

SOME ITALIAN AND CATHOLIC SOURCES ON JAZIRA (1920-1950)¹

di Mirella Galletti

During World War I the Allies supported the centrifugal thrusts of the ethnic and religious groups hostile to the Ottoman Empire. But the promises of a great unified Arab State, of a Kurdish State, of an Armenian State and of an Assyrian State were patently irreconcilable.

The division of the Ottoman Kurdistan removed the protection of autochthonous communities (Armenians, Assyro-Chaldeans, Kurds and Yezidis) so that they became the internal problem of Iraq, Syria and Turkey. These peoples have consequently become transnational. Dispersed through various Middle Eastern States, they have been forced to create different policies, and to pursue different objectives. The passage from multinational identity has had dramatic consequences for each of these people, whereas the Arab and Turkish States pursued a nationalistic policy aimed at creating a new identity for the whole population.

The available documentation in the archives of the Ministry of Italian Foreign Affairs enables a broader and deeper understanding of the tensions and problems, with special reference to Iraq. Nonetheless, these diplomatic observateurs are interesting because they create the atmosphere of this historical period. Italian politics seemed to agree to the rigid application of the Lausanne Treaty and the maintaining of the status quo. Fascism follows a pro-Arab strategy which leaves no room for developing a strategy toward the Middle Eastern communities.

A section is devoted to the Syrian Jazira that, being at the Turkish and Iraqi border, represented an important observation post to follow the Kurdish and Assyro-Chaldean problems in those years. The refugees coming from the two countries sheltered in the region because of the politics of tending to integrate them. These politics were pursued by the French mandatary power.

I have consulted diplomatic and Catholic archives in Rome. The historical archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs permit consultation up to fifty years ago, the Dominican archives seventy years ago, and the Propaganda Fide eighty years. I also consulted the famous Italian scientific monthly journal *Oriente Moderno* that was founded in 1921 and had a precious press review on Near and Middle Eastern affairs.

I examined the dispatches sent from the Italian diplomatic residences in Damascus and Aleppo to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. Of course I also viewed dispatches sent from the

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Italian embassies in the Near and Middle Eastern capitals (Damascus, Ankara, Tehran, Baghdad) and from Europe.

I found reports on the Jazira situation in the Dominican archives of Santa Sabina. They were written by the monks of the Mosul mission, among them the well-known kurdologist Father Thomas Bois. Dominican order established a mission in Jazira in 1936, but failed in 1940.

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As a consequence of World War I, the division of Kurdistan determined the split of the autochthonous communities that have consequently become transnational. Dispersed through various Middle Eastern States, they are the people of the Armenian, Assyro-Chaldean, Kurdish and Yezidi diasporas, people without a State who struggle for their national rights and for their reunification.

In this new regional context the protection of minorities has been one of the most difficult and complex problems to solve, and the failure to achieve it has been a significant factor for the instability of the region until today. In Lausanne (1923), the Great Powers opted for the hegemony of Turks and Arabs in the Near East. While the Kurdish problem has persisted as a domestic problem to this day, the Assyrian question dominated the international scene in the 1930s, but ebbed into the shadows soon after.

Italian attitude toward Jazira

The available documentation in the archives of the Ministry of Italian Foreign Affairs offers a broader and deeper understanding of tensions and problems.² Analysis of the dispatches, shows that Italian diplomats had difficulty in understanding the extremely heterogeneous milieu and the complexity of the social classes and ethnical-religious minorities.

A documentary review confirms that Fascism lacked any Arab strategy, and was largely indifferent to the minorities living in the Near East. It was only during World War II that a change in thinking began to be heard:

Italy must help rebuild the ethnic entities scattered and weakened by the violence of war and peace (Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds); it must favour the Arab populations who wish a regular and legal establishment of their nationalities; and it must ensure the independence of the Arab States in the Near and Middle East, with each of whom Italy will ratify a treaty of alliance and cooperation.³

Italian policy aimed to contain France and Great Britain. This documentation reveals fears, tensions, groundless rumours, and wild speculations on the part of Italian diplomacy during this period. It stirred the ghost of Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935), well-known as Lawrence of Arabia, who seemed "in contact with the Kurds" according to the dispatches from the various Middle Eastern and European capitals in the 1930s. There was a widespread belief that he was

² The envelopes examined at the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, ASMAE) in Rome are: Serie Affari Politici, Syria, envelope (busta, b.) No. 1567 (1920), No.1569 (1921), No.1571 (1922), No.20 (1938); from No. 4 (1932) to No. 9 (1934), No. 15 (1936), No. 20 (1938). While the envelopes on Iraq contain dispatches and documents concerning Southern Kurdistan (Iraq), there are also some dealing with Northern Kurdistan (Turkey), Eastern (Iran), Southwestern (Syria).

³ "L'Italia dovrà aiutare a ricostruire entità etniche che le violenze delle guerre e delle paci avevano disperso e sconquassato (armeni, assiri, curdi); favorire le popolazioni arabe che anelano alla costituzione regolare e legale della loro nazionalità; assicurare l'indipendenza degli Stati arabi del prossimo e Medio Oriente con ciascuno dei quali l'Italia dovrà essere legata da un trattato di alleanza e di cooperazione", ASMAE, *Affari politici, Irak*, b.18, 1942, fasc.1, "Programma politico di azione in Irak e di valorizzazione economica del paese", secret report prepared in January 1942; quoted in Renzo De Felice, *Il fascismo e l'Oriente. Arabi, ebrei e indiani nella politica di Mussolini*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988, p.69.

involved in the Kurdish revolts. «There was a true legend surrounding him. In the end, the most clever moves of the *Intelligence Service* and of British secret diplomacy were attributed to actions by Lawrence».⁴

These reports also refer to Armenian-Kurdish cooperation. Kurdish-Armenian relations were bolstered after 1927, once the *Khoybun* and the Armenian party *Dashnak* entered into an agreement for the liberation of the two sister homelands, and also due to Armenian cooperation during the Ararat revolt. In 1931 the Italian Consul in Aleppo Camillo Giuriati wrote: «... I can confirm that the Armenian organizations participate actively in the success of the Kurdish movement».⁵

In those years the old and new frontiers dividing Kurdistan were exposed to repeated challenges due to endemic Kurdish uprisings in the different areas. In the 1930s the *Khoybun*'s revolt in Ararat was subdued through the intervention of Turkish troops. The unsuccessful revolt of *Khoybun* had deep repercussions in neighbouring countries, and the flux of Kurdish refugees increased into the Syrian Jazira. Soon after the establishment of the French Mandate in Syria (1920-1946) that country became a favourite refuge for Kurdish and Christian refugees escaping from Turkey⁶ and Assyro-Chaldeans escaping from Iraq.

Italian politics tended to a rigid application of the Lausanne Treaty and for the maintenance of the status quo. The oncoming States created out of the collapse of the Ottoman empire had to be maintained. Time and again, recurrent Kurdish revolts were attributed to anti-state rebel gangs, to local and tribal factors, and to interferences by sub-regional and European powers.

