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*Mussolini's War of Words:
Italian Propaganda and Subversion in Egypt and Palestine,
1934-1939*

Abstract: *This article examines Italy's attempts to export the Fascist revolution to areas formally and informally controlled by Britain. The challenge mounted by the Italian government to the British imperial structure rested upon the development of preferential relations with nationalist movements throughout the empire; such relationship would be forged by propaganda in a region, the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, which was central to Mussolini's foreign policy. The promotion of Fascist ideology among the Middle Eastern populations, and in particular in Egypt and Palestine, was driven by political priorities rather than ideological imperatives insofar as propaganda was carefully employed to expand the economic and military capacity of Fascist Italy. Thus propaganda became as early as the 1920s an instrument of foreign policy. This article also questions the effectiveness of Britain's response to the Fascist challenge: here structural problems within the British propaganda machine and intelligence community seriously undermined Britain's defence against Axis subversion in the Middle East.*

Keywords: Fascism; Arab nationalism; propaganda; Middle East; Egypt; Palestine.

«We admire with a feeling of sincere enthusiasm the head of Fascism for his humane comprehension, his sympathy towards Islam, and his courage for having dared to rise before anybody else against the myth of British might», an Arab chief claimed pointing to the photographs of Mussolini and Hitler displayed in a café near the Jaffa gate in Jerusalem.¹ The Italian newspaper «Corriere della Sera» described Muslim celebrations of the Birthday of the Prophet led by the Mufti of Jerusalem and emphasised «the bitter rancour of the autochthonous population of the Holy Land against the Mandatory Power».² Two days earlier, another Italian newspaper, «La Stampa», had drawn attention to the prominent display of Italian and German flags together with Arab flags in Jerusalem; photographs of the

¹ *Drummond to Eden*, May 28, 1937, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/341/15.

² *Ibid.*

Duce and the Führer were exhibited in the centre of town, whilst remarkable appeared the complete absence of British flags.³ The Italians took it as a clear sign of the bitter feelings of the Arab community of Palestine towards Britain, feelings that the Fascist regime was set to heighten through a vast and well-co-ordinated propaganda campaign that employed Italian and local media, bribery and personal contacts, members of the Italian community and diplomats. Italian propagandists carefully exploited the set of political, economic and social circumstances that had undermined British presence in Palestine; through the wavelenghts of Radio Bari and from the pages of Italian and Arab newspapers they played upon the increasing tension between the Jewish and Arab communities and emphasised the inadequacy of the policy of equilibrium adopted by the British mandatory authorities and the excesses of British military response to Arab uprisings that had begun in 1936. The British appeared irritated by and anxious about Italian activities in Palestine and throughout the Middle East, although not greatly concerned about the long-term effects of Fascist propaganda; to many in Whitehall Italian endeavours seemed ephemeral and short-lived, especially once the Arabs had finally understood the imperialist nature of Mussolini's foreign policy. As to the Italian newspapers, the British High Commissioner in Palestine remarked that in his articles the correspondent for both «La Stampa» and «Corriere della Sera», the Italian priest Dr. Mombelli, was «contributing to his utmost to the trend of Italian propaganda».⁴

During the last twenty years, the study of propaganda in its historical and more contemporary manifestations has received considerable impetus. In particular, since the 1980s historians and social scientists have been engaged in a vast programme of scholarly research that has comprehensively explored the building of state propaganda machines in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Exemplar of this trend is David Welch's work on the Third Reich's propaganda machine, strategies and techniques, and even more relevant to the subject of this article is Jeffrey Herf's wide-ranging study of Nazi propaganda in the Arab and Muslim world during the Second World War.⁵ Notwithstanding the growing interest

³ See *ibid.*

⁴ *Wauchope to Ormsby Gore*, 23 August 1937, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/341/15.

⁵ See D. WELCH, ed., *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations*, London, Croom Helm, 1983; ID., *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2001;

in the emergence of mass societies and the subsequent reconfiguration of the relationship between governments, media and public opinions during the interwar years, the contemporary experience of Fascist media and cultural propaganda has received comparatively little attention, despite the regime's widespread use of techniques of mass persuasion. Seminal studies by Victoria De Grazia and Philip Cannistraro address broad questions concerning the creation of public consensus in Italy during the years of the Fascist regime, whilst volumes by W. Vincent Arnold and Luisa Quatermaine offer a thoughtful insight respectively into the work of the Fascist propaganda machine during the Second World War and the controversial activities of the reconstituted Ministry of Popular Culture under the Salò Republic.⁶ In Italy, research into the regime's domestic propaganda apparatus, its use of the mass media and in particular its relationship with the press (especially during the Abyssinian war) have generated considerable interest, although until recently little work had been done to assess the overseas dimension of Fascist propaganda, let alone the powerful connection existing between propaganda, diplomacy and foreign policy. Typically, studies of Italian foreign policy have offered little insight into the role of propaganda within Mussolini's expansionist agenda. In his multi-volume biography of Mussolini, Renzo De Felice briefly addresses the controversial relationship between Fascism and the Arab world, which, De Felice claims, began acquiring real significance from 1933.⁷ As the regime strove to rekindle the old ties with Italy's Mediterranean neighbours and connect with Arab nationalist movements, Rome's diplomatic efforts coupled with propaganda and increasing economic penetration, achieved «results that cannot be regarded as insignificant».⁸ More recently, in his volume *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War*, Robert Mallet briefly comments on the significance of Radio Bari broadcasts and their

ID., *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*, second edition, London, Routledge, 2002; J. HERF, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2011.

⁶ See V.W. ARNOLD, *The Illusion of Victory: Fascist Propaganda and the Second World War*, New York, Peter Lang, 1997; P. CANNISTRARO, *La fabbrica del consenso*, Bari, Laterza, 1975; V. DE GRAZIA, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981; L. QUATERMAINE, *Mussolini's Last Republic: Propaganda and Politics in the Italian Social Republic R.S.I., 1943-45*, Exeter, Elm Bank Publications, 2000.

⁷ See R. DE FELICE, *Mussolini il duce. I. Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*, Torino, Einaudi, 1974.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 655.

impact on deteriorating Anglo-Italian relations during the second half of the 1930s.⁹ Amongst the most noteworthy contributions to the Italian historiography, Stefano Fabei's study *Il fascio, la svastica e la mezzaluna* offers a detailed account of Axis strategy in the Arab world from the mid-1930s to 1945, highlighting ideological similarities, co-operation and divergences between Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Arab nationalist forces.¹⁰

Within the last decade, a renewed interest in Italy's Mediterranean and Middle Eastern policies has given depth and breadth to scholarly research into Fascist Italy's foreign affairs. This author's volume *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad: Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935-1940*, which examines the interplay of politics, diplomacy and propaganda under the fascist regime, was followed by Nir Arielli's *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-40* and by Massimiliano Fiore's monograph *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922-1940*.¹¹ These three studies focus on the period leading up to Italy's entry into the war and examine successes and failures of Italy's colonial and imperial policies with specific reference to the Middle East. Within a broader thematic framework, these volumes give emphasis to discrete aspects of Italy's strategies in the region – cultural policies and propaganda (Williams), foreign and colonial policies (Arielli), diplomatic and military agreements (Fiore).

