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THE SENSE OF A CLOSING: THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR THE ITALIANI D’EGITTO

ABSTRACT - This paper examines a crucial conjunction in the mid 1930s, in which Italian emigration, extraterritoriality in Egypt, the struggle for national sovereignty and both Egyptian nationalist and Italian Fascist propaganda were arranged into a «momentary constellation of contesting forces». Within this constellation, this analysis focuses on the perceived implications of the unraveling of legal conditions that drastically transformed the «conditions of possibility» that had allowed some 60-65,000 Italians to reside in Egypt. Coeval with this unraveling was an intensification of propaganda and efforts to «cohere» a sense of italianità among the italiani d’Egitto framed specifically on an interpretation of their history/historical experience in Egypt rather than as conditioned solely in the peninsula. This paper is therefore not meant to be an extensive history of the 1930s, but to isolate several of the important threads that perdure in coming decades; threads that are introduced into the historical process itself. They help us to understand that the changes brought about later, as a result of the internment of Italian civilians in Egypt during WWII or the Suez Crisis of 1956, were not sudden and were not fundamentally disrupting a sense of permanence, but instead accelerated the already present idea

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1 Drawing from Popper’s claims against historicism, this is not an attempt to teleologically read the history of the italiani d’Egitto in the 1930s but rather to depict temporally extended «events» as important for understanding the ways in which the future was anticipated and imagined contemporaneously, thus entering into the historical process. Popper notes, «Even if such a rational plan coincides with the interests of powerful groups it will never be realized in the way in which it was conceived, in spite of the fact that the struggle for its realization would then become a major factor in the historical process. The real outcome will always be very different from the rational construction. It will always be the resultant of the momentary constellation of contesting forces» (Popper 1957, p. 42).

2 This is to move in the direction of a «theory of possible history», looking beyond the historical as uniquely testimonial and instead directing attention towards the unfolding of historical time in the tension between the realms of experience and expectation. Koselleck argues that this tension is not contained within «the concrete process of history» but is rather generative of it (Koselleck 1979, pp. 258-262).

3 This essay draws inspiration from an idea of «process» such as that articulated in the philosophy of A. N. Whitehead.
that the community of italiani d’Egitto (and foreign residents alike) had a waning future. In telling the story of the mid 1930s, this paper necessarily jumps back in time to illustrate precedent hints to these imminent closures. I try, meticulously, to capture the sense of anticipation, without being teleological. Thus, the paper will combine letters, newspapers, publications and diplomatic and institutional archives in which the authors observe, speculate, contemplate and attempt to imagine the repercussions of contemporary events through their reflection on the historical trajectories that realized their presents. In a sense, this ending is merely a beginning.

Imminent closings

Francesco Mazza, a Calabrese-Italian born in Cairo, wrote to the Italian consul in Alexandria after the revolts that followed the demission and exile of Sa’d Zaghloul. Mazza was blocked from reentering Egypt, where his wife and children resided, in the aftermath of his military service in Italy from 1915 to 1918. On 4 October 1919, he wrote anxiously:

Mazza indicated ominously that rumors of a repatriation circulated between Egypt and Italy.

Mazza’s inquiries are given further substantiation several years later when, in 1922, Gioacchino Volpe traveled to Egypt as a correspondent for Mussolini’s newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*. Although one cannot be sure of the precise timing of his visit - whether it was before or after the declaration of Egypt’s sovereignty and independence by the British Authorities - his insights on the social and political environment give the reader the impression of imminent change. He

\[4\] ACAE, Mazza Francesco Gaetano cl. 1885.
observed the waning of British control in Egypt, writing: «Si ha l’impressione... guardando l’Inghilterra in Egitto, di un’azienda che liquida, o, meglio, di un’azienda che passa in altre mani e licenza il vecchio personale per assumerne uno nuovo» (Volpe 1924, pp. 311-312). This was, for Volpe, the end of British imperialism, concurrent with the tramonto of Istanbul and the rise of Cairo as a new intellectual power in the Eastern Mediterranean (Volpe 1924, p. 300).

Among the growing nationalist movements participating in England’s demise in Egypt, he cited the rise of Islamic movements, the struggles between Zionists and Arabs in Palestine (and between Zionists and local/indigenous Jews), and a minority of xenophobic tensions on the fringe of these other movements (Volpe 1924, pp. 291-294).

Volpe included the anxiety felt by members of the Italian communities in Egypt caught in this tumultuous historical conjunction. The italiani d’Egitto, he noted, felt an «obscure, looming threat» in a part of Africa that importantly mapped onto Italian imperial ambitions in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. Importantly, he observed that they did not have the same «sentimento imperialistico» as the French, English, or the Germans (Volpe 1924, pp. 355-356). In an essay entitled «il nostro avvenire,» Volpe alerted the improbability that Egypt would consent to further «proletarian» immigration: «Numericamente, credo che la colonia italiana d’Egitto possa in seguito piuttosto diminuire che crescere: anche perché, sopprimendo o limitando le capitolazioni, verrà a diminuire per molto elementi levantini il vantaggio della cittadinanza italiana come anche della francese o inglese ecc.» (Volpe 1924, p. 371). Indeed, some of Volpe’s observations proved quite prescient.

