

# ARABIC UNDER SHIDYĀQ IN MALTA 1833–1848

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Information regarding Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq in Malta is scanty, but the fragmented evidences that modern scholars have collected are sometimes not properly investigated leaving, as a result of this, discrepancies that obscure the life and history of this Lebanese writer in Malta. Shidyāq (1804–1887), a Maronite, born in ʿAshqūt, was also a lexicographer, journalist and a poet.<sup>1</sup> His appointment in Malta started around 1833,<sup>2</sup> when he was invited by the American missionaries in Egypt to assist Reverend Christoph Friedrich Schlienz at the Arabic press. There is not much information about Schlienz except that he was an Arabist, a linguist and above all an active propagandist for the Church Missionary Society (=CMS) on an important mission in the Maltese Islands. This paper attempts to reconstruct, from the available information, some important events of Shidyāq's contribution of Arabic to Malta.

At the time when the Malta Arabic press was installed, around 1810 there were already a few printing-presses in operation. These presses were licenced by the British Governor in Malta, F.C. Ponsonby.<sup>3</sup> Printing was extremely active during the second quarter of the nineteenth century and its existence became increasingly important as the number of Christian missionaries gradually established themselves in the Maltese Islands.<sup>4</sup>

The arrival of English and American Protestant missionaries in Malta, chiefly those from Lebanon escaping hostility from the Maronite Church, started as early as 1815. Their aim to use Malta as a Mediterranean base was to revive the oriental churches through the publication of scriptural texts. It was politically significant to move to Malta because it was considered unsafe to take the printing presses beyond the protection of the British flag. In 1822, some Americans brought with them the components of three Boston presses. By 1826 a trained printer, John Kitto was in charge of the presses and there were fonts of types in seven languages, including Italian, Modern Greek and Armeno-Turkish,<sup>5</sup> Arabic became equally important in the subsequent years.

The Arabic press was brought from Beirut to Malta. It is quite probable that this press, though installed around 1810 in Malta, was only in operation sometime in 1822 under the care of Reverend W. Jowett who was a supervisor of all the presses from 1822 to 1826.<sup>6</sup> J. Zaydān nonetheless, following the history compiled by W.E. Strong on the American missionaries, confirmed that the press started to operate the same year it was installed i.e. 1822.<sup>7</sup> However, according to the archivist of the British and Foreign Bible Society (=BFBS) in London, the Church Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission set up printing establishments in the early 1820's.<sup>8</sup> It is not certain however whether this was a joint or separate effort.

When W. Jowett returned to England, the Malta Arabic press came under the direction of C.F. Schlienz who occupied the post from 1827 to 1842. During this period Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, was hired by the American missionaries to correct Arabic manuscripts and assist Schlienz in translations.<sup>9</sup> Before coming to Malta Shidyāq had spent some time in Egypt where he laid foundations of mastery of the Arabic language and its literature. It was in Egypt that Shidyāq encountered the American missionaries who promised him an appointment in Malta under the supervision of Schlienz.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest known religious works from the Malta Arabic press are *Thalāth Rasa'il Mār Yuhannā* (The three epistles of St. John)<sup>11</sup> and *Amthāl* (The parables of Christ with supplementary notes)<sup>12</sup> published in 1828. These were followed by *Tafsīr Muthul* (the parable of the sower according to St. Matthew with a brief commentary)<sup>13</sup> which appeared in 1829; *Tawārikh* (Historical sections from the Old Testament with various meditations)<sup>14</sup> in 1833; *Amthāl Sulaymān* (Selections from the Book of Proverbs)<sup>15</sup> was published in 1834 with a supplementary version in French; *Āyāt Mukhtāra* (Selected biblical extracts)<sup>16</sup> in 1835; *Risāla Mār Butrus* (The epistle of St. Peter)<sup>17</sup> probably in 1837. All works are extracted from the *Biblica Sacra Arabica* of 1671 edition published in Rome reproducing the Arabic and Latin versions.<sup>18</sup> *Al-Zāri'* (The sower)<sup>19</sup> published in 1840 does not seem to have been extracted from the *Biblica Sacra* edition. One other religious work was *Faṣl al-Khitāb*<sup>20</sup> a treatise on the homilies of Jibril Farḥat with supplementary comments and three sermons by Reverend C. Simeon published in 1842.