This article examines the war of words waged by Rome and London to win the favour of Arab nationalist movements throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, with special reference to Egypt and Palestine. The objectives of the programme of 'internationalisation' of the Fascist doctrine and promotion of the regime had become clear already in the late 1920s, but it was towards the end of the 1930s that the Fascist authorities increased the pace and heightened the tone of their overseas propaganda intended to link up with, and to harness, the volatile anti-colonialist movements of the region. The outbreak of the Second World

⁹ See R. MALLETT, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 120.

¹⁰ See S. FABEI, *Il fascio, la svastica e la mezzaluna*, Milano, Mursia, 2002.

¹¹ See N. ARIELLI, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-40*, London and New York, Palgrave, 2010; M. FIORE, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922-1940*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010; M. WILLIAMS, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad: Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935-1940*, London, Routledge, 2006.

War added a further dimension to Italian propaganda and subversion; however, notwithstanding the increased efforts of the Fascist regime, from 1940 the popularity of Italian-sponsored information channels and cultural initiatives in the Arab world began a rapid descent.

With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, expressions of sympathy and appreciation for Italy's conduct in the Muslim world became increasingly rare. Even Galeazzo Ciano was aware of this change of sentiments. In February 1939, after receiving reports from Berlin that the Egyptian king Farouq was asking for Axis support should he proclaim Egypt's neutrality in the event of a European war, Ciano remarked: «This matter is so serious that it makes me want to make a number of reservations, even though the source of information is very reliable».¹² Britain, however, failed to recognise the decline of Italy's influence in the region and to retain the long-term loyalty and friendship of the Arab populations and national governments in the Middle East. As the war began, military and strategic requirements were given priority over cultural propaganda by British policy-makers, although the BBC strove to maintain the ties of sentiment between the metropole and the rest of the empire. But indigenous troops throughout the empire fought for the last time on Britain's side; within few years, India would be granted independence whilst the withdrawal of British troops and administrators from mandatory Palestine would soon be followed by the creation of the state of Israel.

Efforts to assess the effectiveness of propaganda campaigns in history have sometimes proved to be a frustrating endeavour. On a more superficial level it is possible to ascertain whether the objectives of the campaign have been achieved, but this often owes to the particular historical conjuncture and the interplay of various factors as much as the work of the propagandists themselves. In the absence of surveys and questionnaires, establishing a link of causality between propaganda and the response of its target audience remains methodologically problematic.¹³ The case of Italy is particularly indicative: here, Fascist propagandists, unlike their German colleagues, displayed little interest in systematically gauging popular response to their campaigns. The ensuing lack of formal feedback to the

¹² M. MUGGERIDGE, *Ciano's Diary, 1937-1943*, London, Phoenix Press, 2002, p. 193.

¹³ Methodological and theoretical issues related to the assessment of the effectiveness of individual propaganda strategies and campaigns are addressed in J. ELLUL, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, New York, Vintage Books, 1973; G.S. JOWETT – V. O'DONNELL, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 1999.

broadcast of Radio Bari, for example, hinders our understanding of the reaction of Arab audiences to Italian propaganda; participation of Egyptian, Syrian and Palestinian students to educational exchange programmes were seldom and haphazardly recorded, but never examined; the opinions of members of nationalist organisations and parties and their perceptions of Italy's domestic and foreign policies were rarely canvassed. Thus, any attempt to measure the effectiveness of Fascist propaganda in the Middle East and North Africa rests primarily on claims and counter-claims made by Italian and British diplomats in the region, who witnessed the unfolding of the Fascist campaign during times of high international tension. Contradicting accounts are offered by both sides; distinguishing between the real achievements of Italian propagandists and the effects of Britain's mishandling of her relations with the Arab world, becomes here a true challenge.

The organisation of the propaganda machine and the interaction of all its components are at the core of any research into activities designed to influence individual and collective perceptions and attitudes. In the 1920s, the Fascist regime attempted to establish its presence in the international arena by targeting primarily the numerous Italian communities overseas. The *fascistizzazione* of Italian society went hand in hand with the process of expansion of Italian culture abroad and the gradual centralisation of Italian diplomatic and cultural institutions such as the Direzione Generale delle Scuole Italiane all'Estero and the Fasci all'Estero, which were brought under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁴ In 1927, new reforms were introduced to tie Italian nationals living overseas to the metropole, which led to the creation of the Direzione Generale degli Italiani all'Estero and of the Comitato per l'Espansione della Cultura all'Estero; however, the vigorous drive towards the rapid *fascistizzazione* and ideological mobilisation of Italians abroad carried the risk of sowing division within the Italian communities and alienate them from the political and social environment in which they had until then prospered.¹⁵ At the heart of the cultural, political and economic expansion of Fascist Italy was the Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, established in Rome in 1899 to disseminate the Italian language and culture overseas. Throughout the

¹⁴ See B. GARZARELLI, "Parleremo al mondo intero". *La propaganda del fascismo all'estero*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2004, p. 15.

¹⁵ See E. SERRA, *La burocrazia della politica estera italiana*, in R.J.B. BOSWORTH – S. ROMANO, *La politica estera italiana, 1860-1985*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991, p. 83.

1920s the Dante Alighieri society was gradually incorporated into the propaganda machine of the regime, although it would be fair to say that despite the initial resistance of the Dante Alighieri, the relationship between the society and the government was based on collaboration and common nationalist ideals; such strong nationalist component furthered «the rapid identification of the objectives of the society itself with those of the regime».¹⁶

In the 1930s, the organisation of propaganda overseas received new impetus as the regime became increasingly keen to proclaim the international and universal nature of Fascism. The process of expansion of Italian propaganda overseas, which would no longer target Italian nationals but engage foreign audiences in a bid to overturn prejudices and stereotypes that had marred perceptions and understanding of the Fascist regime, was mainly driven by Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1932, Mussolini took over the *interim* direction of the Ministry and reformed its structure: as a result, five distinct sections emerged based on a subject-area division: Political Affairs – that since the 1887 Pisani-Dossi reform had retained clear primacy – Economic Affairs, Treaties and Private Affairs, Personnel, Italians Abroad and Schools.¹⁷ The centralization of Italian propaganda and cultural diplomacy was supported by La Farnesina (the Italian Foreign Ministry) and culminated with the creation of an office for overseas propaganda, under the aegis of the Press Office of the Head of the Government, led since 1933 by Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law. The propaganda apparatus that began to emerge in 1934 was the brainchild of Ciano, who had been inspired by the establishment of the German Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda in March 1933. The newly created overseas propaganda section was initially located within the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with which it kept close relations over time. The strong interdependence between foreign policy and overseas propaganda was also emphasised by the presence of Galeazzo Ciano head first of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda (established in 1935 and renamed Ministry of Popular Culture in 1937) and then of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁶ S. SANTORO, *L'Italia e l'Europa orientale. Diplomazia culturale e propaganda 1918-1943*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2005, p. 54.

¹⁷ See M. ZUCCONI, *Italy*, in B. HOCKING – D. SPENCE, eds., *Foreign Ministries in the European Union: Integrating Diplomats*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2005, pp. 164-165.

