

# The Pacification of the “Fourth Shore”: A Study of the Italian Counterinsurgency Operations in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica between 1922 and 1931

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

The Pacification of the “Fourth Shore”: A Study of the Italian Counterinsurgency Operations in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica between 1922 and 1931, by MAJ Alessio Battisti, 111 pages.

This monograph analyzes the Italian counterinsurgency campaign conducted in Libya between 1922 and 1931 from an operational standpoint. Starting from an adverse situation, the Italian colonial troops quelled a widespread insurgent movement in ten years. The operational approach devised and implemented by the Royal Italian Army commanders envisaged the integration of military and political actions in multiple operational cycles sequenced in time, space, and purpose. Before the advent of modern counterinsurgency doctrine, the Royal Italian Army’s methodology accounted for the population’s role, the critical vulnerabilities of inter-tribal relations, and the articulation of operations to achieve progressive territorial control.

This campaign constitutes a meaningful case study outside the French and British-inspired dogmas of current counterinsurgency doctrine. The study of the Italian experience in Libya sheds light on an important yet scarcely known chapter of Italian military history. A colonialist *zeitgeist*, entailing a different context and a less restrictive use of military force, inspired the Italian commanders’ decisions in countering the Libyan insurgency. Nonetheless, the analysis of those actions and decisions reserves interesting findings. First, it captures the potential fragility of insurgent networks that thrive in a tribal system. Building on that, the study shows the effectiveness of exploiting the fissures between different tribal segments while degrading the insurgents’ capabilities by military means. Second, the Italian experience emphasizes the importance of mastering the sequencing of effects through multiple military and political actions to attain the assigned strategic goals. Predating the modern idea of operational art, this campaign offers a meaningful example of its application. Lastly, this historical example highlights the pitfalls deriving from the lack of a systematic and distributed system for organizational learning. Although a select cadre of Italian officers developed an effective informal doctrine for counterinsurgency and desert operations, the Italian Army could not successfully leverage it thereafter. The effects of these flaws in organizational learning reverberated in the tragic results of the Italian military operations in North Africa at the beginning of the Second World War.

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## Abbreviations

BN	Battalion
BTY	Battery
CO	Company
COIN	Counterinsurgency
FARP	Forward Arming and Refueling Point
KIA	Killed in action
LoC	Lines of Communication
MG	Machine Gun
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
ODI	Office of the Director of Intelligence
PLT	Platoon
RG	Record Groups
RWDGSS	Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs
RCTC	<i>Regio Corpo delle Truppe Coloniali</i> (Royal Corps of Colonial Troops)
SQDN	Squadron
US	United States
WIA	Wounded in action

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## Introduction

At the beginning of September 1931, the *Gebel* Command of the Italian Royal Corps of Colonial Troops (*Regio Corpo delle Truppe Coloniali*, RCTC) in Cyrenaica received information concerning an impending insurgent attack in the area of Slonta.<sup>1</sup> According to the Italian scouts, Sheik Omar al-Mukhtar, the diehard and elusive chieftain of the Sanusi insurgency in Cyrenaica, would lead the raid. Exploiting this precious opportunity, the Italian command quickly planned and executed a kill or capture operation. On 11 September, a combined assault force of three mobile infantry groups, a *Savari* squadron (colonial cavalry), and three aircraft surrounded the insurgents' concentration area. The Italian party caught the rebels in the act of moving their camp. One of the supporting aircraft spotted a small band of twelve riders trying to evade the Italian cordon and directed the cavalry to its pursuit.<sup>2</sup> As historian Giorgio Rochat noted, "Betrayed by the poor condition of their mounts, for too long without rest and adequate fodder, eleven rebels were overtaken one after the other and killed, while the twelfth one was recognized as Omar al-Mukhtar and spared."<sup>3</sup> The Italian forces transferred the precious prey to Benghazi, where a special tribunal awaited him for trial. Condemned to capital punishment, colonial authorities hanged Sheik Omar al-Mukhtar in front of a crowd of 20,000 men at Solluch (Cyrenaica) on 16 September 1931.<sup>4</sup>

The death of Omar al-Mukhtar was particularly significant because it marked the *de facto* end of opposition to Italian rule in Libya. In the words of the British anthropologist Edward E.

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<sup>1</sup> The city of Slonta is located in the north-eastern part of today's Libya, twenty kilometers south of the coastline.

<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata* [Pacified Cyrenaica] (London: DARF, 2002), 234-235. See also Giorgio Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia: studi militari 1921-1939* [Italian wars in Libya and Ethiopia: Military studies 1921-1939] (Treviso, Italy: Pagus Edizioni, 1991), 77; and Federica Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931: le operazioni militari italiane* [Libya 1922-1931: Italian military operations] (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 2012), 300.

<sup>3</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 266-273. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 78; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 300.

Evans-Pritchard, “The resistance died with ‘Sidi Umar al-Mukhtar. The remaining fights were twitches of an already lifeless body.’”<sup>5</sup> The multifaceted and invasive Libyan insurgency had opposed the Italians since the end of the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912). At that time, a general insurrection in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had started to take momentum, fueled by a combination of tribal, religious, and nationalist drivers.<sup>6</sup> However, a decisive Italian reaction arrived only in 1922, in response to the failure to compromise with the most prominent tribal leaders.<sup>7</sup> This shift in strategy initiated what historian Brian R. Sullivan has defined as “the Second Libyan War” (1922-1931).<sup>8</sup> The operational approach devised and implemented by the Italian commanders in the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign waged in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica between 1922 and 1931 enabled an almost complete eradication of a complex and diverse insurgency phenomenon.

The Italian Royal Army successfully defeated the Libyan insurgency because it implemented an operational approach integrating military and political action in multiple operational cycles sequenced in time, space, and purpose. First, the Italian colonial commanders continuously attacked the cohesion of the tribes feeding the insurgency, leveraging already existing frictions in Tripolitania or dismantling unifying political networks, such as the Sanusi Brotherhood in Cyrenaica. Second, the RCTC devised specific ways to persistently target the insurgent bands and their sources of sustenance. Last, given the scarce resources at their disposal, the Italian military commanders implemented a gradual approach, following the “oil patch” model.<sup>9</sup> In essence, they sequenced their operations in time and space to clear and occupy

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<sup>5</sup> Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 190.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Montanari, preface to *Libia 1922-1931*, Saini Fasanotti, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Brian R. Sullivan, “The Italian Armed Forces, 1918-40,” in *Military Effectiveness*, vol. 2, *The Interwar Period*, new ed., ed. Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 186.

<sup>9</sup> The “oil patch” strategy (*tâche d’huile* in the French language) was an approach devised by French General Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey in the pacification of the French colony of Morocco between 1912 and 1925. This approach envisaged a step by step penetration of the lands controlled by

different areas of the colonies, adapting, by trial and error, their tactical solutions to the particular characteristics of the insurgent bands operating in each zone.

The study of the Italian COIN activities in Libya in the interwar period is significant for three reasons. First, an operational analysis of this campaign in the English language makes a relevant chapter of Italian military history available to the modern English-speaking military professional. The Italian COIN operations in Libya represent a prolific period in the history of Italian military art. This campaign saw the emergence of a new way of thinking about warfare, capitalizing on the experiences matured during the Great War.<sup>10</sup> Second, the lessons resulting from this historical episode reveal a different perspective for campaigning in a COIN context. Since the 1950s, the United States' (US) COIN doctrine has revolved around a Maoist model of insurgency.<sup>11</sup> The latest doctrinal manuals build upon concepts chiefly deriving from French and British methodologies, electing "population-centric COIN into the only way of doing any kind of counterinsurgency."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, lessons derived from an Italian perspective could be useful for further reflection on this specific topic and, hopefully, for possible integration into the current doctrinal set. Last, a study on Libya is valuable because this area is currently one of the hot spots

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hostile native elements, leveraging their internal rivalries to subdue and control all the regions of the colony one by one. Jean Gottmann, "Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought From Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward M. Earle, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 248.

<sup>10</sup> Federica Saini Fasanotti, "*Vincere!*": *The Italian Royal Army's Counterinsurgency Operations in Africa, 1922-1940* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 23, 35, 74. Kindle edition. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 18-20.

<sup>11</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria, "American Operational Art, 1917-2008," in *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, ed. John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152. See also William J. Gregor, "Intervention in Intrastate Wars: The Military Planning Problem," *PRISM* 5, no. 1 (2014): 35-36, accessed 14 July 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26470380>.

