

Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–1939

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ABSTRACT *Italian involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine (1936–1939) was perhaps the most explicit example of Rome's attempt to destabilize London's position in the Middle East, prior to Italy's entry to the Second World War. This article examines the mechanisms of Fascist Italy's assistance to the rebels in Palestine, focusing on the secret contacts between Italian officials and the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni. It describes the financial support given by Italy as well as the attempts to smuggle arms to Palestine. The article also analyses Rome's diplomatic manoeuvres in connection with Palestine and its pro-Arab propaganda. It is argued that Italian policy in Palestine was governed by, and subordinate to, wider considerations of Italian policy such as imperial competition with Great Britain and a desire to increase Italy's influence in the Middle East. In fact, Fascist involvement in the 'first Intifada' teaches us more about Italian foreign policy than it does on the course of events in Palestine during the Arab rebellion.*

Italy sought to increase its influence in the Middle East since the beginning of the twentieth century. Benito Mussolini's foreign policy drew on his predecessors' aspirations in the region, adapting them to the realities of the interwar period. During the first half of the 1930s, the Fascist regime supported Middle Eastern countries in their efforts to attain independence from British and French domination. The aims of this policy were two-fold: to improve the tarnished image Italy had acquired in the Arab world during the repression of the Sanusi revolt in Cyrenaica (finally quelled in 1932); and to weaken the positions of the other European powers in the region.

Following the 1935 'Ethiopian Crisis' and the resulting tension between Britain and Italy, Fascist policy in the Middle East became overtly anti-British. Rome began to seek the cooperation of local anti-British movements in an effort to destabilize London's position. Italy was widely perceived as challenging British hegemony in this part of the world. Italian involvement in the Arab revolt in Palestine was perhaps the most explicit example of this attempt, prior to Italy's entry to the Second World War.

Italian officials had initiated contacts with the most prominent Arab leader in Palestine, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, in 1933 and these were gradually strengthened over the next two years.¹ The Mufti was himself seeking foreign support in his struggle against the Zionists and the British Mandate

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¹ De Angelis to Mussolini, 4 May 1933, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* [DDI], 7, Vol. XIII, pp. 585–587; note for Mussolini, 14 December 1934, *DDI*, 7, Vol. XVI, pp. 303–304; N. Arielli, 'La politica dell'Italia fascista nei confronti degli arabi palestinesi, 1935–40', *Mondo Contemporaneo*, 1 (2006), pp. 10–11.

authorities in Palestine. The increasing influx of Jewish immigrants from Europe into the country (more than 60,000 in 1935 alone) and the continuous purchase of Arab lands by Jews were a cause of constant concern for the Palestinian Arabs. The Arabs in Palestine were also envious of their Egyptian and Syrian neighbours, who seemed to be on the verge of achieving their independence. They took note of Britain's inability to stop Italy from conquering Ethiopia on the one hand and its acquiescence to Egyptian demands following violent demonstrations on the streets of Cairo (November 1935) on the other.²

The outbreak of disturbances in Palestine in the spring of 1936 provided Italy with both an opportunity to pressure Britain to recognize the newly established Fascist *Impero* in Africa and a means of increasing Italian political penetration into the Middle East. Two separate historical processes—the Palestinian Arabs' struggle and Rome's ambitions in the region—crossed paths. Therefore, the Mufti's appeal for Italian assistance in obtaining money and arms did not fall on deaf ears. In a recent study, the Italian historian Stefano Fabei went as far as arguing that Italian assistance played 'a significant if not determinate part' in the revolt in Palestine. He rejects the assertion of the prominent Christian-Arab historian, George Antonius, that 'external elements' played no role in the rebellion.³

This article examines the mechanisms of Italian assistance—financial support, attempts to supply arms, diplomatic manoeuvres and propaganda. It is argued here that Italian policy in Palestine was motivated strictly by wider geo-political considerations of imperial competition with Britain and that Fascist involvement in the 'first *Intifada*' teaches us more about Italian foreign policy than it does on the course of events in Palestine during the Arab rebellion.

Financial Assistance—Off to a Bad Start

In September 1940, the Italian Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, met the German Ambassador to Rome, Hans Georg von Mackensen, to discuss Axis policy in the Middle East. During their conversation, Ciano stated 'that for years he had maintained constant relations with the Grand Mufti, of which his secret fund could tell a tale'.⁴ The financial assistance afforded by the Fascist regime to the Arab leadership in Palestine was the most tangible form of Italian support during the revolt.

The Italian Foreign Ministry was willing to provide financial support to Arab nationalists in Palestine even before the revolt erupted. At first this was done indirectly. The Syrian exile, Ihsan al-Jabri, co-editor of the journal *La Nation Arabe* (together with Shakib Arslan) and member of the Syrio-Palestinian delegation to the League of Nations, was receiving funds from the Italian Foreign Ministry since April 1934. By autumn 1935, he had already been given 1,740,000 Italian lire (approximately £18,000). Jabri assured Italian officials he had 'delivered thousands of pounds' to the Mufti of Jerusalem.⁵ In November 1935,

² Y. Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion, 1929–1939* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), pp. 140, 159–160; M. Kolinsky, *Britain's War in the Middle East: Strategy and Diplomacy, 1936–42* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 49–54.

³ S. Fabei, *Mussolini e la resistenza palestinese* (Milano: Mursia, 2005), p. 12.

⁴ Mackensen to Foreign Ministry, 10 September 1940, *Documents on German Foreign Policy* [DGFP] ser. D, Vol. XI (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961), p. 48.

⁵ Archivio Storico – Ministero degli Affari Esteri [ASMAE], Gabinetto 1923–1943 [Gab.] 743, note for Mussolini, 4 September 1934; The secret affairs section of the cabinet to Mussolini, 3 September 1935 and 17 October 1935, *DDI*, 8, Vol. II, pp. 23–25, 364–336.

The Italian *Charge d'Affaires* in Jeddah, Giovanni Persico, handed £5,000 to Fuad Hamza, the Saudi Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, on the understanding that this money was to be passed on to Hamza's 'friends in Jerusalem and Transjordan' who were 'willing to begin work at once'.⁶

In January 1936, Husayni personally asked the Italian Consul-General in Jerusalem, Mariano De Angelis, for a grant of £100,000. This sum was to help in the financing of 'actions in Palestine and Transjordan'. The Duce approved this payment which was to be carried out 'immediately so as not to continue the relationship with us [and thus] compromise it during the period of agitation'.⁷ Despite Mussolini's approval, Palazzo Chigi informed the Mufti he would only be granted £25,000, of which he received approximately £12,000.⁸

On 19 April 1936, an Arab crowd attacked Jews in Jaffa sparking disturbances that spread across much of Palestine. Soon afterwards the leaders of the main political parties and organizations headed by the Mufti founded the Arab Higher Committee and announced a general strike. On 7 May 1936, De Angelis notified the Duce of Husayni's intention to intensify the disturbances and to paralyze the British authorities. To achieve this he requested that the 'other £16,000 that he had been promised' be forwarded as quickly as possible.⁹

In June, the Mufti renewed his request for a further £75,000. De Angelis, who was nearing the end of his tenure in Jerusalem, argued the Arabs' case in Rome. He wrote a long memorandum to Ciano, shortly after the latter's appointment as Foreign Minister, imploring him to agree to Husayni's requests. De Angelis reported that, before he left for Rome, the Mufti asked him to 'tell Signor Mussolini that I have committed myself to the struggle (*sono sceso in campo*) because I believe in his promise and in his support'.¹⁰ Ciano was at first reluctant to enter into a costly commitment. He wished to continue relations with the Mufti but felt that the figure of £75,000 was too high. He told De Angelis he would reconsider if the request was reduced to £5,000 or £10,000.¹¹

In late September 1936, the Italian Foreign Ministry was alerted to the possibility that some of the money, which had been allocated to the Palestinian Arabs in the past, had been embezzled. Subsequently the Mufti was asked to state how much Italian money he had received thus far.¹² According to a British intelligence report, Italy had by then spent £75,000 in Palestine through various channels. Shakib Arslan told an official from the Italian Foreign Ministry Cabinet that some of this money had been 'misappropriated either by Jabri or by De Angelis or by both of them'. According to the intelligence report, De Angelis stated that between 1933 and the early part of 1936 he had provided Jabri with 'over 3,000,000 lire (roughly £40,000)'. Of these the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs had only received

⁶ National Archives in London [NA], HW 12/197, 'Italian activity in Palestine and Transjordan', Persico to Rome, 24 October 1935; Persico to Rome, 11 November 1935; Persico to Rome, 15 November 1935. It is not clear whether this money reached the Arabs in Palestine.

