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***Between Arab Nationalism and Zionism: Fascist Politics and  
Propaganda in the Middle East in the 1930s***

**Abstract:** *This article examines the ambiguous and often fraught relationship between the Fascist regime and nationalist movements in areas under British direct and indirect administration; it will focus primarily on the political and ideological relationship between Italy and Arab nationalist forces, but will also outline the regime's seemingly contradictory overtures to the Zionist Revisionist movement. The evidence examined in this article illustrates that Mussolini's ambition to restore Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean through propaganda and political contacts, and to compete with the European imperial powers of the time was not supported by a coherent imperial strategy, but reacted to diverse stimuli and opportunities that arose over time.*

**Keywords:** Fascism; Arab Nationalism; Zionism; Shakib Arslan; Egypt.

*Introduction*

During the last twenty years, relations between Axis forces and political movements and national governments in the Arab Middle East have received considerable attention from diplomatic, political, military and cultural historians. Traditional historiography of Fascist Italy has located the development of Italian-Arab relations within the broader context of Fascist foreign policy, imperial expansion and, ultimately, appeasement. There is to date a well-recognised division between the Italian school, which downplays Mussolini's imperial challenge and highlights his search for an understanding with Britain, and British and North American historians who have emphasised the regime's

expansionist drive and its political and ideological dimensions.<sup>1</sup> However, broader discussions over the nature and directions of the regime's foreign policy have limited the examination of more specific aspects of Fascist policy in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Such omissions have been recently addressed by new scholarly research that has examined strategies and means of engagement of Fascist Italy with nations and governments in the Arab Middle East, repositioning the region at the centre of both the regime's foreign relations and Fascist historiography.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Work by Italian historians notably includes R. DE FELICE, *Mussolini il duce. I. Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*, Torino, Einaudi, 1974; R. DE FELICE, *Arabi e Medio Oriente nella strategia politica di guerra di Mussolini (1940-1943)*, in «Storia Contemporanea», XVII, 6, dicembre 1986, pp. 1255-1359; R. QUARTARARO, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino. La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940*, Roma, Bonacci, 1980; R. QUARTARARO, *Imperial Defence in the Mediterranean on the Eve of the Ethiopian Crisis (July-October 1935)*, in «The Historical Journal», XX, 1, March 1977, pp. 185-220; S. FABEL, *Il fascio, la svastica e la mezzaluna*, Milano, Mursia, 2002. For British and American historiography, see, for example, R.J.B. BOSWORTH, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism*, London, Arnold, 1998; R. MALLETT, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; M. KNOX, *Mussolini Unleashed 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982; M. KNOX, *The Fascist Regime, its Foreign Policy and its Wars: An "Anti-Fascist" Orthodoxy?*, in «Contemporary European History», IV, 3, November 1995, pp. 346-365; M. KNOX, *Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, in «The Journal of Modern History», LVI, 1, March 1984, pp. 1-57; J. PETERSEN, *La politica estera del fascismo come problema storiografico*, in «Storia Contemporanea», III, 4, dicembre 1972, pp. 661-706.

<sup>2</sup> N. ARIELLI, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-40*, London/New York, Palgrave, 2010; N. ARIELLI, *Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936-39*, in «British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies», XXXV, 2, December 2008, pp. 187-204; M. FIORE, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922-1940*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010; M. FIORE, *La guerra delle parole. La propaganda anti-inglese di Radio Bari e le contromisure britanniche (1935-1940)*, in «Nuova Storia Contemporanea», XV, 1, gennaio-febbraio 2011, pp. 65-86; M. WILLIAMS, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad. Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935-1940*, London, Routledge, 2006; M. WILLIAMS, *Mussolini's Secret War in the Mediterranean and the Middle East: Italian Intelligence and the British Response*, in «Intelligence and National Security», XXII, 6, December 2007, pp. 881-904.

This article builds on existing literature and available documentation to examine perceived ideological and political affinities that during the 1930s and early 1940s underpinned the relations between nationalist forces and Fascist Italy in the Middle East. It claims that Britain's strong and formalised presence in the region served to further an alliance, albeit a short-lived one, between radical nationalists and Mussolini's regime, in which each side relied on the other to advance its political programmes and objectives. Such an alliance rested on some shared notions of nationalism, and in the case of Egypt especially, on vague anti-democratic and anti-parliamentarian ideas espoused by radical nationalist groups, which had found application in both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. However, co-operation between Arab nationalist forces and the Fascist regime remained broadly a confined phenomenon, and one that clearly illustrates the incoherent nature of Mussolini's policy in the Middle East. If Arab nationalists had initially overlooked Italy's imperialist ambitions, the ruthless repression of the Senussi in Libya and the dramatic events in Abyssinia cast serious doubts over this paradoxical partnership between anti-colonial forces and an aspiring colonial power. It became then apparent that the strengthening of political, military and cultural ties between the Arab nations and Fascist Italy would certainly challenge the presence of much-despised British advisers and authorities in the region; at the same time though, this would open the door to a more brutal form of colonial rule, one that had already shown great contempt for the lives of thousands of Muslims in North and East Africa.

In his examination of Nazi propaganda in the Arab world during the Second World War, Jeffrey Herf makes some insightful claims about the ideological currents that linked Berlin with the Arab world. Much of the literature on the Third Reich's policies and attitudes towards the Middle East has until recently emphasised racial issues that would have prejudiced a long-term alliance between the Nazi regime and Arab nationalist forces.<sup>3</sup> Herf, conversely, outlines reasons for co-operation between Berlin and the Arabs, when political developments in the Middle East, and in particular in Palestine, taught the Germans that «their hatred for the Jews was not unique and that they had at least some soul mates and allies» in the Arab world.<sup>4</sup> Radical anti-Semitism here, just like resentment towards the British in the case of Italy, would constitute the cornerstone of the alliance between Arab and Muslim forces and the Nazi regime, a partnership that went beyond the mere convergence of interests, and required a deeper understanding of ideas, culture and religion on both sides. In the process, Herf claims, «Nazism became less Eurocentric while Arab and Islamic radicalism drew on modern, European totalitarian ideology».<sup>5</sup> Herf's work broadly endorses a traditional narrative of twentieth-century Arab history, which highlights the growing and pervasive influence of Nazi and Fascist ideological constructs and political systems on Arab politicians,