The strategies adopted by Italian propagandists overseas aimed to provide the most suitable response to local socio-political conditions, and mostly rested on the existing consular and community structures. The activities of the Italian communities overseas have been the subject of recent historical research. In particular, the role of Italian immigrants to the United States and the extent to which they were actively promoting Fascist policies, culture and values, have received considerable attention. Efforts were made to accelerate the process of *fascistizzazione* of the Italian immigrants and the second generation of Italo-Americans. The Fascist regime engineered the systematic penetration of the numerous cultural and leisure organisations of the Italian community: the Ordine Figli d'Italia, Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, the Italian Library of Information in New York, the Italy-America Society, the Italian Historical Society, the Casa Italiana at Columbia University among the most renowned. Membership of community institutions was particularly high among the so-called *prominenti*, a class of successful Italo-American professionals and businessmen that became one of the most important and effective conduits of Fascist propaganda, although once Mussolini fell out of favour in America, the *prominenti* did not hesitate to denounce Fascism as quickly as they had embraced it.¹⁸ Cannistraro highlights the importance of the immigrant communities «as points of leverage and reference for Italian interests abroad – that is, an Italy lobby in foreign countries».¹⁹ Establishing a *modus operandi* that would be perfected in the Middle East, from the late 1920s Italian propagandists weaved a network that rested on cultural institutions as well as some Catholic parishes and that was dedicated to the promotion of Fascist ideals among Italian immigrants; the outcome was what Italian historian Gaetano Salvemini termed as a «Fascist transmission belt».²⁰ Propaganda activities would be ultimately coordinated by Italian consular offices, and in particular by the local cultural agent. Italy would thus attempt to influence international perceptions and affairs through soft power as well as diplomatic manoeuvring and military agreements.

¹⁸ See M. ABBATE, a cura di, *L'Italia fascista tra Europa e Stati Uniti d'America*, Civita Castellana e Orte, Centro Falisco di Studi Storici, 2003.

¹⁹ P. CANNISTRARO, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921-1929*, WestLafayette, Bordighera Press, 1999, p. 6.

²⁰ As quoted in S. LUCONI – G. TINTORI, *L'ombra lunga del fascio. Canali di propagazione fascista per gli italiani d'America*, Milano, M&B Publishing, 2004, p. 19.

The Italian communities overseas were particularly keen to promote the image of a triumphant Italy. For example, in August 1935, when Ciano arrived in Port Said, British sources reported that approximately 3,000 Fascists travelled from all over the country to the town. A crowd of 20,000 people, including those resident in the area, invaded Port Said: «Those who travelled by car scattered coloured leaflets bearing fascist slogans in the streets. Some were in uniforms [...]. They were noisy and aggressive [...]. The demonstration has not done any good to Italian name. The overbearing behaviour of the Fascist contingents has disgusted local people».²¹

In Egypt Italian nationals appeared particularly proactive and vociferous; Italian diplomats and intelligence agents and their Egyptian contacts relied on the infrastructures and support of a broad Italian community settled in Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said. Italian communities in Egypt had enjoyed a degree of prosperity and amicable relations with their Muslim neighbours at least until the Abyssinian crisis, when suspicion and resentment towards Italy's aggression rapidly spread among the Egyptian population. The size and internal structure of the Italian community in Egypt offered a solid base of support to the regime's propagandists. Italian census data revealed that in 1936 18,548 Italians lived in Alexandria, some 17,300 in Cairo and around 600 in Port Said. Community life was centred upon a number of cultural, political and recreational associations such as the Fascio, the Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, the Circolo Italiano Dopolavoro and the Associazione Nazionale Combattenti, all controlled by the government in Rome.²² These organisations – whose members often operated behind the scenes on behalf of the Italian authorities – did not always appear directly involved in promoting Fascist political propaganda or other activities designed to undermine the internal stability of Egypt and the relations between the Egyptian government and its British counterpart.²³ The Italian authorities appeared extremely proud of the status and achievements of Italian residents in Egypt. At the end of 1936, The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – assessing the activities of Italian nationals in the upper Nile valley – claimed that the «solid, close and patriotic Italian community in Egypt

²¹ *Memorandum*, August 29, 1935, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/19075/J4865/110/16.

²² See *Egitto. Situazione politica nel 1936*, undated, U.K. National Archives, GFM 36/505.

²³ See *Lampson to Halifax*, March 29, 1938, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/21980/J1478/38/16.

was still providing an outstanding example of the achievements of Italian citizens abroad under the direction of the [Fascist] regime». ²⁴ The social profile of the Italian population of Egypt was rather diversified, including skilled workers, clerks, professionals and entrepreneurs. Some had achieved positions of responsibility within the structures controlled by the Fascist government, others had attempted to enter the high circles of the Egyptian political establishment. A small influx of Italian doctors and foreign doctors holding an Italian degree into the Sudan began in 1934, raising concerns that foreign professionals could be used by the Italian authorities to penetrate social and political circles in the Anglo-Egyptian condominium. ²⁵

Italy and the Middle East in the 1920s and 1930s

The history of Italian propaganda activities in the Middle East dates back to the end of the First World War. In the aftermath of the war, the newly born Fascist movement seemed to sympathise with the nationalistic aspirations of the Middle Eastern peoples with which it shared suspicion and resentment towards the British and French colonial systems. The Fascist leadership established close relations with Arab nationalists whose initiatives were soon championed and amplified by the Italian press, generating among British officials fear of a possible collusion between Italy and the Islamic activists.

In the late 1920s, having consolidated his power Mussolini appeared prepared to undertake a more active role in the international arena and sought to build and consolidate an empire, occupying those few territories in North and East Africa that still remained independent. Central to the Fascist ideology and political programme was the notion of empire initially conceived as economic and “spiritual” expansion of the proletarian nation. Towards the end of the 1920s the imperial vocation led the regime to become engaged in the Balkans and in Africa aiming eventually to assert Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean and secure access to the Oceans. ²⁶ Italian foreign-policy makers soon realised that to achieve a position of power in the *mare nostrum*, Italy had to seek an alliance with forces that

²⁴ *Egitto. Situazione politica nel 1936*, cit.

²⁵ See *The Secretariat in Khartoum to the Chancery*, Cairo, March 22, 1938, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/21996/65895.

²⁶ See E. GENTILE, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Bari, Laterza, 2002, p. 29.

could challenge the British imperial and mandatory system from within. The most interesting aspect of Italy's complex Middle Eastern policy was the unlikely partnership between an aspiring colonial power and an anti-colonial movement. In other words, anti-colonialism became in the hands of the regime a tool for colonial expansion. In order to further its political and economic interests in the Middle East and Levant, Italy needed to ensure the friendship and compliance of the 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 force British and French colonial administrators to withdraw from the region. In Syria, for example, the nationalist Misak Party was keen to reach an understanding with the Fascist regime, which would lead to the recognition of an independent Syrian state under a constitutional monarchy, while the Italian government would provide for the security of the Syrian coastline.²⁷

The alliance between Fascist Italy and Arab leaders would be forged 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 did not necessarily match the objectives of Fascist foreign policy makers. Suspicion towards the real aims of Mussolini's policy in the Middle East and resentment at his colonial undertaking in Africa remained widespread, eventually leaving the success of Italian propaganda confined to limited factions of the nationalist movement.

