

What Future for Italian Libya? The Debate on Colonial Policy, 1918–1920

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ABSTRACT

Am Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges wurde die Zukunft der Kolonien global ein bedeutendes Thema. Dem Beispiel von Lloyd George und Woodrow Wilson folgend, begannen auch die italienischen Politiker dieses Thema zu diskutieren. Im Zentrum stand besonders Libyen, wo während des Krieges ein breitflächiger Aufstand stattfand und dessen Zukunft besonders unentschieden schien. An der Diskussion war hauptsächlich die Kolonialverwaltung beteiligt, allerdings fand die Debatte auch in der Zivilgesellschaft Widerhall. Man wurde sich der vergangenen Fehler bewusst: die rücksichtslose Unterdrückung des Widerstandes der Einheimischen sowie der Despotismus des Militärregimes, weswegen die Frage nach indigener Beteiligung und Selbstverwaltung vernachlässigt worden war. Am Ende des Krieges wurden die *Statuti Libici* verkündet. Es waren drei regionale Verfassungen, die eine neue Form der indirekten Verwaltung in den kolonisierten Gebieten und eine offene Haltung gegenüber den lokalen Repräsentationsorganen vorsahen.

In the final year of the First World War, the debate on the future of colonial territories emerged in a new form, invoking the principle of self-determination. On 5 January 1918, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George referred to the future of the German colonies, affirming that:

The governing consideration [...] in all these cases must be that the inhabitants should be placed under the control of an administration, acceptable to themselves, one of whose main purposes will be to prevent their exploitation for the benefit of European capitalists

*or governments. The natives live in their various tribal organizations under chiefs and councils who are competent to consult and speak for their tribes and members and thus to represent their wishes and interests in regard to their disposal. The general principle of national self-determination is, therefore, as applicable in their cases as in those of occupied European territories.*¹

On 9 January, Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States, sent a message for “world peace”, outlining a new vision for colonial empires. Published at a time when the fate of the postwar world was not clear, Wilson’s message proposed a universal goal:

*What we demand in this war [...] is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression.*²

Wilson proposed fourteen points for the recovery of world peace. These points were to be implemented through an agreement among all countries. For the colonial territories, the fifth point was particularly important, which affirmed the need for

*A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.*³

The twelfth point also concerned colonial matters, particularly Italian territories in Libya:

*the [...] nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.*⁴

The colonial question was also debated within the British left. The issue was discussed by the Labour Party and the Trade Unions at the beginning of 1918. On 16 January, the Labour Party sent the Russian people a message which stated that “the British people accept[ed] the principle of self-determination with respect to the British empire”⁵.

German Chancellor Hertling also addressed the issue in replying to Wilson and Lloyd

1 British War Aims. Statement by the Right Honourable David Lloyd George [...]. Authorized Version as published by the British Government, New York 1918, p. 6. It is interesting to remark that the Lloyd George’s speech is copied in the diary of the Italian Minister of the Colonies, Gaspare Colosimo. See V. Clodomiro (ed.), *Il diario di Gaspare Colosimo Ministro delle Colonie (1916–1919)*, Roma 2012, p. 442. David Lloyd George (1863–1945) played a prominent role in the peace conference that led to the Treaty of Versailles (29 June 1919), where were taken initial steps towards the establishment of the League of Nations.

2 T. W. Wilson (1856–1924) was elected president in 1912 and reelected in 1916. He decided to enter the war (6 April 1917) and was the main promoter of the League of Nations. *Ibid.*, p. 397.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 397.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. 443 and 506.

George. During a session of the Reichstag on 25 January, he noted that Wilson's fifth point would bring serious difficulties for Britain and France, the two major imperialist powers allied with the United States. He even promised that a victorious Germany would raise the issue in the peace conference, thereby redefining the destinies of the colonial territories and their administrations.⁶

It was Wilson's speech, which aroused the greatest echo in international political circles. In Italy, the points on colonial possessions did not provoke an immediate reflection. The Ministry of the Colonies, however, did not overlook that Turkey could deploy Wilsonian principles and "bring up again into question the Libyan issue"⁷. Internationally, the Libyan question had already been reopened by the Ottoman Porte immediately after the Italian declaration of war: the Turkish government had notified the Italians that it no longer accepted the agreement of Ouchy⁸ and considered the Libyan territories as parts of its Empire.

This paper analyzes the Italian debate on the future of the colonies during the last years of the First World War, and its consequences in colonial policy. Particularly, it focusses on the Libyan territories, which posed the most urging problems. While Eritrea and Somalia did not witness conflicts serious enough to question colonial government, Libya saw profound upheavals and conflicts. These unrests highlighted the shortcomings in political management, especially in relation to the local population. These shortcomings and errors, combined with the local political forces' almost universal support for the Ottoman Porte and the Central Empires, resulted in almost all of Libya escaping from Italian control during the conflict. In the most dramatic moments of the war, especially after the disaster of Caporetto, Italy even thought of abandoning it⁹. After deciding to retain its presence in Libya, the Italian government made profound revisions to its colonial policy. The result of these policies was a slightly liberal opening, which involved the Libyan population and their representatives in a form of indirect rule, and gave wider space to local autonomy and political expression.

When Italy declared war (24 May 1915), Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were in a critical situation. From the last months of 1914, all of the Fezzan (the Saharan region that constituted a large part of the territory claimed by Italy), had been in the hands of the 'rebels'. The 'rebellion'¹⁰ extended to the North of Tripolitania. In the first months of 1915, the Italian garrisons were under attack almost anywhere. Rome, for its part, echoed the government's position on the withdrawal of the garrisons. In fact, preparations

6 George Earl of Hertling (1843–1919) was the German Chancellor from November 1917 to October of the following year. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 427.