<sup>12</sup> Gian P. Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 7, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a510427.pdf>. See also Dan G. Cox and Thomas Brusolino, introduction to *Population-Centric Counterinsurgency: A False Idol? Three Monographs from the School of Advanced Military Studies*, SAMS Monograph Series, ed. Dan G. Cox and Thomas Brusolino (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 2011), 1.

of the Middle East-North Africa region. Therefore, a closer look at Libya's history and a review of the Italian Army's challenges in the previous century could provide the modern military professional with meaningful food for thought. As maintained by Professor Ali A. Ahmida, the Italian "invasion rapidly changed the balance of power and led to a new phase of Libyan history, in which collaboration with and resistance to the Italian colonizers played a major part. Comprehending these reactions to colonialism, particularly the factors leading to Libyan resistance, is crucial to understanding Libya today."<sup>13</sup> All in all, it is essential to remember that COIN will remain one of the main challenges for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) community in the future. Insurgencies, namely the activities of "rising up against constituted authority," have been an endemic phenomenon in societies throughout the history of mankind and most likely will remain so since they are inherent to the human dimension.<sup>14</sup> This is a particularly salient point for the modern military professional, especially in the current moment of transition back to a mindset that emphasizes large scale combat operations.

The research at the base of the present study draws from a variety of primary and secondary sources, both in the English and Italian languages.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, it is necessary to note that few English sources provide an in-depth military analysis of the COIN operations conducted in Libya by the Italian Army during the interwar period.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, none of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ali A. Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Consolidation, and Resistance*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 103.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas A. Marks, "Counterinsurgency and Operational Art," *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement* 13, no. 3 (August 2006): 183, accessed 19 August 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662840600560527>. See also David J. Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ix. As a further point, looking at the phenomenon of insurgency as "rising up against constituted authority," it is possible to make a connection between the insurgency and the idea of "revolution," posited by the sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 127-128.

<sup>15</sup> The author is responsible for the translation of the Italian sources.

<sup>16</sup> There are three main sources providing a military analysis of the topic in the English language. (1) Saini Fasanotti, "Vincere!"; (2) John Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-1939," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 6 (December 2005): 1005-1032, accessed 4 July 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390500441024>; (3) Brian

researched sources present an operational analysis of the Italian pacification campaign in Libya. In terms of primary sources, the research revolved around three critical works. First, the memoirs of Major General Rodolfo Graziani and Lieutenant General Attilio Teruzzi are essential to understanding the decisions made at the operational level of war.<sup>17</sup> Second, the work of Raffaele Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, provides the necessary political and strategic context for the analysis.<sup>18</sup> Third, *Desert Encounter: An Adventurous Journey through Italian Africa*, by Knud Holmboe, presents the external point of view of a Danish citizen traveling through Libya during the interwar period.<sup>19</sup> This source allows a different perspective, one beyond a purely Italian perspective. The consultation of Italian archival sources, not available through interlibrary loans or online databases, presented the main challenge for research.<sup>20</sup> However, it was possible to mitigate the issue by exploiting reports drafted by the US military attaché in Italy during the considered timeframe and specific studies published with the approval of the Italian Army's and Joint Staff's historical offices.<sup>21</sup>

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R. Sullivan, "A Thirst for Glory: Mussolini, the Italian Military, and the Fascist Regime: 1922-1936" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Major General Graziani led COIN operations both in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica between 1922 and 1931. Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 18, 47-49. Lieutenant General Attilio Teruzzi was governor of Cyrenaica between December 1926 and January 1929. See Attilio Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde: due anni di governo, Dicembre 1926-Gennaio 1929* [Green Cyrenaica: two years of government, December 1926-January 1929] (Verona, Italy: Casa Editrice Mondadori, 1931), 23, 288.

<sup>18</sup> Raffaele Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero* [Colonial history of contemporary Italy, from Assab to the empire] (Milan: Hoepli, 1940).

<sup>19</sup> Knud Holmboe, *Desert Encounter: An Adventurous Journey through Italian Africa*, transl. by Helga Holbek (London: Quilliam, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> The research for this thesis was conducted in the United States, during the attendance of the US Army Advanced Military Studies Program. Therefore, the author did not have the possibility of traveling to Italy to access the Italian Army Historical Archives.

<sup>21</sup> Three military works approved by the Italian Army's and Joint Staff's historical offices have been critical for the research: (1) Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*; (2) Mario Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane* [Policy and strategy in one hundred years of Italian wars], vol. 3, *Il periodo fascista* [The fascist period], bk. 1, *Le guerre degli anni trenta* [The wars of the thirties] (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 2005), accessed 13 August 2020, <https://issuu.com/rivista.militare1/docs/politica-vol-3-t1a-singolo-testo>; (3) Federica Saini Fasanotti, Basilio Di Martino, Filippo Cappellano, Andrea Crescenzi, and Alessandro Gionfrida, *L'Esercito alla macchia: controguerriglia italiana 1860-1943: l'esperienza italiana di controguerriglia dal brigantaggio alla seconda guerra mondiale* [The Army in the bush: Italian counter guerrilla 1860-1943: The Italian

In terms of secondary sources, the research revolved around three approaches. First, the Italian historian Giorgio Rochat and the British historian Frederick H. Dotolo present an overview of the Italian operations in Libya from different angles. On the one hand, Rochat furnishes a comprehensive review of the campaign, including further analysis of the operational cycles conducted in Cyrenaica.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Dotolo highlights the “military-centric” nature of the Italian approach, different from the customary “security-centric” strategy, commonly favored in today’s COIN activities.<sup>23</sup> Second, the studies of British anthropologist Edward E. Evans-Pritchard and Libyan professor Ali A. Ahmida provide critical insight to understand the specific social, political, and religious dimensions of the Libyan society.<sup>24</sup> Third, political scientist James W. Davis offers a theoretical model for framing the Libyan insurgency and the Italian response. In his preface to *Clausewitz on Small War*, Davis illustrates a variant of the renowned Clausewitzian “trinitarian framework” adapted to the context of small wars. This concept represents an indispensable reference to frame the phenomenon of asymmetric warfare from the insurgents’ perspective.<sup>25</sup>

In the study of history, as in all the other academic domains, words matter. Therefore, a small set of remarks regarding terminology is necessary before proceeding further. First, modern Libya comprises three regions: Tripolitania (western part of Libya), Cyrenaica (eastern part of Libya), and Fezzan (the south-western portion of the country).<sup>26</sup> When Italy successfully

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counterguerrilla experience from the banditry to the Second World War] (Rome: Stato Maggiore della Difesa, Ufficio Storico, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 12-22.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick H. Dotolo, “A long small war: Italian counterrevolutionary warfare in Libya: 1911 to 1932,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 1 (December 2014): 158, accessed 2 July 2020, <https://doi-org.lumen.cgscarl.com/10.1080/09592318.2014.959765>.

<sup>24</sup> Whereas Evans-Pritchard focuses more on the specific reality of the Sanusi Brotherhood in Cyrenaica, Ahmida’s analysis includes both Tripolitania (including the Fezzan region) and Cyrenaica. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, iii-v; Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 1-9.

<sup>25</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *Clausewitz on Small War*, ed. and trans. Christopher Daase and James W. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18. Kindle edition.

<sup>26</sup> The term “Libya,” although supposedly coined by the Egyptians around the third millennium BC, found official employment only in 1911 in the usage of the Italian government. Saima Raza, “Italian

snatched Libya from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, it established two distinct colonies, Tripolitania (including Fezzan) and Cyrenaica.<sup>27</sup> The Italian government unified the two colonies in 1934, although they had a single governor-general starting from 1929.<sup>28</sup> The term “Libya” indicates the two regions comprehensively. In contrast, the terms “Tripolitania” and “Cyrenaica” refer to either one of the two colonies. Second, the insurrection of the Libyan tribes presents the same traits of an insurgency movement. Furthermore, the Italian measures implemented in response are, in all respects, COIN operations. The US joint doctrine defines an insurgency as a “political-military struggle by a predominantly indigenous group or movement designed to weaken, subvert, or displace the control of an established government for a particular region” and COIN as “the combination of measures undertaken by a government...to defeat an insurgency.”<sup>29</sup> The roots of the Libyan insurgency derived from the “two-faced Ottoman policy” implemented in the aftermath of the Italo-Turkish War. On the one hand, the Ottoman Sultan ceded control of Libya over to the Italians. On the other hand, he gave the Libyan people independence in a separate declaration to save face in the Islamic community.<sup>30</sup> Together with the Bedouin intolerance to any higher authority<sup>31</sup> and the religious duty to fight a holy war (*jihad*),<sup>32</sup> the Sultan’s ambiguous approach animated the resistance movement to the Italian rule in a wide variety of nuanced ways.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is safe to characterize the Libyan insurrection as a rebel

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Colonisation & Libyan Resistance to the Al-Sanusi of Cyrenaica (1911-1922),” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 6, no. 1 (2012): 88, accessed 15 September 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2012.12023199>.