The initial thrust consisted mainly of cultural propaganda aimed at strengthening Italian ties with the Arab peoples «by praising Italy and the Fascist system».²⁸ The Italian government organised a number of initiatives, along with the sponsorship of Arab press, distribution of Italian publications, the foundation of schools and hospitals, the creation of a news agency in Cairo and the institution of Radio Bari, which began to broadcast programmes of music and news in Arabic in March 1934. The aim was originally to restore Italian prestige after the Senussi massacre and the dramatic events in Libya, but the outbreak of hostilities in Abyssinia

²⁷ See *De Cicco a Mussolini*, 13 giugno 1929, in *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (hereafter DDI), Settima serie, Vol. VII, pp. 476-478.

²⁸ C.A. MACDONALD, *Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures 1934-38*, in «Middle Eastern Studies», XIII, 2, 1977, p. 195.

produced a sudden change in the propaganda campaign orchestrated by the government in Rome. Attacks on British policy in the Middle East became more frequent and direct; attempting to encourage Arab unrest in a region where Britain's presence was strongly resented, the Italians were hoping to keep British troops engaged in security duties and therefore prevent them from intervening in the Ethiopian war.

Italian cultural propaganda in the Middle East and North Africa dramatically increased in the early 1930s, and targeted mainly students and the Arab nationalist intelligentsia. The considerable variety of publications sent directly from the Ministry of Popular Culture to Italian embassies, consulates and representatives abroad was instrumental in promoting the messages of the Fascist regime. The production of a wide range of books, journals and periodicals increased noticeably with the outbreak of hostilities in East Africa and was primarily designed to praise the achievements of the Fascist regime and emphasise Italian role in the international, and more specifically Middle Eastern, political arena. Academic and cultural institutions also opened to a larger Arab membership, Italian schools organised trips to Italy for Arab students, while the Italian government encouraged and promoted the creation of a Confederation of Oriental Students in Europe based in Rome. The Confederation was launched in December 1933 with great pomp in Rome, where 600 Asian students (including a large Egyptian contingent) were hosted by the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti. Mussolini's speech was delivered in Italian and English then translated into French and German. The Duce reminded his audience that under the auspices of the Roman empire East met West, and the emerging union of cultures became central to the development of Western civilisation. Such fusion of Eastern and Western values was kept alive by the Fascist regime and would acquire renewed importance during times of political and social instability: «Today Rome and the Mediterranean, with the Fascist spiritual rebirth, are reclaiming their "unifying mission"». ²⁹ However, Mussolini's attempts to win Arab support were not always successful: Italian manoeuvres were still regarded with suspicion in some Arab circles such as the Arab Youth Committee of Geneva, which boycotted the rally organised in Rome by the Oriental

²⁹ *Convegno degli studenti asiatici a Roma e discorso di S.E. Mussolini*, in «Oriente Moderno», XIII, 1933, p. 19.

Students in 1933 and denounced it as «an instrument of Italian imperialism».³⁰

Cultural and educational exchanges had always been regarded as a key area for the activities of Italian propagandists. This was acknowledged by British officials in the Middle East who had urged the government in London to co-operate with its regional counterparts in order to establish regular exchange programmes for parties of teachers and students who wished to visit the United Kingdom during the summer vacation. The Italians had successfully and ruthlessly exploited their connections with education institutions in Egypt and Palestine providing special discounts for parties interested in visiting Italy; for example, the equivalent of £10 per person would cover a return ticket from Palestine as well as two to three weeks staying in Italy. Undoubtedly, the Italian government's long-standing ability to manipulate education and leisure for propaganda purposes proved to be invaluable. In 1939, the British Foreign Office expressed anxiety about the inroads made by Italian and German agents into Egyptian schools and universities, where young people had been offered free travelling to Italy and Germany in order to study and understand the Fascist and Nazi movements and their achievements; British officials anticipated that many of the young Egyptians might return home «ardent admirers of the totalitarian states [...] and would thereafter act as German and Italian propaganda agents».³¹ On the eve of the outbreak of the conflict in Europe, the Foreign Office appeared uncertain about the friendship of the Egyptian people and fearful of losing control of an area that was vital for the defence of the empire.

Palestine

Although the geopolitical map of Italian propaganda activities covers a vast area, from South America to South East Asia, the examination of Egypt and Palestine offers a clear insight into patterns of propaganda and strategies of information adopted by the Fascist regime. Throughout the 1930s, as the Arab-Jewish dispute over Palestinian land grew in intensity, the Italian government adopted a distinct position in support of Arab claims. The

³⁰ R.L. MELKA, *The Axis and the Middle East: 1930-1945*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Minnesota, 1966, p. 16.

³¹ *Kelly to Lampson*, March 30, 1939, U.K. National Archives, FO371/23342/65833/J1296/G.

directions of Italian policy in Palestine were not based on racial anti-Semitic prejudices, but on 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. 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.

Despite Italian outright support of Arab nationalist demands, Italy's prestige in the Arab world had been seriously undermined by the war in Abyssinia. Italian officials complained that the Palestinian press had expressed strong disapproval of Italian policies in East Africa. However, officials in Rome were quite certain that, after their initial rejection of Italy's military campaign in Abyssinia, Palestinian Arab nationalists would come to realise that an alliance with the Fascist regime offered them the best prospects of future independence. All this was cause for concern in London, where British Foreign Office and intelligence officials believed that Italian activities in the Middle East – of which they claimed to have seen substantial evidence – were also part of Mussolini's war plans, intended to keep Britain 'fully occupied in her Mandated Territories' during the hostilities.³²

Looking at Palestine in the critical years 1935 and 1936, it is possible to observe that the operational pattern adopted to conduct propaganda in that area rather differed from the one that had characterised Italian activities in Egypt. This seems to reflect a Palestinian social and political environment that was crucially distinct from the Egyptian, and in which Italian agents had to deal with markedly different circumstances and actors. First of all, the existence of a British mandatory government removed the opportunity for Italy to find precious allies and sympathisers in the higher or middle spheres of the administration. Second, political interactions in Palestine were rather complex and fraught, based on the development of competing interests of the Arab and Jewish communities, and on the 'policy of equilibrium' adopted by the British mandatory authorities. Having already presented Italy as the champion of the Arab people, Mussolini – despite a brief flirtation with the Zionist Revisionist forces – lent his support to the

³² See *Rice to the Chief Secretary in Jerusalem*, August 23, 1935, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/18958/E5638/293/31.

demands of the Palestinian Arab community against the much resented mandatory government, and an even more despised community of Jewish newcomers, seen as the guarantor of British perpetual presence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Like in Egypt, the Italian community appeared broadly cohesive and proactive; many Italian firms, and in particular engineering firms, were directly subsidised by the government in Rome; managers and employees of companies of international reputation, such as insurance brokers Lloyd Triestino and the Banco di Roma, seemed «unceasing in their efforts to disseminate Italian and Fascist propaganda».³³ However, the main vehicle of Italian propaganda against British policy in Palestine was information, distorted information according to British sources, disseminated not only through press and radio broadcasts, but also books, pamphlets, leaflets, cartoons, and all types of visual and verbal communications. Pamphlets like *Ce que fait l'Italie pour l'Islam et l'Afrique*, outlining in the text and emphasising with images that Italy cared about the moral and physical welfare of the Muslim populations by building schools, mosques, hospitals, community centres in its African colonies.³⁴ Or more gruesome publications like *What the League of Nations does not want to see* containing pictures illustrating atrocities allegedly committed by Abyssinians against Italians and their supporters.³⁵ More pamphlets found their ways into Arab households in countries like Egypt, where young Fascist men began to distribute propaganda material in French and Arabic, such as *Abyssinia and Slavery*, which depicted atrocities and violations committed by the Abyssinians not only against the Italians, but also against local Muslim communities.³⁶ Four Palestinian newspapers were also believed to be the recipient of funding from Italian agents; among them, «Al jami'a Al Islamiya» was regarded as the most open to Italian bribe and inclined to amplify the messages of Fascist propagandists.³⁷

³³ *Wauchope to Parkinson*, October 16, 1936, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/299/12.

