

# Lebanese Archives in the French Archives: Issues and Initiatives

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# Greater Lebanon, French Mandate Flag



# In this presentation



- A case study of a collection of diplomatic archival materials received as a gift by the University Libraries.
- Will try to shed light on issues and challenges concerning the selection, assessment and processing of archival collections

*We will start with a short introduction to the history of Lebanon and its archival resources*

# Lebanon in Modern History



- Lebanon was part of the Ottoman Empire 1516-1918
  - Mount Lebanon managed to get conditioned or total independence several times
- Lebanon came under French Mandate 1920-1943 –at the end World War I and the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire
  - State of Greater Lebanon was created adding to Mount Lebanon, the areas of north Lebanon, south Lebanon and the Bekaa.
- Independence of Lebanon November 1943, final withdrawal of French troupes in 1946

# Archival Sources on Lebanon



- The National Archives in Lebanon
- Ottoman Archives / Turkey
- French National and Diplomatic Archives / Paris
- The Repatriated Archives of the French consulates in Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire/ Nantes
- Diplomatic archives of other concerned countries
- Archives in monasteries and other religious and civil institutions
- Archives of ruling families, Emirs and Sheiks.
- Private collections

# Barriers in Accessing Archival Documents



- National Archives in Lebanon do not cover periods prior to the creation of the state of Greater Lebanon in 1920
- Geographic barriers: travel cost and permission
- Language: Ottoman as an example, few people know the language
- Restrictions to access the archives in institutions and private collections
- Loss, damage and dispersion of family and local administrative archives

# Initiatives to Collect Archival Materials

## Prince Maurice Chehab



- Historian, founder and head of the General Directorate of Antiquities (GDA) from 1928-1982.
- The first to start collecting archives of political families and local administrative registers.
- In an article published in 1976<sup>1</sup>, Chehab described the collection:
  - Houses archival collections from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 1914.
  - Private collections of administrative registers from the time of Mount Lebanon
  - Foreign archives on specific topics from Florence, Vienna and Rome
- GDA activities were affected by the civil war. It is today closed to public. We don't know much about the fate of Chehab collection.

# Adel Ismail



- Student of Chehab, historian and diplomat, was the first to start publishing the French diplomatic Archives in a comprehensive and systematic way.
- Between 1974-1994 Ismail published two series of French diplomatic documents in 41 volumes.
- Ismail work was well recognized. He was assigned to be Ambassador to UNESCO for publishing French diplomatic and consular documents relating to the history of Lebanon .
- Ismail is winner of the Prix de l'Académie française in 1956 and 1989.



# Ismail's Collections: short description



- 1951, Adel Ismail, then a doctorate student at the Sorbonne, started to collect French diplomatic documents concerning Lebanon in coordination with his teacher Maurice Chehab.
- By 1954 Ismail had made copies of 100 000 diplomatic documents from 16<sup>th</sup> century to 1918 .
- Documents were transcribed by a team under Ismail's supervision.
- 1974, Ismail started to publish the transcribed documents according to an official agreement with the Lebanese government.
- Documents were meant to be published in their exact order, form and content.

## Other Initiatives



- In parallel to Ismail's work , other historians were publishing diplomatic documents concerned with a specific period or subject<sup>2</sup>.
- Antoine Hokaym, historian and university professor started in 1981 a book series : *History by Documents, l'histoire par les documents*.

# Qassir Foundation Donation



- In fall 2014 Hekmat Qassir Foundation , donated to the UL a collection of French diplomatic archives mostly covering Lebanon.
- The Foundation indicated that the collection was compiled by Dr. Adel Ismail.
- The donation consisted of 42 boxes, containing 250 volumes and around 500 microfilm reels.
- The condition of documents differed, some were worn out and very hard to read.

# Assessing the donation



First question that comes to mind:

- Is this the same collection that was already published by Adel Ismail?
- After doing an inventory we found that coverage is different<sup>3</sup> :
  - Coverage date of Ismail's published documents ended in 1916 while it ended in 1945 in the donated documents.
  - More than half of the donated documents cover a time period not covered at all in Ismail's published documents.

# Hokayem-Ismail Case



While assessing Qassir's donation we came across an intriguing case:

- In 1980, appeared a 60 page pamphlet signed by Antoine Hokayem, severely criticizing the work of Adel Ismail and discrediting his methodology.
- The controversy, in the middle of the Lebanese civil war, soon took a tour of a conflict with strong political and confessional charge.

# Development of the Case



- 1975- Ismail started to publish the documents
- February 1980, Hokayem published his pamphlet “Etude critique sur les documents diplomatiques et consulaire de Adel Ismail”
- 1996 LU held a conference to honor Ismail and his works<sup>4</sup>
- 1997, Ismail published his response to Hokayem’s allegation in the book « أزمة الفكر اللبناني في كتابة تاريخ لبنان وتوثيقه »
- 1998, Hokayem published his book منهجية عادل اسماعيل في نشر الوثائق الدبلوماسية والقنصلية: دراسة تفويمية

# Hokayem's Accusations



- Questioning the criteria Ismail used in the selection of documents. It was “arbitrary” or even “directed” according to Hokayem.
- There was substantial cuts in some of the reproduced text. According to Hokayem omission and alteration of content was done on purpose and for censorship of certain texts
- Some words were sometimes changed “Christians” changed to “people”

# More



- Ismail mislead the readers when he indicated in his introduction that he published the documents as in their original content “in-extenso”
- Ismail didn't warn the reader when omitting text by using (...) or any other kind of explanation.
- Ismail should have defined in his introduction the criteria he used to select the documents and the cases in which he omitted text.



# Ismail's Defense



- Selection is inevitable due to the huge quantity of documents. Selection is practiced by all government when publishing their archives.
- Censorship is sometimes advisable, to protect privacy and to avoid creating political or communal tensions and it was recommended by the Lebanese authorities who had asked him to publish the documents.
- He accused Hokayem of attacking him for political reasons, confessional differences and professional rivalry.

# Lessons Learned from Hokaym-Ismaïl Case



- More than 40 year work of collecting, transcribing and publishing documents by Ismaïl were undermined due to some wrong methodological practices.
- Subjectivity is relative. It is very hard to agree on the criteria of selecting documents for publication.
- It is almost impossible to publish all archival documents which makes selection a must.
- Visiting the original Archives remains inevitable

# Future of Qassir Donation: Brainstorming



- Catalog and classify the collection in a searchable database
- Digitize the documents
- Invite researchers to collaborate in transcribing the content.
- Identify and link to the same documents when already published.
- Open to suggestions and ideas

# Thank You



# Notes



1. [slide 7] Les archives historiques du Liban, Maurice Chehab in *Les arabes par leurs archives* (1976).
2. [slide 10] L'Empire ottoman, les Arabes et les grandes puissances, 1914-1920 (1981).  
Documents diplomatiques français relatifs à l'histoire du Liban et de la Syrie à l'époque du mandat : 1914-1946 (2003-2012)
3. [slide 12] General date coverage **1670-1914** ; Council in Seyde (1670-1822); Council in Beirut (1826-1914 ); French Embassy in Constantinople(1831-1868)
4. [slide 14] Maurice Chehab died in 1994.