<sup>27</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 395-396.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 504, 522.

<sup>29</sup> US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2018), I-1, I-2.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 118.

<sup>31</sup> Emrys L. Peters, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in Personal and Corporate Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 119.

<sup>32</sup> The holy war was declared by the leader of the Sanusi Brotherhood in 1913. Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 118.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.



movement inspired by the common causes of nationalism and religion (interpreted with multiple nuances) and affected by tribal dynamics in defiance of Italian rule. Considering the definition provided by the US joint doctrine, it is possible to infer that the Italian government faced an insurgency in its colonies and that the measures it took to crush it constituted a form of COIN *ante litteram*.<sup>34</sup>

Before closing the terminology review, it is necessary to address one more point. Studies of the totality of COIN operations conducted by the Italian Army in Libya between 1922 and 1931 have employed different definitions over time. Rochat uses the term “colonial war,” Sullivan calls it “Second Libyan War,” and Evans-Pritchard adopts the formula “Second Italo-Sanusi war.”<sup>35</sup> For a coherent understanding of the entirety of operations, however, it is best to view them as a single pacification campaign composed of multiple operational cycles.<sup>36</sup>

## Strategic Setting

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<sup>34</sup> As posited by the military theorist David Kilcullen, the term “counterinsurgency,” or “classical counter-insurgency” appeared in the context of the “wars of national liberation” between 1944 and 1980. Therefore, the association of this term with the pacification of the Italian colonies denotes a sort of COIN *ante litteram*. David Kilcullen, “Counter-insurgency *Redux*,” *Survival* 48, no. 4 (November 2006): 111, accessed 25 November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330601062790>.

<sup>35</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 13-14; Sullivan, “The Italian Armed Forces, 1918-40,” 186; Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 157.

<sup>36</sup> Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, defines a campaign as “series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space.” Therefore it is safe to employ this doctrinal term to describe the totality of COIN operations conducted in the area of Libya between 1921-1931. US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), I-9. The term “operational cycle” is non-doctrinal, but it serves the purpose of categorizing a variable number of major operations conducted in a certain area of the Libyan colony during a specific timeframe of the overall campaign (season or years) in pursuit of distinct operational objectives. This expression reflects the terminology in use in the Italian colonial establishment. See Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 81; Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 153. In addition, the same term appears in the works of the Italian historians Federica Saini Fasanotti and Nicola Labanca. See Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 36; Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia, 1911-1931* [The Italian war for Libya, 1911-1931] (Bologna, Italy: Società editrice il Mulino, 2012), 150.

According to military historian John F. Votaw, “Military history should be studied in width, depth, and, most importantly, in context.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, before a proper overview of the Italian COIN campaign in Libya, a certain level of breadth and context is necessary. In this respect, there are four main points to consider. First, an illustration of Italian colonialism will pose the necessary premises to understand the political and strategic objectives driving the Italian military efforts during the campaign under consideration. Second, a brief description of the particular geographical and climatic features of the theater of war will furnish the necessary elements to understand the effects of weather and terrain on military operations. Third, the presentation of the road to the reconquest of the Libyan colonies will illustrate the process behind the Italian decision to launch an aggressive COIN campaign in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The last point entails a concise analysis of the ends (political and strategic) and means (troops, capabilities, and doctrine) of the competing actors.

The colonial adventure of the modern state of Italy is a relatively late phenomenon and had a short duration. The Italian colonial expansion started in 1882 and ended in 1943, during the Second World War.<sup>38</sup> Initially, Italian colonial interests fell on East Africa and the Mediterranean, especially North Africa.<sup>39</sup> The drivers of Italian colonial expansion were primarily politico-ideological and only secondarily economic.<sup>40</sup> With the completion of its unification in 1861 (with the exclusion of the city of Rome), Italy was one of the last, if not the very last, contenders to enter the European colonial “scramble” of the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> After

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<sup>37</sup> John F. Votaw, “An Approach to The Study of Military History,” in *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History*, ed. John E. Jessup, Jr. and Robert W. Coakley (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1979), 42.

<sup>38</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 16-22, 32-33, 105-113, 360-368. See also Sullivan, “A Thirst for Glory,” 67.

<sup>40</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 23, 30, 66-67, and 77-78. See also Claudio G. Segré, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3-5.

<sup>41</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 11 and 15. See also Carlo Schanzer, “Italian Colonial Policy in Northern Africa,” *Foreign Affairs* 2, no. 3 (March 1924): 446,

an initial period of domestic stabilization,<sup>42</sup> the Italian government started to consider a colonial expansion more seriously between the 1870s and the 1880s. At the political level, Italy aimed at asserting itself as a great power on the European and international stage. At the time, the status of great power entailed the control of colonies.<sup>43</sup> On the ideological side, a crescendo of voices in political and intellectual milieus progressively spread a narrative fusing ideals typical of the Italian process of unification (*Risorgimento*), the common colonial theme of “civilizing mission,” and a nostalgic reference to the glories of past “Italian” state entities as colonial powers (e.g., the Roman Empire and the Republic of Venice).<sup>44</sup> Finally, in the economic domain, the primary incentive to a colonist endeavor implied land acquisition for a demographic expansion and settlement of the Italian agrarian population.<sup>45</sup>

The first Italian colonial venture targeted East Africa, with the acquisition of the Bay of Assab (located in modern Eritrea) through commercial means in 1882.<sup>46</sup> After an initial expansion in Eritrea and Somaliland, the debacle of Adowa (1896) against the army of Emperor

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accessed 14 August 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20028313>. The term “scramble” is used with great emphasis by the Italian historian Nicola Labanca, who defines it as an “unrestrained competition.” Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 66 and 75. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 30-32; James Meenan, “Italian Colonial Policy and Problems,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 33, no. 129 (March 1944): 91-92, accessed 17 August 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30100422>; and Segré, *Fourth Shore*, 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 74-78. See also Meenan, “Italian Colonial Policy and Problems,” 91-92; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 43; and Bruce Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore: Italy's War for Libya (1911-1912)* (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 2012), 14 and 21-22, accessed 9 February 2021, <https://issuu.com/rivista.militare1/docs/la-quarta-sponda-test>.

<sup>45</sup> Segré, *Fourth Shore*, xiv. See also Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 104-105; Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 204; and Meenan, “Italian Colonial Policy and Problems,” 91-92.

<sup>46</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 79-90.

Menelik II temporarily halted Rome's imperial aspirations over Abyssinia (modern state of Ethiopia).<sup>47</sup>

This defeat prompted a re-orientation of the Italian colonial policy towards the Mediterranean region in general, more in particular on Libya. The "Fourth Shore," as the most nationalist fringes started to call it, gradually assumed the mythical status of the biblical promised land.<sup>48</sup> Italy started to look at the Ottoman colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica as viable terrain of conquest in 1878. At that time, Great Britain and France offered their *placet* for the Italian occupation of these Ottoman colonies in exchange for complacency to the French invasion of Tunisia.<sup>49</sup> In 1881, right after the French occupation of Tunisia, the Italian armed forces began information collection activities, with the contextual drafting of military plans for an invasion.<sup>50</sup> Italy's interest in this particular area of North Africa derived from historical, political, military, and economic reasons.<sup>51</sup> Historically, Italian interactions with Tripolitania and Cyrenaica went back to the era of the Roman Empire. Throughout the centuries, the various states, city-states, and kingdoms of the Italian peninsula had maintained strong, yet not always peaceful, relations with Libya for obvious geographical reasons.<sup>52</sup> At the political level, the Italian government saw the "opening" of Libya as an opportunity to reinforce its diplomatic position among the European powers. After the defeat of Adowa, the Italian political leadership considered the conquest of Libya as potential payback to restore its prestige.<sup>53</sup> In the military sphere, Libya presented critical

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<sup>47</sup> H. R. Tate, "The Italian Colonial Empire," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 40, no. 159 (April 1941): 147, accessed 14 August 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/717888>.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 105; Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 37. The origin and explanation of the expression "Fourth Shore" are from Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 15; Segré, *Fourth Shore*, xvi, 88. The reference to the idea of promised land is from Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 376.