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<sup>3</sup> See F. NICOSIA, *Arab Nationalism and National Socialist Germany, 1933-1939: Ideological and Strategic Incompatibility*, in «International Journal of Middle East Studies», XII, 3, November 1980, pp. 351-372; F. NICOSIA, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> J. HERF, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

intellectuals and public opinions. However, recent studies have reconsidered this narrative and brought to the surface the hitherto silent liberal voices, the voices that continued to express with vigour their belief in the virtue of a democratic political system and a free society.<sup>6</sup> When assessing Arab relations with Fascist Italy during the 1930s, the political and ideological synthesis described by Herf does not appear to be a dominant attribute, nor does it feature prominently in Fascist propaganda in the Arabic language. Instead, Italian claims and associations in the Mediterranean and the Middle East rested upon perceived strong historical and cultural ties, on vague notions of nationalism and nationhood, and on the shared, and highly disputable as far as Italy was concerned, narrative of the oppressed against the oppressor. But the differences between Western European nationalism and the Arab experience were emphasised by some nationalist commentators. Emir Shakib Arslan, who flirted with Fascist Italy in the mid-1930s, highlighted the elements that set apart Arab and Western nationalisms, with the latter bent on conquest, driven by war and «tormented by greed and desire of domination».<sup>7</sup> In direct contrast, Arslan believed that Oriental nationalism was «shaped by the Islamic doctrine which has given its followers moral purpose, discipline and has helped develop a society based on fraternity and justice»; a society

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, I. GERSHONI - J. JANKOWSKI, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship versus Democracy in the 1930s*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010; G. NORDBRUCH, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon: The Ambivalence of the German Option, 1933-1945*, London, Routledge, 2009; P. WIEN, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian and Pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932-1941*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> S. ARSLAN, *Nationalisme Arabe et nationalisme occidental*, in «La Nation Arabe», II, Jouillet-Aout-Septembre 1932, p. 36.

that shies away from conquest and expansion but actively seeks to redress old injustices.<sup>8</sup>

For centuries, Italy and her political predecessors had been regarded as key players in diplomatic and commercial affairs connecting countries around the Mediterranean basin. Since the days of the Venetian republic, Italian had become the foremost international language for political interactions and commercial transactions outside the Ottoman empire. The French, in their first attempt to reinforce cultural and economic relations with the Ottoman Middle East, recognised the significant position attained by Italy during its long years of trading partnership with the Ottoman empire, and often employed Italian emissaries and business agents as French consular representatives in the region.<sup>9</sup> This Mediterranean vocation remained central to the political identity and aspirations of liberal Italy and fostered sentiments of national and political empathy towards the claim of the emerging nationalist movements in the Levant, Middle East and North Africa. In the wake of the Balfour Declaration and of the Paris Peace conference of 1919 – whose outcomes had deeply disappointed both Italian and Arab nationalists, as the former had wished for territorial gains in Europe and Africa, the latter had hoped for the creation of a large independent Arab state – politicians and intellectuals of Liberal Italy lent a sympathetic ear to the claims and grievances conveyed by Arab nationalists touring Europe; the nationalist cause, not only Arab but also Indian, harnessed support from the Vatican, the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See M. BURROWS, “*Mission Civilisatrice*”: *French Cultural Policy in the Middle East, 1860-1914*, in «The Historical Journal», XXIX, 1, March 1986, p.111.

Italian government, the Italian Socialist Party, the Italian nationalists and the Fascist movement. Mussolini's newspaper «Popolo d'Italia» directly addressed the increasing tension between Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine and claimed to be deliberately fanning Arab nationalist flames.

In the period leading up to Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922, pro-Arab and anti-imperialist sentiments had come to dominate the Fascist discourse on foreign policy, sentiments that reflected the genesis of the Fascist movement as synthesis of existing cultural, political and artistic currents; of particular interest for the purpose of this article is the myth of Italy as a "proletarian" nation that would no longer submit to the hegemony of plutocratic "capitalist" ones such as Britain and France. The so-called "Fascists of the first hour" as well as the nationalists and the futurists were keen to display solidarity with other nations whose aspirations to independence had been quashed by the imperial armies and administrators of Britain and France. But as mentioned before, such feelings of solidarity were not confined to the politics and rhetoric of opposition movements; indeed they were shared and endorsed by the Liberal government who had refused to recognise the establishment of a British protectorate in Egypt at the outbreak of the First World War and had supported the emerging nationalist movement in Egypt through the words and activities of the Italian communities in Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said; so strong had become the bond between Egyptian nationalists and the government of Italy, some historians claim, that during the numerous public demonstrations

that took place in Egypt between 1920 and 1921, protesters repeatedly hailed Italy.<sup>10</sup>

Support to the Arab nationalist cause that had indeed characterised the foreign policy of Liberal Italy, despite the war in Libya in 1911 with its clear imperialistic connotations, was not abandoned by Mussolini; under the Fascist regime, the development of special relations with nationalist forces in the Arab world became paradoxically central to the policy of Italian expansion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Parallel to this nationalist dimension, the regime's imperialist vocation became evident towards the end of the 1920s. The vague notion of imperialism espoused by the Fascist movement took then clearer and more tangible connotations: it became political and economic expansion into the Balkans and Africa combined with a project of extension of the totalitarian model and reorganisation of Europe and the colonies along a "new order" based on the leadership of the "young nations", Italy and Germany. Central to Mussolini's renewed imperial vocation was Italy's hegemony in the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup>

However, to achieve a position of power in the *mare nostrum*, and to further its political and economic interests in the Middle East and Levant, Italy had to seek an alliance with forces that could challenge the British imperial and mandatory system from within; it needed to ensure the friendship and compliance of Arab nationalists, who in turn would gain the protection of Mussolini's government, the necessary diplomatic and political leverage, and financial and military support, to

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<sup>10</sup> See S. FABEL, *Il fascio, la svastica e la mezzaluna*, Milano, Mursia, 2002, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> See E. GENTILE, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2002, p. 29.



undermine the influence of British administrators. The alliance between Fascist Italy and Arab leaders would be forged mostly by propaganda. The main task awaiting Italian propagandists was to erase the violent colonial record of Italy in North Africa and Ethiopia, and to promote the image of Mussolini as the champion of modern Islam. However, the response generated by Italian propaganda in the Arab world was neither unanimously positive nor proportionate to the efforts made by the Italian government. Suspicion towards the real aims of Mussolini's policy in the Middle East and resentment at his colonial undertaking in Africa dominated the feelings of the majority of the Arab leaders, eventually leaving the success of Italian propaganda confined to limited factions of the nationalist movement.