In the 1920s the Kurdish revolts did obtain some attention in the Italian press. A dispatch written by the Consul in Aleppo describes the Kurdish centres in Syria.

The main Kurdish centres in the Syrian territory are between Jarablus and Nisibin, on the Turco-Syrian border, and near the belongings of the children of the late Kurdish leader Ibrahim Pasha, in Veranshehir. Another less important centre is in the region: Harem-Idlib-Killis.

Until 1925, Kurds made some uprisings against the French, but the latter were able to get their support and at the moment they defended the border from foreign attacks, or from other Kurdish tribes.

I was told that the children of Ibrahim Pasha receive subsidies from the Government of the Republic, and one shows a French decoration.

When the French army occupied Syria, it received much resistance among these tribes, and was able to receive their cooperation giving them a large amount of arms and munition. They served both against the Turks and the Syrian rebels. During the revolution in the Jebel Druze, they were used in order to increase uprisings at the Syro-Iraqi borders, populated by the Kurds. This policy claimed England responsible for the suspected support at the Druzes and that of Turkey in helping the Syrian nationalists. It is well-known that mercenary troops were enrolled by the Mandatary Power during the last uprising, and were formed almost exclusively by the Kurds.⁷

⁴ «Si era ormai formata intorno a lui una vera leggenda: le mosse più abili dell'*Intelligence Service* (I.S.= Servizio informazioni) e della diplomazia segreta britannica finivano per essere attribuite all'opera del Lawrence», *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XV, No. 6, 1935, pp. 255-256. A number of dispatches from Italian Embassies and Consulates in Ankara, London, Berlin, Baghdad, Tehran, Aleppo, Beirut, Jerusalem, erroneously reported the presence of Lawrence of Arabia in Kurdistan.

⁵ «... posso confermare che le organizzazioni armene collaborano attivamente per il successo del movimento curdo», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 1 (1931), fasc. 2, "Rivolta dei Curdi", Report of the Italian Consul in Aleppo Camillo Giuriati "Rivolta curda", No. 72/24, Aleppo 20 Jan. 1931. See also ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 9 (1936), fasc.1, "Rapporti politici", Report on "Movimento curdo nel Nord-Siria", No. 221209, 23 June 1936.

⁶ W.G. Elphinston, "The Kurdish Question", *International Affairs*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, January 1946, p. 100.

⁷ «I principali centri Kurdi nel territorio Siriano si trovano tra Djerablus e Nissibin, sulla frontiera turco-siriana, e più propriamente nelle vicinanze della proprietà dei figli del defunto Capo Kurdo Ibrahim Pascià, a Veranshehir.

Un altro nucleo di minore importanza si trova nella zona: Harem - Idlib – Killis.

But interest waned in the ensuing decade, when reports of the Italian diplomats, Guglielmo Rulli in Baghdad and Camillo Giuriati in Aleppo, showed more attention toward the Kurdish problem. For example the report of Giuriati relates minor incidents, and describes the leader of the Kurdish revolt in Turkey.

The well-known Ihsan Nuri Pasha, at one time the leader of Kurdish rebels on Mount Ararat, and later interned in Tehran, presented himself with 90 armed Kurds to a French officer of the 'Services Spéciaux' a month ago in Hasakah. He has declared that he wants to stay in Syria, because he was accused of treason for leaving Tehran and for returning to Mount Ararat.

The Mandatory Authority disarmed Ihsan Nuri and his followers and gave them permission to live in the Levant countries under French Mandate. Ihsan Nuri transferred to Beirut with five Kurds, while the others established themselves in Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo.⁸

The Italian interest on the High Jazira is shown by the different visits paid in the region by the Italian consul in Aleppo, Camillo Giuriati. On May 1931 the diplomat wrote a 11 page report on the situation in the Western Euphrates, with special emphasis regarding the conditions of the roads. The village Hasakah has about 6,000 inhabitants, mostly Kurds, Assyro-Chaldeans, Armenians. France tried to attract Christian minorities giving aids, protection, land, facilities for livestock, agricultural instruments, as well as other facilities. Consequently farmers from Turkey and Iraq left their countries to establish themselves here. Some pages are dedicated to the disputed Iraqi-Syrian area of Gebel Sinjar, it's Yezidi population and the presence of oil.⁹

In the dispatch of April 1932 Giuriati reports on his journey in the Euphrates region, along the route from Aleppo to Deir ez-Zor, giving information of military concern to the presence of "Services Spéciaux" in Abu Kemal, Ras el-Ain, Tell Abiad, Rakka and other villages, and of a new airport in Hasakah. He notes that about half livestock belonging to the nomads died for the lack of water and pasture, due to the exceptional dry spell. So the crisis involved the agricultural lands of the Assyro-Chaldean refugees coming from Turkey. The situation deteriorates for the imposition of

Essi, sino al 1925 costituirono gravi focolari di agitazione contro i Francesi, questi però seppero attirarli dalla loro parte e da allora se ne servono per presidiare e difendere la frontiera da eventuali attacchi stranieri o di altre tribù kurde.

Mi si assicura che i figli di Ibrahim Pascià sono regolarmente sussidiati dal Governo della Repubblica; uno di essi farebbe persino mostra di una decorazione francese.

Come accennavo dianzi i francesi trovarono da parte delle predette tribù vivissima resistenza all'epoca del loro ingresso in Siria ma più tardi riuscirono a domarli accaparrandosi le simpatie dei singoli capi tribù fornendo loro largamente armi e munizioni. Di essi ebbero inoltre a servirsi sia contro i turchi che contro i ribelli siriani. Pare anzi assicurato che durante la rivoluzione del Djebel Druso, se ne siano serviti specialmente allo scopo di fomentare agitazioni e moti sulle frontiere Turco-Irakiane, centro popolarissimo di elemento Kurdo, a danno dell'Inghilterra che era sospettata di favoreggiamenti a vantaggio dei Drusi, e della Turchia che secondava ed aiutava i nazionalisti siriani. È noto inoltre che le milizie mercenarie arruolate dalla Potenza Mandataria durante quest'ultima rivoluzione erano composte quasi esclusivamente di elementi Kurdi», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 1576 (1927), fasc. 7200, "Rapporti politici", Report of the Italian Consul in Aleppo "Centri kurdi in Siria", No. 876/153, Aleppo 16 August 1927.

⁸ «Il noto Ihsan Nuri pascià, già capo degli insorti curdi rifugiati sulle montagne Araràt, e poi internato a Teheran, si è presentato circa un mese addietro all'ufficiale francese dei 'Services Spéciaux' ad Hasseccè, accompagnato da 90 curdi armati. Egli ha dichiarato di voler risiedere in Siria, perchè, allontanatosi da Teheran e ritornato nelle montagne dell'Araràt, venne accusato di tradimento.