<sup>49</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 364-365.

<sup>50</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 22-23. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 37-38.

<sup>51</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 360-361.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 361-364.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 377-378; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 21.

basing for the control of the Mediterranean theater.<sup>54</sup> On the economic side, the Bank of Rome (*Banco di Roma*) anticipated the Italian invasion with a progressive economic penetration of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, which saw the implementation of sizable investments in Libyan territory.<sup>55</sup> In the Italian perception, Libya offered significant agricultural resources, constituted a vital geostrategic node to control the Sahara's caravan routes, and presented an indispensable demographic outlet for the Italian agrarian population.<sup>56</sup>

The road to the Italo-Turkish War saw an increasing opposition of the Ottoman Empire towards all the Italian economic initiatives in Libya and, at large, in the Mediterranean area, together with a rising hostility against Italian nationals in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.<sup>57</sup> The Italian government matched this surge of enmity with mixed degrees of diplomatic and military preparation, supported by the hardening of the Italian political and popular resolve in supporting a conflict with the Ottoman Empire.<sup>58</sup> After multiple rounds of negotiations and an ultimatum that did not satisfy the desired conditions, the Italian government led by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti declared war on the Ottoman Empire on 29 September 1911.<sup>59</sup> The Italo-Turkish War was the first expeditionary conflict in the history of the newborn Italian Kingdom and evidenced the strategic and operational shortcomings of a young military institution.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, this war

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<sup>54</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 377-378; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 373-374. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 22; Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 18; and Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 105.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 104. See also Segré, *Fourth Shore*, 4-5, 42.

<sup>57</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 373-374. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 18-19.

<sup>58</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 375-381. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 30-31.

<sup>59</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 23. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 51-52; Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 44, 50; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 109.

<sup>60</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 23-24. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 50-55; Dotolo, "A long small war," 160; and Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 50-51, 57-60, 61-64, 68, 72, 146-147, 151-152.

also anticipated salient elements that would play a significant part in the Italian reconquest ten years later. On the Italian side, this war saw successful experiments in joint integration of assets, the first attempts to conduct wireless communications, embryonic forms of psychological operations through the dissemination of leaflets, and the employment of small local bands and Eritrean *askari* (native infantry).<sup>61</sup> On the Turkish side, the defenders quickly transitioned from conventional operations to guerrilla-type operations, harnessing the natives' support in the fight against the invaders, a thing that the Italian military had not anticipated.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, it is safe to assume that the Ottoman armed forces nurtured and developed the first embryonic insurgent groups to offset a condition of significant numerical inferiority.<sup>63</sup> The hybrid nature of the Italo-Turkish War is also evident from its conclusion. Through skillful diplomatic action, the Italian government leveraged the Turks' preoccupation with the deteriorating situation in the Balkans to obtain a surrender from the Ottoman Empire. On 18 October 1912, the Treaty of Lausanne decreed the end of the war.<sup>64</sup> However, the effective end of the hostilities arrived only in the summer of 1913, when most of the Turkish troops had retreated from the country, leaving behind a small cadre to organize the anti-Italian resistance.<sup>65</sup> In addition, immediately after the issue of the treaty, Suleiman el-Baruni, an Arab-Berber member of the Tripoli parliament, announced the

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<sup>61</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 76-79, 96-97. "Askari" (*ascari* in the Italian language) was the denomination given to colonial infantrymen of African origin. See Saini Fasanotti, "Vincere!" 145. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 14, 119-128, 151-152.

<sup>62</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 24. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 69, 80; Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 110-112; and Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 80-84, 99-100.

<sup>63</sup> The Italian Army initially deployed two divisions for a total of about 34,000 soldiers, against a total of 4,000 Ottoman defenders. Later, in 1912, the Italian strength rose to about 100,000 men. Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 24. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 54-55.

<sup>64</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 90. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 134.

<sup>65</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 24. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 113-121.

beginning of the Berber resistance and the Grand Sanusi, Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif, declared *jihād* against the infidels, proclaiming an independent Cyrenaica under the Sanusi Order.<sup>66</sup>

During the Italo-Turkish War and its aftermath, Italian military commanders had to negotiate a new kind of terrain and climate, for “Libya was not Italy and was not similar to any European country.” Italian commanders soon realized, “There was a complete lack of infrastructure and most of the area was desert, which made it a highly hostile environment where adaptation was vital to win and to survive.”<sup>67</sup> Colonel Guglielmo Nasi, an Italian colonial officer in the interwar period, provides a concise yet significant description of this land: “Except for the *Grande Sirte* [Gulf of Sidra] in the strictest sense of the word, where the Libyan desert skirts the Mediterranean shores, Libya is constituted by a plateau squeezed between the desert and the sea, from which it is separated, here and there, by a flat and more or less deep selvage.”<sup>68</sup> Libya is located in North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea encloses its northern border (see Figure 1). In the interwar period, French and British dominions surrounded the newly-acquired Italian colonies. According to an Italian map drafted at the beginning of the 1930s, Libya bordered: Egypt (east), Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (south-east), Chad (south), Niger (south-west), Algeria (west), Tunisia (north-west).<sup>69</sup> Only 5% of Libya’s surface is arable, mainly along the coasts of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and in the main oases in the interior. The remaining surface includes only desert and pre-desert steppe. In terms of hydrography, there are no perennial rivers and only

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<sup>66</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 100. For the reference to al-Baruni, see Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 24. For the reference to the Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif, see Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 118.

<sup>67</sup> Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 11.

<sup>68</sup> Guglielmo C. Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia” [The War in Libya], *Rivista Militare Italiana* [Italian Military Review] 1, no. 1 (January 1927): 68, accessed 4 September 2020, <http://www.esercito.difesa.it/comunicazione/editoria/Rivista-Militare/archivio/Documents/1927/Rivista%20militare%201927%20n.1.pdf>. A “selvage” is “a narrow border often of different or heavier threads than the fabric and sometimes in a different weave.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “selvage,” accessed 5 December 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/selvage>.

<sup>69</sup> Istituto Geografico D’Agostini, “Libia,” [1930?], Earth Sciences &Map Library, Berkley University, accessed 04 December 2020, <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/maps/libya3.jpg>.

a few streams. However, water is abundant underground in certain areas, such as the oasis system of western Fezzan.<sup>70</sup> Although the Italian administrative division envisaged two distinct colonies, from a geographical standpoint, Libya comprises four main regions: Tripolitania, Fezzan, Sirtica, and Cyrenaica.

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<sup>70</sup> John Wright, *A History of Libya* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xiii-xiv. See also Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 68.





Figure 1. Map of Libya. Clipping from Istituto Geografico D'Agostini, "Libia," [1930?], Earth Sciences & Map Library, Berkley University, accessed 4 December 2020, <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/maps/libya3.jpg>.

Tripolitania includes five main orographic zones. The coastal plain and the Tripolitanian plateau, the *Gebel Nefusah* (maximum altitude of about 900 meters), are the most fertile areas

and host most of the population. There is a small desert plain in the northwest corner, the Gefara, enclosed between the sea and the plateau. The *gebel* southern slopes descend into the Ghibla, a rugged expanse that, in turn, emerges into the Hammadah al-Hamra, a stony plain developing for 320 kilometers to the south towards the oasis clusters of western Fezzan. The latter is a desert plateau, with an altitude ranging between 400 and 600 meters, extending south to the border and the great barrier of Mount Tibesti. This region is the richest in underground water springs generating numerous oases on its surface, the only inhabitable areas. The sandy desert of Sirtica creates a 480-kilometer barrier of desolation between Tripolitania from Cyrenaica. At the beginning of the 1920s, there was no coastal road crossing this area.<sup>71</sup> This fact had two implications. First, historically, the interactions of the people of Tripolitania developed more with Tunisia. In contrast, Cyrenaica's population strengthened its bonds with Egypt.<sup>72</sup> Second, the connection between the two Italian colonies was easier by boat than overland.<sup>73</sup> Finally, Cyrenaica is the easternmost region. Primarily a desert, it contains a jagged and heavily vegetated plateau called Gebel el-Akhdar (the Green Mountain, average altitude of 800 meters) to the north. This tableland descends towards Egypt in the sandy expanse of Marmarica and slopes towards Sirtica into the *barqa* plain. The southernmost part of Cyrenaica comprises the Libyan Desert, enclosed by the Tibesti range to the south. This waste has three main oasis-groups: Gialo (also known as Jalu), Giarabub (also known as Jaghbub), and Kufra.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Wright, *A History of Libya*, xiv. See also Saini Fasanotti, "*Vincere!*" 11-13.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, *A History of Libya*, xiv. See also Vandervort, *To the Fourth Shore*, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Dotolo, "A long small war," 160.