8 After about a year of war, the Ottoman government had to come to terms with the Italian government by signing 18 October 1912 in Ouchy (near Lausanne) a peace treaty and withdrawing his troops from Libya.

9 The government opposed the request by General Cadorna: a Council of Ministers on 3 November 1917, unanimously voted that the troops could "not either in whole or in part, be removed from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica". See *Ibid.*, p. 339.

10 The 'rebellion' was so defined by journalism and colonial discourse, with a term that emphasized illegality. We assume it, on the contrary, as an act of resistance fully legitimate: hence, our quotation marks.

for the war foreshadowed the movement of troops in the battlefields of Europe. During the summer, the troops were ordered to retreat to the coast; only the two maritime bases of Tripoli and al-Khums (Homs) remained under the control of the army.

Retreat had been ordered even in Cyrenaica, and in October 1915 Italian troops held only Benghazi, Darnah and Tubruq. The government of the *tariqa al-Sanusiyya* under Ahmad al-Sharif effectively controlled the rest of the territory¹¹.

This situation did not change for about a year, but in 1916, some events signalled a turning point for the Italian government. In Tripolitania, a part of the Berber population surrendered, and Italian troops occupied the town of Zuara, west of Tripoli. In Cyrenaica, Muhammad Hilal, one of the Sanusi family members, defected. Italy therefore could peacefully occupy Burd Sulayman (Porto Bardia) and part of the internal area. Ahmad al-Sharif, refusing all Italian approaches for a peaceful settlement, committed most of his forces with Turkish and German military commands, organizing an armed campaign against Egypt¹². The *shaykh al-kabir* reached the oasis of Dakhla, but his campaign ended disastrously in early 1917, and the remnants of his militia retreated to Cyrenaica.

This failed expedition badly shook the authority of the Sanusi chief, who moved westward to the region of Surt, continuing the fight alongside the Ottoman caliphate. Control over the brotherhood in Cyrenaica passed into the hands of Muhammad Idris¹³, who was more inclined to negotiations with Britain and Italy. In April 1917, an agreement was devised in Bir 'Akrama, near Tubruk. Muhammad Idris and the tribes loyal to him agreed to a proposal of *modus vivendi* with Italy upon the end of the war, thereby ensuring peace in Eastern Libya.

In Tripolitania, the situation remained difficult. Despite the occupation of Zuara, the 'Arab rebels' under the leadership of Sulayman al-Baruni¹⁴ and other chiefs (such as Ramadan al-Suwayhili¹⁵) and assisted by Turkish and German officers had established their logistic centre in Misrata. They kept all territory firmly in control, besieging the coastal towns occupied by colonial forces.

In 1918, the colonial administration began to reflect on the program proposed by Wilson and others about the future of the colonies. The Colonial Secretary Gaspare Colosimo,¹⁶ in a message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in February 1918, analysed the various positions, claiming not to see

11 Through the initiative of its founder, Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Sanusi, from the mid-nineteenth century the *tariqa al-sanusiyya* (or Sanusi brotherhood) spread gradually the net of its *zawaya* in eastern Libya. It was the only organized institution truly present in a territory barely controlled by Istanbul.

12 See F. Cresti, *La Tariqa al-sanusiyya nella Prima Guerra Mondiale. La Campagna d'Egitto di Ahmad al-Sharif al-Sanusi (novembre 1915–february 1917) secondo i documenti d'archivio italiani*, in: *Studi Magrebini*, XI (2013), pp. 41–93.

13 Muhammad Idris (1890–1983) became the independent ruler of Libya in 1951.

14 Sulayman al-Baruni (1872–1940) had been elected to Parliament in Istanbul after the coup of the Committee of Union and Progress (1908).

15 Ramadan al-Shitiwi al-Suwayhili had inflicted the greatest defeat in Libya to the Italian army at Qasr Bu Hadi (29 April 1915).

16 Gaspare Colosimo (1859–1944) was the Colonial Secretary from 1916 to 1919.

*how the principle of self-determination can be practically implemented; this kind of indigenous referendum would be of little value even among well-evolved populations*¹⁷.

Considering that Britain and France had the greatest risk if this principle was applied, he affirmed his clear opposition to it:

*I do not hesitate to declare that it is in the common interest of the Entente to not bring the argument of self decision to the discussion [in the future Peace Congress]*¹⁸.

It was evident that the colonial question would have great importance in the international agreements about the future of the world. The Italian government needed to arrive prepared at the negotiations, and to resist being pushed aside by France and Britain in the debate on colonial territories.¹⁹

The situation in Tripolitania influenced Colosimo's opposition to the self-determination hypothesis. If self-determination was upheld, Tripolitania, in all probability, would be lost. In his analysis, the minister noted that Eritrea and Somalia had proven loyalty to Italy. Cyrenaica, however, could possibly remain with Italy. The minister believed that the treaties with the Sanusi brotherhood, the new politics of luring tribes with money, and the development of local representative institutions had created a new situation "which gave hope that the people don't have to regret the ancient Turkish domination."²⁰

This analysis appears quite optimistic, if not wrong, for Cyrenaica. The minister was more cautious in his report to the Parliament a few days later, affirming that the situation passed

*through a very delicate political moment, in which our government must dominate, combine and organize. It's impossible to make predictions, always fallacious [...] but, whatever the events, we can say that since the start of the good relations with the Sanusis we have had a year of peace. Life in the colony, for the first time since our occupation (since 1911) began to throb in works of peace, agriculture and trade, even during the war, leaving behind the memory of a wretched life linked to the coast garrisons, unable to develop any fruitful relationship with the interior and of any government action.*²¹

The reasoning seemed more consistent for Tripolitania, also involving the neighboring French and British territories:

Although appropriate providences of indigenous politics have been introduced in Tripoli, with the establishment of local advisory committees, with the code of the Jewish community, with the organization of Aukaf and other provisions, the conditions are very

17 Colosimo to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 15 February 1918; see V. Clodomiro (ed.), *Il diario di Gaspare Colosimo*, p. 444).