As early as the turn of the century there were attempts to curb the influx of Italians to Egypt. British pressured the Italian authorities to enforce - or at least attempt to - stricter controls on ports of emigration. In 1908 a decree published in the Gazzetta Ufficiale sought to limit un-contracted labor migration to Egypt. The decree made official that for blacksmiths, carpenters, and street-pavers (sterratori) destined for Egypt the release of passports and visas was «sospesa per motivi d’ordine pubblico» and would only be released to poten-

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5 This is also long before Italy’s shift in stance on the Zionist question, which until the early 1930s favored the nationalist cause of early Zionism and only once it was realized that this position would hinder Italy’s ambitions in the Middle East, in the mid 1930s, did the stance of Rome shift (De Felice 1988; Rainero 2004).
tial emigrants if they were able to exhibit a certificate illustrating evidence of employment or the presence of relatives able to provide financial support from an Italian consulate. This same decree stipulated that, if the emigrant did in fact have family members able to support him, they should also have the means to provide for an eventual repatriation. A note with the attached *Gazzetta* alerting the Office of Emigration of the decree was sent from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. It emphasized the need for tight surveillance of the port and of any individuals departing for Egypt. Handwritten on the note was: «eccessivo affollamento in Egitto di operai avventizi italiani, i quali non trovandovi occupazione diventano elementi perturbatori dell’ordine pubblico».

A similar notification circulated in 1913, this time reiterating the Ministry’s previous request that the Office of Emigration not release passports to men without contracts and adding that, with the proliferation of prostitution, under no circumstances should passports be released to women traveling alone. In a series of telegraphs from 1915, the British tried to explicitly discipline immigration - particularly working-class immigration: minatori, muratori, scalpellini, fabbri, ferrai, falegnami and sterratori - by requiring prospective emigrants to consult the British consulate prior to their departure. Around 1917 the population of Italians in Egypt was 40,198, an increase from 18,655 in 1882. No unequivocal law regulated immigration apart from a British decree in 1920 that required individuals disembarking in Egypt to hold a British visa (Petricioli 2004, p. 73). By 1927, the population had reached 52,462 (Rainero & Serra 1991, p. 167). In 1937, a telegram from the British offices in Egypt to the Prefect in Naples (by means of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome and the DG of Public Security) stated: «Le richieste di mano d’opera sono facilmente coperte dai disoccupati che già trovarvi sul posto... coloro i quali intendessero recarsi in quelle regioni in cerca di lavoro siano sconsigliati dal partire».

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6 *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, 7 October 1908

7 ASN, Questura di Napoli, Gabinetto-Seconda Serie (1902-1971), Massime, b. 54, f. 1080 «Egitto-Emigrazione (1898-1937)».

8 *Ibidem*; for more on the role of foreign women in the history of prostitution in colonial Egypt, see Biancani (2012).

9 ASN, Questura di Napoli, Gabinetto-Seconda Serie (1902-1971), Massime, b. 54, f. 1080 «Egitto-Emigrazione (1898-1937)».
Due to the capitulations, treaties that gave foreigners in Egypt extraterritorial privileges that placed them under the juridical and legal authority of their own consulates, both British and Egyptian attempts to obstruct the influx of foreigners were widely unsuccessful. The question of Italian futures in Egypt was inextricable from the realities created by the capitulations, as noted by Volpe. Following the 1922 declaration of Egypt’s independence, the widely distributed and favored Italian daily, L’imparziale, circulated what it claimed were «secret instructions» behind the Anglo-Egyptian talks; among these, that «the capitulations would be abolished and England alone would assume the defense of foreign interests in Egypt». Volpe and other leading members of the regime hoped that this was not the case. As with other European powers, the capitulatory regime allowed for the Italian government to adopt protégés - at different times referred to as «passport Italians» as they were not considered full citizens but held Italian passports - many of these were Jewish Ottoman subjects that were perceived as a means to commercial and cultural penetration in the Eastern Mediterranean (Carocci 1969, p. 210). Volpe speculated that the potential end to the capitulations would diminish the importance of protection for the «passport Italians» and thus threaten the intermediary role they provided.