⁷ Memorandum, 2 February 1936, in L. Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini: alcuni documenti italiani sui rapporti tra nazionalismo palestinese e fascismo negli anni trenta', *Storia Contemporanea*, 17(6) (1986), p. 1212; Suvich to Mussolini, 5 February 1936, *DDI*, 8, Vol. III, p. 223.

⁸ De Angelis to Ciano, 9 July 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1213. No reason was given for the reduction of the original sum approved by Mussolini.

⁹ Note for Mussolini, 7 May 1936, *Ibid.*, p. 1212.

¹⁰ Note for Ciano, 9 July 1936, *Ibid.*, pp. 1213–1215.

¹¹ ASMAE, Gab. 743, hand-written note by De Angelis, 25 July 1936.

¹² *Ibid.*, unsigned note, 26 September 1936.

£17,000. The report went on to say that if Arslan's allegations could be confirmed, De Angelis might be 'charged with misappropriation of public funds'.¹³

In December 1936, Major I. Berionni of the Italian *Servizio Informazioni Militari* (military intelligence service, hereafter SIM) was sent to Syria and Palestine on a broad mission intended to upgrade Italian relations with Husayni's faction of the Palestinian leadership. Berionni's objectives included the development of an agreed scheme for smuggling arms into Palestine (see below). One of his lesser objectives was to conduct an inquiry into the dealings of Jabri and De Angelis. Husayni told Major Berionni that he had not received any Italian money before October 1935 and that since then he had been given £52,578. The Italians had in fact spent more than this on fomenting the revolt in Palestine, though Berionni was not yet able to say who was responsible for the discrepancy between the sum allocated and the one received.¹⁴

By the summer of 1937, the identity of the guilty party was already known. In August, an Italian official in Geneva met with Jamal Husayni and Awni 'Abd al-Hadi, both members of the Arab Higher Committee. The official was able to learn from them 'some interesting details' about 'the embezzlement committed by Ihsan Jabri'.¹⁵ 'Abd al-Hadi mentioned a commission of inquiry which had been set up to look into Jabri's wrong doings. It turned out that Jabri had taken some £25,000 from the funds intended for Palestine (though it is not clear whether all this money emanated from Italian sources) and had been 'recklessly indiscreet' in a manner that compromised the activities of the Committee.¹⁶

Enter Musa Alami

September 1936 marked an important turning point in the relations between the Fascist regime and the leadership of the Palestine Arabs. Against a background of increasing Italian involvement in the Civil War in Spain and the tightening of relations with Nazi Germany, Foreign Minister Ciano began to take an increased interest in the revolt in Palestine. On the Arab side, the role of the coordinator with the Italians was assumed by Musa al-Alami, a Cambridge-educated lawyer, who served as a government advocate and as a private secretary for the High Commissioner, Arthur Wauchope, advising him on Arab affairs.¹⁷ Alami was a respected figure in both Arab and Zionist circles. In June 1936—three months before assuming responsibility for contacts with the Italian Foreign Ministry and SIM—Alami met with Moshe Shertok (Sharett), the Political Secretary of the Jewish Agency. The latter made a record of this conversation in which Alami said:

I do not understand what is the point of your [the Zionists'] permanent emphasis on the fact that the Arab movement is nourished by Italian money. First of all I tell you it is a lie. Perhaps I do not know everything that goes on in our camp, but so much I do know. If it turns out that we do have Italian money it would be a great surprise for me.

¹³ NA, AIR 2/1813, A.I. 1, report no. 14225, 11 November 1936. This report can be partially corroborated by Italian sources: ASMAE, Gab. 743, note for Ciano, 13 October XIV [1936]; note for Ciano, 4 November XV [1936].

¹⁴ ASMAE, Gab. 743, 'Relazione relativa alla missione compiuta in Palestina', 3 January 1937.

¹⁵ Foreign Ministry Cabinet to Ciano, 8 August 1937, *DDI*, 8, Vol. VII, p. 235.

¹⁶ 'Incontro con Aumi Abdul Chadri Bey [sic] – 3, 4, 5 agosto 1937', in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', pp. 1235–1236.

¹⁷ G. Furlonge, *Palestine is My Country: The Story of Musa Alami* (London: John Murray, 1969), p. 100.

Shertok's response—that the Palestine government and British Foreign Office also spoke of Italian funds reaching the Arab leadership—elicited this reply from Alami:

You have to understand the soul of the Arabs. People live with the feeling that they are sacrificing their blood and there is no bigger insult for them than the accusation that they are doing it for Italian money. I would really ask that you cease to talk of Italian money.¹⁸

In September, Alami left for Switzerland on the pretext of sick leave. On 9 September, he met with Italian Foreign Ministry officials in the northern Italian town of Cernobbio. He informed his counterpart that he had come to Italy in order to give to the Duce a letter from the Mufti and to urgently ask the Italian government for 'considerable and continuous aid to the Palestinian cause in particular and the Arabs in general'.¹⁹ Within days he received a first payment of £13,000. On 26 September, Alami was received by Ciano in Rome and repeated his objectives as defined by the Mufti.²⁰

For the next two-and-a-half years, Alami remained the key Palestinian Arab contact with the Italians. He appears to have been a very competent *liaison* officer. No complaints were made about mishandled funds after his arrival on the scene. The level of secrecy he maintained was very high. Proof of this is the fact that his name did not appear in any publication on this topic before the mid-1980s, when the secret Foreign Ministry 'Gabinetto' files were first made available to the public.

It is perhaps revealing that Alami spoke unfavourably of Ihsan al-Jabri, who was his father-in-law. Already during his initial contacts with Palazzo Chigi, Alami insisted that both Jabri and Arslan would 'never' be informed about his actual contacts with the Italians.²¹ Alami was let down at least once by these two, when they made public their meeting with the Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, which he helped to set up, despite their assurances of secrecy.²²

The Refined Mechanism

From September 1936 onwards, payments to the Palestinian Arabs were logged and handled by SIM agents and Foreign Ministry couriers. One can assume that both the Italians and the Arabs wished to have tighter control over financial arrangements following the misappropriation described above. The new Italian Consul-General in Jerusalem, Count Quinto Mazzolini, was kept in the dark regarding the secret contacts with the Arab leadership.²³

During the second half of November 1936, Alami was back in Italy. He met with SIM agents in Venice and reached an agreement over a scheme of transferring money and future methods of communication. From that point onwards money would only

¹⁸ M. Sharett, *Political Diary 1936* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), p. 177 [in Hebrew]. For a slightly different account of this conversation, in which Alami admits to two 'negligible' incidents where Arabs from Palestine received Italian money see: D. Ben-Gurion, *Talks with Arab Leaders* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), p. 98 [in Hebrew].

¹⁹ Note, 10 September 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1220. Aside from financial assistance, Alami requested arms and presented the Mufti's political plans (see below).

²⁰ ASMAE, Gab. 743, unsigned note, 26 September 1936.

²¹ Ibid, 'Distrazione di fondi già inviati in Palestina', 21 November 1936; Note, 10 September 1936 in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1221.

²² Ben-Gurion, *Talks with Arab Leaders*, p. 44.