Notwithstanding Italy's intention to appear as a "Muslim" power, in his intricate effort to exploit the forces of nationalism the *Duce* was also seeking to establish new, more profitable relations with the Zionist movement. In the aftermath of the First World War, the increasing Anglo-Italian rivalry in the Middle East and the policy of *rapprochement* with the Vatican had induced Mussolini to oppose Zionism as an instrument of British intervention in the Middle East. The Balfour Declaration (1917) had allowed the creation of a Jewish National Home in Palestine which was seen as a danger for Italian expansionist designs in the same area. Moreover, the *Duce* and other Italian nationalists began to fear that an influential Zionist movement could act as a rival nationalism and therefore alienate the Italian Jewish community. The Italian historian Renzo De Felice claimed that Mussolini's seemingly contradictory attitude towards Italian Zionism

and international Zionism was in fact underpinned by logic and coherent assumptions. According to this view, the thought that the Zionists harboured feelings of allegiance to two homelands – with a strong preference for Palestine – was deeply disturbing to Mussolini's «monolithic and exclusive concept of homeland», which turned the Italian Zionists «automatically into disagreeable suspects».<sup>12</sup> The *Duce's* perception of international Zionism was more sympathetic, De Felice maintained, and in the 1930s Mussolini saw the Revisionist movement and its most outspoken anti-British leaders as useful allies and a vehicle to disrupt British presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Attempting to reconstruct a more coherent narrative of Mussolini's foreign policy in the Middle East, De Felice concluded that «the Zionist card, just as at a later date the Arab card [...] was for Mussolini a pawn that could also be used in his Mediterranean game».<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, in the early 1930s Mussolini, in search of a more successful approach to the Middle Eastern question and still lacking a coherent long-term policy towards the dominant forces in the Near East, «was determined to maintain (and if possible enhance) his reputation as a friend and protector of the Jews».<sup>14</sup> In the period between 1934 and 1935, the Italian dictator met some of the most charismatic figures of the Zionist movement, assuring them of his support for a Jewish National Home. Attempting to replace British

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<sup>12</sup> R. DE FELICE, *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*, New York, Enigma Books, 2001, p.150.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>14</sup> M. MICHAELIS, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy 1922-1945*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 62.

influence in the region, Mussolini conveyed his desire to champion the creation of a Jewish state small enough to be accepted by the Arabs and that, at the same time, would open the door to Italian influence in Palestine.

*Confronting nationalism in the Arab world*

The Italian regime's casual and short-lived interest in Zionism, and in particular Revisionist Zionism, markedly contrasts with the systematic effort to build a solid partnership with Arab nationalist forces in North Africa and the Levant during the period 1934-1940. It was in the mid-1930s that, whilst flirting with Revisionist Zionism, the Fascist regime began acknowledging claims and grievances of the Arab community in Palestine. The political appreciation of the Palestinian events in 1935 and 1936 circulated within the Italian government illustrates sensitivity to the deepening of racial and religious division that was threatening the political stability of the whole area. The opportunity to attack British conduct in Palestine could not be missed. The Italians perceived the tumultuous circumstances that led to the beginning of the 1936 Arab revolt as the result of a substantially ambiguous policy formulated by the government in London whose ultimate objective was the defence of the imperial interests and the creation of an efficient naval base in Haifa that would host the British Mediterranean fleet. Despite having initially tried to win the sympathy of the Arabs without generating discontent among the Jews, the British government had eventually succumbed to the "influence of the Zionists". According to Italian sources, the very

few concessions granted to the Arab Palestinians were offset by measures adopted in favour of the Jewish community: after the long dispute over the establishment of a legislative council that would take into account Arab grievances, the British authorities in Palestine had endeavoured to regain popularity among the Jews by granting legal status to many of those who had entered Palestine illegally and allowed the new colonists to purchase arms for defence in case of unprovoked aggression.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Arab rebellion of 1936-1939 brought to a sudden end the already fragile relationship between Zionism, and in particular Revisionist Zionism, and the Fascist regime.

In the increasingly violent Arab-Jewish dispute over Palestinian land, the Italian government seems to have taken a fairly explicit position in support of Arab claims. The reason for that is not to be found in an anti-Semitic prejudice motivating the decisions taken in Rome, but in political and strategic considerations: in the eyes of the Italians, a powerful and independent Jewish community in Palestine, and eventually a Jewish state, would provide a solid and permanent base for Britain in the Mediterranean. The arrival of Jewish immigrants was then seen within the context of a deliberately aggressive policy carried out by the Zionist movement with the complicity of the British government, an expedient aiming at reducing the Arabs of Palestine to a numerical minority. Hence, the turbulent and sometimes extreme reaction of the Arab community, through petitions, rallies and protests

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<sup>15</sup> See *Situazione politica in Palestina*, 1935, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, GFM 36/508. Italian captured documents are kept together with material from the German Foreign Ministry, hence their class mark GFM. GFM 36, in particular, are the files photocopied from the Italian Ministry of Popular Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

that were gradually turning into riots. The objective was to defend the Palestinian soil «against the Jewish conquest», obstructing Jewish immigration, placing a veto to land sales and introducing an independent local government. Facing a “mortal threat” to their very existence and an opponent that had found apparent support in the British High Commissioner, the Arabs had begun to defend their rights and the course of events in Palestine was regarded in Rome as a prelude to more dramatic future developments.<sup>16</sup> Italian endorsement of the Arab cause became even more explicit as a clear division of camps gradually emerged both in Europe and in the Middle East. Thus Italian propaganda bluntly presented the Axis coalition as the saviour of the Arab world. In a communiqué issued in the name of the Axis powers and broadcast in English, Italian propagandists claimed:

«The Arab populations of the Levant must be freed from the yoke of their present masters interested only in their capitalistic and imperialistic achievements. [...] Arab patriots in Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Trans Jordan – and all those who have not been contaminated by British gold – know well the consequences of Britain’s rule, they know how much grief and bloodshed Britain has caused in Palestine and in the other Arab countries; finally they know that it is in the interest of Fascist Italy that the Arab nations of the Levant attain their freedom and independence».<sup>17</sup>

The myopic and schizophrenic directions of Italian foreign policy would become evident in the 1930s when despite Italian outright support of Arab nationalist demands, Italy’s prestige in the Arab world was seriously undermined by the war in Abyssinia and by the events in

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<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Comunicato trasmesso in inglese*, undated, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, GFM 36/14.

Libya. The harsh regime imposed in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica by the Italian Governor of Libya, General Pietro Badoglio, was subsequently mitigated by Italo Balbo, appointed as the new Governor in 1933. Pursuing a policy of pacification, Balbo promoted the repatriation of thousands of Cyrenaican exiles from Egypt. At the same time though, he endeavoured to build a strong and large community of Italian nationals in Libya who would one day be able to resist the surge of Arab nationalism.<sup>18</sup> The contradictions of Italian policies in Libya were recognised by nationalist forces in some Arab capitals; Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, noted in his diary on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1939:

«At Baghdad there have been demonstrations against our mass immigration to Libya; they think this nucleus of Italians will break the Arabic preponderance in the Mediterranean. They are right, this is our objective, but the *Duce* wanted me to reassure the minister of Iraq».<sup>19</sup>

In a long editorial that examined Italy's expansionist drive in the Mediterranean and in Africa, «La Nation Arabe» noted in 1931 that within less than twenty years the Italian state had attempted to reclaim 2 million hectares of land in Tripolitania and as much in Cyrenaica to make room for 2 to 3 million of Italian settlers in north Africa.<sup>20</sup>

Italy's colonial ambitions had not gone unnoticed: by 1935, Mussolini's plans for expansion in East and North Africa had become clear. In Palestine, the Jewish press echoed the call for international

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<sup>18</sup> See ARIELLI, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-40*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ciano's Diary, 1937-1943*, London, Phoenix Press, 2002, p.173.