³⁴ See Pamphlet: *Ce que fait l'Italie pour l'Islam et l'Afrique*, 1936, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/299/12.

³⁵ See *Palestine Police Summary*, February 18, 1936, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/20018/E1293/19/31. On Italian publications distributed in Palestine, see also *Report from the CID in Jerusalem*, 19 February 1936, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/299/12.

³⁶ See Pamphlet: *Abyssinia and Slavery*, October 1935, U.K. National Archives, FO 141/659/994/69/35.

³⁷ See *Hall to Thomas*, February 29, 1936, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/299/12.

Information was the most effective medium used by the Italian government and its agents for propaganda purposes. Information through press and other printed publications, however, had a limited target of recipients, an elite who was not only literate but also highly educated. Large sections of the Arab populations, particularly in Egypt and Palestine, would have remained oblivious of the message of Italian propagandists if in the 1930s radio broadcasts had not become one of the main instruments of domestic and international propaganda. The key to the success of radio broadcasts was simple: the radio relied upon spoken words leading to a more personal and direct approach compared to that of other media; it was capable of reaching the masses, regardless of their geographical location, social status, education or ideological affiliations; and finally, lacking adequate jamming devices, radio transmissions were extremely difficult to silence.

The success of Radio Bari with its broadcasts in Arabic was not overlooked by the British government of Palestine. In November 1935, British officials estimated that over 10,000 licences had already been issued in Palestine, where Bari broadcasts had become increasingly popular in Arab cafes. Radio Bari was created in 1934 by Galeazzo Ciano, at that time director of the Under-secretariat for Press and Propaganda. Initially, Arab programmes were broadcast three times per week and reached the Italian colony of Libya as well as the French and British territories of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine and part of the Red Sea region. They consisted mainly of Arab music, a favourite among listeners, news, likely to reach a wider audience in an area of high illiteracy, and finally talk shows.³⁸ Already during the summer of 1935, Radio Bari was broadcasting every day and had expanded the length of its well-received programmes. By the end of 1935, Radio Bari broadcasts were becoming increasingly popular, especially in Arab cafes. Arab broadcast news contained a section dedicated to international events, mainly related to Italy and, after the creation of the Axis, to its allies Germany and Japan.

Interestingly, the broadcasts in Arabic appeared to be very discreet about the Italian empire, often leaving out of the bulletin news coming from Somalia, Ethiopia or other regions where Italian policies could be opened to

³⁸ The language used during the first news broadcasts was classical Arabic, which was understood only by a minority of educated listeners. Fearing a sharp decline in audience, Radio Bari began to employ Egyptian and Palestinian speakers who could be followed by a wider Arab audience.

criticism. Reports of events in the Middle East were considered interesting as long as they underlined the contrast between the positive role played by Italy and the repressive measures adopted by Britain and France. As a result, «areas such as Egypt, Palestine, where the relationship between Western Democracies and Arabs was strained, were the ones that hit the headlines».³⁹

To promote Italy's diplomatic endeavours and the values and ideology of the regime, Italian propagandists also relied on personal contacts. Among them, most prominently features the Syrian nationalist writer Emir Shakib Arslan who in the 1930s began promoting an alliance between Italy and nationalist forces in Syria and Palestine, and his friend and collaborator Ihsan al-Jabiri, as well as Haj Amin al-Hussaini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who in the 1930s gradually shifted towards more amicable relations with the Axis powers.⁴⁰ In 1934 al-Jabiri and the Mufti were believed to have distributed 30,000 Italian lira to Scout groups and Nazi and Fascist organisations in Palestine.⁴¹ Italian propaganda in Palestine kept its momentum for a few years, exploiting the situation of political and social unrest that was undermining Britain's presence in its own mandate, in particular at the outbreak of the Arab rebellion of 1936. Eventually, the pressure brought by the intensifying Fascist campaign in the Middle East and the Levant forced the Italians and the British to look for a settlement over the major object of their contention: the Mediterranean sea. The Gentlemen's Agreement of January 1937 was a first step in this direction. Furthermore, in April 1938, after long on and off negotiations, Rome and London signed the Easter Agreement in which both parties agreed that any form of hostile propaganda would be «inconsistent with the good relations

³⁹ D.J. GRANGE, *Structure et technique d'une propagande: Les émissions arabes de Radio Bari*, in «Relations Internationales», 2, 1974, p. 171.

⁴⁰ Despite taking a clear pro-Axis stance in the late 1930s, throughout the decade the Mufti was rather wary of making his political allegiances publicly known. Some British officials in Palestine came to the conclusion that he was not Italophile: «He is however sitting on the fence and it is of course quite possible that he might in certain circumstances be persuaded to make use of Italian money or of international complication to further Arab Nationalist aims and his own ambition». *Telegram from the Officer Adminstrating the Government in Palestine to the Secretary of State for the Colonies*, September 12, 1935, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/18925/E5595/5595/65.

⁴¹ See *Moody to Williams*, March 18, 1937, U.K. National Archives, CO 733/341/15.

which is the object of the present agreement». ⁴² Italy's subversive activities in Palestine seemed to have waned as a result of the agreed settlement. Broadcasts from Radio Bari were reported to have softened their tone, although part of the local press – backed by Rome - still maintained a fairly violent opposition to the mandatory government. ⁴³ By the end of 1940, Italian activities in Palestine were not as preponderant as they had been: Italy had broadened the scope of its overseas propaganda and was simultaneously engaged in various geographical areas. Italian embassies in Portugal, South America, Iran, in the Indian subcontinent and the Far East were by then providing the logistic support for Italy's promotional activities.

Egypt

During the interwar years Egyptian politics critically shifted from traditional – moderate and West-friendly – values to the adoption of more militant and pan-Arabic models, which gradually re-shaped Egyptian national identity and brought Egypt right to the heart of the Arab world. The escalating tension between nationalist forces and British representatives together with the emergence of a pan-Arab orientation within the nationalist movement created favourable conditions for the Italian government to promote a closer alliance with some Egyptian political and intellectual circles. During the interwar years, and in particular in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Egyptian national consciousness moved from values based on a glorious pharaonic past to the adoption of a shared Arab and Islamic identity. The Arabisation and Islamisation of Egyptian national identity had profound repercussions on Egyptian society and politics and offered new opportunities to Italian propagandists: nationalist forces began to look up to the Axis regimes and borrow their ideological blueprint, as well as political and cultural models.