²³ ASMAE, Affari Politici 1931–45 [AP], Palestina, b. 22, 'Pretesi agenti italiani', 17 May 1937. This report illustrates that the Italian representatives in Palestine were unaware of the methods by which the secret contacts were maintained.

be given at pre-arranged meetings to persons approved by Alami. He named two persons who might take part in future meetings: Ishaq Darwish (a relative of the Mufti) and Muhammad Afifi. The Italians would write to Alami after each meeting, to notify him of the amount paid and Alami would write back to confirm its receipt. Letters would also be used in order to schedule future rendezvous in various European cities. The system included the use of agreed-upon code names (which would change from one letter to the next) and double envelopes.²⁴

An encoded correspondence, mostly in French, followed. Letters from Italy would be sent to a Mr. Husni Sawaf at the American University of Beirut. Letters from Lebanon would be sent to a post office box in Rome. The Foreign Ministry kept copies of all incoming and outgoing letters. Below is a typical example:²⁵

Dear George [Alami],

30.I.1937

I have sent you, through your friend that I have seen [Darwish], 10 meters of the silk you were expecting [£10,000]. Let me know if you have received them and if they suited your taste. On the first occasion I will send you 20 more meters. As you know my father has given his approval for a trip in Europe. [. . .] I would like to stop in Nice for a few days. Let me know if I will be able to meet there some friends of yours and if you know a good hotel. The "Hotel Negresco" has been recommended to me. Do you think it advisable? I have seen the other day our friend doctor Hawfman [Casto Caruso]. He told me he had been invited to Palestine, and will go there next March.²⁶ Please let me have news from yourself, my friend, and remember me as cordially as I always remember you.

Truly yours,

Charles

In October 1937, the British authorities in Palestine dissolved the Arab Higher Committee following the assassination of the Acting District Commissioner of Galilee, Lewis Andrews. Most of the Palestinian Arabs' senior leaders were arrested and deported to the Seychelles. Amin Husayni (officially no longer 'the Mufti of Jerusalem') and after him Jamal Husayni escaped to Beirut. During the same month Musa Alami was relieved of his official duties in the Mandate government. He too relocated to Beirut.²⁷ In November he notified the Italians of having difficulties travelling to Europe. He suggested that future meetings take place in Cairo or in Damascus and recommended using the Italian Consul in Damascus to facilitate future contacts. Afifi, speaking on behalf of Alami, also asked for a double-sided briefcase to help smuggle money from Syria to Palestine. Such a briefcase was indeed provided by SIM.²⁸

On 31 December 1937, the new Italian Consul in Damascus, Vittorio Castellani, was instructed to return to Rome 'due to important and urgent family matters' in order that he might be consulted in person.²⁹ He was then brought into the picture of the secret relations. From this point onwards, Castellani would receive the

²⁴ ASMAE, Gab. 743, note for Ciano, 21 November 1936.

²⁵ For this letter and others see: ASMAE, Gab. 743 as well as Gab. 744.

²⁶ Alami asked to meet Caruso of the Italian Foreign Ministry Cabinet in the Italian hospice in Tiberius on 20 March 1937. 'Relazione relativa alla missione compiuta ad Atene', 20 January 1937, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1225. The meeting was later canceled.

²⁷ Furlonge, *Palestine is My Country*, pp. 112–113.

²⁸ ASMAE, Gab. 744, note for Ciano, 17 November 1937; note for Ciano, 28 November 1937.

²⁹ Ibid, note for Ciano, 31 December 1937.

money in hand-delivered packages from Italy. He would then meet Darwish in pre-arranged locations in Beirut and pass the packages on to him.³⁰

From the moment Musa Alami arrived on the scene in September 1936 until the early summer of 1938 Italy had spent £138,000 on fomenting the revolt in Palestine.³¹ However, the payment made by Castellani to Darwish in June 1938 turned out to be the last. Italian payments were discontinued following a decision to suspend material assistance to the Palestinian Arabs (see below). Between June 1938 and March 1939 Alami made several requests for additional funds but to no avail.

In Palestinian terms the sums provided by Italy since the autumn of 1935 were quite significant. For comparison, in June 1936, the High Commissioner thought that an amount of £5,000 to £10,000 would suffice in order to pacify (or bribe) the Bedouin tribes in Transjordan.³² From the available sources it is impossible to determine how the Italian funds were spent. However, there appears to have been an air of discontent with the Mufti's handling of the funds that were at his disposal. In a private phone conversation in September 1936, Raghīb Nashashibi, leader of the National Defence Party, told a friend that he was surprised to hear Husayni turning down a request by a local dignitary for 3,000 Palestinian lire. Husayni said that the Arab Higher Committee's treasury did not have even 100 lire. Nashashibi commented that 'as far as I know we recently received 50,000 lire. Where this sum disappeared and on what it was spent—the Mufti does not wish to answer'.³³ During Ciano's conversation with the German Ambassador in Rome in September 1940, the Foreign Minister referred to the Mufti's 'secret fund': 'The return on this gift of millions had not been exactly great and had really been confined to occasional destruction of pipelines, which in most cases could be quickly repaired'.³⁴ It is perhaps worth pointing out that there is no evidence that the Italians attempted to instruct the Palestinian Arabs on how their money ought to be spent.

Attempts to Supply Arms—the Elusive Smuggling Route

As early as September 1935, Ihsan Jabri suggested to the Foreign Ministry that Italian arms be sent to Jeddah. From there, with the permission of King Ibn Sa'ud, they would be moved to the Transjordanian frontier. The Mufti could then wait for an opportune moment to ignite a revolt which would be based at first on Bedouin tribes and would then spread to the cities of Palestine. Jabri presented a list of requested arms, which were approved—he said—by the Mufti, and included various rifles, machine-guns, hand grenades and explosives for mines.³⁵

At the beginning of 1936, the Mufti asked the Italians to provide him with 10,000 rifles and munitions as well as six anti-aircraft machine guns. Mussolini decided that the arms and munitions ought to be sent 'without secrecy' from the Italian colony of Eritrea to Ibn Sa'ud.³⁶ This decision was based on the assumption that Ibn Sa'ud

³⁰ Ibid, note on agreement reached between Caruso, Castellani and Darwish for the delivery in Syria of packages destined for the Mufti, 19 January 1938.

³¹ 'Riassunto versamenti fatti e da farsi al mufti di Gerusalemme dal settembre 1936-XIV' in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', pp. 1244–1245.

³² Y. Eyal, *The First Intifada* (Tel-Aviv: Marachot, 1998) p. 126 [in Hebrew].

³³ Central Zionist Archives [CZA], S25/22836, intercepted phone conversation, 11 September 1936. This statement should be treated with care because of Nashashibi's long-standing rivalry with Husayni.

³⁴ Mackensen to Foreign Ministry, 10 September 1940, *DGFP*, ser. D Vol. XI, pp. 48–49. If Ciano was not exaggerating, the figure of 'millions' would have to refer to Italian lire.

³⁵ The secret affairs section of the cabinet to Mussolini, 3 September 1935, *DDI*, 8, Vol. II, p. 23.

³⁶ Memorandum, 2 February 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1212.

would officially order arms from Italy and would then allow a portion of them to be smuggled into Palestine through his kingdom, keeping the rest as commission. However, Ibn Sa'ud was in no rush to submit such a request. In July 1936, De Angelis wrote that 'This sovereign is afraid that receiving arms provided by Italy might arouse English suspicion regarding his personal conduct'.³⁷

On 9 September 1936, Musa Alami presented the Italians with a specific 'shopping list' of arms: 10,000 rifles with a thousand cartridges for each rifle; 5,000 hand grenades; 25 light machine-guns and 12 heavy ones with ammunition; some mortars and mortar shells.³⁸ By the end of the month Ciano was able to inform Alami that the War Ministry had set aside 4248 Belgian rifles with 7,000,000 cartridges and 35 S. Etienne machine guns with 70,000 cartridges.³⁹ These arms and munitions were purchased in Belgium before the war in Ethiopia, apparently not for the use of Italian soldiers but rather to prevent their sale to the Abyssinians.⁴⁰ The weapons were stored in the harbour of Taranto in southern Italy. In November 1936, some 25 tons [sic] of dynamite, 150,000 ignition devices and 150,000 meters of ignition fuse were added to the arms already there.⁴¹ All that remained was to work out how to smuggle the weapons into Palestine.