18 Ibid.

19 Colosimo to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 3 June 1918, in Ibid., p. 507.

20 Ibid., p. 445.

21 Relazione sulla situazione economica, politica ed amministrativa delle Colonie italiane presentata dal Ministro delle Colonie (Colosimo) nella tornata del 23 febbraio 1918, in: *Atti Parlamentari*, XXIV, 1913–1918, n. LV, Roma 1918, p. 14 [hereinafter Colosimo Report].

*different in the region where the rebellion of 1915 has reduced us to the coast and only to a part of it, making us lose all control over populations outside the walls of the coastal cities. One application of the criteria set out in the above discourse, as it were possible, would be a serious danger not only for Italians interests, but also for those of neighboring French and British possessions*²².

While it was in Italy's interest to not introduce the question of self determination at the Peace Congress, the minister accepted that the issue might be raised in other forums. In any case, it was important for the government to discuss the problem, gathering all the information and facts needed for a valid defense, in case the affair took directions unfavorable to Italian interests.

Beyond the debate on Wilson's points, which some saw as a philosophical pronouncement difficult to enact politically, some liberal opening in European colonial policies had begun to take shape.

France had not yet made official statements on the proposals of Wilson. However, with the arrival of Clemenceau²³, some administrative reforms for Algeria's Muslim population were announced. On 29 January 1918, France promised partial electoral rights to the Muslim population. Unlike the previous legislation, this measure recognized a kind of naturalization to the *indigènes* without the obligation of renouncing their personal status. It promised the establishment of the Advisory Council for Algeria in Paris, composed of six Muslims and fifteen French members²⁴.

The decree was issued on 4 February 1919. It created an indigenous citizen status through which some categories of Algerian Muslims became eligible voters in municipal constituencies. French politicians who promoted this liberal reform defended their position by citing generally progressive political principles and by noting the need to recognize and repay a military debt that France had contracted towards the Muslim subjects of Algeria. Thousands had been enrolled and had fought (indeed, were still fighting) for the motherland, shedding their blood in trenches and battlefields of Europe. It is interesting to note that even in the report presented to the Italian Parliament on the situation of the colonies at the end of February 1918, Colosimo stressed the important effort made by the Libyans during the war in favor of the motherland²⁵. Since 1917, indigenous Libyans had been sent to Italy. They worked in major industries engaged in war production; more than 4,700 workers worked in the large industrial centers, and in southern cities.²⁶ The number of Libyan workers brought in Italy was not conspicuous in absolute terms, especially in comparison with the other countries. But taking into account the small size

22 Ibid.

23 Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929) from 1917 to 1919 was Prime Minister in a cabinet of national unity.

24 On the debate about this reform proposal, see Ch.-R. Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie Contemporaine*, vol. II, Paris 1919, pp. 270–276.

25 Colosimo Report, p. 31.

26 See F. Cresti, *La Prima Emigrazione di Lavoratori Maghrebini in Italia*, in: M. Aymard, F. Barca (eds.), *Conflitti, Migrazioni e Diritti dell'Uomo*, Soveria Mannelli 2002, pp. 47–59.

of the area effectively controlled by Italy, Libyans constituted a substantial part of its adult male population.

Colosimo devoted great attention to the future of colonial administration, especially regarding measures to foster a policy of collaboration with indigenous peoples. He mentioned the *Ordinamento Bertolini*, the first decrees issued for governing the colony. The Bertolini system comprised two decrees, issued in 1913 and 1914²⁷; the second one, in particular, recommended governing the country with the cooperation of indigenous leaders²⁸. However, Bertolini's administrative structure gave the Libyans only a role of practical execution, while decision-making and management were reserved for Italian officials. The local councils were meant to facilitate the expression of Libyan aspirations, but in the short period separating the first Italian-Turkish conflict from the World War, the *Ordinamento* had not fostered any real participation of Libyan representatives. Instead, a succession of military governors had retained highly centralized and authoritarian powers, repressing all dissent.

The Minister cited many excuses for the failure of Bertolini's laws: the lack of time, the continuing instability in the country, the outbreak of the 'rebellion' in Tripolitania and the inability to control the territory in Cyrenaica. The beginning of the First World War subsequently led to the suspension of all civilian measures. Nevertheless, the theory formulated before the war remained sound, although subsequent events in 1915 had invalidated it.

*In Libya we are few among many, like in most African and Indian colonies, and [...] we must proceed by guiding the people, not putting them aside*²⁹.

The position expressed by the minister and his considerations presaged a more liberal direction in Libyan politics. This position resulted from a lively debate on indigenous policy. The question of the relations with the Muslim population had attracted the interest of politicians since the conquest of Tripoli. The most debated issues were the religious affiliation of the population and the degree to which the history, legal tradition and Muslim institutions had to be preserved to make Italian rule acceptable. In case of Cyrenaica, the history of the Sanusiyya, its resistance to the occupation, its internal organization and its relations with the Italian government had aroused interest.

All such analyses argued for active participation of the indigenous population in governmental bodies, and the recognition of wider civil rights. The jurist Savino Acquaviva, for example, contradicted a widely held view by affirming that the Libyan uprising and its support for the Ottoman Empire and the Entente powers had not been caused by well-organized propaganda, but was in fact the result of a colonial policy which had

27 Decreto 39, 9 January 1913 and Decreto 35, 15 January 1914. See the texts in Ministero delle Colonie, *Ordinamenti della Libia*, Roma 1914.

