yet received scholarly attention in a structured way. In anticipation of further research that will succeed in connecting the history of the para-diplomatic personnel working in Egypt with the historiography of the Eastern Mediterranean, or an analysis of the dragomanate in Egypt that will include touristic dragomans, the present essay already provides the following insights.

I demonstrated how the need for administrative aides was something the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was aware of from the moment it decided to establish diplomatic relations with the region. Notwithstanding this ambition, financial restrictions resulted in a coming and going of men who had the abilities to fulfill administrative tasks but who did not have sustainable careers in the Belgian diplomatic corps. The situation of the dragomanate of the Belgian diplomatic posting in Alexandria shows that, despite the grandeur of diplomatic receptions and pompous ceremonies that are usually associated with the office, improvisation and pragmatism were present in its day-to-day workings as well. In general, the dragomanate of Belgium in Egypt in this period affirms that the interplay of contacts to which it contributed, rather sketches an image of conviviality or 'how we work things out between ourselves' in accordance with what Robert Ilbert, Ilios Yannakakis and Henk Driessen wrote earlier.⁷⁸ The absence of an institution that provided the Belgian diplomatic corps with officials proficient in the languages of the Eastern Mediterranean, played an instrumental role in this regard and contributed to the haphazard character of the Belgian dragomanate in Egypt. Yet, one must remain attentive that this perception of the West's entanglement with Egypt as a form of conviviality does not result in nostalgic and outdated ideas of the region as a hotbed of cosmopolitanism and be aware that this contact took place in a very elitist context.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Auwers and Alloul 2019; Amirell 2022.

⁷⁸ Ilbert and Yannakakis 1992; Driessen 2005.

⁷⁹ Hanley 2008; Freitag 2014.

The career of Eïd demonstrates the discrepancy between contemporaneous and contemporary interpretations of who was a subaltern actor. For Leopold and the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eïd was first and foremost, by virtue of not being Belgian, a 'subaltern agent' in the consular corps, someone local who was instrumental in bridging the gaps between the West and the Orient. Via his role as private dragoman of Zizinia, Eïd could make use of his linguistic versatility and gain a consular positions as well as Belgian citizenship. Even though his status as subaltern actor was stressed and confirmed by his hierarchical superiors, most notably prince Leopold, his professional qualities allowed Eïd to gain access to the opportunities provided by the western presence in Egypt. His Belgian nationhood, close connections to the Belgian monarchy, impeccable professional reputation were subsequently conferred to his descendants and thus show how the need for translators acted as a gateway for local elites in the long run. As a result, Eïd, who already had a privileged position as landowner prior to any consular office, could further transcend his assumed status as 'subaltern' and climb the social ladder of Egypt. In short, the subaltern status of Eïd was as much in flux as his Syro-Lebanese, Ottoman, Egyptian or Belgian subjecthood and changed in the face of the specific situation he found himself. Men like Eïd and their "lived history" are simply too complex to resort under a label such as 'subaltern'. This insight may inspire research on the role the dragomanate played in this sense in other parts of the Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean or in regard to other secondary powers in Egypt. Based on an exhaustive collection of biographical profiles of diplomats working for the various foreign diplomatic corps in Egypt in the long nineteenth century delivering translating services, no less than 228 out of a total of almost 1790 actors are labelled as either dragomans, translators or interpreters. Surely, among them, similar histories to those of the Eïds are yet to be found.

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