In November 1936, the plan to transfer arms to Palestine via Hijaz was temporarily set aside. During Alami's negotiations with SIM agents, an alternative plan was devised: An Italian ship would take the arms from Taranto. Some four miles west of the estuary of the Litani River the ship would rendezvous with a local sailing boat, which would unload the arms and take them to the Lebanese shore. From there the arms could be smuggled by night into Palestine. The War Ministry cabinet instructed the Director General of the Engineer Corps to prepare the arms in boxes that bore no indication of coming from Italy and whose weight must not exceed 30 kg. This was to be done by 12 December.⁴² Major Berionni of SIM travelled to Damascus and Jerusalem from 10 to 28 December to meet with Alami and the Mufti and to discuss the details of this operation. A signalling system was worked out in order to allow the two vessels to recognize each other. The operation was scheduled to take place on New Year's Eve, when the French and Lebanese coastguards would presumably be preoccupied with other matters. Eventually, Berionni ordered the cancellation of the operation due to high seas, which would have delayed the unloading, and a full moon which would have endangered it.⁴³

Shortly afterwards the Lebanese route was abandoned. On 25 January 1937, Ciano concluded that the consignment of arms should wait for the decision of Ibn Sa'ud.⁴⁴ The Italian Foreign Ministry was led on by over-optimistic reports regarding

³⁷ Note for Ciano, 9 July 1936, Ibid, p. 1213.

³⁸ Note, 10 September 1936, Ibid, p. 1220.

³⁹ Note for Mussolini, 26 September 1936, Ibid, p. 1222.

⁴⁰ ASMAE, Gab. 244, Mussolini to representatives in Brussels, Prague, Bern & Copenhagen, 3 April 1935; note regarding Belgium, 15 May 1935.

⁴¹ ASMAE, Gab. 743, Pariani to Ciano, 28 November 1936.

⁴² Ufficio Storico – Stato Maggiore Esercito [USSME], H-3, Car. SIM, Rac. 2 'Verbali di armi belghe in Palestina tramite l'Italia (1936–1937–1938)', War Ministry Cabinet to Director General of Engineer Corps, November 1936.

⁴³ ASMAE, Gab. 743, note for Ciano, 21 November 1936; note for Ciano, 18 December 1936; 'Relazione relativa alla missione compiuta in Palestina', 3 January 1937; note for Ciano, 1 January 1937, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1223. Berionni's coded telegram canceling the operation was sent from Damascus on 18 December 1936. See: USSME, H-3, Car. SIM, Rac. 2 'Verbali di armi belghe in Palestina tramite l'Italia (1936–1937–1938)'.

⁴⁴ ASMAE, Gab. 743, note for Ciano, 25 January 1937. Ciano's comment is in handwriting on the top left-hand corner of the document.

promises Ibn Sa'ud had supposedly given the Mufti during the latter's visit in the Arabian Peninsula for the annual pilgrimage. A Palestinian contact person told the Italians that Ibn Sa'ud had agreed that arms destined for Palestine would be shipped with other materials the King would purchase for himself in Europe. The ship carrying the joint cargo would then be allowed to land in Jeddah.⁴⁵ A note for Ciano from 23 April 1937 reveals the details of the planned delivery. Ibn Sa'ud's agent, Khalid al-Hud al-Qargani, was to be sent to Europe to purchase arms. The same al-Qargani would contact Alessandro Ajello, a ship owner from Catania (in fact an agent of SIM) and ask for a ship to transport the arms he had purchased. The arms destined for the Mufti would also be loaded on this ship, accompanied by a SIM agent.⁴⁶

The Italian government wanted to strengthen its ties with the Saudi Kingdom. Ibn Sa'ud's intention to purchase arms was seen as an opportunity to draw the Saudis away from the British sphere of influence and to bring them closer to Italy's orbit. Throughout 1937 Italy was negotiating the sale of 10,000 rifles plus 10,000,000 cartridges to the Saudi government.⁴⁷ However, despite Italy's eagerness to meet Saudi needs, no agent of Ibn Sa'ud contacted Ajello, the SIM ship owner.⁴⁸ In July 1937, Alami assured the Italians that the Saudi King was willing to assist the Palestinian Arabs in obtaining arms from Italy. According to Alami, Ibn Sa'ud's personal agent, al-Qargani, had been very ill and was unable to travel to Europe and that was the reason why no request had been submitted thus far.⁴⁹ Eventually, in December 1937, the Saudi government decided to purchase 10 cannon from Italy but did not ask for any rifles, pistols or explosives destined for the rebels in Palestine.⁵⁰ It is not clear from the available sources whether the Saudi King notified the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs of his decision. In January 1938, the Mufti was still pressuring Ibn Sa'ud to go through with the plan.⁵¹

Ibn Sa'ud was mistrustful of the Italians owing to their policy of penetration in neighbouring Yemen and to the presence of large numbers of Italian troops on the opposite shore of the Red Sea, in Italian East Africa. He had no qualms about purchasing arms or receiving them as gifts from Italy.⁵² However, the King was not willing to cooperate when it came to providing Italian arms to the Palestinian Arabs. This was due either to his fear of the British reaction or to his desire to prevent the Italians from gaining a foot-hold in Palestine or both. It seems the Italians failed to understand Ibn Sa'ud's apprehensions over their ultimate intentions in the region. The Mufti and Alami also appear not to have taken the King's position into consideration.

On 31 May 1938, Ciano wrote to the Italian War Ministry that he no longer had need for the arms which were being stored for the Mufti in Taranto.⁵³ This decision was probably taken following the signing of the 'Easter Accords' between Italy and Britain (see below) and the subsequent suspension of material assistance given by the regime to the Palestinian Arabs. Thus, the Taranto or 'Belgian' consignment never reached Palestine. As this was the only significant load of arms intended for the Mufti,

⁴⁵ Ibid, Caruso to Ciano, 7 April 1937.

⁴⁶ Ibid, note for Ciano, 23 April 1937.

⁴⁷ USSME, H-3, Car. SIM, Rac. 17 E, fasc. 2 'Fornitura di armi al governo saudiano (febbraio 1937–novembre 1938)'.

⁴⁸ Ibid, Rac. 2, Meeting with Caruso, 26 May 1937.

⁴⁹ ASMAE, Gab. 744, note for Ciano, 18 July 1937; note for Ciano, 28 July 1937.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Gab. 202, fasc. 'Fornitura armi alla Saudia', Sillitti to Foreign Ministry, 18 December 1937.

⁵¹ Ibid, Gab. 744, note for Ciano, 19 January 1938.

⁵² M. Pizzigallo, *La diplomazia dell'amicizia: Italia e Arabia Saudita (1932–1942)* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000), p. 92; G. Alegi, *Ali sul deserto* (Roma: Stato Maggiore Aeronautica, 1994), pp. 39–56.

⁵³ ASMAE, Gab. 744, Ciano to War Ministry, 31 May 1938.

Italy's contribution to the revolt in the direct supply of arms was negligible. British and Zionist reports on Italian arms smuggled to Palestine by way of diplomatic mail arriving in Haifa, or through the Bay of Aqaba can not be corroborated by Italian sources.⁵⁴ On 19 November 1936, the courier Alfredo Trinchieri met Alami in Venice and gave him two automatic pistols.⁵⁵ These were the only weapons directly supplied by Italy to the Palestinian Arab leadership that can be verified from Italian sources.