<sup>74</sup> Wright, *A History of Libya*, xiv. See also Saini Fasanotti, "*Vincere!*" 11-12; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 29-33.

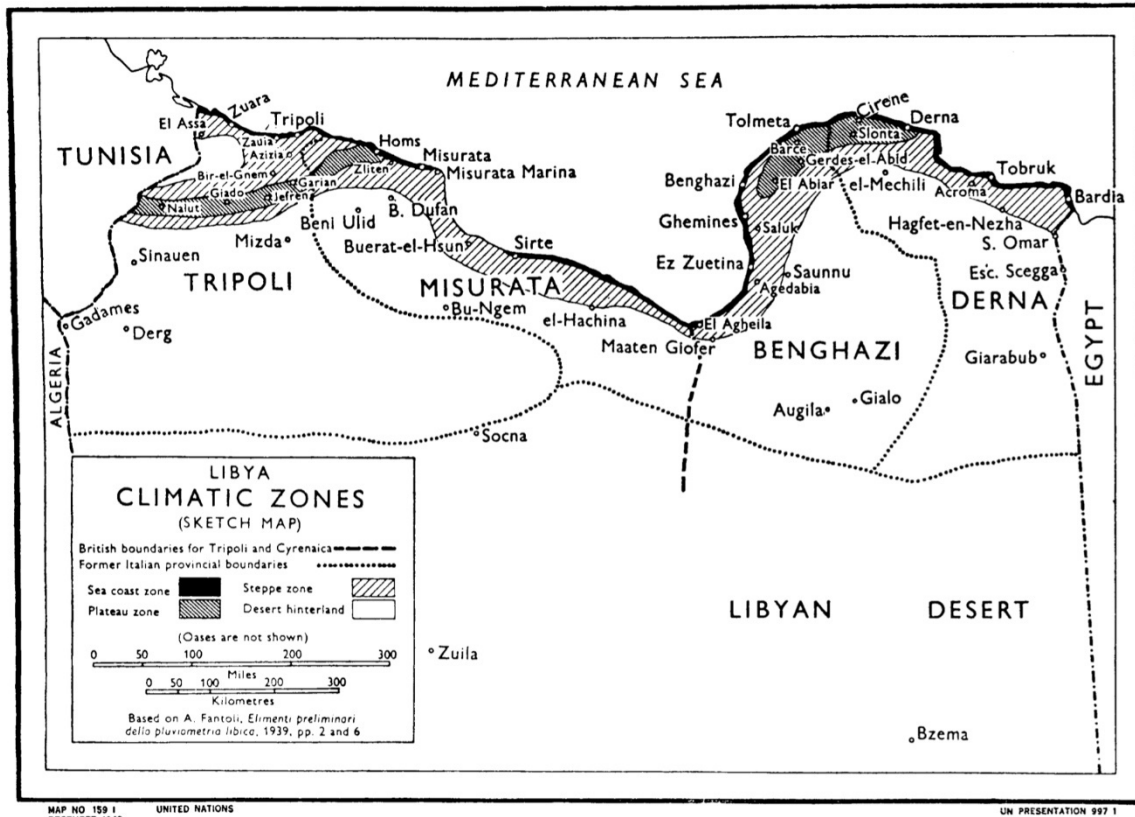


Figure 2. Libya Climatic Zones (Sketch Map). Chia-Lin Pan, "The Population of Libya," *Population Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 1949): 101, accessed 16 September 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2172494>.

Libya's climate is highly variable: milder on the coast, it retains characteristics typical of hot desert weather towards the interior (dryness, scant precipitations, and significant temperature leaps). By and large, Tripolitania is hotter and drier than Cyrenaica and it feels the effects of the hot *ghibli* wind between April and June and torrential rains between October and April. In contrast, Cyrenaica has a more stable climate throughout the year. See Figure 2 for a visual depiction of climate zones and Figure 3 for annual precipitation. Additionally, it is not uncommon to have snow on the highest zones of the plateaus during the winter.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Sullivan, "A Thirst for Glory" 226. See also Wright, *A History of Libya*, xiv-xv; and Saini Fasanotti, "Vincere!" 12.

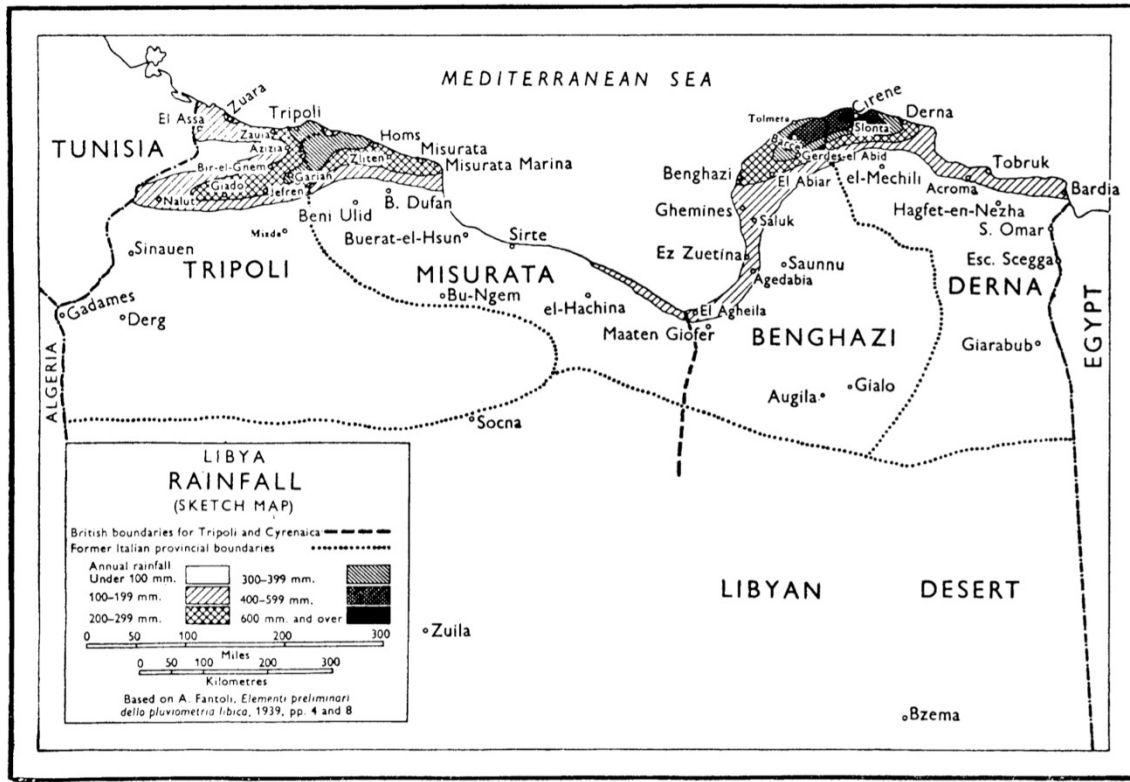


Figure 3. Libya Rainfall (Sketch Map). Chia-Lin Pan, "The Population of Libya," 101.

A clear picture of Libya's characteristic environment is essential to gauge its effects on military operations. As posited by Colonel Nasi in his analysis of the military operations in Libya, "Except for the oases... the field of view is always extended, the terrain is accessible everywhere, with only some small limitations for the field artillery."<sup>76</sup> However, some of the above-described terrain features undoubtedly represented obstacles, namely the desert and the great plateaus. In the desert, dunes, fissures in the rock, and wadis hindered mobility and affected observation, cover, and concealment. Furthermore, the lack of viable reference points presented significant challenges for navigation. Clefts, ravines, and lush vegetation had similar effects on military operations on the tablelands.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the steep cliffs on the plateaus' northern slopes, pointing at the sea, usually affected mobility.<sup>78</sup> Water sources, oases, and the historical caravan

<sup>76</sup> Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 68.

<sup>77</sup> Saini Fasanotti, "Vincere!" 14.