Coinciding with the efforts of the Fascist regime to develop italianità among Italians abroad, in Egypt the capitulations permitted the formation of an extraterritorial national subjectivity while also giving Rome space to utilize its connazionali as «assets» in their relations with Egyptian and British authorities. The capitulations laid the groundwork for a community to develop that envisioned a «na-

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10 CAI, L’Egitto Stato sovrano e indipendente, la dichiarazione del Governo Britannico, «L’Imparziale», 2 March 1922; it should also be noted here that the Italian daily L’imparziale - the «mouthpiece for the Italian community» in the 1920s - frequently reproduced select articles from Il popolo d’Italia. For more on the role of the Italian press in Egypt and its close relationship to the Italian authorities see Marchi (2010, pp. 101-102) and Rizzitano (1956).

11 For more on the role of protégés under the capitulatory regime, specifically dealing the slow demise of extraterritoriality in Tunisia, see Lewis (2008).

12 This included both their economic and financial role within the Italian communities and also their role (sometimes merely perceived) as assisting Italian expansionism in the Eastern Mediterranean.

13 For one particularly insightful study in this regard see Baldoli (2003).

14 What I have in mind is something akin to what Passerini’s Torino Operaia (1984).
national» future despite its very distance from the «Patria». Aside from their immediate positioning in a series of historical events, the capitulations conditioned a sense of being a foreigner in Egypt during the early years of the twentieth century (Hanley 2007). But as the possibility for this future began to close, its eventual - and at times seemingly inevitable - end appeared on the horizon. Therefore, the «ending» that that is told in this story begins with 1936 Anglo-Egyptian accords and the 1937 Montreux conference for the abolition of the capitulations the following spring. It marks an acceleration towards a prefigured horizon, foreshadowed in Mazza’s talk of a rumored eventual «rimpatrio» circulating among italiani d’Egitto, at least as early as 1919, as the possibility to live as an extraterritorial community closed. This ending juxtaposes Italy’s imperial aspirations in the region and yet is grounded in the very lives of Italian immigrants that were never quite «immigrants» - at least legally - until it became impossible for them to remain in Egypt.

Politics and the end of extraterritorialism

In the aftermath of Italy’s occupation of Ethiopia in 1935 and the chilling of «formally polite» Anglo-Italian relations, the Anglo-Egyptian accords in 1936 affirmed many fears among the Italian leadership in Egypt (Fiore 2010, p.190). The accords, which represented an alliance after years of violence and struggle, were described as taking the «wind out of the Italian sails» by turning the British into an ally

15 Appropriate here is Sheehan’s (2006) argument that territorial claims were part of the consolidation of national identities (or «national collective identities») has important implications given the history of the anachronistic nature of the legal extraterritoriality of foreigners in Egypt under the capitulatory regime and the jurisdiction of the mixed courts. The legal structures essentially allowed for Italy to be extended beyond itself just as its identity was being consolidated; and, where Italian foreign policy emphasized demographic politics - «ethnographic colonies» to use Choate’s (2005) term - in Egypt there was, until much later than any other country in the Mediterranean, and exaggerated sense of that extension.

16 For more on the call for a deeper analysis of the histories of those living in colonial space, see Cooper (1994).

17 Segré (1988, p. 202) also describes how Mussolini followed the traditions of Liberal Italy in the years immediately following the march on Rome in 1922, and «...muted his anti-imperialist statements and supported the British. He outlined Italy’s own Imperial ambitions, but followed policies of peaceful economic and cultural penetration». 
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The early 1930s were years of an aggressive propaganda campaign by the Italian regime, one that was anything but covert\(^\text{18}\). From the 1920s until the years preceding the Ethiopia campaign, Italy had portrayed itself as a «peaceful» power in the Eastern Mediterranean that supported burgeoning nationalist movements (Tedeschi Lalli 1976, p. 722). As some have argued, this policy was a continuation of Liberal Italy’s expansionism which contemporaneously purported to champion colonial subjects (Carocci 1967; Segre 1988; Mack Smith 1976). The sudden intensification caused great concern among British authorities in Egypt (Williams 2006, pp. 109-110). Apart from its reinforcement of the Italian institutions in Egypt, the Fascist regime supported several nationalist Egyptian parties, most notably Young Egypt leaders Ahmad Hussein and Fathi Radwan, and smaller groups that had broken from the largest oppositional party, the Wafd (Gershoni & Jankowski 2010; Jankowski 1970). However, even to some of the nationalists, Italian propaganda assumed threatening undertones in 1934 when Mussolini declared Africa and Asia to be the «historic objectives» of Italian «natural expansion» (Monroe 1938, p.194; Tedeschi Lalli 1976, p. 726).