Other Forms of Military Assistance—the Libyan Episode

In his initial meeting with the Italians on 9 September 1936, Musa Alami asked not only for money and arms but also for assistance in the form of technical advisors. These men would help to carry out more efficient attacks on the oil pipeline from Iraq to Haifa and would arrange for the water supply of Tel Aviv to be 'contaminated'.⁵⁶ On 26 September, Ciano told Alami that Italy would be willing to provide the necessary 'material'. The request for men would have to wait until a later date, once the possibility of instructing Libyan non-commissioned officers to carry out these tasks had been examined. Mussolini personally approved this response.⁵⁷

On 29 September, the Ministry for the Colonies asked the Governor General in Tripoli, Italo Balbo, for Libyan non-commissioned officers to be entrusted with a task in Palestine. The nature of this task was not specified. These men would have to 'have lived in Egypt and visited the Arab countries in the Levant. They must not be easily identified as Libyans, not even through their dialect'. This matter was to be kept absolutely secret.⁵⁸ On 5 October, Balbo was in Rome. He attended a meeting on this matter in the Foreign Ministry and at 19:00 he was received by the Duce.⁵⁹ On 29 October, Balbo wrote to inform Ciano that a certain Captain Kalifa 'possesses all the necessary qualities to carry the mission through'. Kalifa was serving in Ethiopia at the time and Balbo asked Ciano whether he should have him recalled at once.⁶⁰ Ciano preferred that Kalifa should be called back to Tripoli 'as soon as possible so he could begin his mission'.⁶¹ Balbo promised that Kalifa should be back by Christmas and that he would be made available as soon as he returned.⁶² The subject then suddenly disappears from the records. It partly resurfaced in July 1937 when, following a renewed request by Alami, the possibility of sending Libyan military instructors to Syria to train 'a dozen men loyal to the Mufti to act in Palestine and Kurdistan' was discussed.⁶³ After this, the

⁵⁴ Y. Gelber, *Growing a Fleur-de-Lis: The Intelligence Services of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine*, Vol. I (Tel-Aviv: Defense Ministry, 1992), p. 273 [in Hebrew]; Haganah Archives, division 8, file 39, p. 181, 'Routes for smuggling arms', 25 July 1936; NA, FO 141/445/3, Trott (Jeddah) to Kelly, 18 September 1937. The arms discovered in the Bay of Aqaba did not come from Italy.

⁵⁵ ASMAE, Gab. 743, note for Ciano, 23 November 1936.

⁵⁶ Note, 10 September 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1220.

⁵⁷ Note for Mussolini, 26 September 1936, *Ibid*, p. 1222. 'Approvato dal Duce' is written on the top left corner of this document which also bears Mussolini's 'M'.

⁵⁸ ASMAE, Gab. 743, fasc. 'personali Libico da inviare in Palestina', Ministry for the Colonies to Balbo, 29 September 1936.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, note, 5 October 1936; Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Udienze, b. 3126.

⁶⁰ ASMAE, Gab. 743, fasc. 'personali Libico da inviare in Palestina', Balbo to Ciano, 29 October 1936. Captain Kalifa Khalid was somewhat of an anomaly, since Libyans were usually not allowed to hold officer's ranks.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, Ciano to Balbo, 4 November 1936.

⁶² *Ibid*, Balbo to Ciano, 12 November 1936.

⁶³ Note for Ciano, 18 July 1937, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1234. Alami told the Italians that the Mufti wished to 'supply and develop' a Kurdish revolt, but did not elaborate.

subject again disappears and the documentation does not state what came of the renewed request. It is possible that the Palestinian Arab leadership abandoned the plan or that it was eventually ruled out by Mussolini. Alternatively, the plan could have died out in the Italian bureaucracy.

Indirect Assistance in Obtaining Arms

In April 1939, Mussolini and Ciano met Field Marshal Hermann Göring in Rome. During the conversation the Arab topic came up. According to the German account:

Count Ciano then explained how Italy was aiding the Arabs. Direct supply was too risky; Italy was therefore giving them money and they had so far always succeeded in buying arms through Greek middlemen with the help of the funds thus received. The British, however, had now barred the way to Palestine so thoroughly that direct imports were impossible. But the import of arms was easier by the roundabout route of Syria.⁶⁴

Nowhere in the detailed records from the Ciano-era is there any mention of Italian knowledge of where (outside of Italy) the Palestinian Arabs were purchasing arms and how these were smuggled into the country. One cannot discount the possibility that, for whatever reason, Ciano was misleading the Germans (Italy had suspended its material assistance to the Palestinian Arabs a year before the conversation with Göring took place). If we assume he was telling the truth, the following reconstruction might explain how this came about. Throughout the period of the Ethiopian War, certain Greek companies and businessmen offered the Italian government the sale of various products despite the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations. The Italian government accepted many of these offers and the merchandise was exported first to Albania and from there to Italy. SIM handled all these transactions.⁶⁵ It may be that these business deals created the connections which were later used to facilitate arms sales to the Palestinian Arabs. Vague hints of this can be found in Foreign Ministry sources. On 15 January 1936, the Secret Affairs Section of the Cabinet recommended that an agent of the Mufti could purchase weapons in a 'foreign market' using funds 'provided especially by us'.⁶⁶ On 16 September of that year, having received the initial list of arms stored in Taranto, the Foreign Ministry considered 'providing for the acquisition of the rest of the material abroad'.⁶⁷

Italy's Formal Position

Soon after the disturbances in Palestine broke out, British allegations regarding Italian complicity began to appear. On 6 May 1936, for instance, Graham White MP asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies in the House of Commons if he could state 'the extent to which propaganda from Italian and other outside sources has been the cause of the recent disturbances in Palestine?'.⁶⁸ The Italians denied

⁶⁴ Unsigned memorandum, 16 April 1939, *DGFP*, ser. D, Vol. VI, p. 262.

⁶⁵ USSME, H-3, Car. SIM, Rac. 4: 'Offerte varie alla Grecia, agosto 1935–marzo 1936'. I am greatly indebted to Dr Brian Sullivan for this information.

⁶⁶ The secret affairs section of the cabinet to Mussolini, 15 January 1936, *DDI*, 8, Vol. III, p. 81.

⁶⁷ ASMAE, Gab. 743, note, 16 September 1936.

⁶⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, fifth series, Vol. 311, House of Commons, Deb. 5, 6 May 1936, p. 1685. The secretary replied he 'had no information' on the subject.

such allegations. In an interview with George Ward Price of the *Daily Mail* Mussolini stated that Italy 'had no political interest at all' in Palestine. 'It was utterly false to ascribe to Italy any responsibility whatsoever for the recent disturbances in Palestine or for any troubles there', he added.⁶⁹ On 14 May 1936, De Angelis published a declaration denying allegations made in the Jewish 'anti-Fascist' press as to the responsibility of Italian agents for the disorder in Palestine. 'The Royal Consul-General of Italy in Palestine and Transjordan' he wrote, 'is the only Italian agent in these countries'.⁷⁰

In July 1936, newly appointed Foreign Minister Ciano fully approved a memorandum summarizing Italy's pro-Muslim policy in the past and recommending its continuance and enhancement in the future. It argued that Italy's future policy should be guided by two central factors: from a 'negative' point of view, relations with the Arab countries would enable Rome to exert pressure on Britain and France; and from a 'positive' point of view, such relations ought to 'affirm our increasing moral, cultural and commercial influence in these countries'.⁷¹ Palazzo Chigi reckoned that, by supporting local leaders, Italy was able to attain strict neutrality and even mild support from the Arabs in Palestine during the Ethiopian War. The attitude adopted by the Arabs posed 'a grave threat to British interests in the Near East and in Egypt'.⁷²

In September 1936, both the Palestinian Arabs and the Italian leadership took steps to strengthen their cooperation with each other. On 9 September, Alami informed the Italians of a secret agreement, which had supposedly been reached between the Mufti, Ibn Sa'ud, the Imam Yahya of Yemen, the Foreign Minister of Iraq and three nationalist leaders from Syria. The objectives of this agreement were: to suspend Jewish immigration to Palestine; to replace the Amir Abdullah of Transjordan by a Wahabi prince;⁷³ to further the independence of Palestine, Transjordan and Syria; and to create an Arab Federation that would include Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan and the Arabian Peninsula. This federation would be anti-British and anti-French in character.⁷⁴ Alami did not give a reason why he was divulging this information, but it is apparent that he was seeking Italian consent for the Mufti's long-term plans.