<sup>78</sup> Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 68.

routes connecting the main wells constituted important key terrain features for military purposes and were critical for the local population.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the great distances between the various inhabitable areas and the harsh climatic conditions played a predominant role in military operations, decisively affecting the performance of men and machines alike. As explained later, this environment required specific measures of adaptation on the Italian side to create and maintain operational reach.<sup>80</sup>

Having depicted Libya's terrain and climate, it is now possible to outline the sequence of key events that, starting from the aftermath of the Italo-Turkish War, led to the beginning of the Italian pacification campaign in 1922. In the summer of 1914, at the end of a quick and successful expansion, the Italian Army controlled almost all the Tripolitanian territory (including Fezzan) and the entire Cyrenaican coastal plain, including most of the Gebel Akhdar. However, the outbreak of World War I changed the situation drastically. By the end of August 1915, the Italian forces had collapsed to the main coastal garrisons in both colonies. Two factors drove the Italian contraction. On the one hand, Turkey and Germany initiated an extensive unconventional warfare campaign in North Africa to destabilize the British and French colonies, so creating a viable distraction for their adversaries in the Great War. The instigation of insurgency and rebellion in Tunisia and Egypt deeply affected Libya, located between the two regions. On the other hand, the Italian government and the Italian military establishment compounded the problem by showing indecisiveness in responding to this surge. Finally, the Italian solution envisaged the

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<sup>79</sup> Saini Fasanotti, "*Vincere!*" 14. See also Anonymous, "Situazione ed avvenimenti nel sud tripolitano, primavera 1929" [Situation and events in southern Tripolitania, Spring 1929], *Rivista Militare Italiana* [Italian Military Review] 3, no. 10 (October 1929): 1604-1605, accessed 18 October 2020, <http://www.esercito.difesa.it/comunicazione/editoria/Rivista-Militare/archivio/Documents/1929/Rivista%20militare%201929%20n.10.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> Saini Fasanotti, "*Vincere!*" 14. Colonel Nasi, when referring to the conditions of the desert, reports that it was necessary to employ special troops on camels or motorized vehicles to retain combat effectiveness. Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 68. According to US Joint Doctrine, "operational reach" is "the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military capabilities." US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), IV-35.

consolidation of all garrisons to the coast. In this way, Italy could maintain a sufficient foothold in the colonies while saving troops in anticipation of a possible involvement in the Great War on the European front.<sup>81</sup>

In the aftermath of World War I, the Italian government faced a dire situation. In Cyrenaica, the Pact of Acroma (signed on 17 April 1917 by Sanusi and Italian officials) had split the colony into two main areas of influence: the coast for the Italian government and the interior for the Sanusi Order. In Tripolitania, a delegation of the most prominent local tribal leaders proclaimed an independent Tripolitanian Republic (*Giamhuriyya el-Trabulsia*) in November 1918, asking for the official recognition of the international community.<sup>82</sup> At this point, the Italian government had three options: (1) abandon the colonies; (2) conduct further negotiations with the local tribes to reach a non-belligerent compromise; (3) reestablish Italian authority throughout the entirety of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica by force.<sup>83</sup> The final verdict entailed a policy of compromise, underpinned by the concession of a “Fundamental Charter” to the Libyan population. In short, this document granted a semi-independent status to the above-mentioned political entities and a wide variety of rights to the populations of both colonies while reaffirming the Italian sovereignty over the two regions. In Cyrenaica, the Italian government conceded even more leeway to the Grand Sanusi, with the agreements of er-Règima (October 1920) and bu-Mariam (October 1921).<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 100-102.

<sup>82</sup> The *Giamhuriyya el-Trabulsia* represented the political association of the four most powerful tribal leaders in Tripolitania: Suleimàn el-Barùni for western Tripolitania (Berber leader), Abd el-Nebi Kelber for the Orfella territories and Fezzan (Arab leader), Ahmed el-Mràied for the Tarhuna (Arab leader), and Ramadàn esc-Scèteui for the area of Misurata (Arab leader). The latter assumed the presidency of the newly formed republic, whose formation was encouraged by the German and Turkish advisors before their retirement. Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 102-103. See also Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 443, 446-449.

<sup>83</sup> Montanari, preface to *Libia 1922-1931*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> The Fundamental Charter granted to the people of Libya an Italo-Libyan citizenship and political representation in a colonial parliament. In addition, this document conceded freedom of speech, teaching, reunion, worship, and property to the people of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. It was, in essence, a very liberal and permissive attempt to quell the unrest by compromise. Moreover, the agreements of er-Règima and bu-Mariam in Cyrenaica recognized the Grand Sanusi, Mohammed Idris, the title of “Emir” of

The way of compromise did not yield the expected results. Overall, the Italian government aimed at a pacific penetration of the two colonies. Italy did not have sufficient political resolve or resources for a large scale military intervention necessary to reassert its sovereignty. On the contrary, both in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the local leaders interpreted the Italian approach as an opportunity to acquire more power in anticipation of future emancipation from the Italian yoke.<sup>85</sup> First, the security situation did not remain stable, especially in Tripolitania. In the summer of 1920, Ramadàn esc-Scèteui, principal tribal chief of the Misurata area and leader of the *Giamhuriyya*, started a tribal war against the other three notables of the Tripolitanian Republic. This treacherous attempt ended with Ramadàn's death during the invasion of the Orfella territories on 24 August 1920. This event brought closure to the internecine fight. However, it also reinforced the resolve of the other two Arab tribal leaders of the Tripolitanian Republic to fight for their independence.<sup>86</sup>

In November 1920, during the Conference of Garian, the chiefs of the Orfella and Tarhuna established the so-called "Committee of Reforms," without the participation of el-Barùni (the only Berber leader of the former republic). The new insurgent political association established a delegation, called "League of the Oppressed Populations," later sent to Rome to support the Libyan cause with the Italian Parliament in concert with the Italian Socialist Party. In addition, the Committee of Reforms initiated a large scale offensive against the Berber tribes of western Tripolitania and the Italian colonial forces.<sup>87</sup> In Cyrenaica, Idris did not uphold the terms of the agreements and never disbanded the Sanusi military camps, exploiting only the advantages

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Cyrenaica, with his political capital in Agedabia and the direct control of the main oases of the interior. In return, the Emir had to disband all the Sanusi military camps and support the implementation of Italian-issued laws. Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 468-470, 478-483.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 469-471, 480-481. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 146-147; and Segré, *Fourth Shore*, 45.

<sup>86</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 470-475. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 147.

<sup>87</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 470-475. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 147.

of this situation.<sup>88</sup> Second, starting from the Tripolitanian internecine war of 1920, the Italians detected a progressive strengthening of the linkages between the insurgents of the two colonies. This trend culminated in April 1922, following the conference of Sirte, when the Committee of Reforms offered Mohammed Idris, the Grand Sanusi, the Emirate of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. After long hesitation, the Grand Sanusi accepted the proposal in October 1922, immediately leaving Cyrenaica for the safety of Egypt. Idris left behind his younger brother, Mohammed er-Redà, as his representative.<sup>89</sup>

All in all, during this period of “political sharecropping,”<sup>90</sup> the Italian government suffered a decrease in prestige. Even worse, it did not attain the main objective of asserting the Italian full political and administrative control over the two colonies.<sup>91</sup> This condition was the keystone underpinning the Italian foreign policy objectives related to Libya’s invasion in the first place. In addition, the lack of control over the colonial territories made Italy vulnerable to eventual encroachments of neighboring colonial powers.<sup>92</sup> For these reasons, at the end of 1921, Count Giuseppe Volpi, Governor-General of Tripolitania, launched a series of military operations to regain control of the colony. This initiative had the full endorsement of the Italian Minister of the Colonies, Giuseppe Girardini, and, later, Minister Giovanni Amendola (who replaced Girardini in February 1922).<sup>93</sup> In October 1922, Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Fascist Party, took over the role of Italian Prime Minister after the famous “March on Rome.” Under the Fascist regime, the Italian colonial policy essentially maintained the same objectives and approach devised by the previous liberal government. What changed was the political resolve behind those

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<sup>88</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 482.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 471, 482-483, 498-499. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 153-155.

<sup>90</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 483.

<sup>91</sup> Segré, *Fourth Shore*, 45-47.

<sup>92</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 129.