Italian efforts to combat these negative impressions were materialized in the creation of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, headed by Galeazzo Ciano, in 1935, which was then transformed into the Ministry of Popular Culture in 1937. First, Italian propaganda needed to convince Egyptian nationalists that Italy was not a territorial threat. This was attempted by controlling the information circulating in Egypt on Italian colonies through influence over local media - Italian, French, Greek and English newspapers were provided with subsidies directly from the Ministry of Popular Culture\(^\text{19}\). Radio Bari, the first

\(^\text{18}\) Most telling in terms of the transparency of Italian propaganda in Egypt are the several memories/political reflections of Egypt in the late 1930s which speak openly about the role of Ugo Dadone, the director of the Italian propaganda office in Cairo, and the bribes offered to persuade local newspapers. See Martelli (1938), Monroe (1938), Segre (1988, p. 204); Morewood (1989, p 169) describes 1935 as the beginning of a «collision course» between the Italian and the British authorities in Egypt.

\(^\text{19}\) The subsidized newspapers reported until 1936 were al-Balagh (Cairo), al-Muqattam (Cairo), La Patrie (Cairo), Takidromos (Alexandria), Partout (Cairo), and Le Phare Egyptien (Alexandria). From September 1936 on, subsidies were reduced because Ghigi reported optimistically that Italo-Egyptian relations had improved (Ariell 2010, p. 46); Martelli describes Italian bribes to French and Arabic newspapers going so far as to say that the Italians, and Ugo Dadone - the known director of
internationally broadcast Arabic radio station was one of Italy’s most powerful resources in this endeavor. Its cultural programs sustained the image of Italy as a friendly nation; they did this, for example, by showing discretion in the time given to discussions and news from the Italian colonies in Libya and Ethiopia. Radio Bari broadcasted overwhelmingly - sixty percent of its programming - programs that stressed historical and cultural contacts and encounters between Italians and Muslims. The success of Radio Bari was not in its ability to create sympathy towards Italian interests, but instead to encourage Egyptian and Arab interests in their opposition to English and French hegemony in the Mediterranean; it helped the Arabs more than the Fascist regime Grange 1974, pp. 171, 174, 185; Tedeschi Lalli 1976, pp. 726-734).

The Ministry of Press and Propaganda and later the Ministry of Popular Culture furnished literature on Fascist projects to movements such as the Blue Shirts, a group that had emerged through their disapproval of the Waf’d’s and al-Nahhas’s hegemony in the Egyptian opposition. They were reported to have reached around 18,000 followers throughout Egypt, uniting youth through squadrons and sports activities and adopting a similar salute (but with closed fists). The leader, Muhammad Bilal, acknowledged that models the squadrons had come from the paramilitary organizations in Italy. After their involvement in the demonstrations that nearly brought down the Egyptian government in 1934-1936, the Italian leadership noted that, these movements could provide a legitimate force against the Waf’d and the English alike. Another squadron group, the Green Shirts, grew from the Young Egypt movement. Italian assistance was not covert. During the anti-British demonstrations, which became increasingly violent in late 1935, Makram Ebeid, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, implied that Italians were providing moral and material support to the Green Shirts. The English and pro-British Arab press warned that these «squadristi» movements were an obstacle to dealing with the «question of the capitulations» as they exacerbated the disquietude of foreign communities in Egypt.\(^{20}\)

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By 1935 the possibility that Egypt could become a theater of war for Anglo-Italian aggression became strikingly real for the Wafd. The conflict in Ethiopia had revealed a violently undemocratic Italian regime, which worried many nationalist intellectuals who had previously shown sympathy - however slight - towards the Italians and their anti-British sentiments. Suez factored into both British and Egyptian fears. Fifty percent of the passengers passing through its waters in 1935 were Italian and as Italians forces grew in Libya and East Africa, and British ones diminished in Egypt, the potential for an Italian attack from the Western Desert became, at least, a possibility. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia had «stirred Egyptian sentiments» because of perceived affinity between the two peoples: among the factors that angered Egyptian nationalists was Italy’s unilateral declaration of the autonomy of the Ethiopian Coptic Church, splitting the Coptic church that had united Egypt and Ethiopia. This upset even Muslim nationalists in Egypt (Gibb 1936, p. 202; Monroe 1938, p. 351, 371). Moreover, the Wafd feared that Italian hands on the headwaters of the Nile would have future implications for the life-blood of Egypt’s agriculture. Italy’s role as a colonizer in Ethiopia was more formidable than its propaganda was remedying (Hashish 1994, p. 54; Martelli 1938, p. 169).

Watching the Egyptian nationalists of the Wafd align in what seemed like a unilateral move by the British to abolish the capitulations and thus to gain authority over foreign communities was perceived by the Fascist regime as a major setback for Italian regional interests (Monroe 1938, p. 37). This was especially true given that the Wafd had backed the anti-British demonstrations. The Wafd were kept out of power by either the Monarchy (favored by the Italians) or the British and had largely seen the Italian diplomats as an adversary due to their support and connections with the royal family in Egypt. Likewise, acknowledging the antipathy between the royal family and the Wafd, al-Nahhas was not a favored interlocutor by the Italian Minister in Egypt, Pellegrino Ghigi, in the months preceding the

21 Williams describes: «...the direct menace of a militaristic and expansionist Italy produced a major shift and many of those who had previously sympathized with the Fascist regime began to retract unconditional admiration expressed for the Italian dictator. Italy appeared to be the country which, displaying disregard for international agreements, had attacked and invaded the civilised nation of Ethiopia and so threatened the peoples of Africa and Asia» (2006, p. 37).
1936 Accords (Tedeschi Lalli 1986, p. 1191). Some have argued that it was precisely these tensions that drove the al-Nahhas to support the accords. According to a contemporary British commentator, the accords were «brought about through the agency of a third party - Italy» (Monroe 1938, p. 35).