Coincidentally, at the same time the Fascist leadership expressed for the first time a desire to see the revolt in Palestine intensified. In a note to Mussolini, Ciano stressed that the periodical payments to the Palestinian Arabs should continue 'if the Arabs maintain the present situation in Palestine [or] make it worse'.⁷⁵ This, however, was not the case. In October 1936, the violence in Palestine decreased and the general strike was suspended, following an appeal by the Arab sovereigns and the British threat to declare martial law. In November 1936, Berionni met Alami in Venice and informed him of the Italian desire to see the revolt revived.

⁶⁹ *Palestine Post* (7 May 1936), p. 1.

⁷⁰ *Oriente Moderno*, XVI (June 1936), p. 329.

⁷¹ 'Relazione di Massima', 15 July 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', pp. 1216–1218.

⁷² ASMAE, Gab. 743, note, 6 September 1936.

⁷³ A few months later, in April 1937, the Jewish Agency notified the Amir Abdullah of a report they had received, according to which the Mufti had used the pilgrimage to Mecca to 'undermine the position of the Emir'. According to the same report, King Ibn Sa'ud was 'not enthusiastic about the plan and answered to his guests that he does not intend to invest efforts and money in a plan whose execution is doubtful'. CZA, S25/22836, Political Department to Emirate Palace, 4 April 1937.

⁷⁴ Note, 10 September 1936; note for Mussolini, 26 September 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', pp. 1220–1222.

⁷⁵ Note for Mussolini, 26 September 1936, *Ibid.*, p. 1222.

In January 1937, Berionni reported that the Mufti was 'disappointed at not being able to resume the revolution immediately and *in full strength*, as we wanted [original italics]'.⁷⁶

In July 1937, Italy was faced with a dilemma regarding its official response to the Peel Commission report and the plan to divide Palestine between an Arab state, a Jewish state and a small British protectorate. An Italian Foreign Ministry review of the matter concluded that it was in 'our interest to prevent the execution of this project'. Concern was voiced over the possibility that Britain would use the Partition Plan to establish a permanent military presence in Haifa (an outlet to the Mediterranean). Palazzo Chigi was also uneasy about the fate of the Christian holy places (regarded as Italian interests).⁷⁷

At first, the Italian government seems to have been at odds on how to voice its opposition to the Partition Plan. Ciano instructed Mazzolini in Jerusalem to convey to the Arabs with whom he came into contact that Italy had not yet decided on its official course of action regarding the partition scheme. He was also to make clear that this should not be interpreted as a sign of disinterest on Italy's part.⁷⁸ On 31 July 1937, Renato Bova Scoppa, the Italian Consul-General in Geneva, conveyed a similar message to a delegation of Palestinian Arabs headed by Jamal Husayni and Awni 'Abd al-Hadi.⁷⁹ The Palestinian delegation wanted to secure Italy's support for its refusal to accept the Partition Plan. For this purpose Jamal Husayni was scheduled to travel to Rome on 13 August in order to meet with Ciano.⁸⁰

While support for the Arab opposition to the Partition Plan was not made public at first, Italy had no qualms about secretly inciting the renewal of the troubles in Palestine. On 28 July 1937, Ciano passed to Alami, through an emissary, the message that the best time to renew the revolt was the present, since Britain was preoccupied with developments in Spain and the Far East.⁸¹ In September 1937, Rome was notified of the Mufti's intention to resume the violent campaign against the British and of his plan to have the Amir Abdullah of Transjordan overthrown. Upon learning of this, Mussolini approved an immediate payment of £15,000 and promised a further £5,000 once the revolt recommenced.⁸² When, in October 1937, the revolt was renewed, the Italian press violently attacked British policy. *Il Popolo d'Italia* expressed 'horror at the harsh measures in Palestine' and published a caricature showing two soldiers stabbing a bound man representing Palestine. The title read: 'Mandatory Politics of the League of Nations'.⁸³ On 26 October 1937, Shertok noted in his diary that despite the shortage of paper in Italy and the limiting of dailies to six pages, the Italian press still found plenty of room to write large-scale reports on the situation in Palestine with big anti-British and anti-Zionist headlines.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Note for Ciano, 1 January 1937, *Ibid.*, p. 1223.

⁷⁷ ASMAE, Gab. 744, Review regarding the Peel Report, [July] 1937.

⁷⁸ Ciano to Mazzolini, 28 August 1937, *DDI*, 8, Vol. XI, p. 310.

⁷⁹ ASMAE, Gab. 744, Bova Scoppa to Foreign Ministry, 31 July 1937.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Bova Scoppa to Foreign Ministry, 11 August 1937; Bova Scoppa to Foreign Ministry, 14 August 1937. Mussolini gave his approval for Jamal Husayni's visit to Rome. See minute from 30 July 1937 on a note for Ciano, 28 July 1937. Eventually, Husayni had to return to Palestine because his wife was ill and the meeting with Ciano did not take place.

⁸¹ Note for Ciano, 28 July 1937, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', p. 1228.

⁸² Note for Mussolini, 22 September 1937, *Ibid.*, pp. 1238-39; ASMAE, Gab. 744, note for Mussolini, 23 September 1937. The Amir Abdullah supported the Partition Plan, from which he stood to gain.

⁸³ *Il Popolo d'Italia* (25 October 1937), p. 1.

⁸⁴ M. Sharett, *Political Diary 1937* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1971), p. 394 [in Hebrew].

At the beginning of 1938 Italy finally formally objected to the idea of the creation of two states in Palestine inherent in the Peel Report. On 16 February, the famous *Informazione Diplomatica* n. 14, which Mussolini wrote himself, was published. In it was the statement regarding the international Jewish problem having only one solution: 'the creation in some part of the world, not in Palestine, of a Jewish state'.⁸⁵ According to Ciano, the words 'not in Palestine' were added 'on the grounds that we must safeguard our relations with the Arabs'.⁸⁶ In the summer of 1938, Mussolini informed Ciano of his intention to settle the Jews in various parts of Italian East Africa as a 'concession for International Jewry'.⁸⁷

However, before Mussolini divulged these plans to Ciano, Italy was to undertake an important shift in its attitude towards Palestine. On 8 March 1938, Ciano and the British Ambassador in Rome, Lord Perth (formerly Eric Drummond), began discussing the formula for Palestine as part of the preparations for an Anglo-Italian agreement. The British proposal for a formula was:

His Majesty's Government desire to obtain from the Royal Italian Government an undertaking that they will refrain from any attempts to create difficulty for His Majesty's Government either *in the framing of policy for* or in the administration of Palestine. [my italics]⁸⁸

The Italians objected to this proposal. The phrase about the 'framing of policy' implied Italian abstention from interfering with the Partition Plan. The Director General for Europe and the Mediterranean in the Foreign Ministry pointed out to Ciano that the partition of Palestine contradicted the Mandate charter (which Italy ratified) and the *status quo* in the Mediterranean required by the Anglo-Italian 'Gentlemen's Agreement' of January 1937. In addition, the Foreign Ministry wanted to use the wording of the agreement regarding Palestine to safeguard Italy's prestige in the Muslim and Arab world.⁸⁹ Eventually, the Palestine issue was settled in a 'verbal assurance' outside of the formal accord. Ciano promised the British Ambassador that the Italian government would 'refrain from creating difficulties or embarrassments for His Majesty's Government in the administration of Palestine'. Perth, in turn, promised that the British government would 'preserve and protect the legitimate Italian interests' in the country.⁹⁰ Italy's main diplomatic achievement in the 'Easter Accords' was to obtain British *de jure* recognition of the Fascist *Impero* which was established in East Africa after the conquest of Addis Ababa in May 1936. For Mussolini this was a much coveted prestige prize. Following the agreement Rome toned down its anti-British propaganda, halted its financial assistance to the Mufti and abandoned the plan to supply the rebels in Palestine with arms.

