

Whatever abuses the *amiras* may have committed, they functioned as defenders of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Patriarchate and of the *status quo* of the *millet*, which was threatened by the efforts of Catholic priests and Protestant missionaries, who began to gain converts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Conversion was a political issue within the Ottoman Empire: the French (and to a lesser degree the Austrian) ambassadors championed the Catholic cause, the British diplomats defended Protestantism, while the Armenian national church had no foreign power to support it. However, the Ottoman policy was to stabilize the *millet* system by supporting the Patriarchate, and the *amiras* were the cutting edge of this policy. Their own values and interests within the *millet* were in perfect accord with Ottoman policy, and this coincidence made the *amiras* formidable opponents. Even the powerful French ambassador in Istanbul feared their enmity, as reported in his letter to the Foreign Minister concerning his efforts to advance the cause of Catholicism: "... éviter ... le double inconvénient d'attirer gratuitement sur moi seul l'inimitié fort redoutable des *sarafs* arméniens et de tous les turcs influents qu'ils ont sus gagner à leur cause..."¹²² Clearly, the *sarraf-amiras* must have enjoyed the full support of Ottoman governing circles in their opposition to Catholic and Protestant inroads.

Amiras believed that the survival of the Armenian nation depended on the continued existence and strength of the church. They defended the church whenever the institution came under attack. Several times, when the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem was on the verge of losing its centuries-old rights on various places in the Holy City, *amiras* came to its rescue. Although the Patriarchate in Jerusalem was equal to its counterpart in Istanbul in the Armenian church hierarchy, the latter enjoyed both moral and political-administrative superiority. Yet, any attack on the Patriarchate of Jerusalem would hurt the Armenian church in general, and the central institution of the *millet* in Istanbul, in particular.

During Ottoman rule over Palestine, Latins and Greeks tried to dislodge Armenians whenever the time was thought opportune to take such steps. For example, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem faced such a danger in

¹²² *Archives des Affaires Etrangères*, Paris, Correspondence Diplomatique, Turquie, vol. 284 (October-December 1841), p. 14.