One work which Shidyāq probably wrote was *Khabariyyāt As 'ad al-Shidyāq* published in 1833. This is an account of his brother's imprisonment as a result of his involvement in Protestantism and his death. Shidyāq's feelings for the Maronite Church turned into hatred for Catholicism, and probably as an expression of revulsion at his brother's death, he embraced Protestantism.<sup>21</sup> His decision was an important religious and political move for the CMS in Malta. He won the confidence of his authorities and gained further appointments outside the Arabic press. In the meantime he continued to help Schlieniz in publishing more works. One significant work was the translation of the *Pilgrim's Progress* into Arabic, published in 1834. Pierre Cachia has remarked to the present writer that it is "the earliest translation of a European (religious) literary work into Arabic."<sup>22</sup> Although it might be supposed that Shidyāq had translated the *Pilgrim's Progress* (and probably other major works), one should not exclude the possibility that Schlieniz, who was an Arabist and an active linguist, may have attempted to translate it, either separately or jointly with Shidyāq. Other works translated from English into Arabic pose a similar problem in determining whether Shidyāq or Schlieniz was the principal translator of: *Qissat Rubinsūn Kruzu* (The adventures of Robinson Crusoe) published in 1835; *Fāṭishū 'l-Kutub al-Muqaddasa* (Search for the sacred books)<sup>23</sup> which is a translation from the *Religious Tract Society Book No. 23* published in 1838; *Sharh Tabāi' al-Hayawān* (An exposition on animal qualities)<sup>24</sup> which appeared in a first volume in 1841; and the *Book of Common Prayer* (title in Arabic missing) published in 1840. We know, however, that, according to the archivist of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (=SPCK), Shidyāq in fact did revise the 1850 edition published in London.<sup>25</sup>

During his stay in Malta, Shidyāq held a government post as a lecturer in Arabic at the University of Malta from 1838 to 1848.<sup>26</sup> He was brought to London by the SPCK on special leaves of absence for various periods of time to carry out, in association with the British Arabists, Thomas Jarrett and Thomas Robinson, a new translation of the Bible into Arabic.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime he did not abandon his career as a helper to Schlieniz at the Malta Arabic press during the time when he was correcting manuscripts and writing a number of text-books. *Tariqa Mustahdatha* (A modern method)<sup>28</sup> was a manual of Arabic script printed on coloured paper and set on cardboard. He edited in 1836 the Arabic grammar of the Syrian Jarmanūs

Farhāt (1670–1732), *Bahth al-Matālib* (Investigation of problems)<sup>29</sup> an abridged work of the 1707 manuscript. Shidyāq provided the commentary to this work and it was then published by Butrus al-Bustānī (d. 1882–3) in Beirut in 1854.<sup>30</sup> An elementary textbook for the study of Arabic extracted from *Bahth al-Matālib* was *Al-Ajwiba 'l-Jāliyya* (Clear answers)<sup>31</sup> published in 1841. Shidyāq also published in 1836 *Al-Bakurat al-Shahiyya* (Pleasant beginnings)<sup>32</sup> an English grammar written in Arabic which was reprinted in 1881/1882; *Kitab al-Muhawarāt al-Unsiyya* (Book of friendly dialogues)<sup>33</sup> in 1840 which is a book of Arabic and English grammatical exercises together with dialogues, intended for English-speaking students; the *Atlas*, a mapbook intended for scholastic use by F. Brockdorff published in 1835; *Al-Kanz al-Mukhtār* (The selected treasure)<sup>34</sup> a manual of basic geography published in 1833. As for prose, he published in 1839 *Al-Lafif li-Kull Ma'na Zarif* (A collection of elegant thoughts),<sup>35</sup> an elementary Arabic reader and *Al-Ṭaqrīc fī 'l-Badīc* (Persuasion in the art of good style),<sup>36</sup> which is an epitome of *Khizānat al-Adab* (A treasure house of literature) by Ibn Hījja (d. 837/1434), composed by Shidyāq and published in 1843. He also composed a *Qaṣida* in praise of the Beg of Tunis while he was in Malta but it seems that this was never published by the Arabic press.<sup>37</sup>