L'Autorità Mandataria, dopo aver disarmato Ihsan Nuri e seguaci, ha dato loro il permesso di risiedere nei Paesi del Levante sotto Mandato francese.

Ihsan Nuri con cinque curdi si è trasferito a Beirut, mentre gli altri si sono stabiliti a Deir-Ez-Zor ed Aleppo», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 4 (1932), fasc.3, "Rivolta dei Curdi", Report of the Consul Giuriati, "Movimento Curdo - Ihsan Nuri Pascià", No. 43/15, Aleppo 11 Jan. 1932.

⁹ ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 4 (1932), fasc. 2, "Rapporti politici (1° semestre)", Report of the Consul Giuriati, "Ispezione nell'Alto Gezireh", No. 539/121, Aleppo 14 May 1931.

new taxes on the agricultural revenues. As a result half of the Assyro-Chaldean community has left and returned to Turkey.¹⁰

In Spring of 1933, Yezidi riots broke out, during the commission's works for defining the Syrian-Iraqi boundaries.¹¹ During a meeting with the consul of Turkey in Syria, the deputy consul Renato Citarelli reports the Turkish rumours and fears. Ankara fears that Paris is going to establish a buffer state, inhabited by Armenians, in the Northern-Eastern Syrian boundary, for military purposes.¹² Maybe it is curious to note that in this period there are rumours on the passage to Italy of the mandate on the Euphrates Valley, in order to have a numerous Italian colonization to exploit the agricultural resources of this area.¹³

Another dispatch dated June 1934 the consul describes his journey in Jazira. The Kurdish leader Hagio Agha, who was involved in a recent revolt, lives in Hasakah. The Turks want him back, but the French authority do not permit this. The diplomat notes «the precariousness of the present situation».¹⁴

The French administration granted the Kurds some cultural rights, allowed them to issue Kurdish publications, and to establish clubs, cultural and social societies in the areas where they formed a majority.¹⁵ Italian Foreign Affairs is more attentive to the Kurdish cultural phenomena, as evidenced by the Press Office Translation Section calling attention to *Hawar*. This journal was published in Kurdish by the brothers Celadet Ali Bedir-Khan (1893-1951) and Kamuran Ali Bedir-Khan (1895-1978) in Damascus and had a great importance in that period as a cornerstone of the Kurdish language and culture. The report ends: «We must closely monitor this people, as it is a potential factor which could upset the current political balance in the Middle East. For this reason, it would be appropriate to subscribe to this journal».¹⁶

In a dispatch considered “strictly confidential” the Consul Caruso reports his meeting with Celadet Ali Bedir-Khan:

a Kurd from Bohtan, for many years a resident in Damascus, where he leads the local review in Kurdish language HAWAR.

Bedir-Khan has declared to be the leader of the Kurdish association “KHOYBUN” (Independence) for the Near East countries under French Mandate and for the Kurdish refugees there. He has expressed his personal and his comrades' sympathy for the Italian Government, the only one toward whom the Kurdish populations can have faith and admiration.

He has communicated that the present revolt in Kurdistan is very dangerous for the Turks who are not able to crush it, in spite of the large amount of troops.¹⁷

¹⁰ ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 4 (1932), fasc. 2, “Rapporti politici (1° semestre)”, Report of the Consul Giuriati, “Ispezione a Gezireh”, No. 386/85, Aleppo 18 April 1932. See also Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, Beirut, Librairie du Liban, 1968, pp. 211-214.

¹¹ ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 5 (1933), fasc. 2, “Frontiera Siria-Iraq”, Report of Porta, “Frontiera siro-irakiana”, No. 454/161, Baghdad 27 April 1933.

¹² ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 6 (1933), fasc. 1, “Situazione politica in Siria e cessazione del mandato (1° semestre)”, Report of Renato Citarelli, “Siria del Nord”, No. 103/21, Aleppo 4 February 1933.

¹³ ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 6 (1933), fasc. 2, “Situazione politica in Siria e cessazione del mandato (2° semestre)”, Report of P.A. Rossi, “Situazione politica – Voci di cessione all'Italia della vallata dell'Eufrate”, No. 709/144, Aleppo 1 July 1933.

¹⁴ «...la nota dominante della situazione è la precarietà», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 8 (1934), fasc. 2, “Situazione politica (1° semestre)”, Report of P.A. Rossi, “Viaggio di servizio nell'Alto Gesireh”, No. 620/174, Aleppo 18 June 1934.

¹⁵ Saad N. Jawad, *The Kurdish minority in Syria*, paper presented at BRISMES Annual Conference, 12-15 July 1987, University of Exeter, p. 2.

¹⁶ «Si deve guardare a questo popolo con attenzione, perchè esso è uno di quei fattori di perturbazione che possono scuotere l'odierno equilibrio politico del Medio Oriente. Sarebbe perciò, opportuno, abbonarsi alla rivista in oggetto», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 4 (1932), fasc.3, “Rivolta dei Curdi”, three-page report subscribed by S.C. (Selim Cattan), no date.

¹⁷ «... si è presentato a questo Ufficio il signor DJELADET AALI BEDIR-KHAN, curdo originario di Bohan (sic!), da numerosi anni residente a Damasco, ove dirige la rivista locale in lingua curda HAWAR.

The Assyrian Question

The 1930s are marked on the one hand by Italian indifference toward the Kurdish problem, and on the other hand by the government's resolution to remain uninvolved in the Assyrian question. Fascism followed a pro-Arab policy which left no room for developing a strategy toward the Middle Eastern minorities.

After the August 1933 massacres in north Iraq, over 9,000 Assyro-Chaldeans fled into Syria and settled along the Khabur River in the Jazira Province, while 15,000 more asked permission to leave Iraq. For eight years the League of Nations operated a special administration to assist their settlement and economic integration.

The League inherited the problem.¹⁸ Following the summer massacres, Italian politics were ambiguous, seeking to placate the Assyrians while not alienating the Iraqis; and concerned especially that neither London nor Paris should exploit the Assyrian problem to their advantage. There was particular concern that France, citing Iraqi immaturity to obtain its independence, might use this pretext to extend its mandate in Syria as long as possible. Gino Buti, the General Director for European and Mediterranean Affairs, sent explicit and cynic instructions to the Undersecretary of State and to the delegation in Geneva:

It seems convenient that our delegation:

a)- shows our sympathy toward the Christian minorities in the Levant for obvious reasons, avoids offending the Arabs and try to mitigate the eventual responsibilities of Arabs in this circumstance. This means the League should be prevented from adopting measures, beyond those decided before, aimed at the protection of the Christian minorities but giving more influence to Great Britain in this State. It is in our interest to maintain this independence in the limits of the present Anglo-Iraqi Treaty...