Despite the change of policy regarding Palestine, relations with its Arab leadership were not severed. Italian Foreign Ministry officials continued to meet with Musa Alami during the second half of 1938 and the early months of 1939.

⁸⁵ 'Nota n. 14 dell'Informazione Diplomatica', 16 February 1938, *DDI*, 8, Vol. VIII, p. 190.

⁸⁶ February 1938, G. Ciano, *Diary 1937–1938*, A. Mayor trans. (London, 1952), p. 75.

⁸⁷ August and 4 September 1938 *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 151. For more information on the plans to settle Jews in Ethiopia see: S. I. Minerbi, 'Il progetto di un insediamento ebraico in Etiopia (1936–1943)', *Storia Contemporanea*, 17(6) (1986), pp. 1083–1137.

⁸⁸ 'List of Subjects for the Agenda of Anglo-Italian Conversations', *DDI*, 8, Vol. VIII, p. 330.

⁸⁹ Director General for Europe and the Mediterranean to Ciano, 15 March 1938, *Ibid.*, p. 372; B. Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2003), p. 153.

⁹⁰ 'Palestina (assicurazioni verbali)', 16 April 1938, *DDI*, 8, Vol. VIII, p. 577.

Rome wanted to 'maintain the position we have acquired' in the Muslim-Arab world.⁹¹ In late June and early July 1938, as the revolt in Palestine was reaching its climax, the Fascist regime considered renewing its support for the Mufti. However, the Duce and Ciano concluded that any renewal of assistance should 'wait for developments in Anglo-Italian relations'.⁹²

As a tool in peace-time international politics Italy stood to gain nothing more from Britain by supporting the struggle of the Arab nationalists. However, as the conversation between Mussolini and Göring in April 1939 illustrates, the Arabs could still be of use to Italy once war broke out:

The Duce expressed the view that, by anti-British propaganda among the Arabs, the Axis Powers could probably achieve a state of tension, but not a revolution. In the event of a war, however, the prospect of fomenting an Arab uprising would be more favourable.⁹³

Active collaboration between Fascist Italy and Husayni was indeed resumed during the Second World War.

Italian Pro-Arab Propaganda during the Revolt

Italian propaganda in the Middle East through subsidies to various local newspapers as well as radio broadcasts in Arabic began during the first half of the 1930s. At first, this propaganda was aimed at improving Italy's image among the peoples of the region. With the mounting of tension between Britain and Italy surrounding the Ethiopian Crisis in the summer of 1935, Italian propaganda in the Middle East, and especially transmissions in Arabic from 'Radio Bari', assumed a strong anti-British tone.⁹⁴

During the first two years of the revolt (spring 1936 until spring 1938) Italian propaganda regarding Palestine was in tune with the main objectives of the Mufti: it attacked British policy, criticized the Jews and undermined the Amir Abdullah by reporting that the uprising would soon spread to Transjordan. In late June 1936, Radio Bari stated that 'the Mandatory Power in Palestine is very much afraid of Trans-Jordan whose Arabs have decided to cooperate in the Holy War' and that 'Whitehall has great confidence in Amir Abdullah, but nevertheless they admit that he exercises not much influence upon the Bedu tribes'. Bari also reported that 'young Arabs attacked a Jewish bank in Damascus for refusing to give donations to the aid of Arab Palestine'.⁹⁵ In mid-September 1936, the Bari announcer said that the 'Palestinian Arabs were being killed by the local British authorities in order to protect the Jews'.⁹⁶ In late October 1937, Bari published false reports about the destruction of the Allenby Bridge that crosses the Jordan River and on troubles on the Transjordan-Saudi frontier.⁹⁷ On 10 December 1937, Bari

⁹¹ ASMAE, Gab. 744, note for Ciano, 2 June 1938.

⁹² Ibid, note for the Duce, 29 June 1938; note for Ciano, 4 July 1938. See minutes on both documents.

⁹³ Unsigned memorandum, 16 April 1939, *DGFP*, ser. D, Vol. VI, p. 262.

⁹⁴ C.A. MacDonald, 'Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures 1934-1938', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 13 (May 1977), pp. 195-207. Despite its name, the broadcasts of Radio Bari emanated from a station in Rome.

⁹⁵ NA, CO 733/299/12, 'Radio Bari Broadcast, 7:40 p.m. 27/6 [1936]'; 'Radio Bari Broadcast, 7:40 p.m. 30.6.36'.

⁹⁶ Ibid, Hallett to Peel, 24 September 1936.

⁹⁷ NA, FO 371/20819, 'Summary of Broadcasts from Bari-Rome', 19 October 1937; 'Summary of Broadcasts from Bari-Rome', 20 October 1937; Report from Jerusalem, 2 November 1937; Embassy in Rome to Foreign Office, 5 November 1937.

announced that ‘the troubles in Palestine are all the fault of the British themselves’ and on 29 December it cited an interview given by Shakib Arslan to the paper *Il Messaggero* ‘inveighing against the Palestine policy of Great Britain, who intend to set up a Jewish state under British protection’.⁹⁸

Radio Bari’s attacks were not constant, but they were recurring. The anti-British tone would vary according to political considerations. In July 1937, for instance, Ciano conveyed to the Mufti an assurance that the station’s recent moderate tone did not signify a change in Italian policy and was merely a formal (and temporary) concession to the British.⁹⁹ In March 1938, Bari moderated its tone as not to disrupt the negotiations for the Anglo-Italian treaty. The reduction of attacks against British policy in the broadcasts of Bari may partially explain the decrease in the station’s popularity in 1939.¹⁰⁰

During the revolt, the majority of the Arab press in Palestine was hostile to Britain—as far as the Mandate government’s censorship permitted. It also published occasional articles in support of Italy.¹⁰¹ Even the Jaffa daily *Filastin*, which was a hard-line critic of Italy before and during the Ethiopian War, adopted a more amicable approach.¹⁰² Some of the ‘favourable press’ that Italy received was due to subsidies that the Fascist regime was willing to dispense.¹⁰³

Italian representatives in Palestine and the press in Rome took great pride in pro-Italian manifestations by the Arabs in Palestine. During the festivities marking the anniversary of the birth of the prophet in May 1937, a shop near the Jaffa Gate in the old city of Jerusalem was decorated with pictures of Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and King Ghazi of Iraq, as well as Italian and German flags.¹⁰⁴ The Italian Consul-General, Mazzolini, reported receiving ‘numerous requests’ for more flags and pictures of the Duce, which despite his efforts, he was unable to supply. The Vice-Consul in Haifa reported that Italian flags and pictures of the Duce were hung in the centre of the town’s market.¹⁰⁵ The Jerusalem correspondent of the *Corriere della Sera*, Alessandro Mombelli, cited an ‘Arab chief’ who pointed at the picture of Mussolini and told the reporter: ‘We admire with a feeling of sincere enthusiasm the head of fascism for his humane comprehension of Islam, and his courage for having dared to rise before anybody else against the myth of British might’.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁸ ASMAE, AP, Italia, b. 54, fasc. 1 ‘Stampa e trasmissioni radio’.

⁹⁹ Note for Ciano, 18 July 1937, in Goglia, ‘Il Mufti e Mussolini’, p. 1229.

¹⁰⁰ NA, GFM 36/82, Report 75, Mazzolini to Ministry of Popular Culture, 30 May 1939.