<sup>93</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 475. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 41; Segré, *Fourth Shore*, 47; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 107-108.



aims, emphasizing the pre-existing rhetoric inspired by the Italian civilizing mission and the past Roman glories in North Africa.<sup>94</sup> In essence, the advent of the regime ensured continuity in governance, political coverage, and sufficient resources for the upcoming process of pacification.<sup>95</sup>

The Italian strategic military objective was the pacification of the colonies through defeating the Libyan insurgency and enforcing the submission and disarmament of the local tribes.<sup>96</sup> The general strategic approach envisaged “a gradual expansion of control,”<sup>97</sup> placing an initial focus on the reconquest of Tripolitania, the richest of the two colonies, with a subsequent effort on the pacification of Cyrenaica.<sup>98</sup> To attain the intended goals, the Italian government had two colonial contingents at its disposal. In 1922, at the beginning of the COIN campaign, the colonial troops of Tripolitania comprised twelve infantry battalions (four metropolitan and eight indigenous battalions), two machine gun companies, eight artillery batteries (heavy, mountain, and fortress assets), four indigenous cavalry squadrons, one *Meharist* company (camel mounted infantry for desert operations), four engineer companies, for a total of 18,000 men. In Cyrenaica, the Italian government had a smaller contingent, amounting to 9,300 men in total, displaying the same variety of units present in Tripolitania. The contingents of both colonies could count on naval and air force detachments in direct support.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 113-114. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 41; Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 157; and Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 489-490, 498.

<sup>95</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 114.

<sup>96</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 42. See also Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 72; and Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 177.

<sup>97</sup> Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1007.

<sup>98</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 483, 489, 499-500. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 147-148, 155; and Sullivan, “A Thirst for Glory,” 230.

<sup>99</sup> Distribution of Troops in the Italian Colonies, 2 May 1922, ODI, G2 Report, War Department, RWDGSS, RG165, NARA, Washington, DC. The Italian Army called a company of cavalry “squadron.” In addition, the reference to the Italian Navy support detachment for the colonies in 1922 is taken from two others, more detailed, US War Department G2 Reports, detailing the Italian troops’ consistency in 1927. However, considering that the very first operation of the campaign entailed an amphibious seizure of the city of Misurata Marina in January 1922, with the obvious support of Italian Navy vessels, it is safe to

At the beginning of 1923, the Italian Army unofficially redesigned its Libyan contingents as the Royal Corps of Colonial Troops (one for each colony), the first step of a reorganization based on the French model. The new structure found its officialization on 3 September 1926, with the Royal Decree no. 1608.<sup>100</sup> Table 1 illustrates the composition and strength of the two RCTCs in 1926, period of maximum expansion of the Italian forces during the campaign.<sup>101</sup>

It is necessary to make four observations regarding Italian military means. First, each colonial contingent was under a military commander-in-chief, who reported directly to the governor-general. The forces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica operated separately until 1928, when the Italian government implemented an operational cycle to connect the two colonies.<sup>102</sup> The governor-general represented a critical node between the civilian and the military chain of command. Throughout the campaign, the nomination of active or former military officers in the governor-general's role (except Count Giuseppe Volpi) guaranteed a unified and synchronized approach to civilian-military relations.<sup>103</sup> This is an important point since the lack of unity of effort represents one of the common obstacles in the effective conduct of COIN operations.<sup>104</sup>

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assume that both colonies maintained an assigned naval element throughout the entire campaign. See Distribution of Troops. Colonial Troops–Tripolitania, 23 March 1927, ODI, G2 Report, War Department, RWDGSS, RG165, NARA, Washington, DC. See also Distribution of Troops. Colonial Troops–Cyrenaica, 23 March 1927, ODI, G2 Report, War Department, RWDGSS, RG165, NARA, Washington, DC. For the mention of the Navy's support in the seizure of Misurata Marina see Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 187-192.

<sup>100</sup> Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 61.

<sup>101</sup> In March 1930, the troops of Cyrenaica appeared significantly reduced if compared to the situation of 1927, falling to a strength of 439 officers, 609 NCOs, 2,083 Italian enlisted personnel, and 8,475 indigenous enlisted troops. The historian Saini-Fasanotti does not make any mentions of possible reductions of the troops in Tripolitania in 1930. Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 68-78.

<sup>102</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 64.

<sup>103</sup> For the list of the all the governors-general of the two colonies in the period 1922-1932, see Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 330-334. This structural unified approach is also evident in the colonial warfare manual produced by Colonel Nasi for the Italian Command and Staff Officer School. According to the Italian officer's precepts, “The governor decides on the operation, he defines its character and purpose. The military authority supervises and executes.” See Guglielmo C. Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali” [Colonial operations], manual for the 55th Italian Command and Staff Officer Course (Turin: Scuola di Guerra del Regio Esercito Italiano, 1925-1928), 22.

<sup>104</sup> The historian Edward J. Erickson, in the analysis of the British Malayan COIN campaign, highlights the unique chain of command joining military and civilian components as a vital factor of

Table 1. Composition and Strength of the Italian Forces in Libya in 1926.

Royal Corps of Colonial Troops–Tripolitania	Royal Corps of Colonial Troops–Cyrenaica
One Division of Royal <i>Carabinieri</i> and <i>zaptié</i> (battalion-size unit; the <i>zaptié</i> were indigenous military police units)	One Division of Royal <i>Carabinieri</i> and <i>zaptié</i> (battalion-size unit; the <i>zaptié</i> were indigenous military police units)
Two light infantry battalions ( <i>Cacciatori d’Africa</i> –Italian units)	Four light infantry battalions ( <i>Cacciatori d’Africa</i> –Italian units)
Six Libyan infantry battalions (indigenous units)	One Libyan infantry battalion (indigenous units)
Six mixed Eritrean infantry battalions (indigenous units, included Ethiopian and Yemeni soldiers)	Eight mixed Eritrean infantry battalions (indigenous units, included Ethiopian and Yemeni soldiers)
Seven <i>Savari</i> squadrons (indigenous cavalry units)	Three <i>Savari</i> squadrons (indigenous cavalry units)
One <i>Spahis</i> squadron (indigenous heavy cavalry unit)	Two Saharan <i>Meharist</i> companies (indigenous desert warfare units)
Three Saharan <i>Meharist</i> companies (indigenous desert warfare units)	Five artillery batteries (three Italian field artillery units and two Libyan mountain artillery units)
Seven artillery batteries (three mountain artillery and four field artillery, all indigenous units)	Two engineer companies (Italian units–sappers, miners, and telegraph specialists)
Three engineer companies (Italian units–sappers, miners, and telegraph specialists)	Two armored cars squadron (company-size, Italian unit)
One armored cars squadron (company-size, Italian unit)	One legion of the Italian <i>Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale</i> (Voluntary Militia for the National Security–Italian paramilitary unit)
Combat Service Support elements	Combat Service Support elements
Total strength: 560 officers, 620 NCOs, 4,000 Italian enlisted personnel, 14,000 indigenous enlisted personnel	Total strength: 530 officers, 750 NCOs, 7,600 Italian enlisted personnel, 10,000 indigenous enlisted personnel

*Sources:* created by the author with data drafted from: (1) Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 65-66; (2) Distribution of Troops. Colonial Troops–Tripolitania, 23 March 1927, RG165, NARA; (3) Distribution of Troops. Colonial Troops–Cyrenaica, 23 March 1927, RG 165, NARA.

Second, during the pacification campaign under scrutiny, the Italian commanders relied heavily on indigenous regular units and Libyan irregular bands.<sup>105</sup> Italian colonial commands usually dedicated metropolitan units to static garrison tasks in the coastal areas while employing mainly indigenous units, led by Italian officers, in combat operations in the interior.<sup>106</sup> The

success. See Edward J. Erickson, “Practicing Operational Art in Countering Operations,” *Military Review*, March 2019 Online Exclusive Article (March 2019): 3, accessed 19 August 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2019-OLE/March/Practicing-Operational-Art-in-Countering-Insurgency/>.

<sup>105</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 118, 126-127. See also Nir Arielli, “Colonial Soldiers in Italian Counter-Insurgency Operations in Libya, 1922-1932,” *British Journal for Military History* 1, no. 2 (February 2015): 51-52, 60, accessed 2 July 2020, <http://bjmh.gold.ac.uk/article/view/612/734>.