The desire to deal promptly and finally with the capitulations was key to the 1936 accords. The tax exemptions and other privileges enjoyed by foreigners made it exceedingly difficult for a young, educated Egyptian elite to contribute to economic life (Gibb 1936, p. 368; Ryzova 2005). Pellegrino Ghigi, in a report sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, observed that «the aspiration of Egypt to liberate itself from the consular privileges and to reenter the foreigners resident in her territory in the sphere of common law is not recent, but is instead from an ancient date». He noted that, in 1922, when Egypt was declared a sovereign and independent state and then in the following years, Egypt’s many parties (the document itself mentions al-wafd, al-hizb al-watani, hizb al-ahrar ad-dusturiyyin, and hizb al-ittihad) came together immediately on only one point - «the struggle for the complete independence of the country» - as the abolishment of the capitulations took an increasingly paramount role.

The realities foreseen from Egypt

1936 brought to the surface very real worries for Italians in Egypt, both those in the diplomatic offices and the italiani d’Egitto. Ghigi, prior to the official announcement of the accords, observed that the capitulations were, in fact, real treaties – not mere privileges as they were treated – that needed to be acknowledged and dealt with by all of the powers involved: «Stadi più il fatto che le capitolazioni, che costituiscono veri trattati e non già come suol dirsi semplici privilegi... sono tutt’altro che un affare interno e che la loro fine o modif...
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Before the accords were announced, the consular judge, Cucinotta, sent a letter to the Consul and the Italian Legation in Alexandria warning of foreseeable implications to the abolition of the capitulations. Perhaps having caught wind of the discussions, he feared that, not having their own courts to oversee jurisdiction in the case of a transfer of powers to the Mixed Courts, Italian subjects will never be considered equal to other foreign subjects in the eyes of authorities. Great concern was shown for the standards of legal practice extant in Egypt, noting that they would hardly suffice for Italians. Slight relief, argued Cucinotta, might be in the sheer size of the communities and the large amount of work that would be transferred from the consular courts to the Mixed Courts. He advised the Italian authorities to raise this point in future negotiations. Italian census materials in Egypt numbered the communities at 52,462 (drawn from the 1927 census) - roughly 18,548 in Alexandria, 17,500 in Cairo, and the remainder dispersed mostly between the cities in the Canal Zone and some in Upper Egypt. In nearly all reports from the Italian authorities, it was noted that the census information provides at best an estimation and that the numbers are likely much higher. Cucinotta brought

24 Ibidem; this was an interesting position for Italy to take in the same year its government refused to participate in the negotiations held at Montreux dealing with the Straits linking the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, a position that helped to instigate the Turks and further isolate the Fascist regime in the Eastern Mediterranean (Monroe 1938, pp. 176-177); a report given to Ghigi several months later cited the Belgian vice-president of the Court of Appeals, C. Van Ackere as having stated «La suppression pure et simple des Capitulations, sans garanties d’aucune espèce, est une chose impossible. Il est des faits qui sont le produit de l’évolution de l’histoire et de la marche du progrès, contre lesquels aucun raisonnement ne saurait tenir», ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter.


26 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., «Prevedibili ripercussioni dell’eventuale abolizione del regime capitolare» 1937; here, concern is shown for the difference in functioning institutions, even hospitals and the types of treatment foreigners will be subject to under Egyptian authorities, comparing them to how Egyptians are treated at the hand of their own authorities: «Il personale subalterno nei Caracol (posti di polizia) ricorre talvolta ad atti di violenza con gli indigeni, intollerabili per gli europei».

27 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., report attached to «Telespresso» dated 11 September 1936.

28 See Amicucci (2000, p. 82) for a more nuanced interpretation of data regarding the actual size of the population throughout the years. According to Amicucci’s
attention to the fact that, between the Italian consulates in Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo, around 1,100 penal proceedings and 200 civil causes were processed on a yearly basis. Notwithstanding, he stated, that Italians would not be considered equal to other subjects, the increase in the volume of work that would be required of a transitional Mixed Courts should be used to lobby for a larger Italian presence in the courts themselves.