28 Ministero delle Colonie, *Nel primo anno di vita del Ministero delle Colonie. Relazione dell'on. Pietro Bertolini*, Roma 1914, p. VI [hereinafter Bertolini Report].

29 Ibid. See also A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia. Tripoli Bel Suol d'Amore 1860–1922*, Milano, 1997, p. 356.

degraded Libyans from citizenship to subjecthood with no political rights³⁰. According to Acquaviva, the way forward was a policy of cooperation and affirmation of the just demands for the country's progress, along with an ultimate acceptance of Libya's political and religious independence. That did not mean the complete detachment of the Libyan territories from Italy: these could still remain parts of the Italian Empire, just as Australia and Canada were parts of the British Empire. It was thus appropriate to move towards an indirect rule policy, following Great Britain's example.

Beyond the theoretical debate, even the military government of the colony during the war years was increasingly convinced of the necessity of establishing advisory bodies, permitting Libyans to express their opinions and wishes. In April 1916, General Ameglio (who ran the government of the two colonies during the war) proposed an administrative reform along such lines.³¹ The Ministry of Colonies implemented his proposal, creating the Indigenous Advisory Committees (*Comitati consultivi indigeni*) in Tripoli and Benghazi in March 1917. A Joint Central Advisory Committee for Libya (*Comitato centrale consultivo misto per la Libia*), based in Rome, was later joined to the latter.

Alongside the debate on the future of the colonies, the Italian government created the 'Committee for the study of the measures for the transition from the state of war to that of peace' on 21 March 1918³². The committee was divided into different sections. Section VII advised on the study of 'Colonial Issues' (*Questioni coloniali*), enlightening the public and counselling the government on policies to be adopted after the war. It included experts, members of the Academy, members of Parliament and senior ministry officials, and published its reports in 1919³³.

The first session was inaugurated by the Minister of the Colonies, who recalled the dramatic situation caused by the war, and hoped that the League of Nations, "like a ray of light in the terrible tragedy of the world", would solve all international problems and usher in an era of peace. For that to happen, however, it was necessary to find solutions to problems which maintained divisions between peoples and nations. Here the colonial question was of paramount importance³⁴. For Italy, the Mediterranean remained the center of interest and the future of Libya was a key question. Hence, the members of the section dealt chiefly with territories on the southern shore of the Mediterranean (Tripolitania and Cyrenaica), tackling issues relating to the relations with the populations of the two colonies:

30 S. Acquaviva, *Il Problema Libico e il Senussismo*, Roma 1917, passim.

31 Archivio storico-diplomatico del ministero degli Affari esteri [hereinafter: ASDMAE], Archivio storico del ministero dell'Africa italiana [hereinafter: ASMAI], Libia 126/1, b. 6. See also S. Behre, *Notabili Libici e Funzionari Italiani: l'Amministrazione Coloniale in Tripolitania (1912–1919)*, PhD Thesis, XXIV cycle (2009–2011), University of Messina, pp. 301–308.

32 Documents of the Commissione per lo studio dei provvedimenti occorrenti per il passaggio dallo stato di guerra a quello di pace in Archivio Centrale dello Stato [hereinafter ACS], Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri [hereinafter: PCM] (Gabinetto, Affari generali), Guerra Europea, b. 269 bis, 304.

33 Ministero delle Colonie, *Relazione della VII sezione della commissione del dopo-guerra (Quistioni coloniali)*, Roma 1919 [hereinafter: Section VII Report], p. 1.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 7–8.

*Our Muslim politics. Here's an interesting problem [...] concerning [...] the road we have traveled, worrying about remaining faithful to the policy of collaboration that according to the needs of the times and the maturity of the peoples, allows them a gradual development of their civilization; and respects the special contents of the Muslim religion [...]. The future [...] of our colonies [...] will depend largely on our Muslim policy and our indigenous policy*³⁵.

In his reply to the minister, the section president Carlo Schanzer remembered the colonial events of the past decades and concluded

*hoping that Italy, not slavishly following the methods of the other nations, will know how to give his own imprint to a colonial policy responding to its civilization and special aptitudes, so that this work becomes the effective instrument of our colonial expansion corresponding to the position and mission of Italy in the world*³⁶.

The arguments of Section VII covered a very broad field. Schanzer covered the Ministry of the Colonies and its advisory bodies. His report was critical of the Indigenous advisory committees for Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, which the minister Colosimo had hailed as crucial elements of the new indigenous policy.

These committees sought to involve “the indigenous element, and in particular the Muslims” in the colonial government bodies, fulfilling the pledges taken since the beginning of the conquest of Tripoli³⁷. However, the real representation of indigenous interests was somewhat problematic. Committee members were appointed by the government, which chose between “notables welcomed by the Governor and those proposed by him”³⁸. It was possible that the members had no real independence, but were just puppets in the hands of Italian officials. The people regarded them as agents of the colonial power, not as their representatives.

The *Convegno nazionale coloniale*, held in Rome in January 1919, discussed the creation of a truly representative body of indigenous interests. Section VII also proposed an elected assembly, stressing that future “indigenous advisory committees will be based entirely on the election”³⁹.

Among the reports of Section VII, the one by Carlo Alfonso Nallino⁴⁰ stands out, titled *Treatment of the Natives and their participation in the colonial administration. Political and administrative system*⁴¹.