Both Shidyāq and Schienz became familiar with Maltese, and the latter had expressed his views to the Government of Malta regarding its potential development into literary Arabic.<sup>38</sup> Strongly opposed by the Maltese Italophiles, he had to abandon the whole idea completely. Yet, an attempt was made by a few Maltese to adopt an Arabo-Latin alphabet to the Maltese language.<sup>39</sup> As a matter of fact, in 1839 the colonial government published an *English and Maltese Reading Book* as part of the syllabus for the government primary schools, making use of this Arabo-Latin alphabet.<sup>40</sup> It may be assumed that the government availed itself of the Malta Arabic press in order to publish this text-book. It is to be noted that at this time no Maltese Arabophil had ever published a work in Arabic, but we know for sure that a few did publish works in Italian and Maltese, the latter experimenting with different alphabet systems. Even then, the British Governor of Malta to dispel any spirit of nationalism among Maltese, had prohibited publications other than for the purpose of distribution in the East.<sup>41</sup> Only the CMS had been granted licences to own and operate printing-presses. A law issued by the colonial government at the beginning of the nineteenth century banning the import of presses to Malta was therefore not adhered and A. Bonnici argued that the government was discriminating against the Maltese by allowing foreign missions to operate presses.<sup>42</sup>

By 1845 the Malta Arabic press was dismantled and shipped to Beirut.<sup>43</sup> The political situation in Beirut became favourable for the Protestant missionaries and soon printing in Arabic was resumed. In 1848, Shidyāq left Malta, thus ending his career as a lecturer at the University of Malta. He went to London to terminate the translation of the Bible. The work was long and laborious and soon after he finished the translation left for Tunis through France and Italy.

In Tunis he wrote a book on his travels and experiences in Malta and the European cities. The work entitled *Kitāb al-Rihla 'l-Mawsūma bil-Wāsiṭa ilā Ma'rifat Malta wa Kashf al-Mukhabbā' an Funūn Ūrubā* was published first in Tunis in 1866, and then edited in Istanbul in 1881.<sup>44</sup> Away from Europe was an opportunity for

Shidyāq to look at his past life with a more critical eye. He had enough of missionary activity in Malta and was disillusioned with several unfulfilled promises by missionary activists, Arabophiles in Malta and Arabists in London. In his book Shidyāq describes social life in the cities in general. The tone was sometimes mockery and scorn of western (Christian) customs and ethics. With Malta, he was uncomplimentary making several contemptuous comments on their religion and culture. On the other hand, his remarks on the Maltese language are historically interesting. There are observations on phonological shifts and syntactic behaviour the rules of which are compared with Classical Arabic. It was during his stay in Tunis that he contemplated to abandon Christianity and embrace Islam.

Shidyāq's ornate style derives from his early education in Egypt where he met the most eminent professors of the day. His literary career started in Malta and the works he completed at this time lack the stylistic force of his later works composed at the time when he became a prominent author and journalist in Tunis and Istanbul.

The Arabic press in Malta had a brief but active lifespan, producing both religious and non-religious works for almost twenty-three years. Apparently, no one was able to conduct publications until the American board decided to hire Ahmad Fāris al-Shidyāq under the supervision of Christoph Friedrich Schlienz.<sup>45</sup> Shidyāq, as it seems, had practical control of all the publications. Although it may be argued that Shidyāq's contribution to literary Arabic while in Malta is minimal and perhaps insignificant the Malta Arabic press, nonetheless, has historically linked the West and the East and played an important religious-political role until it found its way back to Beirut.