<sup>20</sup> See "Procédés de guerre moyenageux ressuscités per les italiens fascistes", in «La Nation Arabe», I, Avril 1931, p. 9.

sanctions put forward by the British government at the League of Nations; more worryingly for the Italians, Arab newspapers and periodicals voiced Arab solidarity with their Muslim brothers of Abyssinia who were fighting for freedom against another imperialistic European power. Notwithstanding this, officials in Rome were quite certain that, after the first wave of indignation that had seized Arab public opinion against the Abyssinian “adventure” had subsided, Italy would gradually succeed in regaining the trust of the Arab peoples and leadership, eager to find an external champion to their cause. However, they claimed that Britain had plotted to incite the Arabs against Italy exploiting the threat of Italian colonial ambitions. British officials in Palestine, for their part, appeared increasingly puzzled by the influence exerted by the Fascist government over some Arab nationalist circles.

Although often dismissive of the political power and popularity of nationalist and pan-Arab ideas, British officials in London and – especially – in Palestine were weary of the convergence of nationalist forces and Fascist regime, which could progressively and rapidly erode from within Britain’s influence at the periphery of the empire. Police reports and telegrams from British representatives in Palestine were read with growing discomfort at the Foreign and Colonial Offices, and provided often detailed accounts of anti-British propaganda and activities organised by Italian agents and their Arab collaborators.

*Seeking friends among the Arabs: Mussolini and Emir Shakib Arslan*

Emir Shakib Arslan constitutes perhaps one of the most intriguing and controversial linkages between Fascist Italy and nationalist circles in the Arab world. His name had appeared very frequently in weekly and monthly intelligence and police reports sent from Palestine to London since 1934, when the Foreign Office opened a new file containing information on all the most prominent figures in Syrian politics. The assessment of Shakib Arslan's activities is both bitter and contemptuous. «La nation arabe», the publication created in Geneva by Shakib Arslan in 1930, was described as «an incendiary and puerile journal»; the portrayal of Arslan was certainly not more flattering, he was described as «intelligent, self-seeking, treacherous».<sup>21</sup> In truth, during the course of his life and career, Shakib Arslan remained committed to the cause of Islamic, rather than Arab, unity. To this end, he had supported the partnership with the Turks, while serving as a member of the Ottoman Parliament between 1913 and 1918; at the outbreak of the First World War, he had been an outspoken supporter of the alliance between Istanbul and Germany. His hostility towards British and French presence in the Levant led him to seek support in the most unusual quarter; his praise of the Italian Fascist regime, albeit short-lived, severely undermined his credibility among mainstream Arab nationalists. Shakib Arslan, however, believed that Fascist Italy posed less of a threat to Islamic unity than Britain and France, the major European colonial powers; furthermore, he felt that Mussolini's regime

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<sup>21</sup> *Record of Leading Personalities in Syria*, August 26, 1936, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, FO 371/20018/E5398/209/89.



might prove a useful ally in the fight to dismantle the much-reviled Mandate system.

A writer, journalist, political activist and diplomat, Shakib Arslan is representative of a generation of Arabs born and brought up under the Ottoman Empire and who were suddenly confronting the emergence of a powerful Arab nationalist movement and new concepts of self-determination and nation state. Born in 1869 in a Lebanese village and member of a Druze family (he was the grandfather of Druze leader and Lebanese politician Walid Jumblatt), Shakib Arslan received a broad education at the Christian preparatory school and subsequently completed his studies in Islamic sciences and Ottoman Turkish at the governmental institution of *Madrasah al-Sultaniyyah*. His literary talent was rather precocious: at the age of fourteen he saw his first poetry published in Arabic journals, four years later his collection of poems *Prémices* was published as a book. The seven years spent at the Christian Maronite school provided him with access to the intellectual and literary circles of Beirut and Damascus; his flair for writing would help him in his future career as a journalist and politician, gaining respect and admiration as well as criticism for the often ambiguous political stance reflected in his articles and prose. Although he did not take his education to university level, Shakib Arslan enjoyed the acquaintance and protection of some of the most influential political and religious thinkers of his time, like the celebrated Islamic reformer Muhammad Abduh. The idea of Islamic unity was central to Arslan's political vision, for the rise of a strong Islamic power would contain the expansion of Europe into the Arab world.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Arslan, still loyal to the imperial policies of the Ottoman empire and its universal Islamic aspirations, decided to give his personal contribution and joined the Ottoman army. Here, the first of his unwise associations: although many Arabs had initially given their support to the Caliphate in its war against the Western powers, many had also distanced themselves from those Ottoman rulers, like Ahmad Jamal Pasha, whose policy of terror had alienated large sectors of the Syrian opinion to the Ottoman government. Arslan's relation with Jamal Pasha, as twenty years later with Mussolini, generated suspicion and disapproval, by linking him «in the minds of many Arabs to the harsh regime of the most hated of Turks».<sup>22</sup>

During the final years of the war, Arslan was in Istanbul, taking care of his responsibilities in the Ottoman parliament. In 1918 he was sent to Berlin to harness support for the Ottoman cause. But the collapse of the Empire was imminent; in Germany, Arslan learnt of the victory of the Allies and the armistice. He believed it dangerous to return to a British occupied Istanbul and preferred to remain in Europe, travelling from Germany to Switzerland, Russia and Italy always following with great

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<sup>22</sup> W.L. CLEVELAND, *Islam Against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism*, London, Al Saqi Books, 1985, p. 29. A bibliography on Shakib Arslan that would exclude texts in Arabic is rather limited. However, apart from the above quoted monograph, other contributions worth looking are: J. BESSIS, *Chekib Arslan et les mouvements nationalistes au Maghreb*, in «Revue Historique», CCLIX, 526, April-June 1978, pp. 467-489; E. LÉVI-PROVENÇAL, *L'Emir Shakib Arslan (1869-1946)*, in «Cahiers de l'Orient Contemporain», IX-X, 1947-1948, pp. 1-15; G. WIDMER, *Übertragungen aus der neuarabischen Literatur*. III. *Emir Shakib Arslan*, in «Die Welt des Islams. International Journal for the Study of Modern Islam», XIX, 1937. More information on the life and career of Shakib Arslan, as well as translations of articles elsewhere published by the Syrian journalist, are given in the Italian periodical «Oriente Moderno», particularly in the years 1933-1936.