35 Ibid, p. 9.

36 Ibid., p. 18.

37 Ibid., p. 12. On the civil legislation enacted by the first colonial governments in Libya, see D. Caruso Inghilleri, *I Primi Ordinamenti Civili della Libia* (5 ottobre 1911–9 gennaio 1913). Contributo alla Storia della Conquista, Roma 1914.

38 Section VII Report, p. 53.

39 Ibid.

40 Carlo Alfonso Nallino was one of the most illustrious orientalists, and professor of Arabic in the University of Rome.

41 Section VII Report, p. 111–124

Nallino devoted most of his report to Libya, stating that it was not necessary to introduce major political and administrative transformations in other colonies. He recalled that the Ministry of Colonies had agreed to this and had repeatedly stressed the need for implementation and development of the measures since 1914. On the issue of the political status of the Libyan population, it was necessary to examine a classic conundrum: should Italy preserve the institute of *sudditanza* (subjection)⁴², or move towards a model of *cittadinanza* (citizenship)? In other words, was it possible to unify the legal status of Italian and indigenous citizens?

Nallino stressed that the concept of *sudditanza* was not acceptable in Libya, and that the situation must evolve toward *cittadinanza*. There would be a particular Libyan citizenship for the entire native population, distinct from metropolitan citizenship. The distinction was based on the observation that Libyans would not accept the Italian Civil Law, since its acceptance would mean the abandonment of the rules related to Muslim or Jewish law.

The personal property and inheritance laws in Muslim and Jewish legal traditions were often different from those applied in Italy, so it was impossible for one to subscribe to both. On the other hand, Nallino remembered that from the beginning of the conquest the government's agreements with the main Libyan leaders had shown the differential treatment of Italians and Libyans. Muslim women were prohibited from marrying into other religions, laws on conscription and military service were non-applicable, family laws corresponding to their religious tradition were enforced, and religious endowments (*awqaf*) received special treatment⁴³. This made it clear that even the Muslims did not wish to be completely assimilated with the Italians.

According to Nallino, citizenship for Libyans needed to be based on a juridical status guaranteeing the essential rights, "without prejudice to their personal property and inheritance law, as established respectively by the Muslim and the Jewish laws"⁴⁴. Nallino thought that the example of French Algeria must not be followed in Libya. The law allowing Algerians to access full French nationality through an explicit renunciation of their Muslim status, if applied to Libya, "[would] stir up the natives of Libya against us, since it is an invitation to apostasy"⁴⁵.

Nallino criticized the indigenous advisory committees. He thought that they were results of the conflict between the central and the colonial governments, the latter excluding the elective principle and leaving the choice of the members to the Governor. The Governor had the right to dismiss them and to suspend their payments, and therefore the members

42 The rd. 6 April 1913 already cited, introduced the institute of *sudditanza* for the entire native population. The *sudditanza* took away any political right for the Libyans, while under Ottoman rule, starting from 1908, they had enjoyed full citizenship.

43 See G. Bourbon del Monte Santa Maria, *L'Islamismo e la Confraternita dei Senussi*, Città di Castello, 1912, p. 233-238.

44 Section VII Report, p. 114.

45 Ibid., p. 115.

of the committees had no independence. This state could only be changed by introducing the election of the members.

The rapporteur opposed joint assemblies, since the diversity of cultures and political agendas might result in perpetual disagreement between the Italian and Libyan members⁴⁶. All ideas of assimilation were to be abandoned, since they “would not only be doomed to failure, but also create a violent hostility against us”. Finally, Nallino recommended the elimination of assimilative tendencies, the introduction of a ‘Libyan citizenship’ for all the natives, their right to work in public service, the extension of the representative system, the preservation of differentiated administrative systems, and the study “of Bedouin or nomadic societies, which constitutes a very serious problem of internal Cyrenaica and in part of Fezzan”⁴⁷.

There was a paradox in the debate within Section VII. While it advocated a policy of association and collaboration with the Muslim population, no Libyan representative was consulted. Nallino did not think that members of Libyan society had expressed their wishes independently, voicing aspirations which contradicted the scholars. For example, some notables of Tripoli had requested rights equivalent with those of metropolitan citizens after the Peace of Ouchy. They had also called for the establishment of mixed representative bodies, having sent a memorial to the head of the Italian Government, Giovanni Giolitti, and asking that the Arabs

*be not considered as a colonized people, but be given perfect equality of treatment with right to vote and representation, by organizing local power on the basis of a mixed board composed of Arabs and Italian and provided with broad powers*⁴⁸.

Other politicians for independence, like Sulayman al-Baruni, had a more radical attitude. In the last months of 1912, he declared the Berber region and the entire southern Tripolitanian region independent, executing “the desire of the majority of the coastal population of Tripoli, and of all the inhabitants of Jebel Garbi, of south of Tripoli till the Sahara and Fezzan”. Enacting the text of a Sultan’s firman “clearly granting independence to the people of Tripoli,” al-Baruni proclaimed the birth of “a government founded on the law of the Koran and on principles inspired by civilization and progress that will be modulated on those of civilized nations”⁴⁹.

This proclamation was the first instance of independence of a part of Libya. It followed the meeting of several Berber notables organized by al-Baruni in Yefren on 8 November 1912. We do not know if this republican idea was widespread among Berber notables;

46 “Mixed Assemblies seem premature and harmful”, Ibid., p. 120.

