

A Document Regarding the Conditions Required for Permission to Migrate from the Syrian Province of the Ottoman Empire to the Cape Colony

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Context

The following document is located in the State Archives of the Turkish Presidency and has the serial number (COA), DH.MUİ., 79/31-3.¹ The document was prepared on 7th of Rabi' al-Awwal, Year 1328 (Hijri calendar), March 6, 1326 (Rumi calendar) or March 19, 1910, according to the Gregorian calendar. It was prepared to be sent to the Ministry of Interior (*dāhiliyye nezāreti*) via the Consular Affairs Branch (*umūr-ı şehbenderi şu 'besi*), which is a sub-branch of the General Directorate of Consular, Commercial and Mixed Legal Affairs (*umūr-ı şehbenderi ve ticārī ve hukuk-ı muhteliğe müdiriyyet-i 'umūmiyyesi*), and signed by the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ohannes Pasha (Kouyoumdjian). Ohannes Pasha, an Ottoman bureaucrat of Armenian origin, served as Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs and later (1912-1915) as Governor of Mount Lebanon, playing a significant role in the administration of the region.²

The document outlines the requirements that Syrians wishing to go to the British Cape Colony had to meet, and the date indicates that it was written just before the establishment of the Union of South Africa in May 1910. Although it was prepared to inform Ottoman subjects about the increasingly stringent immigration conditions in the colony, it is noteworthy because it was directly addressed to the subjects residing in the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire and because of the conditions it contained.

According to the document, those wishing to go to the British Cape Colony were required to speak a European language, be literate enough to sign their names, or be familiar with Polish, and possess good moral character. Although Cape Colony was a British colony at the beginning of the 20th century, a substantial proportion of the population was of British and Dutch (Afrikaner) descent, making the requirement of knowing a European language understandable. However, the requirement of “familiarity with

¹ T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri, Osmanlı Arşivi (COA), DH.MUİ., 79/31-3, “İngiltere’ye ait Güney Afrika’daki Kap müstemlekesine hicret etmek isteyenlerin hangi şartları haiz olması gerektiği”, 7 Rebî’ülevvel 1328 / 6 Mart 1326 (19 Mart 1910).

² Selim Deringil, “The Land of Polite Fictions: The Tanzimat State and Mount Lebanon” 1860 *Histoires et mémoires d’un conflit*, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth, University of Balamand, Institut français du Proche-Orient, Beirut, 2015, 33-47.

Polish” may indicate selective criteria on behalf of non-Muslims in general or Jews in particular.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Polish lands had not constituted an independent state, and were divided among the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and German empires.³ The Ashkenazi Jewish population inhabiting these territories, and the broader Pale of Settlement under Russian rule, numbered several million and was overwhelmingly Yiddish-speaking, although assimilated or integrated segments of this population were also conversant in German or Polish.⁴ The requirement of a “European language” in contemporary British colonial immigration legislation was, in practice, a flexible category left to the examining officer's discretion rather than a fixed list of languages, and was used elsewhere in the British Empire to exclude undesired immigrants while nominally avoiding explicit racial criteria.⁵ The Cape Colony's own Immigration Restriction Act of 1902 required prospective immigrants to write out an application in a European language of the officer's choosing, a provision designed to restrict both migration from Britain's Asian colonies and Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe.⁶

Cape Immigration Act No. 30 of 1906 explicitly extended literacy testing in a European language to restrict the entry of Indian and other Asian immigrants. The mention of “Polish” in this Ottoman document likely reflects a consolidated administrative translation or conflation of these Eastern European linguistic exemptions (encompassing Yiddish, Polish, and Russian dialect speakers from the Pale of Settlement) transmitted via British diplomatic channels to the British Embassy in Istanbul. South African immigration officials of the period had their own informal shorthand for this population: Polish and Russian Jews were commonly referred to as “Peruvians,” a category kept administratively distinct from “Syrian” or “Arabian” migrants.⁷ For Ottoman Syrian

³ Gershon Bacon, “Poland: Poland from 1795 to 1939,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, February 12, 2010, <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/18>.