1 For full information on Shidyāq, see Mohammed b. Alwan, "Ahmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq and the West" Unpublished dissertation, Indiana University, 1970; also, see Geoffrey Roper "Arabic Printing in Malta 1825–1845: Its history and its place in the development of print culture in the Arab Middle East" unpublished dissertation, University of Durham, 1988.

2 According to Hanna al-Fakhūri, Shidyāq came to Malta in 1834; see *Tārīkh al-Adab al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: Maṭbaʿat al-Bulusiyya, 1951) pp. 1040–1. This date seems to be somewhat late since Shidyāq had already published his first work there in 1833. Yet this date does not correspond to the 1834, which Shidyāq reports in his *Wasīta fī Maʾrifat Ahwāl Maṭta* p. 3. There may be two possible answers for this confusion; either Shidyāq sent the *Khabariyyat* for publication in Malta while he was in Egypt or mistook the year in his *Wasīta*.

3 "There is at present an order of Government here against the press being employed for other purposes than that of printing for distribution in the East"; see, Antonio Cremona, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli u Żminijietu* (Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975), p. 136. See also Hilda I. Lee, *Malta 1813–1914. A Study in Constitutional and Strategic Development* (Malta: Progress Press, 1972), p. 8.

4 The little island was regarded as a convenient base for extending operations in all directions. "From this commanding station, Christians have easy access, in their efforts to raise and propagate the faith, to important position of three continents of the Old World . . ."; see, Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society* Volume 1 (London: CMS, 1899), p. 219.

5 In 1831, 2,500 copies of the New Testament in Modern Armenian were printed with a revised edition; see Margaret T. Hills, "Language of the Near East 1831–1860" MS. Missionary Research Library American Bible Society, New York 1964, Part 111–F. p. 68.

6 For further details concerning the missionaries' activities in Malta; see, Dun Karm<sup>5</sup> Sant, *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti 1810–1850* Malta: University of Malta, 1975.

7 Jurjē Zaydān, *Ta' rīkh Adāb al-Lughat al-ʿArabiyya* Volume 4 (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1957), p. 45. W.E. Strong has remarked that: "Rev. Temple brought to Malta in 1822 the first press and font of type ever seen there." *The Story of the American Board* (Boston, Mass.: The Pilgrim Press, c. 1910), p. 85.