47 Ibid., pp. 123–124.

48 G. Mondaini, *Manuale di Storia e Legislazione Coloniale del Regno d’Italia*, I vol., Roma, 1924, p. 328.

49 ASDMAE, ASMAI, Libia 150/14–59: Ufficio politico-militare del governo della Tripolitania, *Notizie su Suleimàn el-Barùni*, att. n. 4, p. 39. The proclamation is presented as a logical consequence of the Sultan’s firman that, two days before signing the Treaty of Ouchy, gave Libya a full and complete autonomy. See F. Cresti, *Due Volte Minoranza: i Berberi Ibaditi del Jabal Nafûsa nella Visione Coloniale*, in: F. Cresti (ed.), *Minoranze, Pluralismo, Stato nell’Africa Mediterranea e nel Sahel*, Roma, 2015, p. 33.

we are also not sure if it was merely al-Baruni's tool for realizing personal ambitions, or even a reformulation of an earlier idea about an independent Berber State⁵⁰. In effect, the Yefren republic was short-lived, and disappeared a few months later due to colonial occupation.

In Tripolitania, the republican idea probably had other stimuli, such as Wilson's Fourteen Points and, later, the military command of the colony statement, which wanted the country's future to be determined by a political solution and with the agreement of the population⁵¹. The republican idea found a new expression on 16 November 1918. During a meeting of the main military leaders of Tripolitania in al-Qusabat, Sulayman al-Baruni and 'Abd al-Rahman 'Azzam⁵² proclaimed the Tripolitanian Republic (*jumhuriyya al-tarabulusiyya*).

According to Lisa Anderson⁵³, the formation of a republican government was not a product of the ideology of the al-Qusabat conference participants, but rather a reflection of disagreements on who should head the independent state. Temporarily, a quadrumvirate was formed, composed of Sulayman al-Baruni, Ramadan al-Suwayhili, Abd al-Nabi Bilkhayr and Ahmad al-Murayyid, along with an advisory board of 24 members. According to the reconstruction of Simona Behre

*the adoption of the republican formula was an obligatory choice; it was an attempt to defuse the centrifugal forces that threatened to trigger a new civil war. The decision to set up a collegial summit confirmed that this danger was a real one. The composition of the Quadrumvirate perfectly captured the political dynamics of the country*⁵⁴.

While Anderson and Behre see the Tripolitanian republic as a tool for maintaining the balance of power among the main political factions of the country, Mondaini explains it as "a wartime artificial Turkish-German creation", which led to future peace negotiations, but also responded to the political ideas of its time, such as the renewal movement spreading from Turkey to the entire Islamic world through the Young Turks, the spread of Wilsonian principles of freedom and self-determination of peoples, and the liberal political reforms of the post-war in the French and English colonies.⁵⁵

In fact, when the Ottoman command left the scene after the Armistice of Mudros (30 October 1918), the quadrumvirs autonomously ruled the territory that they could control. The republic was not the result of a common political vision beyond the leaders' as-

50 See F. Corò, Suleiman El Baruni, il Sogno di un Principato Berbero e la Battaglia di Asàaba (1913), in: Gli Annali dell'Africa italiana, 1 (1938) 3-4, p. 958.

51 See E. De Leone, La Colonizzazione dell'Africa del Nord, 2 vols., Padova 1960, vol. II, p. 481-482.

52 The Egyptian, Abd al-Rahman, Azzam studied medicine in Britain. During World War I he went to Libya, becoming the counsellor of Ramadan al-Suwayhili. Many years later, in 1945, he was elected the first Secretary General of the Arab League.

53 L. Anderson, The Tripoli Republic, 1918-1922, in: E.G.H. Joffé, K.S. Maclachlan (eds.), Social and Economic Development of Libya, London 1982, p. 43-66.

54 S. Behre, Notabili Libici e Funzionari Italiani: l'Amministrazione Coloniale in Tripolitania (1912-1919), Soveria Mannelli, 2015, p. 269.

55 G. Mondaini, Manuale di Storia e Legislazione Coloniale del Regno d'Italia, p. 424.

pirations to supremacy. Al-Suwayhili, an inspiration for ‘Azzam, probably had the major role in the Republican project formulation. With this tool, he had

*the possibility of dismissing the regional leader's clothes to rise to the rank of national leader, extending his hegemony over entire Tripolitania. The implementation of this plan called for a renewal of institutional structures, as the organization that [...] had implanted in and around Misrâta could not support the weight of governing the whole country*⁵⁶.

However, several other actors with similar ambitions competed with him, and no one was willing to give way to others. The following events of the Tripolitanian republic demonstrate that while the supporters of the republic hoped to express their aspirations for independence at the Peace conference, their efforts were in vain.

The *shaykh al-kabir* of the Sanusiyya, Ahmad al-Sharif, hoped that Wilson's fifth point could be used to gain the autonomy of Libyan territories. When the war events did signal a defeat for the Turko-German forces, he journeyed to Istanbul to plead his cause (September 1918)⁵⁷. We do not know how Ahmad al-Sharif carried out his action in Istanbul. However, messages sent by the British Embassy in Rome to the Ministry of the Colonies in November 1918 made the Italian Government fear that the Ottomans wanted to apply the principle of self-determination during post-war negotiations regarding the future of its former African territories.

*The Sultan of Turkey would appoint Sidi Ahmad al-Sharif as the deputy sultan of Tripoli, with the intention and hope to intervene in the treaties of peace with a request of evacuation of the Libyan territories, under the pretext that the occupation of this country is contrary to the will of the population and therefore not in accordance with the principles of the US President*⁵⁸.

Whether this information was true or not, the Italian government was on guard against the maneuvers that could jeopardize the future of Libya⁵⁹.

In Cyrenaica, Idris al-Sanusi assumed the control of the brotherhood and aspired to a broad autonomy, if not complete independence. He wished to be titled “Emir” of his territory. He had repeatedly asked for the creation of “a Sanusi kingdom under Italian protectorate (like the Khedive in Egypt)”⁶⁰, recognizing the political and military free-

56 Ibid.

57 E.A.V. De Candole, *The Life and Times of King Idris of Libya*, Publ. by Mohamed Ben Ghalbon, Manchester, 1990, p. 35–36.