Italian agents like the journalist Ugo Dadone were instrumental in establishing contacts with radical nationalists. In June 1935, the Agenzia di Egitto e Oriente (AEO) was created; on the surface, this was a news agency but behind the scenes the AEO provided local support to the propaganda

⁴² *Anglo-Italian Agreement*, April 1938, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/21981/65895/J1658/38/16.

⁴³ See *Appreciation of Italian Activities in Palestine*, January 1-31, 1938, U.K. National Archives, AIR 2/1813.

activities of the Italian government. In particular, it was tasked with developing close relations with the Arab press by offering financial backing to Egyptian newspapers and by bribing journalists.⁴⁴ The Agenzia had its headquarters in Cairo and was placed by Galeazzo Ciano under the direction of Ugo Dadone, previously editor of the «Giornale d'Oriente». Dadone's directorship of the AEO lasted until 1938 when, as Italy started reorganising and scaling down some of its operations in Egypt, the Agenzia was closed and its functions absorbed by the local branch of the Agenzia Stefani, the official news agency of the Fascist regime. Dadone left for Rome and then Germany, where he would conceivably ease the transfer of propaganda initiatives in the Middle East from the Italians to the Germans, at a time when the Third Reich, initially reluctant to challenge Britain's presence in the region, had opted for heavier involvement in Arab politics. Dadone's importance within the Fascist overseas propaganda machine was not downplayed by British officials: «Signor Dadone would, with all the information he has been able to collect in the Near East, no doubt be regarded at Italian headquarters in Rome as an expert of anti-British propaganda».⁴⁵

Dadone and his collaborators scoured the political landscape of Egypt in search of support from the more vociferous and militant quarters. Among the youth nationalist organisations approached the Young Egypt movement, for example, was asked to lend its voice to an anti-British campaign during the Abyssinian crisis. In order to 'inflame Egyptian public opinion as much as possible against Great Britain', the Italian consular authorities suggested that the main points of the propaganda campaign should be: a) Egyptian application for membership of the League of Nations; b) the restoration of Egyptian rights in Sudan; c) the abolition of the Capitulations; and finally the recognition of Egyptian right to protect the Suez Canal.⁴⁶ The effects of Italian manoeuvres soon became visible. Attracted to Fascist anti-parliamentarian ideas and to the financial support promised by the Italian government, the Young Egypt society gave its contribution to the pro-Italian and anti-British campaign orchestrated in Rome. For example, ignoring the wave of indignation that had swept over Egyptian public

⁴⁴ See FABEL, *Il fascio, la svastica e la mezzaluna*, cit., p. 42.

⁴⁵ *Lampson to Halifax*, December 9, 1938, U.K. National Archives, FO 371/21982/65895/J4655.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*

opinion after the invasion of Abyssinia, at the end of October 1935 members of the Young Egypt movement sent a petition to King Fuad, demanding that Egypt should remain neutral towards the Abyssinian dispute. However, it should be remembered that Young Egypt was by no means representative of the views of mainstream nationalists. Recent scholarly research into 1930s Egypt, has successfully demonstrated that Egyptian public opinion was by and large unreceptive to the allures of the European revisionist powers and the ideological and political constructs of fascism and totalitarianism.⁴⁷

Italian propaganda in Egypt gathered momentum following the increasing tension in East Africa. The Italians, concerned by the mounting hostility expressed by most Egyptian press, began to explore more affective ways to increase the profile of Fascist Italy to the detriment of Britain's influence in the upper Nile region. Galeazzo Ciano took direct interest on the matter and suggested that existing publicity outlets, and mainly press activities, should be strengthened. In particular he proposed the creation of a news bulletin under the aegis of the Italian Legation in Cairo, which in form and contents 'would meet the special demands of public opinion in Egypt'.⁴⁸ The new organ would make use of material provided by the Italian publication «Giornale d'Oriente» and by intercepts supplied to a wireless receiving set «to be installed in a suitable place with due secrecy».⁴⁹ Overall, supported by a well-connected network of agents – and the role of Italian secret services in North Africa deserves special treatment – co-ordinated by the Italian Consular offices and relying on the infrastructures of the Italian community in Egypt, Fascist propaganda carefully attempted to exploit domestic political feuds and nationalist sentiments emerging among Egyptian political and intellectual forces.

The means employed by the Italian government to open new channels of communications with broader sectors of Egyptian society as well as the Palace and parliament were very varied. Attempting to engage in a dialogue

⁴⁷ See J. JANKOWSKI, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship versus Democracy in the 1930s*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009. By the same author, see also: *Egypt's Young Rebels: "Young Egypt," 1933-1952*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1975; *The Egyptian Blue Shirts and the Egyptian Wafd, 1935-1938*, in «Middle Eastern Studies», VI, 1, 1970, pp. 77-95.

⁴⁸ See *Italo-Abyssinian Dispute: Italian Press Propaganda in Egypt*, July 26, 1935, U.K. National Archives, HW12/195.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

with the Egyptian educated urban class, the Italians began to implement an educational programme that would expose Egyptian students to the history and culture of Fascist Italy. Starting from primary education, the Italian authorities were offering a wide range of incentives to pupils interested in Italian history and culture. The two Italian elementary schools in Cairo, for example, provided special subsidies and support to children coming from non affluent backgrounds: shoes in winter, sandals in summer, aprons, books and stationery, together with free meals, were given to poor children to encourage them to register with schools run by Italian authorities. In the only Italian secondary school in Cairo, all subjects – mainly vocational or art-related – were taught in Italian, while books on Italian history and literature were distributed as a reward to the most deserving students. Following strict Fascist traditions, every morning pupils entering the school had to greet the Head Teacher with the Fascist salute.⁵⁰ Egyptian universities were also targeted by the Italian propaganda machine. Italian staff at the Faculty of Arts of the Egyptian University in Cairo liaised directly with Italian Ministries in Rome, and actively promoted cultural exchanges by providing financial support to Egyptian students who wished to undertake short-term courses at Italian universities.⁵¹

Anglo-Egyptian relations deteriorated in the winter of 1935 and through 1936, when unresolved constitutional issues created a state of tension in urban areas between the Palace and middle class youth. This opened new opportunities to Italian propagandists like the Colonial Attaché of the Italian Legation, Patrizi, who in the autumn and winter of 1935 frantically worked to document public demonstrations, fuel resentment and prove that Britain was to blame for the state of unrest in Egypt. The British government laboured to provide an adequate response to Italian propaganda and subversion. Fuelled by the events in East Africa, relations between Rome and London reached a critical stage. British representatives in Egypt called for a more coherent and decisive line of action, which needed integrating into an overarching counter-propaganda and counter-intelligence strategy. Italian activities in Egypt continued undisturbed until 1937, when the Gentlemen's Agreement between Rome and London softened the tone and intensity of Fascist propaganda; however, the British

⁵⁰ See *Report on Italian Schools in Cairo*, April 6, 1935, U.K. National Archives, FO 141/532/635/2/35.

⁵¹ See *The News Department to the Chancery*, Note, April 2, 1935, U.K. National Archives, FO 141/532/635/1/35.

government proved to be somewhat slow in co-ordinating its cultural and information policies designed to mend the broken relations with its Egyptian counterpart and with the leadership of the nationalist movement. This set the trend for the interaction between British, Italians and nationalist forces in Egypt right until the outbreak of the Second World War, when Egyptian and Arab forces fought for the last times to defend Britain and the empire.