[...] In late of the foregoing, it does not seem convenient for us to carry out the request recently sent to the Chief of Government by the Patriarch of the Assyrians Mar Shim'un (presently exiled from Iraq and residing in Cyprus) wherein he asks the Italian Government to support the Assyrians, especially in their quest for a stable solution assuring their future welfare.¹⁹

Il Bedir-Khan mi ha dichiarato di essere a capo dell'Associazione curda "KHOYUBUN" (Indipendenza) per i Paesi del Levante sotto Mandato Francese e per i curdi in essi rifugiati e mi ha espresso le simpatie sue e dei suoi compagni di fede per il Governo Italiano, l'unico - egli mi ha detto - verso il quale le popolazioni curde possono guardare con fiducia oltre che con ammirazione.

Invitato a precisarmi lo scopo della sua visita, ha soggiunto che voleva comunicarmi, perché potessi darne notizia a V.E., che la rivolta recentemente ripresa nel Kurdistan si presenta quanto mai minacciosa per i turchi i quali non riescono a dominarla non ostante i forti contingenti di truppe impegnati», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 8 (1934), fasc. 1, "Rapporti politici", Report of Caruso, "Movimento curdo", No. 1043/245, Damasco 17 August 1934.

¹⁸ "Situazione della minoranza assira nell'Irak", *Bollettino mensile della Società delle Nazioni*, No. 9, 1933, pp. 313-314.

¹⁹ «Sembra conveniente che la nostra Delegazione:

a)- pur dimostrando, per ovvie ragioni, in linea di massima la nostra simpatia per le minoranze cristiane nel Levante, eviti tuttavia di ferire le suscettibilità degli arabi e cerchi di attenuare le eventuali responsabilità dell'Iraq nell'attuale circostanza; e ciò anche per evitare che la S.d.N. adotti, oltre quelle già disposte a suo tempo, misure che, col pretesto di proteggere le minoranze cristiane in Iraq, importino una inframmettenza della Gran Bretagna in questo Stato la cui indipendenza, pur contenuta nei limiti dell'attuale trattato anglo-iraqueno, conviene a noi di salvaguardare...

[...] In considerazione di quanto precede non sembra quindi conveniente di dare alcun seguito da parte nostra alla richiesta recentemente inviata a S.E. il Capo del Governo dal Patriarca degli assiriani Mar Shimun, (attualmente esiliato dall'Iraq e residente a Cipro), con la quale si invoca l'appoggio del Governo Italiano in favore degli Assiri, particolarmente per una stabile soluzione della questione che assicuri il loro futuro benessere» ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 5 (1933), fasc. 6, "Minoranze (gennaio-settembre)", "Appunto per S.E. il Sottosegretario di Stato" signed Gino Buti, Rome 18 Sept. 1933.

This strategy is subsequently reaffirmed by a Press Office communiqué where it is considered suitable "to kindly invite the Italian press to keep an impartial and discreet behaviour in the possible publications and articles concerning the Assyrian question in Iraq".²⁰

A Committee was appointed to devise a project for the settlement of about 20,000 Assyrians. It considered areas in British Guyana, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Australia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and other regions of the world. The pros and cons of this issue are also examined by Mario Porta according to whom:

Assyrian emigration in whatever South or Central American country would likely be damaging to the Assyrians. At the same time, their presence would likewise be disruptive. [The Assyrians] are a people who for centuries have resolved both internal and external disputes at the end of a gun. They are attuned to this approach not by the war fought by their *levies*, but by daily guerrilla existence over a protracted period both before and after the war. These Indian-Spanish countries of the New World tend to be more or less turbulent and domestically factious. Perhaps the Assyrians would become an excellent fighting faction for this or that political 'cacique' { Spanish in the original text}, or for this or that native power contender. All this would not contribute to the already unreliable peace of the country - there are no exceptions- that would receive them, or to its pacific development.²¹

Strong idealism, a neglect of risks, and also a certain naivete characterize the report on the mission prepared by the Italian dr. Guido Renzo Giglioli with British Brigadier Browne. They conducted a ten-week travel mission through most of British Guyana, crisscrossing malarial and

²⁰ «... di voler cortesemente invitare la stampa italiana a mantenere atteggiamento imparziale e riservato nelle eventuali pubblicazioni e articoli relativi alla questione assiriana in Iraq». These restrictions were imposed following the publication of Paolo Caccia Dominioni's article on *Il Giornale d'Oriente* (Cairo), No. 214, dated 10 Sept. 1933, and the *Corriere della Sera* dated 29 Aug. and 6 Sept. 1933. The author had reported on an Assyrian-Iraqi clash, with a pro-Assyrian spin. These measures were solicited by Mario Porta, ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 6 (1933), fasc.1, "Minoranze (ottobre-dicembre)", dispatch No. 992, Baghdad 2 Oct. 1933. Gino Buti observed in his note: «The article here considered includes inaccuracies of fact and of opinion that are bound to generate unfavourably comment over there, especially with the state of public opinion in Iraq today. It is desirable to avoid such comments for the sake of safeguarding good relationships with the young Iraqi State» («L'articolo di cui trattasi contiene inesattezze di fatto e di valutazione che, specie nelle attuali condizioni di spirito dell'opinione pubblica in Iraq, non possano non venire colà sfavorevolmente commentate, ciò che è preferibile, date anche le buone relazioni esistenti fra l'Italia e il giovane Stato irakiano, di evitare»), ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 6 (1933), fasc.1, "Minoranze (ottobre-dicembre)", "Appunto per l'Ufficio Stampa" signed from Buti, No. 232692/2071, Rome 31 Oct. 1933.

See the detailed eight page report, with maps "Battaglia di Fech Kabour (Alto Tigri) tra Assiro-Caldei e Irakiani 4-6 agosto 1933" signed from Conte Ing. Paolo Caccia Dominioni who was in the place, Beirut 6 Oct. 1933, confidential. ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 6 (1933), fasc.1, "Minoranze (ottobre-dicembre)".

²¹ «... se un'emigrazione assiriana in qualunque paese Sud o Centro Americano potrebbe quasi sicuramente rappresentare un non buon'affare per gli Assiriani, ugualmente un non buon affare rappresenterebbe, in ultime analisi, la presenza di Assiriani -gente, al postutto assuefatta da secoli a risolvere ogni questione, tra sè come con gli altri, a colpi di fucile, allenata a siffatta vita più che dalla passata grande guerra combattuta come 'levies', dalla guerriglia d'ogni giorno dell'ante e del dopo guerra- nei paesi indo-iberici del Nuovo Mondo, paesi tutti dal più al meno così tendenzialmente turbolenti e internamente tanto faziosi: gli Assiriani diverrebbero -forse- un'ottima massa di manovra effettiva per questo o per quel 'cacique' politico, per questo o per quel signorotto dell'interno, e ciò non contribuirebbe certo alla già di per sè instabile tranquillità del paese - non ci sono eccezioni- che li accoglierebbe, od al suo pacifico sviluppo.», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 7 (1934), fasc.3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)", Report of Mario Porta, "Questione assiriana", No. 1394/457, Baghdad 20 Dec. 1933.