58 ASDMAE, ASMAI, Libia 140/3, fasc. 19: Rodd to Agnesa, 11 January 1918.

59 A Turkish official statement addressed to the Italian government through the embassy of Spain in Istanbul in April 1918, with the reassertion of Ottoman suzerainty over Libya, made the Minister of the Colonies believe that “basically, Turkey prepares the ground for reopening the issue of Libya in the Peace congress, trying to demonstrate the territorial reconquest of Tripolitania”, See V. Clodomiro (ed.), *Il Diario di Gaspare Colosimo*, pp. 495–496.

60 ASDMAE, ASMAI, Libia 138/2, f. 14: Relazione Piacentini-Villa sulle trattative di Zuetina (oct. 1916), p. 11. See also *ibid.*, Libia 143/3, f. 27: Serra to Ministero degli Esteri, 27 March 1916.

dom of the internal regions of Cyrenaica. For the Italian Ministry of Colonies, the concessions were further reduced for a certain administrative autonomy of the southernmost territory of Cyrenaica. But Idris had stuck to his initial plan even after the conclusion of the *modus vivendi* of 1917. Even in early 1919, he wanted the title “*amir dawakhil Libya*” (Emir of the internal regions of Libya), but the ministry saw in this request a “Wilsonian maneuver” and was ready to concede only the less binding title of “*sceikh al-tariqa*” (Head of Sanusi brotherhood), with administrative autonomy in the oases of Kufra and Jalu⁶¹.

The positions of the Italian Ministry of Colonies and the most active political forces in Libya were therefore quite distant at the end of the First World War. It took diplomatic approaches, plea bargains and mutual concessions to reach an agreement that led to the proclamation of the *Legge fondamentale* (*qanun al-asasi* or Basic Law) for Tripolitania and for Cyrenaica, better known as *Statuti libici*.

The negotiations with the members of the Republican Quadrumvirate of Tripolitania began in March 1919 at Qal’at al-Zaytun, and reached an agreement based on reciprocal concessions. The Quadrumvirate returned Italian prisoners and pacified the territory with gradual disarmament of the armed forces of the republic. Italy, in turn, established new administrative rules that guaranteed the population a broad institutional participation in governing the country. The benefits were mutual: the Italian government avoided the military action in the colonies, while the leaders of the republic obtained substantial appanages without yielding power and autonomy, but recognizing a sort of protectorate to Italy. Moreover, Libyan leaders were aware that, with the Ottoman Empire and its allies withdrawing at the end of the war, their ability to support a further war effort, such as obtaining supplies and arms, would be very limited.

The agreement was enforced by Ramadan al-Suwayhili, who persuaded the other leaders to sign it on April 21, 1919. It sparked controversy in Italy, especially when the political strategy advocated by the statutes proved unsuccessful. Many claimed that Italy should conquer the territory by military force, since the end of the European war allowed to move the necessary troops into the colony. Those who supported this line were convinced of the inability of the Libyan leaders to understand the actual value of the concession made by Italy peacefully. It was regarded as an act of weakness, for they were accustomed to acknowledge only the logic of force⁶².

The ideology of the Italian Government played a decisive role in its policy. The judgment of Gennaro Mondaini, who witnessed the debate of that era (and also participated in the drafting of the postwar policy as a member of the Committee), is well balanced:

Italy, where democratic ideals in domestic as well as in International and colonial politics had been among the most striking and effective coefficients of the heroic deeds [of World War], [was] politically and psychologically prepared for a great liberal political reform to

61 ASDMAE, ASMAI, Libia 144/4, f. 26: Ministero delle Colonie [hereinafter: MC] to Arcari, tel. 1204, 4 April 1919; Arcari to MC, tel. 912, 16 April 1919.

62 See G. Mondaini, *Manuale di Storia e Legislazione Coloniale del Regno d'Italia*, vol. I, p. 425.

*ensure the pacification of Tripolitania without having to reconquer it, especially as it was bound by the commitments made in the first Peace of Lausanne with Turkey and by the solemn promises repeatedly made to natives in the early years of the occupation*⁶³.

On June 1, 1919, a proclamation of General Vincenzo Garioni, the new governor of Tripolitania,⁶⁴ announced to the population the opening of a new era:

*His Majesty the King has signed and the minister of the Colonies has countersigned the decree that establishes the FUNDAMENTAL PACT for the people of Tripolitania. It consecrates with intangible rules the wide and loyal fulfillment of those commitments, which due to known events beyond the will of the Italian government had been delayed, but not forgotten. By virtue of this Act, the inhabitants of Tripolitania are elevated to the moral and political dignity of citizens, guaranteed by the same rights recognized to Italian citizens and are called to contribute to the governance of public affairs and the administration of the territory in a wider and more concrete form in a regime of freedom and social progress, for them a sure pledge of a peaceful future*⁶⁵.

The *Patto fondamentale* for Tripolitania was a real Constitution. It was the first constitution in the Libyan territories, and it was also defined as such by the local population. It consists of forty articles⁶⁶ and defines the criteria for recognizing Tripolitanian Italian citizenship. It claims, among other things, that all persons born in Tripolitania at the date of the decree, are considered Italian citizens (art. 1). All citizens are equal before the law, will maintain their own status concerning the right of the individual and the inheritance, and will enjoy the following civil and political rights: guarantee of individual freedom, inviolability of home and property, the right to participate in civil and military offices, free professional practice in Italy (on condition of having the necessary qualifications), the right to vote and to stand for the right of petition to the national Parliament, the right of residence, and the right to emigration.