attention the political developments in the Levant and tirelessly campaigning for Syrian independence. Condemned to death in absentia for his role in the Syrian revolution of 1925-1926, Arslan remained in exile in Europe for almost twenty years until 1937, when the French authorities in Syria, attempting to encourage the dialogue with the moderate fringes of the Arab nationalist movement, granted to him and his long time collaborator, Ishan al-Jabiri, permission to make their way back to the country. In Switzerland, his activities received new impetus; with al-Jabiri he recreated the Permanent Delegation of the Syrian-Palestinian Congress and set up office at 21 Glacis de Rive in Geneva, the city that had become the home of the newly-established League of Nations. From his office, Arslan would lobby the League of Nations to harness support for Syrian independence through letters, memoranda and petitions. The flurry of activities generated turned the Syrian-Palestinian Delegation into «a focus for Arab hopes in the interwar years».<sup>23</sup>

During the first years of his European exile, Arslan's political horizon enlarged considerably: until then he had been committed to promoting the interests of a single nation, Syria; now, the scope of his intense political and literary activity had broadened to encompass the issues of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialist struggle. He travelled extensively from Berlin, to Rome and Brussels to preside over, coordinate or simply participate to political protests that increased his popularity among the other Arab exiled and refugees in Europe as well

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<sup>23</sup> P. SEALE, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010, p. 209.

as his compatriots in his homeland. Arslan had, by the early 1930s, defined his “mission” as a leading figure and promoter of a number of cultural and political nationalist movements that were flourishing in the Middle East and North Africa. He employed his talent as a writer to «internationalize the issues facing the Arab-Islamic lands under European domination and to galvanize Arab-Islamic opinion into recognition that only through mutual assistance based on common Islamic bonds could they gain independence and restore the proper social order».<sup>24</sup>

Arslan’s simultaneous engagement on many fronts, however, generated mixed feelings, as some admired his fervour and total dedication to the Arab cause, others were more sceptical and saw him as an ambitious manipulator, a meddler and a political agitator. His previous alliance with some of the most ruthless Ottoman commanders had not been completely forgotten or forgiven; to regain the esteem of many of his earlier followers, Arslan was now determined to put «his words and his pen at the service of the Arab movement and Arab unity, acting as a mediator and, by embracing an impeccable Muslim orthodoxy, he attempted to dispel the mistrust that he might have caused among the Arabs».<sup>25</sup>

Geneva undoubtedly provided a fertile environment for Arslan’s activities; here, the presence of the secretariat of the League of Nations and a large number of political refugees welcome by the Swiss government had contributed to creating an unrivalled forum for world

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<sup>24</sup> CLEVELAND, *Islam Against the West*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> LÉVI-PROVENÇAL, *L’Emir Shakib Arslan*, cit., p.10.

politics as well as a unique centre for the defence of the rights and aspirations of the Arab peoples.<sup>26</sup> Geneva hosted numerous Arab committees and delegations whose ideas were circulated through a number of pamphlets, journals and publications of various nature. It was in Geneva that eventually Shakib Arslan founded in 1930, together with Ishan al-Jabiri, the periodical «La nation arabe», organ of the Syrian-Palestinian delegation in Europe and whose objective was «to present to the Western world the demands of a nation which has projected its civilising light across the darkness of the Middle Ages and the ruins of the Greco-Roman world and thus served as one of the principal agents in the formation of the modern world».<sup>27</sup>

A monthly review of politics, literature, economics and social issues, «La nation arabe» was intended to amplify Arslan's personal engagement in supporting the claims of his people as well as a voice of the whole Arab nation who had recently become aware of the importance of solidarity and common intents in the strive for independence. Between 1930 and 1938, 38 issues of «La nation arabe» were discontinuously published and mostly sponsored by Arslan's personal finances, providing the Syrian writer with invaluable opportunities to cultivate useful contacts in the political establishments of some of the European powers. It was during the years in Geneva and through the pages of «La nation arabe» that Arslan had sought a rapprochement with the Italian government whose violent conquest of Libya and the ruthless regime imposed on the Libyan populations had

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<sup>26</sup> See A. FLEURY, *Le mouvement national arabe à Genève durant l'entre-deux-guerre*, in «Relations Internationales», XIX, Autumn 1979, p. 329.

<sup>27</sup> S. ARSLAN, *Préface*, in «La Nation Arabe», I, Mars 1930, pp.1-2.

caused great dismay among Arab public opinions. When Italy, seeking to rehabilitate its image in the Middle East and North Africa, converted to a more conciliatory attitude towards the Arabs of Libya, Arslan found that the Syrian-Palestinian cause and his own paper could benefit from a precious political and financial support. The new alliance inflicted a severe blow to Arslan's restored credibility among Arab intellectuals, leading him into some of the «most twisted polemics of his career' and subjecting him 'to fierce attacks on his integrity».<sup>28</sup>

Arslan's friendship with Mussolini began in 1933 and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hoped that gaining Arslan's acquiescence would move Italian-Arab relations in a different direction. The brutal repression of the Arab tribes of Libya, and especially the atrocities and summary executions perpetrated in Libya under the stern regime imposed by the Italian Colonel Graziani, had set the rest of the Arab world against Italy. In «La nation arabe», before Arslan's change of mind, had commented on Graziani's repression of the Libyan rebellion: «We do not believe that such measures represent an achievement whatsoever for Italy: on the contrary, they will only serve to inflame hatred and hinder the prosperity of both countries. The Arabs will not be the only ones who will be hurt».<sup>29</sup> In 1934, Shakib Arslan accepted Mussolini's invitation to Rome on condition that Italy softened its policy towards the populations of Libya and allowed those Libyan tribes that had been deported to be repatriated. The effects of the deal that had allegedly been struck in Rome became soon evident. In the

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<sup>28</sup> CLEVELAND, *Islam against the West*, cit., p.144.