⁴ Bacon, “Poland: Poland from 1795 to 1939.”

⁵ William Pimlott, “The Yiddish Press and the Making of South African Jewry in the British World: Exclusion, Libel, and Jewish Nationalism, 1890–1914,” *Jewish Historical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2023): 10.

⁶ Pimlott, “The Yiddish Press and the Making of South African Jewry in the British World”.

⁷ Andrew McDonald, “Colonial Trespassers in the Making of South Africa's International Borders, 1900 to c. 1950,” PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2012, 136.

subjects (many of whom were Christian Maronites or Levantine traders) this nuance was pivotal: while the test was designed to manage Eastern European migration, its selective enforcement posed an immediate barrier to non-European Levantines unless they possessed formal European language instruction.⁸ After the establishment of the Union of South Africa in May 1910, the Immigrants Regulation Act No. 22 of 1913 extended an equivalent education and literacy test across the Union, effectively closing off further Indian immigration except for the wives and minor children of already-resident Indians.⁹ The present document, dated within months of the Union's establishment, should accordingly be read within this broader trajectory of increasingly restrictive and selectively administered immigration legislation in British South Africa.

Studies show that there was a significant migration from the Syrian province to other countries, particularly to America via Alexandria, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries due to economic and social reasons. For example, it has been recorded that Catholic/Maronite Christians migrated from the Lebanon region, which was part of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ Port arrival statistics for Cape Town and Durban between 1898 and 1910 record some 4,500 migrants classified as "Arabians," a category that likely included Lebanese, Syrian, and other Ottoman subjects.¹¹ This is consistent with the broader historical process by which South African "white" identity came to encompass not only English- and Afrikaans-speakers but also Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe, Greeks, Portuguese from Madeira

⁸ Andrew McDonald, "Colonial Trespassers in the Making of South Africa's International Borders, 1900 to c. 1950", PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2012.

⁹ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, "False Fathers and False Sons: Immigration Officials in Cape Town, Documents and Verifying Minor Sons from India in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Kronos* 40, no. 1 (2014); South African History Online, "Indian South Africans Timeline 1900–1909," accessed July 31, 2026, <https://sahistory.org.za/article/indian-south-africans-timeline-1900-1909>.

¹⁰ Kazım Baycar, "Amerika'ya Göç Eden Osmanlı Suriyelileri ve Yeni Topluma Entegrasyon Süreçleri, 1870-1914," *History Studies: International Journal of History* 10, no. 7 (2018): 103-126. On the push factors behind emigration from Mt. Lebanon in this period, more broadly the 1860 Druze-Marionite violence, the decline of the silk trade after the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal, and the 1907 extension of conscription to Christians previously exempt from Ottoman military service; see also Amy E. Rowe, "A Trace of Arabic in Granite: Lebanese Migration to the Green Mountains, 1890–1940," *Vermont History* 76, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2008): 97-98, 111-112.

¹¹ McDonald, "Colonial Trespassers," 22-23, n. 90.

and Mozambique, and Lebanese; while East Asian and some Middle Eastern populations remained more ambiguously positioned within these racial classifications.¹² This Alexandria route is further corroborated by an earlier archival document, dated 17 Rabi' al-Thani 1307 [11 December 1889], concerning Syrians returning from America who obtained cheap *tezkires* in Alexandria and continued their journey without a passport. This practice is noted as both contrary to regulations and detrimental to the revenue of the consulate.¹³ To the best of our knowledge, this is among the earliest instances in the Ottoman archival record in which the term “Suriyeliler” (Syrians) appears as a collective designation. It should be noted tentatively, as a more exhaustive search of the relevant archival fonds may well reveal earlier occurrences.