¹⁰¹ For the attitude of the Jerusalem *Meraat A-Sharq* see: ASMAE, AP, Palestina, b. 15, Mazzolini to Foreign Ministry, 10 June 1937; for the attitudes of the Jaffa based *Addifa* and the Bethlehem based *Saut Ashaab* see: NA, GFM 36/508, Direzione Generale Affari Generali – Ufficio V, ‘Palestina e Transgiordania: Situazione politica nel 1937’.

¹⁰² M. Shemesh, ‘*Filastin*’s Position vis-à-vis the Axis and European States, 1938–1939’, *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, 2 (1992), pp. 259–276 [in Hebrew]; M. Kabha, *Journalism in the Eye of the Storm: The Palestinian Press Shapes Public Opinion, 1929–1939* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2004), p. 186 [in Hebrew].

¹⁰³ In March 1937, Mazzolini asked the Ministry of Press and Propaganda to ‘facilitate’ the planned visit in Italy of *Filastin*’s owner, Isa al-Isa. ASMAE, Ufficio Stampa Estera – Ministero Cultura Popolare (1920–1944), b. 223, Mazzolini to Press and Propaganda Ministry, 16 March 1937. For details about the contacts between Italy and the owner and editor of *Al-Jama’a Al-Islamiyya* see: Arielli, ‘La politica dell’Italia fascista’, pp. 21, 24.

¹⁰⁴ NA, AIR 2/1813, A. I., 17 June 1937.

¹⁰⁵ ASMAE, AP, Palestina, b. 15, Mazzolini to Foreign Ministry, 21 May 1937; Mazzolini to Foreign Ministry, 27 May 1937. Similar scenes were reported in Bethlehem and Jaffa.

¹⁰⁶ NA, FO 371/21159, Drummond to Eden, 31 May 1937. Mombelli was an agent of the *Agence d’Egypte et d’Orient*, an organ of the Italian Ministry of Press and Propaganda. As such, the authenticity of his interview with the ‘Arab chief’ was questioned. CO 733/431/15, Wauchope to Ormsby Gore, 23 August 1937.

Italy was perceived as a power challenging British hegemony in the Middle East and as such it attracted adherents among the Arabs in Palestine. Key political figures maintained secret contacts with Italian officials while Italy enjoyed relatively favourable coverage by most of the Arabic press in Palestine. The support Italy received was motivated by political considerations, not ideological ones. Italian propaganda was successful insofar as it managed to tap into local political, social and cultural dispositions by criticizing British policy. Furthermore, the pro-Muslim policy that Italy adopted in its colonies in Africa assisted in removing some of the hostility that the repression of the Sanusi revolt had created in the past.

However, it would be misleading to conclude that 'Italy had won approval and sympathy in the Arab-Muslim world'.¹⁰⁷ Italy did not enjoy unanimous support and many Arabs found Fascist Italy's backing of Arab nationalism contradictory to Italian imperialism.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Arab intellectuals found British and Zionist insinuations that they were fighting *for* Italy rather insulting. In 1938, the Christian-Arab leader and historian George Antonius wrote that 'One of the most prevalent misconceptions is that the trouble in Palestine is the result of an engineered agitation', attributed among other things 'to the agents and the subsidies of Italy and Germany'. This he emphatically denied: 'the rebellion today is, to a greater extent than ever before, a revolt of villagers, and its immediate cause is the proposed scheme of partition'.¹⁰⁹ *Filastin* likewise rejected the allegation that the Arabs were incited by Italian propaganda: 'as if we are cattle or naïve and senseless to a degree that we need Italy or another country to kindle our flame of nationalism'. The Arabs, the paper said, were aware that any manifestation of sympathy towards them was 'either a lie or a part of the imperialistic competition'.¹¹⁰ The publicised shipping of thousands of Italian colonists to Libya in late 1938 and the conquest of the predominantly Muslim Albania in April 1939 severely undermined Mussolini's efforts to enhance his prestige in the Middle East.

Conclusions

How influential was Italian assistance on the course of the revolt? Before and especially during the rebellion in Palestine, Hajj Amin al-Husayni and his subordinates received direct Italian financial support, a certain degree of political backing and possibly indirect assistance in obtaining arms. Italian propaganda endeavoured to incite the Arab population in Palestine against the British Mandate authorities and, to a certain extent, against the Jewish population. Until the summer of 1936, the Italian Consul-General in Jerusalem played a central role in mediating between Rome and the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs. From September 1936 onwards, Italian assistance to the revolt was coordinated directly from the Foreign Ministry and SIM headquarters in Rome. This change reflected a desire to maintain maximum secrecy and to avoid misappropriations of funds.

¹⁰⁷ Fabei, *Mussolini e la resistenza palestinese*, p. 170.

¹⁰⁸ H. Erlich, 'Periphery and Youth: Fascist Italy and the Middle East' in S. Ugelvik Larsen (ed.) *Fascism Outside Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 410–420.

¹⁰⁹ G. Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 405–406.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Shemesh, 'Filastin's Position', p. 274.

The period during which Italian assistance reached its peak was between the autumn of 1936 and the spring of 1938. This period has been defined by one historian as the 'cease-fire' episode of the revolt.¹¹¹ By the time the rebellion reached its climax in the summer of 1938 Italian aid had already been stopped. We can not say how influential Italian financial support was, since we do not know how much money the Mufti was able to raise from other sources or how he used the funds that were at his disposal. Perhaps if the arms, which were stored for the Mufti in Taranto, had found their way to Palestine, Mussolini and Ciano would have been able to boast a substantial contribution to the rebellion. But Mussolini seems to have cared little for the success of the revolt in Palestine. He did not mention the struggle of the Palestinian Arabs in his public speeches as Hitler had done on more than one occasion.¹¹² Contrary to the Civil War in Spain, where Mussolini felt that Fascist prestige was at stake, Italian involvement in Palestine never crossed the threshold of armed military intervention. While Italy was, as Stefano Fabei notes with pride, the first European power to offer assistance to the Palestinian Arabs in their struggle against the British and Zionists,¹¹³ its motives were self-serving. The regime's support for the Arabs in Palestine was governed by, and subordinate to, wider considerations of Italian policy. The Duce's main interests in the Middle East were derived from imperial competition; he sought to weaken and manoeuvre Britain as well as to increase Italy's influence. Ironically, it was probably apprehension about Mussolini's desire to increase his influence in the Middle East that prevented King Ibn Sa'ud from collaborating with the plan to smuggle Italian arms to Palestine.

Finally, through the analysis of predominantly Italian sources, it is difficult to estimate the true impact Fascist policy had on the revolt of the Palestinian Arabs. The Mufti's message: 'Tell Signor Mussolini that I have committed myself to the struggle because I believe in his promise and in his support',¹¹⁴ which was passed-on during the first months of the revolt, was no doubt flattering to Mussolini, but might not necessarily reflect the truth. A comprehensive study based on Arab sources (if such sources exist), examining what occurred behind the scenes on the Arab side of the secret relations with Italy, still waits to be written. In any case, it is clear that the Mufti's decision to tie his fate with that of the Axis starting from the mid 1930s and continuing throughout the Second World War did little to further the cause of his people.

¹¹¹ Y. Arnon-Ochana, 'Social and Political Aspects in the Arab Rebels' Movement, 1936–1939' in E. Danin (ed.) *Documents and Portraits from the Arab Gangs Archives* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981), p. 26 [in Hebrew].

¹¹² F. R. Nicosia, 'Fritz Grobba and the Middle East Policy of the Third Reich', in E. Ingram (ed.) *National and International Politics in the Middle East: Essays in Honor of Elie Kedourie* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), p. 218.

¹¹³ S. Fabei, 'Il sostegno dell'Italia alla prima intifada. I rapporti tra fascismo e nazionalismo palestinese negli anni trenta', *Studi Piacentini*, 35 (2004), p. 145.

¹¹⁴ Note for Ciano, 9 July 1936, in Goglia, 'Il Mufti e Mussolini', pp. 1213–1215.