<sup>29</sup> S. ARSLAN, *L'action coloniale italienne*, in «La Nation Arab», I, Jouillet 1930, p. 239.

issue of September-October 1934 of «La nation arabe», the tone of Arslan's commentary on Italy's colonial policy is extremely friendly, especially considering the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist tendencies within the Syrian-Palestinian Delegation and the Arab nationalist movement, whose aspirations had always driven Arslan's work. It was not an easy task, but the Syrian journalist seemed to have accepted the challenge to turn Mussolini from the villain of Libya and the ruthless invader of Abyssinia into the champion of modern Islam. "*L'Italie en Erythrée. Comparaisons avec d'autres puissances colonisatrices*" is a manifest praise of Italy's virtues and successes in administrating Abyssinia compared with the despotic yoke the Muslims of other nations, «although more advanced than those of Eritrea», had been brought under.<sup>30</sup> It is legitimate to ask whether the intense rhetoric used by Arslan was skilfully intended to appeal to the emotions of the reader or genuinely reflected the author's Italophile feelings and gratitude for the «wise and fruitful policy adopted by Italy in its East African colony», where Muslims had been awarded seats in the high ranks of the administration, and the Islamic faith and the Arab culture and language were protected under the benevolent Italian patronage. Italy had, according to Arslan, mended its torn relations with the Arabs, the deplorable events of Libya belonged to the past: finally and «luckily the "duce", whose spirit and high feelings did not match the measures

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<sup>30</sup> S. ARSLAN, *L'Italie en Erythrée. Comparaisons avec d'autres puissances colonisatrices*, in «La Nation Arabe», II, Septembre-Octobre 1934, p. 50.

taken, and who had never agreed with foolish initiatives, has without delay put right the harm caused».<sup>31</sup>

Arslan's partnership with Mussolini, whether based on sincere esteem of Italy's conduct in North and East Africa or on convenient convergence of interests, soon produced its fruits. Apart from financial contributions to his precarious publication, Arslan acquired a solid political backing to his campaign against British and French presence in the Middle East. Arslan was most probably aware of the real aims of Italy's foreign policy; he was using Italy to further Arab grievances and aspirations as much as Italy was endorsing the Arab cause to strengthen its prestige and credibility in the Arab world. In a letter published by the Palestinian newspaper «al Moqattan» in 1935 and allegedly addressed to the Mufti of Jerusalem, the Syrian writer declared his satisfaction at the understanding reached with Mussolini, and his trust in the Italian authorities who would "not dare" treat the Arab populations «in the same manner as did France and Great Britain».<sup>32</sup> From the letter it is possible to infer that arrangements for a co-ordinated propaganda campaign had been made between Arslan and Mussolini and that, in case of war, those arrangements were to be executed as soon as possible. The Italian Undersecretariat for Press and Propaganda – later renamed Ministry for Popular Culture – would provide the necessary material for publication, which would also to be distributed to other newspapers in Palestine. Arslan added a twist and sought to transform Italy's colonial adventure in Abyssinia into Italy's

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Extract from «al Moqattan», April 17, 1935, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, FO 371/18925/E2695/2695/65.



triumphal liberation of the Muslims of Abyssinia: «My opinion is this, that we should seize the opportunity of the dispute between Italy and Abyssinia in order to show the Islamic world the evils of the Abyssinians towards the Mohammedans».<sup>33</sup>

*Nationalist and radical movements in Egypt*

The paradoxical relationship between Arab nationalists and Fascist Italy remains at the heart of this article for despite all the inconsistencies of Italian foreign policy between 1930 and 1936 Italian policy-makers had understood that nationalism was the force that would corrode the structure of the British empire from within. The network of personal contacts developed by Fascist representatives and Arab nationalist forces was not unique to Palestine. In Egypt Italian diplomats failed to engage with mainstream nationalist forces such as the WAFD and resorted to courting more radical political organisations that operated on the fringes of parliamentary life. The 1930s witnessed a growing interest in European politics and in particular on contemporary Fascism among the Egyptian educated classes; such an interest was reflected in public discussions on the merits of the new authoritarian and totalitarian regimes emerged in Europe versus the virtues of liberal democratic systems. However, despite the proliferation of youth and paramilitary organisations that mimicked Fascist rhetoric and practices, recent studies convincingly argue that «Egyptian attitudes towards

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

authoritarian fascism and liberal democracy were neither uniform nor static». <sup>34</sup>

In the 1930s, at the height of the constitutional crisis in Egypt, the WAFD proved to be an elusive, if not hostile, counterpart. Fascist Italy and Egyptian WAFD were never very close: the Italian government was regarded with suspicion and hostility due to its links with the Egyptian Palace and its ruthless policy in North and East Africa. Furthermore, the democratic parliamentary principles underpinning the Wafdist policies were incompatible with the militarism and authoritarianism of Fascist ideology. In 1932 the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile together with Mussolini wrote *The Doctrine of Fascism*, which was published as an entry in the *Italian Encyclopaedia*. Here, the tenets of the Fascist doctrine were for the first time laid out; contempt and distaste for the democratic process is evident:

«[...] Fascism denies that numbers, as such, can be the determining factor in human society; it denies the right of numbers to govern by means of periodical consultations; it asserts the irremediable and fertile and beneficent inequality of men who cannot be levelled by any such mechanical and extrinsic device as universal suffrage. Democratic regimes may be described as those under which the people are, from time to time, deluded into the belief that they exercise sovereignty, while all the time real sovereignty resides in and is exercised by other and sometimes irresponsible and secret forces». <sup>35</sup>

Likewise, Italy's imperial aspirations were clearly spelt out. This is a clear message that should have crushed the hopes of nationalists like

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<sup>34</sup> GERSHONI - JANKOWSKI, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt*, cit., p. 268.

<sup>35</sup> B. MUSSOLINI, *The Doctrine of Fascism*, 1932, (English translation), in <http://www.upf.edu/materials/fhuma/nacionalismes/nacio/docs/muss-doctrine.pdf>, accessed on 21/12/2012.

Arslan who had actively sought the support of the Fascist regime to remove Britain's and France's colonial presence from the Arab world:

«Imperial power, as understood by the Fascist doctrine, is not only territorial, or military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical. [...] Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit -- i.e. in the tendency of nations to expand -- a manifestation of their vitality. In the opposite tendency, which would limit their interests to the home country, it sees a symptom of decadence».<sup>36</sup>

The Italian government was well aware of the distrust and animosity felt within the Wafd and expressed by the Egyptian press close to the nationalist party.<sup>37</sup> The Egyptian newspapers «al Jihad» and «al Balagh», for example, voicing Wafdist concerns, campaigned against «Italian atrocities in Libya», the inhuman treatment the Senussi tribe, and the «martyrdom of Omar el-Muktar».<sup>38</sup> However, Italian claims that the «al Balagh» was controlled by the British government were wide of the mark. Towards the end of 1935, Radio Bari, the mouthpiece of Italian propaganda in the Middle East established in 1934 by Galeazzo Ciano, retaliated and reported that the Egyptian press had been unanimously criticising the policy of the Prime Minister Nessim Pasha, considered to be too easily influenced by Britain. Among the newspapers at the forefront of the campaign, the «al Balagh» stated that Britain had taken «advantage of the weakness of the present cabinet to

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See *Egitto, situazione politica: 1936*, undated, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, GFM 36/505/321/3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

make Egypt a British colony and to return to the regime of 1914».<sup>39</sup> These were certainly not the remarks of Anglophile reporters.