The settlement of the Assyrians outside Iraq is widely examined in the following reports: ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 7 (1934), fasc. 3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)"; b. 8 (1935), fasc. 3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)".

infected zones under primitive conditions, both on foot and on horseback. In the end, they came to an unfavourable conclusion of the proposed Assyrian emigration to that area.²²

In this same period, some far-fetched Assyrian resettlement ideas were advanced. Porta wrote from Baghdad:

Some minor English newspapers have mentioned the idea proposed -vaguely- by Germany. If Tanganyka would be returned to Germany, Germany would be willing to accept all the Assyrians ready to leave Iraq for its ex-colony.

This may seem absurd, but the fact is not a journalistic invention. It is an initiative, I would say a fantastic one, of this German Minister who submitted it to Sir Francis Humphrys in an academic way and then repeated it to an English journalist, Mr. Main, who is in Baghdad to report on Assyrian events. Of course, Sir Francis did not consider the proposal to be serious, and when he recently informed me of it, he was laughing. In the same spirit, I replied that we have no problem accepting some Assyrians if England or some other country would provide us with a Colony to accommodate them!

In reality Sir Francis asked me – seriously and no longer laughing- whether I believed Italy would be willing to accept some Assyrians, in Eritrea for example. For obvious reasons, I dropped the subject.²³

In 1934 the Minister for the Colonies, Emilio De Bono, reacted negatively to a proposal which would settle Assyro-Chaldeans in the Italian colonies (Somalia, Eritrea, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica):

This Royal Ministry is obliged to exclude the possibility of a prospective settlement of the Assyro-Chaldeans in the territory of our colonies.²⁴

After some three years, the Minister for Italian Africa, Alessandro Lessona, addressed the Foreign Office on the possibility of settling some ten thousand Assyrian workers with their families, a total of about forty thousand people, in colonial East Africa, and "on the opportunity of this transfer, in relation with international requirements".²⁵ But Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano

²² ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b.8 (1935), fasc.3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)", Report of Bova Scoppa "Stabilimento degli Assiri", No.270/250, Geneva 7 March 1935.

²³ «Qualche minore giornale inglese ha accennato ad un'idea lanciata -vagamente- dalla Germania che ove le fosse stato restituito il Tanganyka essa sarebbe stata disposta ad accogliere in quella sua ex Colonia tutto il numero disponibile di Assiriani, disposti a lasciare l'Iraq.

La cosa, assurda come può sembrare, non è del tutto un'invenzione giornalistica.

Si tratta di un'iniziativa, direi fantastica, di questo Ministro di Germania che la sottopose, in via accademica, a Sir Francis Humphrys e che poi ripeté ad un giornalista inglese, Mr. Main, mandato qui a Baghdad per raccogliere notizie sugli avvenimenti assiriani.

Sir Francis, naturalmente, non prese la cosa sul serio, e me la riferì recentemente ridendone: al che io risposi, sullo stesso suo tono, che noi pure non avremmo avuto difficoltà a prenderci qualche assiriano se o l'Inghilterra o altri ci avesse ceduta una sua Colonia ove sistemarli!

Realmente però, Sir Francis mi domandò - e non più ridendo- se credevo che l'Italia sarebbe stata disposta ad ospitare qualche nucleo di Assiriani, ad esempio in Eritrea. Come è facile intendere lasciai cadere il discorso», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 7 (1934), fasc.3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)", Report of Porta, "Questione assiriana", No. 1394/457, Baghdad 20 Dec. 1933.

²⁴ «... questo R.° Ministero è costretto a escludere la possibilità di una eventuale sistemazione degli Assiro-Caldei nel territorio delle nostre Colonie», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 8 (1934), fasc.1, "Minoranze (luglio-dicembre)", Report of the Minister of Colonies, Emilio De Bono, "Questione Assiri nell'Iraq", No.45402, Rome 18 July 1934. This note answered a question posed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 7 (1934), fasc.3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)", No. 221499, Rome 2 July 1934. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Galeazzo Ciano had had this request from Lopez Olivan, President of the Committee of the League of Nations for the settling of the Assyrians of Iraq, Geneva 11 June 1934.

²⁵ ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 11 (1938), fasc.4, "Minoranze", note of the Minister of Italian Africa Alessandro Lessona, sent to the Foreign Minister S.E. Conte dott. Galeazzo Ciano di Coltellazzo, No. 15448, Rome 19 Sept. 1937, confidential.

dropped the initiative, citing circumstances militating against it, namely, that the settling of such a large Christian community in Ethiopia would put at risk Italy's pro-Arab policy:

This is a warrior population, with valiant and independent character, turbulent and difficult to govern, accustomed to raising sheep more than to agriculture, and not in the habit of continuous and methodical labor as is demanded of workers and farmers.

For such reasons, no State, in spite of the general labour shortage in the colonies, offered hospitality to the Assyrians when the League requested it. These are also the causes explaining why the experiment of agricultural colonization which was tried in Syria failed.

Without going into the question of colonial domestic order which the immigration of a large number of Assyrians in Ethiopia would impact, and these are questions of specific competence in your Ministry, I also call to your attention the unfavourable repercussions of such immigration to a a mostly Muslim country in other Islamic countries and on the pro-Islamic politics that we are pursuing in our colonies and in the Arab States. As to the latter, the admission of Assyrians in Syria has already provoked such protest and reactions to induce France to limit the number of those to be admitted.

For such reasons I do not encourage the transfer to Ethiopia of the Assyrians from Iraq.²⁶

After four years yielded no plan, the League by default decided that the Assyrians should stay in Iraq, except for a small number who could settle in the Syrian High Jazira.

A dispatch of the Consulate in Damascus notes that: «According to official statistics on Assyrian immigration from Iraq to Syria, 17,590 Assyrians arrived in the Khabur region (northern Syria) in 1935, and more than 5,000 of them have been sent to the Alawite region».²⁷

Under the French Mandate, the government exploited this fragmented nature of Syrian society, and Syria was divided into administrative units corresponding to religious consideration.²⁸ In short, Syria was divided into the state of the Alawis, the state of the Jebel Druze, the state of Aleppo and the state of Damascus. Furthermore, through the divide-and-rule policy, the French government attempted to expand the detachments among the Alawis, the Druzes, the Kurds, the Circassians, and other minorities.²⁹

²⁶ «Trattasi di una popolazione guerriera, di carattere fiero e indipendente, turbolenta e di difficile governo, dedita alla pastorizia più che all'agricoltura e poco incline al lavoro continuato e metodico quale si richiede sia ad operai sia a contadini.

Queste sono le ragioni per cui nessuno Stato, nonostante la crisi generale della mano d'opera nelle Colonie, offrì ospitalità agli assiri quando ne fu richiesto dalla Lega e queste sono pure le cause per cui è fallito l'esperimento di colonizzazione agricola tentato in Siria.

