Threads of the Conspiracy — The Beginning with Napoleon: France’s Early Attempts to Settle Jews in Palestine



France was not removed from the early European ideas that linked Jews and Palestine within broader political and strategic projects. By the late eighteenth century, proposals had emerged that envisioned benefiting from Jewish settlement in Palestine or securing Jewish support for France, within the context of rivalry among European powers and the growing imperial interests in the eastern Mediterranean.

During the siege of Acre in 1799, reports circulated in Europe of an appeal attributed to Napoleon and addressed to the Jews. On May 22, 1799, the French newspaper *Le Moniteur Universel* published a report stating that Bonaparte had issued a proclamation calling on the Jews of Asia and Africa to rally under his banner in order to “re-establish ancient Jerusalem.” In the decades that followed, a

longer text attributed to Napoleon circulated, bearing the date April 20, 1799. The authenticity of this text, however, remains disputed among historians, and no authenticated original has been found in the archives of the French campaign.

The widely circulated text attributed to Napoleon states:

> “Providence, which has sent me here at the head of this army, has made justice my guide and entrusted victory to my hands. It has made Jerusalem its headquarters, and will soon establish it in Damascus, whose proximity to the land of David is no longer a cause for fear.”

The text attributed to Napoleon goes on to address the Jews as the “rightful heirs of Palestine,” calling on them to support his campaign and to work toward what the text portrays as the restoration of their homeland. It also urges them to strengthen and preserve their national existence in the face of the ambitions of rival powers, so that they might become, according to the wording of the text, “the true masters of their country.”

Some historians and researchers have linked the reports surrounding this appeal to broader strategic objectives of the French campaign, including the possibility of using a population loyal to France in Palestine to form a human and geographical barrier between Egypt and Syria. According to this interpretation, such a presence could have served French ambitions by helping consolidate French influence in both regions, while also creating a buffer zone aligned with French imperial interests. This interpretation, however, remains tied to the wider debate over the nature of the project attributed to Napoleon and the extent to which it ever developed into a practical plan.

Napoleon’s campaign in Palestine and Syria also formed part of a broader confrontation with Britain. By expanding its influence across the eastern Mediterranean, France sought to strike at British interests and threaten the communication and trade routes linking Britain to its possessions in India and Asia.

Some historical accounts also suggest that Napoleon may have been interested in winning over Haim Farhi, an influential Jewish financial adviser in Acre and one of the leading associates of Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar. Farhi played an important role in the administration of the city, the organization of its defenses, and the securing of its supplies during the French siege. Some interpretations suggest that winning his support could have weakened Acre’s defenses.