However, the broadening of the Egyptian political spectrum offered Fascist Italy opportunities for new alliances. In the early and mid-1930s, the emergence of militant and regimented youth organisations – such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the WAFD-sponsored Blue Shirts, the Green Shirts, and the Young Egypt – was a clear sign of the transformation of the core values of Egyptian nationalism. Some scholars have emphasised that these newly born groups imitated «fascist behaviours and symbols and, while spreading continual violence, had the effect of rapidly and irrevocably undermining Egypt’s parliamentary system».<sup>40</sup> It could be argued, however, that the very existence of an intense political debate is a testimony to the health of the Egyptian democracy. The anti-parliamentary tendencies and paramilitary behaviour manifested by youth organisations in Egypt certainly appealed to the Italian authorities who were looking for an amenable interlocutor. Among these nationalist offspring, for example, the Young Egypt was born in 1933 as a “patriotic society” working to reform the social and political system in Egypt. The paramilitary structure of the organisation and the “martial spirit” promoted by its members were complemented by the use of a wide range of modern propaganda techniques.

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<sup>39</sup> Extract from *Radio Bari broadcasts*, 14 October 1935, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, FO 371/19077/J6763/110/16.

<sup>40</sup> H. ERLICH, *British Internal Security*, in M.J. COHEN - M. KOLINSKY, eds., *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s: Security Problems, 1935-39*, London, Macmillan, 1992, p.108.

The Young Egypt found its small but loyal core supporters in the middle class educated youth of the Egyptian University in Cairo, and in a young generation of teachers, intellectuals and governmental bureaucrats. Direct action, marches and rallies were often employed by members of the Young Egypt together with propaganda through press and pamphlets. It has been observed that «pressure was brought on public officials through the publication of open letters and the collection of signed petitions calling for such things as British evacuation of their military forces from Egypt and the Sudan, the abolition of the Capitulatory system and Mixed Courts, and the introduction of universal military conscription in Egypt».<sup>41</sup>

Both Italian and British records seem to identify the Young Egypt as the political force that was most receptive to the values and messages of the Fascist regime. The Young Egypt had found a source of political and financial support, Italy had found a cause to champion. Through the channels opened by the Italian journalist Ugo Dadone, by many regarded as the architect of Fascist propaganda in Egypt in the 1930s, and his Egyptian collaborators, the Italians consular offices of Cairo successfully approached the leadership of the Young Egypt; the movement would be at the forefront of a new anti-British campaign designed to exploit the volatile political situation and further weaken the already fragile Anglo-Egyptian relations. Attempting to strike a cord with the radicalised youth of Egypt, the Fascist regime – the «revolutionary and radical» regime of the «young and virile Italians» –

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<sup>41</sup> J.P. JANKOWSKI, *Egypt's Young Rebels: "Young Egypt", 1933-1952*, Stanford, University Hoover Institution Press, 1975, p.17.

claimed to be prepared to back the Egyptian cause to the extent of «assisting a revolution to secure full Egyptian independence».<sup>42</sup> This, however, was not to last. As Italy's ambitions to replace Britain as the leading colonial power in the Middle East began to emerge, the gap between the Fascist authorities and Egyptian militant nationalist groups – who had initially been inclined to «identify with Mussolini, the enemy of the British enemy» – became unbridgeable.<sup>43</sup>

### *Italian Fascism and Revisionist Zionism*

The development of closer relations between Fascist Italy and nationalist forces in Egypt and Palestine is not the only story to be told here. For a brief period, in search of widespread political support, the Fascist regime, oblivious of its own contradictions, sought, although sometimes half-heartedly, a dialogue with the Zionist leadership. Mussolini's relations with the Italian and the international Jewish Community were rather tortuous; eager to play the role of the mediator between the Jews and Nazi Germany, the *Duce*, according to one historian, «resumed his diplomatic tightrope walking between the two, alternately attacking and defending both».<sup>44</sup> If anti-Semitism had not been endemic under the Liberal government, the early 1920s saw the emergence of anti-Judaic sentiments that were often expressed through publications that identified the Jews as the corrupting force within

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<sup>42</sup> *Kelly to Hoare*, September 4, 1935, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, FO 371/19075/J4831/110/16.

<sup>43</sup> ERLICH, *British Internal Security and Egyptian Youth*, cit., p.105.

<sup>44</sup> MICHAELIS, *Mussolini and the Jews*, cit., p. 65.

Italian society – as well as culture, the arts and the economy – and highlighted the role of the Italian Jewry within the international bolshevik-plutocratic-masonic conspiracy; the Jews had become «the silent, new organism, that like woodworms are not discovered until they start gnawing holes».<sup>45</sup> The extent of overt and latent anti-Semitism in Italy prior to and during the Fascist years is still the subject of a vibrant historical debate that revolves around the reaction generated among the Italians by the racial laws of 1938.<sup>46</sup> The implementation of anti-Semitic legislation, according to a growing number of historians, although part of the increasing alignment between Rome and Berlin, should be regarded as a clear expression of racism, which «was endemic in Fascism, and in large sectors of Italian society before the Fascist period».<sup>47</sup> Evidence to this claim is offered by the brutal repression of the nationalist rebellion in Libya, by war crimes in Ethiopia, by the harsh treatment of Slav minorities in the North East of Italy. Yet, by many account the Italian Jewish population of some 40,000 individuals was well integrated and some of the leaders of the community had developed over time close relations with the leadership of the Fascist Party.

During the first half of 1930s, the increasing rivalry with Hitler, the deterioration of German-Italian relations and the need to present to the

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<sup>45</sup> M. MARTELLI, *La propaganda razziale in Italia, 1938-1943*, Rimini, Il Cerchio, 2005, p.13

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, A. VISANI, *Italian Reactions to the Racial Laws of 1938 as Seen through the Classified Files of the Ministry of Popular Culture*, in «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», XI, 2, June 2006.

<sup>47</sup> J. DUNNAGE, *Twentieth Century Italy: A Social History*, London, Longman, 2002, p.107.

western public opinion the superiority of “Roman” Fascism over «the crude Teutonic imitation», prompted Mussolini to deepen his relationship with the Zionist leaders.<sup>48</sup> In the period between 1934 and 1935, the Italian dictator met some of the most charismatic figures of the Zionist movement, assuring them of his support for a Jewish National Home. Seeking to expand Italian influence in Palestine, where the fierce confrontation between the Arab and Jewish communities was weakening Britain’s mandatory policies, Mussolini indicated that Italy would support the creation of a Jewish state small enough to be accepted by the Arabs and that, at the same time, would further Italian presence and commercial interests in the area. Furthermore, support from the international Zionist network could be harnessed to undermine Britain’s influence in Europe and within the League of Nations. The latter turned to be a very appealing proposition in the wake of the Abyssinian crisis, when two representatives of the Italian Jewish community agreed to meet Chaim Weizmann in London on behalf of Mussolini to warn the Zionist leader that supporting the application of sanctions against Italy would have serious consequences as it would draw Italy into the arms of Nazi Germany and confine Palestine under Britain’s domination.<sup>49</sup>

In Palestine, the Fascist regime strengthened its relations with the Revisionist movement as a potential ally against British presence in the area. During the last decade, scholarly research has cast new light over the seemingly ambiguous relations established between the Jewish

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<sup>48</sup> See MICHAELIS, *Mussolini and the Jews*, cit., p.75.