Senza poi volere entrare nell'esame di questioni d'ordine politico interno coloniale cui l'immigrazione in Etiopia di forti masse di assiri darebbe luogo, questioni che sono di specifica competenza del tuo Dicastero, ritengo di dover attirare la tua attenzione anche sugli sfavorevoli riflessi che tale immigrazione di cristiani in un paese in gran parte mussulmano, avrebbe sui paesi islamici e sulla politica filo-islamica che stiamo con notevoli risultati svolgendo sia nelle nostre Colonie sia nei paesi arabi. In questi ultimi già l'ammissione degli assiri in Siria, aveva sollevato proteste e reazioni tali da indurre la Francia a limitare il numero degli ammessi.

Per le ragioni su esposte non consiglieri per parte mia il trasferimento in Etiopia degli assiri dell'Irak», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 11 (1938), fasc.4, "Minoranze", note of the Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, No. 234466/1105, Rome 5 Oct. 1937. Apparently, Ciano did not consider the Assyrian problem important, since his diary for this period is silent on the subject.

²⁷ «...da una statistica ufficiale circa l'immigrazione in Siria degli Assiri provenienti dall'Iraq risulta che nel 1935 un numero di 17.590 assiri è arrivato nella regione di Khabur (Siria del Nord) e che più di 5.000 di essi sono stati avviati nella regione degli Alaouiti», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b.10 (1936), fasc.1, "Minoranze", Report No. 329/57, Damascus 6 Feb. 1936.

²⁸ A.R. Kelidar, "Religions and State in Syria", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 61, 1974, p. 16.

²⁹ Naoto Sekio, *Nomadology and community formation. The principle of coexistence in Syria*, Tokyo, Institute of Middle Eastern Studies (IMES), 1990, pp. 110-111.

The Consul Alberto Rossi wrote from Aleppo:

The Assyrian immigration in the High Jazira (...) goes on and is supported by the Mandate Power as it facilitates a secret but even more visible tendency: that of the creation of a new autonomous State, in spite of the theoretical discussions on the unity of the mandate. Some 'mazbata' have circulated by means of the same authorities (who know how to use this kind of popular petition when it is convenient for them) among the minority populations (Armenians and Kurds). They are asking the Mandatary Power for separation from Syria in order to create their own administration with their center in Deir ez-Zor. The French interest in the 'Bec de Canard' has increased after the railway prolongation (built on the back of the Syrians) of Baghdad...³⁰

As for the Syrian nationalists, they protested strongly against the Assyro-Chaldean immigration.³¹

It is significant to mention the relevant role of the Dominican mission in Qamishli that was active from 1936 to 1940. It was founded by the French Dominicans living in Mosul and closed for various reasons, such as the xenophobic mentality of the Iraqi authorities, crossing the Syro-Iraqi boundary, economic problems, World War II, conflicts among the different rites. Jazira was also a territory where the ancient Capuchin presence in Hasakah made opposition to the other Catholic orders. In 1935 the Vatican decided that the territory of Jazira had to be co-divided among Dominicans and Capuchins.

Mosul mission paid a lot of importance to the instruction of the missionaries. According to the Father Drapier's instructions the Arab language is necessary, but a collaborator must speak Armenian in order to be accepted by these populations. Catholic Armenians were numerous in those years. Jacobites were the largest Christian community in High Jazira, most of them migrated from Gebel Tur in Turkey.

Father Drapier's report dated 1936 pointed out that according to the official census Jazira counted one hundred thousand inhabitants, in reality they are about 150-180 thousand, so distributed: 50-60 thousand Kurds, 25-30 thousand Bedouins, the remaining are Christians which are divided in order of importance: Jacobites, Gregorian Armenians (which are by far the largest groups), Catholic Armenians, Catholic Syrians, Chaldeans. Ten thousand Nestorians form a separate group, among whom 500 Catholics. There are some Yezidi and Circassian³² villages, some Russes (about forty families in Qamishli) and Jews in the main centres.

Almost all of the population is formed by refugees, without resources. At the beginning they were installed on the Turkish frontier. The land is very fertile. In ten years crops have increased from 1500 tons of wheat in 1926 to 50.000 tons in 1936. The population is not rich, except for a few rich families living in the big cities. It does not live in extreme comfort, but they do survive.

³⁰ «L'immigrazione assira dell'Alto Gezireh (...) prosegue ed è assecondata dalla Potenza Mandataria in quanto ne facilita una segreta ma sempre più visibile tendenza: quella della costituzione d'un nuovo Stato autonomo, a dispetto delle discussioni teoriche sull'unità del mandato. Circolano dei 'mazbata' ad opera delle stesse autorità (che sanno servirsi di questa forma di petizioni popolari quando loro conviene) tra le popolazioni minoritarie (armene e curde) chiedenti alla Potenza Mandataria di voler staccarle dalla Siria e creare una loro propria amministrazione con sede a Deir-Ez-Zor. L'interesse francese nel 'Bec de Canard' è aumentato in seguito al prolungamento della ferrovia (costruita a spese dell'erario siriano) di Bagdad...», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b.8 (1935), fasc.3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)", Report of the Consul Alberto Rossi in Aleppo, "Questione assira - Suoi sviluppi ed influenza sull'evoluzione siriana", No. 240/80, Aleppo 27 Feb. 1935.

On the separatist tendencies in Jazira and the spreading of petitions, see *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1932, pp. 54-55. See also Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism. 1920-1945*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co., 1987, pp. 525-534.

³¹ *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XIV, No. 10, 1934, pp.472-473; Vol. XV, No. 6, 1935, pp.266-267; Vol. XVII, No. 3, 1937, pp.141-142; Vol. XVII, No. 8, 1937, pp.377-378; Vol. XVII, No. 9, 1937, pp. 445-447.

³² Circassians migrated from the Caucasus ca. 1870 according to J. Rowlands, "The Khabur Valley", *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, April 1947, pp. 144-149.

For example in Qamishli there are no Christian families living in poverty. If a situation is positive for the security, the chances of the economic development are considerable. Only one fourth of the land is cultivated. And there exists the possibility of oil resources.³³

Among the Dominicans the presence of Thomas Bois O.P. (1900-1975) is prominent.³⁴ He was sent to the mission in Jazira because of his deep knowledge of Assyrians (Nestorians). He arrived on October 24th, 1936. He worked as a librarian, inspector in the Catholic Syrian schools in Jazira and Euphrates region.³⁵ He was in France when World War II started in 1939. He come back in November but for health problems left this region and reached Beirut. In a letter dated December 17th, 1936, he points out that Aramaic and Arabic, and some French are taught in the schools. In the report on the Nestorians dated April 23rd, 1937, he explains that Assyrians established along Khabur are about 10,000, spread in 17 villages of different importance. Among them are a thousand of Catholics who are dispersed everywhere. For the more poorer conditions, a large number of refugees returned to Iraq in spite of the danger. The poor do not trust their chiefs (Melik) who are accused to work only for themselves, nor their religious chief Mar Shimun, nor in the League of Nations.