In addition to guaranteeing respect for the religious traditions and local customs, the Pact recognizes freedom of press and assembly. As for military service, citizens cannot be forced to enrol, but they may enlist volunteers to form local armed forces. Tolls set by the Parliament must be used exclusively for the needs of Tripolitania.

As for education, the government would ensure the freedom of education and establish schools for compulsory primary education (being “restricted to males only” for Muslims), set up courses for secondary and higher education. For Muslims, all elementary education and secondary scientific subjects would be taught in Arabic, while Italian would be compulsory; it would be forbidden to teach principles in conflict with Islam.

63 Ibid., p. 424–425.

64 Garioni (who had already been governor of Tripolitania in the years 1913 and 1914) replaced Giovanni Ameglio, from August 1918 until August of the following year.

65 Ibid. A copy of the notice in ASDMAE, ASMAI, Libia 122/22, f. 196.

66 Legge fondamentale per la Tripolitania. Al-qanun al-asasi li'l-qathar al-tarabulusi, 1st of June 1919, in ASDMAE, Asmai, Libia 122/22, fasc. 196.

Articles 13 to 26 concerned the government and its administration. The government was to be formed by a governor appointed by the king and by a local parliament elected by the people for a four year term (the voters must be more than twenty years old) ; the number of members by right and gubernatorial appointment was not to exceed one-sixth of the elected members; the members must be older than thirty years and be Tripolitanian citizens; they were to be elected on the basis of one for every twenty thousand inhabitants, and the chairman would be among the members of Muslim religion. Immunity was granted to the members of Parliament (art. 19).

Administratively, the territory was divided into regions (*liuà*), provinces (*cazà*) and districts (*nahia*), headed respectively by a regional commissioner (*mutassarif*), a delegate of the province (*caimacams*) and a district agent (*mudir*). These officials would be appointed “by decree of the Governor, after consultation with a special committee, called the Council of Government”, and renewed upon each new election of the local parliament (art. 25).

Italian citizens of Tripolitania might ask for metropolitan citizenship, if more than 21 years old, monogamous or unmarried, having a clean record and residing for at least five years in Italy or in Tripoli. Apart from these general conditions, they must belong to one of a number of special categories, including having past affiliation to a military body of the state, Italian educational qualification (at least primary school) or the job of a government official.

The text is largely identical in Cyrenaica, where the statute was enacted a few months later (31 October 1919). One variance is in article 13 (“The Government of Cyrenaica and its self-administration”), which defines the local parliament, “consisting of representatives of local tribes and urban centers, as a friendly federation of all tribes and peoples of the country”. The text seems to recognize the importance of tribes and nomads in the social rubric of the territory, the autonomy of each tribe and the assembly’s federal character. It echoes the observations that Nallino had expressed in his report to the Post-war commission, where he had affirmed the need to recognize the specificities of Bedouin society.

There was another peculiarity is the composition of the parliament: “about fifty representatives [...] in the proportion of one in every four thousand members [of the tribe] or inhabitants”. The vagueness of the number of the members of parliament was due to the imprecision of the available data on the population, about two hundred thousand according to this statement, but possibly much less. A subsequent decree⁶⁷ determined the number of voters using calculations of recognized leaders of different fractions and the *shuyukh* of the tribes, following a complex administrative mechanism pending the establishment of the registry office in the colony. If the tribes or their autonomous fractions (and the villages of the interior oases) had less than four thousand members, it

67 Rd. 270, 25 March 1920: Norme per l’elezione al Parlamento locale e agli altri Consigli elettivi della Cirenaica. See Gazzetta ufficiale del Regno d’Italia, 19 May 1920.

was considered sufficient to reach fifteen hundred to send a representative to the parliament.

Yet another difference concerns the division of the territory. While Tripolitania is divided into regions, provinces, and districts within specific territorial limits, the population of Cyrenaica, according to its traditional constitution, is divided into tribes, sub-tribes and their subdivisions. The administration of each sub-tribe was to be left to a chief, and the control of each tribe to a chief of chiefs (art. 21). The leaders would continue to be designated “according to traditional rules”, and would then be recognized by a government decree. The creation of the parliament was not to repeal other existing bodies according to traditional rules. Particularly, the powers of the council of elders were confirmed, in order to oversee “the order and security in the area pertaining to the tribe,” and to be “responsible [...] in front of the Government” (art. 22). The entire colony is divided into districts “for the protection, development and progress of the local interests of each territory”: if a district has its capital in a built-up center, it will be a city district or municipality, with an administration consisting of a mayor and a council elected every three years (art. 26-27).

As for the other chapters (such as financial administration, justice, and metropolitan citizenship) the Cyrenaican statute was not significantly different from that of Tripolitania. Ultimately, the main difference between the two statutes was constituted by the

*territorial representation rather than the purely individual which was established in Cyrenaica, in homage to the still predominantly gentilitial constitution of the country in comparison to the more developed neighbouring colony*⁶⁸.

The events that followed the promulgation of the statutes soon made clear the practical impossibilities of fully implementing them. The parliament never worked in Tripolitania, and in Cyrenaica it worked for only about two years, from 30 April 1921, to early 1923.

While in Libya the anti-colonial resistance movement was growing more and more radical, with demands for autonomy and independence becoming stronger, the political developments in Italy were ominously affirming nationalist forces which would reject all prospects of compromise and prefer the use of force and military domination. The impossibility of a peaceful recognition of Italian supremacy began a long and bloody confrontation anew, which would end only with the ‘pacification of Libya’ at the beginning of 1932.

68 G. Mondaini, *Manuale di Storia e Legislazione Coloniale del Regno d'Italia*, vol. I, p. 463.