<sup>49</sup> See MARTELLI, *La propaganda razziale in Italia*, cit., p.189.



Revisionist movement and the Nazi and Fascist regimes. Recent studies have sought to prove that the alliance between a Fascist power and a Zionist movement was not as paradoxical as it might have at first appeared, as both Fascism and Revisionist Zionism found their ideological roots in the inter-war European radical right.<sup>50</sup> On pragmatic grounds the already divided Revisionist leadership was also looking for a country that would support the establishment of a Jewish state, thus hoping to compel the British government to relinquish its mandatory control over Palestine. Sentiments of friendship and sympathy towards Revisionist Zionism and its leader, Vladimir Jabotinsky, were repeatedly expressed by the Fascist regime and a school for training young Revisionists was open in 1934 and remained in activity until 1937 in the coastal town of Civitavecchia.<sup>51</sup> The private correspondence between Jabotinsky and Isacco Sciaky, the Italian Revisionist theorist, is in this context enlightening. In the early 1930s, the Revisionists' attempts to open the dialogue with the Fascist regime intensified. In 1932, Jabotinsky approached the Italian embassy in Paris through an intermediary. He made his feelings towards Italy and Fascism clear and hoped to be able to count on the support of the Fascist regime. His short-term objective was to create a special school in Italy for those who wished to visit the Middle East; in return, Jabotinsky promised to boost Italian propaganda in Palestine. Jabotinsky would later claim that his activities as propagandist for the Fascist regime dated back to his youth in Ukraine, when, working as a

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<sup>50</sup> On the origins of the Jewish Revisionist movement, see J. HELLER, *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics and Terror 1940-1949*, London, Frank Cass, 1995.

<sup>51</sup> See MARTELLI, *La propaganda razziale in Italia*, cit., p.190.

journalist, he began encouraging young people to study in Italian universities rather than in France or Eastern Europe.<sup>52</sup> However, officials of the Italian Foreign Ministry were rather uneasy at the prospect of a meeting between Mussolini, as requested by Jabotinsky, and the Revisionist leader, for such an audience could be exploited by Zionist Revisionists in Palestine.<sup>53</sup> The marriage of convenience between Fascist Italy and Revisionist Zionism was thus short-lived; Mussolini's increasing distaste for mainstream Zionism, the growing tension in Palestine that culminated with the Arab rebellion of 1936-1939, the rapprochement between Italy and Germany in the face of deteriorating Anglo-Italian relations brought the pro-Zionist rhetoric of the regime to a swift end. In March 1937, with a pompous ceremony in Tripoli, Mussolini was offered the "Sword of Islam"; the *Duce* gratefully accepted the new role bestowed on him, that of protector of the oppressed Arab nations. Isacco Sciaky for a short period of time encouraged Jabotinsky to persevere in the search of a contact with the *Duce*; in June 1937, following a disagreement between the Italian authorities in Palestine and the Jewish community, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated – perhaps less convincingly – the government's general feelings of sympathy towards Revisionist

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<sup>52</sup> See *Lettera manoscritta di Jabotinsky a Sciaky*, 10 luglio 1936, in V. PINTO, ed., *Stato e Libertà. Il carteggio Jabotinsky-Sciaky (1924-1939)*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2002, p.161.

<sup>53</sup> See *Pro-memoria di Guariglia, direttore generale per l'Europa, il Levante e l'Africa per il Gabinetto di S.E. il ministro*, 1 febbraio 1932, ASDMAE, AP 1931-45, *Palestina 1932*, busta 4, fascicolo Vladimiro Jabotinsky, capo del movimento sionista secessionista, *ibid*, p. 61.

Zionism, although the regime felt that it ought to maintain cordial relations with all political forces in Palestine, including the Arabs.<sup>54</sup>

### *Conclusions*

In the 1930s, Italy's policy of expansion on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean and in the Middle East was centred upon the development of a preferential partnership with Arab governments and nationalist movements, which would eventually replace the political and economic links created by the British empire. Throughout the colonial world, nationalist groups had sought the support of external forces capable of providing political, financial and military backing needed to overthrow foreign rulers. In the second half of the 1930s, the Axis powers attracted a remarkable degree of attention from radical fringes of the nationalist movements, determined to remove the last vestiges of the British empire.

Italy's policies towards both Arab nationalists and Revisionist Zionists were characterised by ambiguity: the regime's promise to pave the road for the independence of the Arab nations stands in stark contrast with the Fascist notion of empire-building as natural expansion of the nation. War and conquest sit at the heart of the Fascist ideology, whilst territorial expansion in the Mediterranean was regarded as the first step towards the recreation of the glory of the Roman empire. Likewise, Italy's overtures to Zionism, and in particular that anti-

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<sup>54</sup> See *Lettera dattiloscritta di Sciaky a Jabotinsky*, 28 giugno 1937, posizione: IJTA, P307, fascicolo 2, sottof.4/2, *ibid*, p.186.

British brand of Zionism, the Revisionist movement, were full of contradictions.

At the heart of Italian policies in the Mediterranean and the Middle East was the Fascist regime's firm intention to compete with Britain and France on their own ground: the "least of the Great Powers", as Italy was described, would rapidly build an empire at the expense of her major European competitors. To this end, an alliance with indigenous forces capable of challenging and eventually dismantling British and French imperial structures was indispensable. But mainstream Arab nationalist and Zionist forces remained by and large impervious to Mussolini's charm and assessed the regime's claims against the regime's deeds: the massacre of the Senussi in Libya, the war in Abyssinia and the use of nerve gas against poorly equipped enemy troops cast serious doubt over Mussolini's Arab policies; and, as far as the Zionists were concerned, Italy's oscillating relations with Nazi Germany and its fascination with Arab nationalism, strengthened the perception of the regime as an unreliable ally. At the outbreak of the Second World War, few Arab leaders and no Arab government lent their assistance to the Axis powers, choosing to side with the Allies, despite their ties with Zionism and their role in creating and supporting a strong and viable Jewish national home in Palestine. Those Arabs and Muslims who did collaborate with the Axis powers represented a minority and more radical fringe of nationalist forces, what Herf

describes as «the extremist wing of a much broader anti-Zionist consensus».<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> HERF, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, cit., p. 264.