Studies on Ottoman citizens who migrated to South Africa highlight Ebubekir Efendi, who was sent by Sultan Abdulaziz in 1862 at the request of the British consulate to resolve religious disputes among Muslims; his arrival is credited with familiarizing Cape Muslims with religious practices in the Ottoman Empire, which led to an increase in pilgrimage to Mecca and to imams travelling abroad for training¹⁴. However, detailed studies on non-Muslim Ottoman immigrants are quite lacking in the literature. Nevertheless, there is some information suggesting that Lebanese Christians or Ottoman subjects of Jewish, Armenian, and Greek origin migrated to the Cape and Transvaal provinces of South Africa in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This document is an important source for researchers wishing to investigate these issues.¹⁵

¹² David M. Gordon, *Apartheid in South Africa: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017), 3.

¹³ BOA, DH.MKT, 1680/143.

¹⁴ Halim Gençöglü, *Güney Afrika'da Osmanlı İzleri*, İstanbul: Tezkire Yayıncılık, 2016. See also T. R. H. Davenport and Christopher Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 5th ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), 687.

¹⁵ Cecile Yazbek, “Albinos in the Laager – Being Lebanese in South Africa,” Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, June 21, 2016, <https://lebanesestudies.ncsu.edu/news/2016/06/21/albinos-in-the-laager-being-lebanese-in-south-africa/>; World Lebanese Cultural Union (WLCU), “The Struggle of the Christian Lebanese for Land Ownership in South Africa,” October 26, 2013, <https://wlcui.com/2013/10/26/the-history-of-the-south-african-lebanese-the-struggle-of-the-christian-lebanese-for-land-ownership-in-south-africa/>. A scholarly account corroborating this pattern can be found in Amy E. Rowe, “A Trace

Transcription

bāb-ı 'ālī //

dāhiliyye nezāret-i celilesine //

nezāret-i umūr-ı hāriciyye //

umūr-ı şehbenderī ve ticārī ve hukuk-ı muhtelite müdiriyyet-i

'umūmiyyesi //

umūr-ı şehbenderī şu 'besi //

'aded 25 //

Afrika-yı cenūbideki İngiliz müstemlekesine // muhāceret idecek Sūriyyeliler hakkında // devletlü efendim hazretleri // İngiltere hükümetiniñ Afrika-yı cenūbide kā'in Kāp müstemlekesine hicret itmek isteyen Sūriyyeliler hükümet-i mahalliyyece mevzū 'ı kânūn mūcibince // Avrupa lisānlarından birini tekellüm itmeleri ve vāz 'ı imzā idecek derecede yazabilmeleri veyāhūt Leh lisānına āšinā ve hūsn-i ahlāk aşhābından // olmaları iktizā idüb şerā 'it-i maṭlūbeyi hā'iz olmayanlarıñ duhūline mūmāna 'at idildigi Londra sefāret-i seniyyesinden iş 'ār buyurulmuş olmağla // keyfiyyetiñ Sūriyye vilāyetine tebliği huşuşuna himem-i 'āliyye-i nezāret-penāhileri derkār buyurulmak bābında emr-ü fermān hazret-i men lehū'l-emriñdir // fī 7 Rebī 'ülevvel sene 328 ve fī 6 Mart sene 326 // hāriciyye nāzırı nāmına müsteşār // bendeniz //

of Arabic in Granite: Lebanese Migration to the Green Mountains, 1890–1940,” *Vermont History* 76, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2008): 99, which records a Vermont Lebanese family whose matriarch was born in South Africa to Lebanese immigrant parents before the family returned to Mt. Lebanon in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Translation

To the Sublime Ministry of the Interior

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

General Directorate of Consular Affairs and Mixed Commercial and Legal Affairs

Consular Affairs Branch

Number 25

Regarding the Syrians who will emigrate to the British colony in Southern Africa

Your Excellency,

Syrians who wish to emigrate to the British Cape Colony in southern Africa must, according to the law established by the local government, speak one of the European languages, be able to write well enough to sign documents, or be familiar with the Polish language and possess good morals. It has been reported from our Sublime Embassy in London that those who do not meet these requirements will not be allowed to enter. I request that your high ministry exert its supreme efforts to communicate this situation to the Province of Syria. The command and decree belong to His Excellency, the one who holds authority.

Dated 6 March 1326 and 7 Rabi' al-awwal 1328

On behalf of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Undersecretary,

Your humble servant,

Ohannes

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