- 8 Kathleen Cann, BFBS (London) 10th October, 1973.
- 9 M.B. Alwan's statement concerning Shidyāq's appointment as a manager of the Arabic press is incorrect; "Jews in Arabic Literature 1830–1914" *Al-ʿArabiyya* 11, iv (1978): 48.
- 10 Schlienz, in sixteen years sent out from the Malta Press hundreds of thousands of scriptural texts in Italian, Maltese, Modern Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Amharic. E. Stock, *op. cit.* p. 349.
- 11 British Museum Library (=BML) No. T.2110; 24 pages.
- 12 BML No. 14500.D.13; 180 pages.
- 13 BML No. 14500.aa.25; 19 pages.
- 14 BML No. 14500.b.5 and 11; 380 pages.
- 15 BML No. 14500.aa. 35/11; 48 pages.
- 16 BML No. T.2110, no. 14505. C.2b.; 118 pages.
- 17BML No. T.2110; 24 pages.
- 18 The *Biblia Sacra* was published in three Volumes in Rome by the Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide in 1671. It was edited from several Arabic MSS. and compared with the original Hebrew & Greek by Sarkis al-Rizzī, the Maronite Archbishop of Damascus in 1624 in Rome. It was also edited by his assistant Philip Guadagnolo from 1647 to 1650. Further revision was entrusted to Abraham Ecchellensis and Louis Maracci in 1664; see, T.H. Darlow & H.F. Moule (eds), *Historical Catalogue of the printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Vol. 2, pt. 1 (London: Bible House, 1911), pp. 66, 70.
- 19 BML No. 14505.c 15; 236 pages.
- 20 BML No. 14505.c.2; 373 pages.
- 21 A.G. Karam is of the opinion that Shidyāq joined the Protestant Church not in Malta but in Beirut as early as 1825; see, "Fāris al-Shidyāq" *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition) Volume 2: 801. Karam does not mention in his article the work *Khabariyyāt As ʿad al-Shidyāq* published in Malta in 1833.
- 22 Correspondence, 15 November, 1972.
- 23 BML No. 14500.aa.35; 22 pages.
- 24 BML No. 14533.a.11; 349 pages.
- 25 The information came in a personal communication from the archivist and librarian, Arthur E. Barker (26th October, 1973). According to him, the information came from the Minute Books of the SPCK's Foreign Translation Committee. No archival number was provided.
- 26 D. Agius, *The Study of Arabic in Malta: 1632 ti 1915* (Louvain: Orientaliste, 1990) p. 27.
- 27 A.J. Arberry, "Fresh light on Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq" *Islamic Culture* 26, i (1952): 164.
- 28 BML No. 14546.f.1.
- 29 BML No. 14593.b.2, 3,; 317 pages.
- 30 J. Manash, "Matālib fi baḥth al-matālib" *Al-Mashriq* 3 (1900): 1077; "Al-Mutaṭarrifāt fī ḥayāt al-Sayyid Jarmānūs Farḥāt" *Al-Mashriq* 7 (1904): 105, 149, 210; I. Kratschkowsky-A.G. Karam, "Farḥāt" *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition) Volume 2: 795.
- 31 BML No. 14593.c.33; 123 pages.
- 32 BML No. 14586.e.7., 104 pages.
- 33 BML No. 14586.d.7, e1., 188 pages.
- 34 BML No. 14565.b.21 and another copy illustrated No. 14565.b. 14.
- 35 BML No. 14586.a.15; 2 pages.
- 36 Chester Beatty Library MS 4099; 177 pages.
- 37 Heinrich Lebrecht Fleischer, "Eine neurarabische *Qaṣīde*" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 5(1851): 249–257.
- 38 Christoph Friedrich Schlienz, *Views on the Improvement of the Maltese Language and its Use for the purpose of Education* Malta, 1838.
- 39 The first writing of this kind ever-recorded was in 1824 in a manuscript found by the present writer in Panzavecchia's collection at the archives of the Cathedral, Mdina, Malta; see, D. Agius, "Writing of Maltese in Arabic characters" *Sunday Times of Malta* (25 February, 1973): 10.
- 40 The Arabo-Latin alphabet represented a mixture of Arabic and Latin letters in one alphabet. The Arabic symbols were used for sounds that could not be represented by the Latin script; see J. Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (Malta: University of Malta, 1961) pp. 82–101b.
- 41 H.I. Lee, *op. cit.* p. 81.
- 42 Arthur Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta* Volume 3 (Malta: Veritas Press, 1975) p. 191.

43 Both J. Zaydān and I.A. Saliba quote 1834; see: J. Zaydān, *op. cit.* p. 45; I.A. Saliba, "The Bible in Arabic: The 19th Century Protestant translation" *Muslim World* 65, iv (1975): 254. The date 1834 is definitely incorrect because books were still being published at the Malta Press after that date. See, G. Roper, *op. cit.* pp. 168, 256.

44 Some parts of this work were translated by Pierre Cachia in the *Maltese Folklore Review* 1, i–iii (1962–66): 62–69; 110–116; 232–243.

45 "Rev. Schlienzy, whose acquirements and taste in oriental languages render him a very valuable co-adjutor in this department, as well as in the superintendence of the printing of the Arabic tracts;" A. Cremona, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli* pp. 136–7.