Jazira: melting pot of nations

It is useful to remember that in April 1926, H. de Jouvenel (as High Commissioner of Syria) advanced a proposal to Chaim Weizmann (President of the Zionist Organization) and Colonel F.H. Kisch (Chairman of the Palestine Zionist Executive) for a Jewish settlement in Jazira.³⁶ In the period 1938-41, Zionists planned for the transfer of the Arab population of Palestine to the Jazira,³⁷ while some Western milieu, governmental and otherwise, planned for Jewish settlement in certain areas of sub-Sahara Africa, including Ethiopia.³⁸

There is a special section addressing the Syrian Jazira – located at the Turkish and Iraqi border – which is seen as an important observation post for monitoring Kurdish and Assyro-Chaldean problems. The refugees coming from the two countries found refuge in the region which tended to integrate them. The French mandatary power supported this approach:

... France seeks by all means to convince the Kurdish populations, who have emigrated in great numbers from Turkey, to settle in the High Jazira, near the Assyro-Chaldean colony recently established in that area. The Mandatary Authority assigns lands and builds shelters with this goal in mind. It does not trouble the authorities much if the new Kurdish farmers of the High Jazira resort occasionally to mattock and gun, or if they temporarily leave their homes to cross

³³ Reports by Father Drapier on September 11, 1936; and January 18th, 1937. Ms. Archive of Santa Sabina, Rome, Serie XIII,076001 Historia Missionum dominicarum in Haute Djezireh (Siria), 1936-1963.

³⁴ Joyce Blau, "Vie et oeuvre de Thomas Bois, 1900-1975", *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* (Louvain), Peeters Press, Vol. I, 1995, pp. 85-96.

³⁵ Thomas Bois, "Au pays de lumière et de misères", *Les Missions Dominicaines*, Vol. XVII, 1938, pp. 10-17.

³⁶ Yitzhak Gil-Har, "French Policy in Syria and Zionism: Proposal for a Zionist Settlement", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, January 1994, pp. 157-158.

³⁷ Nur Masalha, *Expulsions of the Palestinians. The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought. 1882-1948*, Washington D.C., Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, pp. 136-137; Denis Hermann, "Les tentatives d'extentions de la colonisation sioniste en Syrie de 1930 à mai 1934", *Revue d'Etudes Palestiniennes*, No. 91 n.s., Printemps 2004, pp. 49-67.

³⁸ Sergio I. Minerbi, "Il progetto di un insediamento ebraico in Etiopia (1936-1943)", *Storia contemporanea*, Vol. XVII, No. 6, 1986, pp. 1083-1137. Galeazzo Ciano mentions that Benito Mussolini would support Jewish settlement in Juba, see Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, edited by Renzo De Felice, Milano, Rizzoli, 1990, p. 173.

the border in support of Kurdish rebels on the Turkish and Persian frontiers following the orders of Assan (sic!) Nuri Bey.³⁹

The Committee for the Settlement of Assyrians from Iraq was aware of the dangers inherent in the concentration of so many ethnic and religious groups in the High Jazira, an area between the Euphrates and Tigris known as "Bec de Canard". In one of his reports, the Secretary-General of the Italian delegation, Renato Bova Scoppa, noted:

The French Government has demonstrated some disadvantages of this plan:

1) this migration will increase the proportion of minority groups (including numerous Kurds), who already live in the region of Khabur. This province is on the periphery compared to Damascus. It risks to becoming increasingly centrifugal. There is a real possibility that the scenario which obliged the present exodus of Assyrians from Iraq may repeat itself.⁴⁰

A dispatch sent from Aleppo reports on the meeting of the autonomous rebels of Jazira in July 1938. It was held in Samanik, and attended by a number of seventy people, followers of Hagio Agha, Abd el-Ahad Qaryo and Michel Dum, well-known Assyro-Chaldean and Kurdish leaders, refugees from Turkey, all who were helped and paid by the Mandatary Power. In the final document, it was asked that France would nominate a French governor in Jazira with the presence of French troops; a special autonomous status for Jazira; to subsidize Hagio Agha and his Kurdish men for the defense of the region; the possibility to not pay taxes at the Syrian government.⁴¹ A previous dispatch sent in May 1938 shows concern for the events in Jebel Akrad (Kurd Dagh) where the Kurdish sect Murud is very active and some followers have acted as brigantage and reprisals against the rival sect of Seydo Dyko. There are many victims of these atrocities.⁴²

In this period, *Oriente Moderno* pays special attention to this region. It published the whole Arabic document translated into Italian on the question of Jazira according to the *Syrian Communist Party* led by the Kurdish general Secretary Khalid Bekdash.⁴³ The Italian journal gives some peculiar news on Syrian Kurds and Palestine. In February 1938 some Kurds, Druzes, Armenians, Arabs, were enrolled by the British agencies in Damascus and then sent to Palestine to fight the uprising for their spirit of adventure, religious feeling, and need of employment. Some

³⁹ La Francia «cerca in ogni modo di ottenere che le popolazioni curde, emigrate in massa dalla Turchia, si fissino nell'Alto Gezire, nei pressi della colonia assiro-caldea recentemente stabilita in quella zona. A tal fine l'Autorità Mandataria procede all'assegnazione di terreni ed alla costruzione di ricoveri, e non si preoccupa soverchiamente di controllare se i nuovi agricoltori curdi dell'Alto Gezire maneggino alternativamente la zappa ed il fucile, o si allontanano temporaneamente dalle loro residenze, varcando la frontiera per prestare man forte ai ribelli curdi che sulle frontiere turche e persiane obbediscono ad Assan (sic!) Nuri Bey», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b. 1 (1931), fasc. 3, "Convenzioni anglo-irachene in occasione della cessazione del mandato inglese", Report of Sanmartin, "Notiziario", No. 45/II, Baghdad 12 Jan. 1931.

⁴⁰ «D'altra parte fra gli inconvenienti che tale piano può rappresentare il Governo francese ha tenuto a far presente:

1) che l'applicazione di esso farà aumentare la proporzione di elementi minoritari (fra cui numerosi curdi), che già si trovano nella regione del Khabbour. Tale provincia eccentrica rispetto a Damasco, è già 'centrifuga'. Essa rischia di divenirlo ancora maggiormente e non sembra da escludere che si possa riprodurre lo stato di cose che rende oggi opportuno l'esodo degli Assiri dell'Irak.», ASMAE, *Affari politici, Iraq*, b.8 (1935), fasc.3, "Minoranze (gennaio-giugno)", Report of Renato Bova Scoppa, "Stabilimento degli Assiri dell'Irak", No. 350/92, Geneva 26 March 1935.

⁴¹ ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 20 (1938), fasc. 1, "Rapporti politici", Report of F. Crudelini, "Situazione nel Geziret – Congresso di Samarik", No. 1202/296, Aleppo 30 July 1938.