This concern both contradicted and conformed to the reality faced by many of the Italians resident in Egypt. In September 1936, a report sent from the Console Generale in Alexandria to the Italian Foreign Ministry noted that the Italian communities were, ultimately, in a state of «continuing decline» - global economic crisis, the accentuated «spirit» of Egyptian nationalism and the consequent elimination of many Italians from public positions, the campaign in East Africa, and sanctions were listed as influencing this trend. Later census data reveals that by 1937, the population of Italians had declined to 47,706. Numerous Italians had repatriated at their own expense and a further 183 (and their families) at the expense of the Consulate in Alexandria - a trend that was anticipated to accelerate. A report submitted by the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Cairo in January 1937 told a similar story. It repeated that the hardships confronting the italiani d’Egitto would be exacerbated as a result of the abolition of the capitulations. It added the possibility of a large-scale repatriation as the only foreseeable solution. The aforementioned pressure to limit immigration to Egypt by British authorities had given many data, the numbers circulated in the memo were actually from 1927. According to the same census data, the total population of foreigners too declined between 1927 and 1937 from 225,600 to 186,515.

29 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., Cucinotta to Console Generale d’Italia in Alexandria and Legazione italiana 10 August 1936.
30 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., «Telespresso 11.9.1936».
31 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., «Telespresso 11.9.1936».
32 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., «Prevedibili ripercussioni dell’eventuale abolizione del regime capitolare» January 1937; Mario Vanni, an engineer from Cairo, born in Galluzzo 1884, moved to Egypt in 1928 where he worked as a consultant for the Mixed Courts. He sent his wife and daughter to Firenze in 1935 at the time of the sanctions against Italy and then in February 1936 he too returned to Italy, selling his (mobili) «a causa dei rapporti tesi con l’Inghilterra che facevano temere da un momento all’altro lo scoppio della guerra». ACS, MI, D.G. Pubblica Sicurezza Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, 1938, b. 17, R. Prefettura di Firenze to Ministro dell’Interno D.G. della P.S. Roma 18 May 1938.
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Italians in Egypt the impetus to leave. Almost ironically, the Chamber of Commerce averred that without the British - who had dealt with immigration in a liberal manner - the Egyptian Government would be free to exercise its own will on the borders, tightening controls on the in- and out-flow of people and goods. Thus it was advised that a condition of any future negotiations include the explicit recognition and assurance by the Egyptian Government of the right of foreign residents in Egypt to leave and return freely. Without this guarantee, the Chamber argued, the growing divide between mainland Italy and the italiani d’Egitto would become dangerously exaggerated (by the end of the 1930s, especially in the aftermath of the Ethiopia campaign, financial support provided to the community had greatly diminished, linked to this was the severely decline in investments made in Italy by italiani d’Egitto).

The majority of Italians in Egypt were working-class\textsuperscript{33}. Although the list of Italian shop-owners appeared large, their earning power was rather low as incomes mostly served to sustain their families\textsuperscript{34}. The Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria noted that of the estimated eight million Egyptian pounds circulating in the Italian communities, only around 850,000 was in real estate holdings, and the remainder comes almost entirely from work-earnings, signifying that most Italians had a hand-to-mouth daily existence\textsuperscript{35}. Moreover, it was noted that in recent years, italiani d’Egitto had lost ground in nearly every category of professional life. The communities were heavily reliant upon the subsidized resources of the Italian institutions. For the time being, foreigners in Egypt were almost entirely exempt from paying

\textsuperscript{33} ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., «Telespresso 11.9.1936», The same census data cited above noted that of the Italians in Alexandria, 73.3% were registered as impiegati, operai and artigiani; 9.10% industrialists, commercialists or bankers; 8.13% non degree holding professionals or technicians; 3.2% degree holding professionals; 3.64% religious figures; 1.58% landowners or retirees; and 1.05% artists. In Cairo the numbers were relatively similar: 61.7% laborers, artisans or day laborers; 22.9% employees; 9.1% small-business owners, commercialists, industrialists, or imprenditori edili e stradali; 3.4% professionals; 2.9% uncategorized; see also Amicucci (2000) for a greater analysis of the professions held by Italians through time.

\textsuperscript{34} Monroe (1938, p. 193) observes of the Italian businessmen that most were «small agents and shopkeepers living from hand to mouth, who are too poor to do more than support their large families, and who have not a piastre to spare for the hungryman of the Italian treasury».