Britain

In 1934, as Radio Bari began its vehement anti-British broadcasts in Arabic, British officials in the metropole were still debating about the moral and ultimately financial justification for promoting Britain's interests overseas through cultural initiatives and political propaganda, which had by then fallen into disfavour among the British public and politicians. The excesses of atrocity campaigns during the First World War, when nevertheless the British set the standard in modern propaganda, created an environment in which propaganda was denounced as violation of the core values underpinning democratic systems. During the interwar years, British politicians and public opinion shared with their American cousins the fear that propaganda, one of the most powerful and subtle instruments used by governments to persuade domestic and foreign audiences, might turn «human beings into an amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope».⁵² All this of course reduced the British government's capacity to compete with the fast-growing state propaganda machines created by the Nazi, Soviet and Fascist regimes at a time when even the Treasury was unwilling to commit public money to propaganda activities overseas.

Despite numerous changes to Britain's propaganda and communication strategy brought about by the intensification of the aggressive campaign organised by the Italian government, and the worsening of Britain's relations with Arab nationalist leadership, the steps undertaken in London seemed insufficient to counter Axis offensive and to restore Britain's tattered prestige in the Middle East. As late as 1939 the complex and cumbersome nature of the British propaganda machine was still considered detrimental to the success of British efforts against the well-orchestrated Italian campaign. If lack of co-ordination between governmental

⁵² H. LASSWELL, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, New York, Knopf, 1927, p. 221.

departments and clear directions from the centre had hindered progress in London, scarce communication with local authorities and population had grounded the take-off of British propaganda in Egypt, Palestine and the other mandated territories. The implementation of a comprehensive policy devised to safeguard British interests in the Near East had become a crucial issue. The measures until then adopted by the British government, especially in relation to propaganda, appeared unsatisfactory to those assessing political and strategic developments in the region: «The BBC Arabic Broadcasts are still an isolated effort which needs to be co-ordinated with other propaganda measures and the arrangements to do this are ad hoc instead of being permanent and defined in both London and the Middle East».⁵³

On the eve of the Second World War, therefore, despite military rearmament and the re-organisation of the structures responsible for overseas propaganda and intelligence, Britain was still considered unprepared to meet the challenge of Axis subversive activities in the Mediterranean and the Levant. The long-awaited shift in direction of overseas propaganda began in the mid-1930s through the creation of new institutions such as the British Council (1934), or the strengthening of existing ones like the BBC, in order to compete with the growing pressure brought by Italian and German activities in the Middle East.

If the nature of the challenge facing Britain's strategic and economic interests in the Middle East was not immediately grasped by Foreign and Colonial Office civil servants in London, the perception afforded by British diplomats working in the region was far more realistic. Some of them, following the end of three years of upheaval in Palestine, called for a more vigorous propaganda offensive and the decentralisation of the British propaganda machine, with the establishment of a co-ordination bureau in Haifa. This was the result of increasing scepticism towards the effectiveness of the methods employed to project Britain's military, security and trade interests overseas. In particular, the work of the BBC and its foreign language broadcasts came under scrutiny, as audiences in the Middle East seemed largely unimpressed by news and views that came from as far as the British isles and had, apparently, very little impact on their daily lives. The aloofness of British broadcasts, despite the various

⁵³ *Beaumont Nesbitt to Cornwall Jones*, April 13, 1939, U.K. National Archives, CAB 104/206/62326, Appendix A.

correctives introduced to make them more appealing to local audiences, would, critics believed, play in the hands of Britain's political opponents, not the propagandists of Radio Bari or officials of the Germany Foreign Ministry, but the more extreme fringes of the Arab nationalist movement.⁵⁴

Several strategic reviews of British propaganda in the Middle East were carried out throughout 1939. Some, at the Foreign Office, suggested that the Middle Eastern Section of the Foreign Publicity Department should be strengthened and staffed with British personnel and foreign propaganda officers, who would be responsible for activities in crucial and sensitive areas such as Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Aden, where Italian intrigues were intensifying, but also Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Persian Gulf. All this, at a cost of approximately £5000 for the first twelve months.⁵⁵ After much speculation, it was decided to approach the restructuring of British propaganda in the Middle East by creating a Central Bureau in London, which would be tasked with dealing with "wordy propaganda" only.⁵⁶ The Middle East section would co-ordinate its work with that of the British Council and of news broadcasting agencies as well as regional consular offices and would also be linked through various government departments to the Cabinet. This later review of British propaganda strategy belatedly acknowledged that the more insidious and venomous of anti-British activities in Arab countries had been orchestrated by indigenous forces that had not always relied on the support of Axis regimes. By the late 1930s, British officials seemed to become aware that the challenge to Britain's imperial asset came from within and not outside the empire; nationalist movements had morphed into formidable political forces whose strength no longer depended on the support they received from Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany.

Towards the end of spring 1939, the Italian government complained vehemently about an increase in anti-Italian propaganda in the Middle East. The Italians emphasised that this wave of hostile activities masterminded by the British authorities in the region blatantly contravened the spirit and clauses of the 1938 Mediterranean Agreement that had called for a cessation of British and Italian propaganda in the Middle East.

⁵⁴ See *MacKereth to Lord Perth*, July 22, 1939, U.K. National Archives, FO 395/651.

⁵⁵ See *Minute by Professor Rushbrook Williams*, June 24, 1939, U.K. National Archives, FO 395/650.

⁵⁶ See *Memorandum*, "British Propaganda in the Middle East", July 22, 1939, U.K. National Archives, FO 395/651.

Furthermore, the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, remarked that British representatives in the Middle East, and especially in Iraq and Egypt, were exerting undue pressure on local governments. This, according to Ciano, resulted in a mounting hostility by governing institutions in Iraq and Egypt towards Italy and Italian interests, and led to the adoption of «unjustified measures against Italian nationals». ⁵⁷ The new and more resolute strategy adopted by the British authorities to contain the diffusion and negative impact of hostile propaganda in the Levant had produced some convincing results. In 1940 the Turkish government, supported by its British counterpart, banned the publication of news and newspapers that could contradict or undermine the country's official position in relation to the European conflict. The Italian-inspired «Beyoglu» and the German «Turkische Post» were among the first newspapers suspended, while the Italian authorities lamented that «the Turkish press as a whole, already subservient to the democratic powers, has been reduced to a mere instrument of British propaganda». ⁵⁸

By 1939, the British government had come a long way since the early days after the Great War when the entry “propaganda” had been deleted from the peacetime political dictionary and the successful propaganda machine had been dismantled on moral grounds. However, by the second half of the 1930s, the proliferation of Axis – and in particular Italian – activities in the Middle East had prompted British policy makers to reassess their political priorities and ethical preconceptions. Through its media corporation, the BBC, the British government joined its external competitors attempting to project and ultimately sell its image to a large overseas audience. In 1937, the BBC was asked to set up a broadcasting service in Arabic and, at the same time, to begin broadcasting in Spanish and Portuguese to Latin American countries. It was considered to be an adequate response after years of rampaging Italian propaganda in the Levant.