⁴² ASMAE, *Affari politici, Siria*, b. 20 (1938), fasc. 3, "Situazione politica (2°-3°-4° trimestre)", Report of G. Navarrini, "Situazione sulla frontiera siro-turca", No. 841/229, Aleppo 30 May 1938. See also Roger Lescot, "Le Kurd Dagh et le mouvement Mouroud", *Studia Kurdica*, No. 1-5, 1988, pp. 101-125; Pierre Rondot, "Les Kurdes de Syrie", *La France méditerranéenne et africaine*, Lib. Sirey, Paris, Vol. II, No. 1, pp.81-126; Stefan Winter, "The other Nahdah: the Berixans, the Millis and the tribal roots of Kurdish nationalism in Syria", *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XXV n.s. (LXXXVI), No. 3, 2006, pp. 461-474.

⁴³ Virginia Vacca, "La questione dell'el-Gezirah secondo il memoriale del Partito Comunista siriano", *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XVIII, No. 5, 1938, pp. 197-211.

young Kurds made propaganda against this enrollement saying “your father fought for Islam, so do not take weapons against your Muslim Palestinian brothers”.⁴⁴ Ten years later, one thousand Assyrians from Jazira were enrolled as volunteers in the Arab Liberation Army in support of the Palestinians.⁴⁵ The journal paid attention to the improved situation for agriculture and population in Jazira.⁴⁶

The positive aspects of the migration in Jazira exceeded expectations. These refugees contributed to the cultivation of the High Jazira lands so that in a few years it became Syria’s granary. The region swarmed of Kurdish, Assyro-Chaldean, Armenian and Yezidi villages. After the end of the mandate and the rise of Syrian nationalism, there are few traces of the movement that in the 1930s had consolidated nationalism and developed the culture of the Kurdish community.⁴⁷

In conclusion, on the basis of the large documentation analyzed, we find that Fascism had no clear and coherent political-diplomatic strategy toward the minority populations of the Middle East. In the 1920s and 1930s, it tried to ignore them, to minimize their role and impact on regional politics. It constantly feared that London and Paris would gain advantages from the tension reproduced in the area by the endemic conflict between the central government and the autochthonous ethno-religious groups. Italy had no defined strategy. Its main aim was simply to maintain the status quo and to contain France and Great Britain.

It was only during World War II that Fascism considered forging itself a role within this ethno-religious mosaic. Italy wanted to manipulate the different groups. But the project never got off the ground. It was no easy task to conjoin its pro-Arab politics with an overture to peoples it had ignored all along. It lacked credibility among the possible interlocutors. The autochthonous populations, among many contradictions, remained substantially linked to London and Paris. Unlike Italy, France and England have been active players in the region for decades. They had provided manpower and materiel. They moved with ease from one Middle East venue to the next, promoting politics of mediation, conferring with high level staffs, lending scholars to the army who, for example, wrote memorable pages on the Kurdish people.

Here we quote, among others, French General Pierre Rondot (1904-2000), a friend of the two brothers Celadet Ali Bedir-Khan and Kamuran Ali Bedir-Khan in Syria, who wrote important publications both on Kurdish and Assyrian culture and structure of the society⁴⁸; and Cecil John

⁴⁴ «I giovani Curdi di Damasco hanno diffuso in città manifestini contro l’opera di emissari inglesi che cercano di arruolare Curdi per combattere contro i ribelli in Palestina. Il manifesto fa appello ai sentimenti religiosi e alle tradizioni militari dei Curdi: i loro padri combatterono per l’Islamismo, essi non debbono prendere le armi contro i loro fratelli musulmani palestinesi, né dimostrarsi inferiori ai Circassi, che hanno rifiutato simili proposte», *Alif-bâ*, 21.8.1938, quoted in *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XVIII, No. 9, 1938, pp. 510-511. See also *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, 1938, p. 166.

⁴⁵ Joshua Landis, “La Syrie et la guerre de Palestine: en guerre contre le plan de Grande Syrie du roi Abdallah”, in Eugene L. Rogan et Avi Shlaim, 1948: *la guerre de Palestine. Derrière le mythe*, Paris, Editions Autrement, 2002, p. 203. The author quotes Adil Arslan, *Mudhakkirat al-Adil Arslan* (Adil Arslan’s Journal), 1994.

⁴⁶ Maria Nallino, “Considerevoli risultati della bonifica agraria e del ripopolamento nell’ «el-Gezîrah» siriana”, *Oriente Moderno*, Vol. XXVIII, No.10-12, 1948, pp. 165-169.

⁴⁷ Michel Seurat, “Les populations, l’état et la société”, in André Raymond (ed.), *La Syrie d’aujourd’hui*, Paris, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1980, p. 104. See also Christian Velud, “Régime des terres et structures agraires en Jézireh syrienne durant la première moitié du vingtième siècle”, in *Terroirs et Sociétés au Maghreb et au Moyen Orient*, Lyon, Maison de l’Orient, 1987, pp. 161-194.

⁴⁸ Pierre Rondot, “Les tribus montagnardes de l’Asie antérieure. Quelques aspects sociaux des populations kurdes et assyriens”, *Bulletin d’études orientales de l’Institut français de Damas*, t. VI, 1936, pp.1-50, 6 tav.; *Les Chrétiens d’Orient*, Paris, J. Peyronnet & Cie, 1955, pp. 332; “Les Assyriens des tribus de l’Hakkîari: égalité tribale assyro-kurde”, in: Actes du colloque des CMA à Paris (septembre 1987), *Les Chrétiens du Monde Arabe. Problématiques actuelles et enjeux*, Paris, Editions Maisonneuve & Larose, 1989, pp. 131-138; “Origine et caractère ancestraux du peuplement assyrien en Haute Djézireh syrienne. Esquisse d’une étude de la vie tribale”, *Bulletin d’études orientales*, No. 41-42, 1989-90, pp. 65-111; “Les Kurdes de Syrie”, *La France méditerranéenne et africaine*, Lib. Sirey, Paris, Vol. II, No. 1, 1939, pp. 81-126; “Véture

Edmonds⁴⁹ (1889-1979), British official in the vilayet of Mosul (1918-1925) and adviser to the Iraqi Interior Ministry (1935-45); and English Major Ely Bannister Soane⁵⁰ (1881-1923), who played a role in the administration of Sulaimanya district (1919-21). In this sense, by failing to intervene when it had the opportunity, Italy had lost the game since the Treaty of Sèvres. After World War II the diplomatic dispatches do not contain references about Jazira. It was a forgotten world.

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⁴⁹ Cecil John Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq 1919-1925*, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. XIII, 457.

⁵⁰ Ely Bannister Soane, *Grammar of the Kurmanji or Kurdish language*, London, Luzac, 1913, pp. 289; *Elementary Kurmanji Grammar*, Baghdad, Government Press, 1919, pp. 197; *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in disguise, with historical Notices of the Kurdish Tribes and the Chaldeans of Kurdistan*, London, John Murray, 1926², pp. 421.