\textsuperscript{35} ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., notes prepared for Ghigi by the Camera di Commercio Italiana Alessandria d’Egitto (resided over by De Semo), February 1937.
taxes or other fees to the Egyptian Government. This too, it was feared, would change - affecting both Italian subjects and institutions. The Dante Alighieri Society had expressed this same angst in 1935, in a word of caution regarding the «likely» closing of foreign schools in Egypt with the inevitable end of the capitulations. The Cairo Chamber of Commerce noted:

L’operaio italiano, che ha bisogno per vivere di un sostegno morale (scuole, associazioni culturali e ricreative) e di aiuti materiali (gratuità dell’insegnamento, dei libri e delle refezioni, assistenza ospedaliera, sussidi, ecc.) non potrà essere assistito dalla sua collettività che in misura minore, proprio nel momento in cui egli risentirà maggiormente il bisogno di aiuti; perciò sarà costretto - oltre che per le ragioni che ricordiamo più oltre (interessi di lavoro, arti e mestieri) - a rimpiantare... Il pericolo maggiore dell’abolizione delle Capitolazioni si presenta per queste categorie (che sono le più numerose della nostra collettività); prive di mezzi di resistenza, con un’assistenza morale e materiale ancora minore di quella attuale, nella impossibilità di accontentarsi di un livello di vita basso quanto quello dell’indigeno, esse saranno costrette man mano al rimpatrio.

Meanwhile, the Alexandrian Chamber of Commerce stated:

Senza dubbio, non si può misconoscere il diritto degli indigeni, di essere protetti ed anche favoriti, e quindi potrebbe sembrare inutile ogni tentativo di resistenza a questo naturale legittimo postulato [l’abolizione delle capitola- zioni]... Ma, d’altra parte, se è inevitabile che le nostre colonie... si rassegni- no ad un graduale - e speriamo il più lento possibile - ripiegamento, sarebbe però contrario ad ogni giustizia, che la possibilità di lavoro - almeno dei nu- clei già qui stabiliti - venga limitata o comunque ostacolata, e che, di conseguenza, essi si trovino nella necessità di abbandonare - in breve periodo di tempo - il territorio sul quale vivono ed operano da molti decenni?

With the Anglo-Egyptian accords of 1936, the abolition of the capitulations had become certain; many were to witness the closure of the conditions that had permitted the Italian communities to exist.

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36 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., notes attached to «Relazione» from Ghigi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
37 SDA, Alessandria d’Egitto, reserved letter from Stanislao Rocchi to the president of the SDA in Rome Felice Felicioni.
38 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., «Prevedibili ripercussioni dell’eventuale abolizio- ne del regime capitolare» January 1937.
39 ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter., notes prepared for Ghigi by the Camera di Com- mercio Italiana Alessandria d’Egitto (resided over by De Semo), February 1937.
The sense of a closing: the beginning of the end for the italiani d’Egitto

Conditions of impossibility

While the Fascist regime from Rome emphasized its support of the Italians abroad and inflated the historical significance of the Italian communities in Egypt, the abolition of the capitulations signified the collapse of one of the few remaining supports to a structure through which immigrants had imagined their future. Those active in the administration of the communities interpreted what was occurring as an irreversible process. Italian functionaries - along with other foreigners - were slowly being removed from government jobs and replaced with Egyptians following the declaration of independence in 1922. Italian employees in state ministries and offices dropped from 480 in 1922 to around 50 in 1936 (Petricioli 2007, p. 86). In the months preceding the Montreux conference held in spring 1937, Ghigi reported that it seemed «utterly difficult» to imagine that, following the abolition of the capitulations, the Egyptian Government would hire anew foreign functionaries\(^{40}\). Anticipated concerns about the weakening authority of the consulates to offer protection to the «passport Italians» led in part to the unraveling of «un paziente lavoro di educazione e di graduale assorbimento» of the Italian protégés - among these many wealthy Sephardic Jews - who had financial backed the Italian institutions\(^{41}\). This loss was ongoing in the 1930s, but accelerated substantially after the Ethiopia campaign and the abolition of the capitulations. The functionaries who had held state-level positions, however, were a minority in the community and, as noted, the reports from the chambers of commerce in Alexandria and Cairo are replete with references to the growing unemployment and difficulties experienced by the generalized «operaio italiano».

Indeed, on the occasion of the Vittorio Emanuele III’s visit to Egypt in 1933, sixteen-year-old Antionette Paonessa addressed a letter to the king, describing the frustration and poverty her family confronted. Her father, Giuseppe, a carpenter by trade, came to Egypt from Miglierina (Calabria) sometime between 1905 and 1912. These were

\(^{40}\) ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter. «Relazione sulla abolizione delle Capitolazioni in Egitto» addressed from Ghigi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome.