The intensification of German and Italian activities in the Middle East also called attention to the inadequacy of British counter-propaganda and counter-intelligence plans. The BBC Arabic broadcasts, the pinnacle of British propaganda in the region, were initially regarded by local listeners

⁵⁷ *Ciano a Crolla*, 19 giugno 1939, *DDI*, Ottava Serie, Vol. XII, pp. 232-233.

⁵⁸ MINISTERO DEGLI AFFARI ESTERI, *Situazione politica in Turchia*, 29 October 1939 – 28 ottobre 1940, U.K. National Archives, GFM 36/31.

as unsatisfactory and scarcely appealing. They aimed at a restricted intellectual circle, leaving out a large sector of Arab audience unable to fully appreciate the significance of some news bulletins, and even to follow most British broadcasts, as they coincided with time for prayers.⁵⁹ However, not only specific propaganda activities, but also the whole structure supporting Britain's propaganda strategy in the Middle East had come under increasing criticism. The lack of a central co-ordinating authority was strongly emphasised, and the work of well-reputed agencies such as the British Council was subject to scrutiny. Some of the activities designed to match the Fascist regime's zeal, for example in the field of cultural propaganda, were initiated after laborious discussions and hindered by inadequate funding and half-hearted commitment. The British Council funding allocation for Egyptian schools in 1937-38 is exemplary: the budget was shrunk despite the advertised increase, and access to non-European students was further restricted in an area where a proactive policy of inclusion of Egyptian children should have been adopted.⁶⁰

However, towards the end of the 1930s, Britain's belated propaganda offensive caught the Italians by surprise and generated a wave of indignation in the corridors of the Italian Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Popular Culture. With the consolidation of broadcasting services in foreign languages, Britain actively engaged its European competitors in a war of words which, as hostilities broke out, became integral part of the grand strategy of the war. The Italians were left to watch the developments and progression of the British propaganda machine and its role within the dynamics of the conflict. In March 1941, the BBC Director General Frederick Ogilvie confidently claimed that «[this] was the first war by radio, the first war where radio broadcasts played a significant role. Propaganda has become the fourth weapon, the radio a new instrument of technological warfare, which has profoundly affected military operations».⁶¹ The Italians would soon complain that the «insidious British propaganda» not only succeeded in recruiting sympathisers overseas, but

⁵⁹ See *Barnard to Williams*, November 2, 1939, U.K. National Archives, CAB 104/206/62326; *Barnard to Williams*, November 10, 1939, U.K. National Archives, CAB 104/206/62326.

⁶⁰ See *The Foreign Office to Sir Miles Lampson*, November 30, 1937, U.K. National Archives, CO 732/79/16.

⁶¹ *Il Ministero degli Affari Esteri al Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, 8 marzo 1941, U.K. National Archives, GFM 36/80.

was effectively undermining the morale of Italian troops, by emphasising the degree of support Britain still enjoyed in Italy, where the British services had created an efficient network of collaborators and informers.⁶²

Conclusion

Although conscious of the limitations of their propaganda and intelligence structures and concerned about the hostile efforts of German and Italian agents in the Middle East, many in Britain were also confident that Italy's and Germany's aggressive campaigns in the Arab world had in the long-term met with relatively little success.⁶³ Slightly different was perhaps the assessment provided by diplomats and military personnel stationed in the region, who were weary of Italy's attempts to exploit Britain's weakening political and economic partnerships in the Middle East. On the eve of the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, the Italians became also aware of the slow decline of their popularity and, although blaming technical incidents and language difficulties, seemed to believe that Arab audience was gradually shifting towards «clear and, apparently, more interesting» British broadcasts.⁶⁴ Despite the initial positive response, Italy's contacts with sectors of the Arab nationalist leadership did not result in a long-lasting political alliance, as the real nature of Mussolini's imperialistic ambitions soon became too apparent. Italy's position in North Africa and the Levant did not benefit from the decline of Britain's prestige in the Muslim world. Instead, following the ill-fated alliance with Germany, the fall of the Fascist regime and the disastrous economic consequences of the war, Italy's ambitions to become a world power crumbled. On this matter, Arielli convincingly argues that lack of strategic foresight, coupled with financial constraints, the poor state of the Italian armed forces and scarce domestic support, undermined the Italian experiment at empire-building. Thus, after a period of intense activity between 1935 and 1938, «Mussolini and his

⁶² *Il Ministero della Guerra al Ministero degli Interni e al Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, 28 marzo 1941, U.K. National Archives, GFM 36/82.

⁶³ See F. HINSLEY, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. I, London, HMSO, 1990, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁴ *Il consolato italiano a Gerusalemme al Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, 30 maggio 1939, U.K. National Archives, GFM 36/82.

followers neglected to prepare the ground for a serious threat to Britain's Middle Eastern position».⁶⁵

However, until then, Italian propaganda and subversive activities had generated concern and suspicion in London, although assessment remained somewhat contradictory and patchy. The strong inter-dependence between propaganda and foreign policy was underlined by the organisational structure of the Italian propaganda machine, where the synergy between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Popular Culture allowed for an efficient division of responsibilities and transmission of information and instructions. Unlike its contemporary information and intelligence services – made of disparate and competing agencies – the Fascist propaganda machine succeeded in co-ordinating the activities and interaction of its diverse departments. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained in charge of providing general directives to propagandists in Italy and abroad, and ensured that Italian propaganda overseas constantly met the specific objectives of Italy's foreign policy; it also provided logistic support through its official overseas representatives and the numerous Italian communities in North Africa. From 1937, in particular, the Ministry of Popular Culture was responsible for the operational aspects of propaganda, initiating and co-ordinating various activities through its specialised sections dealing with press, publications, cinema and radio. Budgeting and funding of particular activities was a task often shared by the two Ministries. The Italians had allocated a substantial budget to both domestic and overseas propaganda, and in particular to publications promoting the civilising mission underlying Italy's colonial endeavours.⁶⁶

Although Axis encroachment in the British and French colonial world were often viewed with a degree of anxiety in London and Paris, the British government appeared to have significantly overlooked the set of political and social circumstances that had created throughout the Arab world an audience receptive to the allure of Axis propaganda. The growth and

⁶⁵ ARIELLI, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-40*, cit., p. 192.

⁶⁶ Between 1933 and 1943, the Italian government allocated a budget for the main publications dedicated to the rising Italian empire. Out of seven publications, four were produced in Rome and received funds ranging from 1,811,447 to 55,000 Italian Lire. Three publications were from Addis Abeba and received from 370,000 to 5,000 Italian Lire. *Fondi segreti del Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, undated, U.K. National Archives, GFM 36/82.

strengthening of nationalist movements throughout the British empire had created a political counterpart that Britain seemed unable to acknowledge and deal with, thus resisting any substantial re-structuring of her commitments in the Middle Eastern region. Inter-departmental disagreements between Colonial Office and Foreign Office over the handling of Britain's relations with independent Arab states and with the Arab nationalist movements hindered the formulation of a coherent and clear policy in the Middle East, while the fragmented and under-funded counter-intelligence service provided little valuable insight into the subversive strategy of Axis powers in British-controlled territories. Finally the late revival of the British First World War propaganda machine delayed the adoption of effective measures to curb the hostile activities of Italian propagandists.