\(^{41}\) ASDMAE, AC, b. 301/ter. letter from Ghigi to Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome and to the Ministry of Press and Propaganda entitled «Atteggiamento dell’Italia nei confronti dell’ingresso dell’Egitto nella S.D.N. e nella soppressione del regime capitolare», 8.1.1937.
the years during which the community experienced its quickest growth. They lived in the popular quarters of Bacos, where many of the laborers who worked in the newly constructed Ramleh zone resided. Although it is likely that Antionette’s letter never reached the king, it spoke to concerns being raised increasingly within the Italian communities. Antionette wrote because of the «need in which we find ourselves, in the greatest misery», she continued, describing her father as an unemployed, ex-combatant of the First World War and her brother as a young, committed Fascist who was among the avanguardisti that had welcomed the king upon his arrival in Alexandria. The family was, she wrote, without any institutional assistance, «ni per lavoro, ni di quello che abbiamo bisogno». She continued, humbly, «non dico per divertimento ma almeno per poterci sollevare un po di questa miseria... sono una ragazza di 16 anni che mi rivolgo alla Sua Maestà commé figlia di poterci aiutare»42. Instead of repatriating the unemployed and impoverished Italians, a campaign was organized, with little success, to relocate the unemployed Italians from Egypt to East Africa (Petricioli 2007, pp. 89-90). Antionette’s father eventually filed an application to be sent to East Africa, but the Second World War was to breakout before his request was processed. Her eldest brother left Egypt to find work in Italy, never to return. Much of the community received assistance from either the Società Italiana di Beneficenza (Italian Charity Society) or the Fascio/consulate, both of which were drawing from the same sources (Morsy 1984, p. 222). Close observation of the connazionali - part of the surveillance conducted by the Fasci in Egypt to ensure the hegemony of fascist ideologies - led to conservation in archival sources of cases such as that of Savatore Caccioppo, a carpenter who lived in the working-class predominately Italian neighborhood around Via Dardar (Attarin). Caccioppo requested assistance for his children to attend the Italian school. The Consul, in considering his circumstances, noted that «because of the work situation [confronting Italians], Mr. Caccioppo is absolutely unable to pay, and occasionally his family lacks bread at home»43.

Complaints were increasingly sent to the consulate. Only adding fuel to the fire, Italian foreign policy had created an environment of hostility between different nationalities within the professional class, resulting in discrimination against Italians precisely because of their

42 ACAE, «Paonessa Beniamino - 1883» and «Paonessa Giuseppe - 1882».
43 ACAE, «Caccioppo Salvatore di Giovanni - 1897».
assumed ties to the regime. One Italian dismissed from the Suez Canal Company following the sanctions against the Italians wrote, «voi sapete, senza dubbio, che la vita in Egitto è resa molto dura per i nostri connazionali... non si sente altro che ripetere, quando si cerca un impiego - vous êtes Italien, Monsieur, nous regrettons de ne pouvoir vous engager».

With the withdrawal of many wealthier Italians from the community and the general sense of economic crisis, Italian institutions in Egypt suffered. The leadership of the Dante Alighieri Society noted in 1937 that of its 200 associates, payments were increasingly «stento» and rumors spread even among those most loyal to its mission that the Society was bound to disappear. Smaller clubs and associations had already closed because of lacking funds, among these the library that was part of the Dante, one of the few collections of Italian books, newspapers and propaganda, considerably built up during the 1930s. The library, to those in the Dante, was importantly placed in the heart of the Italian community in Attarin, around the corner from Caccioppo’s residence, for «our citizens who don’t have the money to buy books».

Attempting to bring donations into the assistance funds, letters were sent from the Consul in Alexandria to the members of the community who, in the past, had contributed to the supportive organizations. In 1939, one of these, written by the Consul at the time, Giuriati, implored, «Ritengo inutile illustrare a voi, che conoscete quali siano i bisogni assistenziali della nostra collettività, la necessità di venire in aiuto - oggi più che mai - delle numerose famiglie cadute nella miseria che invano cercano lavoro a che, per molteplici ragioni, nonnè possibile, almeno per ora, rimpiantare».

The conditions of possibility were effectively arranged for the Italians residing in Egypt so that - as noted in the aforementioned Chamber of Commerce report - the moment from which Italians began to «veramente» live in Egypt, a future in Egypt became a near impossibility.

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44 Aware that the Italian communities were being controlled, monitored and used as a tool for fascist propaganda, the British authorities did not distinguish between an Italian in civilian clothes and one in black shirt. See Williams (2006, p. 127).
45 ACAE, «Paolleti Enrico Rodolfo fu Albino».
46 ASDA, Alessandria-Egitto, b. 11 fasc.18 «1933-1934», letter from Ruiz to Felicioni (president of the Società Dante Alighieri), 29.10.1937.
48 ACAE, «Turrini Virgilio - 1897». 
Abbreviations

ACAE: Archivio del Consolato Generale d’Italia in Alessandria d’Egitto
ACCC: Archivio Cancelleria Consolare al Cairo
ACS: Archivio Centrale dello Stato
   MCP: Ministero della Cultura Popolare
   MI: Ministero dell’Interno
ASDMAE: Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri
   AC: Ambasciata Cairo
   AP: Affari Politici
ASN: Archivio dello Stato Napoli
CAI: Centro Archeologico Italiano al Cairo
SDA: Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri

Bibliography