<sup>106</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 57. Colonel Nasi remarks this point in “Operazioni coloniali,” 77-79.

reason for this choice was threefold. First, the use of African colonial troops represented a form of “political expediency,” allowing the Italian government to offset the risk of political and informational repercussions linked to the loss of Italian conscripts in a colonial conflict. Secondly, although the indigenous units received a military stipend, this was usually lower than the one granted to the regular Italian soldiers. In addition, African personnel were entitled to fewer rations. Therefore, the employment of indigenous formations permitted the Italian government to wage war at a lower financial cost. Lastly, African units were more suitable for the conduct of military operations in Libya. By and large, all the ethnicities of indigenous soldiers at the Italian service (Eritreans, Ethiopians, Yemenis, Libyans) showed innate courage, aggressiveness, an incredible resilience to the local climate, and were excellent fighters and walkers. The irregular bands, constituted chiefly from Berber tribes that had submitted to Italian rule, provided a reserve of troops that Italian commanders could quickly raise to control territory, conduct long-range expeditions, and, most of all, counter the insurgents with their own tactics. In essence, even if the Italian Army did not formulate a real “martial race” theory, as in the British colonial milieu, “early twentieth-century Italian officers and military scholars...developed a set of essentialist beliefs about the levels of effectiveness and virility of the various groups of colonial soldiers they employed.”<sup>107</sup> Notwithstanding the previous point, the indigenous units also presented disadvantages. For example, the Eritrean soldiers had difficulties staying in formation and were challenging to control in battle. The Libyan soldiers were less aggressive than the Eritreans. On top of that, their employment entailed a higher risk of insurgent infiltration in

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<sup>107</sup> Arielli, “Colonial Soldiers in Italian Counter-Insurgency Operations in Libya,” 53-55. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 118-129; and Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 78-80. A specific mention of the presence of Yemeni and Ethiopian soldiers in the Italian colonial units is in Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 61.

the Italian ranks, especially in Cyrenaica.<sup>108</sup> Overall, “these indigenous units represented an experiment that, although not always winning, proved successful over a long period.”<sup>109</sup>

The third important point to mention regarding the Italian colonial military instrument is the specific method adopted for territorial organization. As the Italian units progressively cleared and pacified different areas, they handed those over to civilian control. Therefore, there was a primary distinction between pacified areas and not-yet-stabilized regions.<sup>110</sup> The Italian colonial civilian government controlled the first category of territories, divided into regions, circuits, and districts, whose security was the purview of presidios manned by *Carabinieri* and *zaptié*.<sup>111</sup> On the contrary, the other areas were under the direct supervision of military forces. Their organization envisaged the partition in zones and sub-zones, controlled through a combination of garrisons and mobile units.<sup>112</sup> Every military zone was under an Italian colonel who reported to the commander-in-chief of the colony. The garrisons and outposts of the military zones had a double function: defense and logistical support. This particular form of basing allowed the Italian Army to extend the operational reach of its columns throughout the campaign.<sup>113</sup> In Cyrenaica, Italian colonial forces went as far as developing a network of small outposts called “maneuver pivots” (*perni di manovra*), specifically designed for supporting mobile units during their operations in the pre-desert zone. This particular expedient further enabled the extension of operational reach in military operations.<sup>114</sup> “In this manner,” noted Foreign Minister Carlo

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<sup>108</sup> Arielli, “Colonial Soldiers in Italian Counter-Insurgency Operations in Libya,” 55, 60-61. See also Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 40-41; Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 79-80; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 162-163.

<sup>109</sup> Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 9.

<sup>110</sup> Schanzer, “Italian Colonial Policy in Northern Africa,” 450. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 63. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 156-157.

<sup>112</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 63. See also Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 92-94.

<sup>113</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 63-64.

<sup>114</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 25. See also Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 32.

Schanzer, “the way was paved for the gradual transformation of the government of the colony into one where a civil governor has jurisdiction over the whole area and a military commander is in control of the troops alone.”<sup>115</sup> The military organization of the colonies is a crucial point to consider because, similarly to the French “oil patch” methodology and the modern “Clear, Hold, Build” framework, allowed the Italian forces to consolidate their control over a specific area at the end of a cycle of clearance operations.<sup>116</sup> In addition, the Italian colonial government retained the possibility to develop the stabilized zones through the construction of roads, airfields, railway, and wells.<sup>117</sup>

During the pacification campaign, the Italian colonial commanders shaped the existing doctrine and military thought, initially focused on the conduct of conventional warfighting, into an effective COIN methodology underpinned by a specific set of military capabilities. Unlike the armed forces of other more prominent colonial powers, the Italian Army did not have an official doctrine for colonial warfare at the beginning of the interwar period.<sup>118</sup> This notwithstanding, the small cadre of officers in the lead of Italian COIN operations in Libya successfully devised innovative solutions at different levels.<sup>119</sup> This process of spontaneous adaptation drew upon the hard lessons of World War I and the previous ten years of colonial warfare, leading to the emergence of an unofficial doctrine that inspired the actions of Italian commanders between 1922 and 1931.<sup>120</sup> While Italian commanders did never completely detach from the cultural biases and

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<sup>115</sup> Schanzer, “Italian Colonial Policy in Northern Africa,” 450.

<sup>116</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 92. A specific mention to the French “oil patch” methodology as a model for territorial organization appears in Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 7, 174-175. Italian historian Labanca further reinforces this point in *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 157. For a detailed explanation of the operational framework known as “Clear, Hold, Build,” see US Joint Staff, JP 3-24 (2018), VII-6 to VII-10.

<sup>117</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 94.

<sup>118</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 157.

<sup>119</sup> Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 8. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 144.

<sup>120</sup> Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 8. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 14, 19. Nasi’s manual represented an attempt to formally introduce the lessons of the colonial experience into the Royal Army’s education system. See Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 3.

stereotypes typical of an imperialist setting, they were able to develop a sufficient understanding of the Libyan terrain, its population, and their adversaries.<sup>121</sup>

At the operational level, the Italian maneuverist approach envisaged the harmonious integration of military and political action to achieve a methodical disintegration of the insurgent network, subduing and disarming the hostile tribes one by one.<sup>122</sup> Colonel Nasi provides a telling characterization of the Italian military problem: “It is not an army that we have to defeat, but it is a population in arms that we have to subjugate, disarm, pacify.”<sup>123</sup> On the one hand, political action included propaganda and continuous negotiations with the various tribal chiefs in the assigned operational areas. This approach preyed on existing fissures between the tribes or created new ones to preclude the unification of the insurgent factions under a common leader, making them more vulnerable to subjugation and disarmament.<sup>124</sup> The concept of “prestige,” defined as “the moral dominance that is a consequence of the victorious strength [employment of military force],” was at the center of the idea of political action. This notion also represented a critical link between the political and military spheres.<sup>125</sup> On the other hand, the typical operational methodology of the time called for the combination of light and mobile columns, operating on different axes of advance and usually converging on the main identified territorial objectives.<sup>126</sup> Every column, also known as mobile group, was a combined arms package, task-organized according to the single operation, on the core of at least two infantry battalions, one

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<sup>121</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 19.

<sup>122</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 71, 73; Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 5, 7, 88.

<sup>123</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 72.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71; Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 5. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 52, 57.

<sup>125</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 72.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. See also Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1007; and Dotolo, “A long small war,” 170. The Italian colonial practices envisaged also the employment of a single column in mass along interior lines in specific circumstances, such as when the Italian detachments had to cover long distances or when they had to break strong insurgent concentrations. See Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 184.

artillery section (two guns), and one cavalry squadron.<sup>127</sup> When possible, mobility was augmented with motorized transports and armored cars, providing additional firepower.<sup>128</sup> The use of the radio-telegraph guaranteed command and control and timely coordination during the operations.<sup>129</sup> The employment of aircraft granted coordination, reconnaissance, and fire support to the various maneuver elements. In addition, the air force also provided information collection, emergency resupply, and casualty evacuation.<sup>130</sup> The columns operating along the coast usually enjoyed the support of naval gunfire provided by Italian vessels.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, an overview of the Libyan insurgency is in order. In this regard, the starting point is a consideration of the Clausewitzian trinity maintained by the political scientist James W. Davis in *Clausewitz on Small War*. Contemplating the application of Clausewitzian theory in asymmetric warfare, Davis posits that “Clausewitz’s framework directs our focus to changes in the relationship between the identity of warriors, the means of violence employed, and the purposes to which it is put. For these are the outward expressions of an inner change in the interaction among hatred and enmity, the play of chance, and efforts to subordinate violence to reason in pursuit of political objectives.”<sup>132</sup> Therefore, an initial visualization of the Libyan

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<sup>127</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 84-87. Colonel Nasi also recommends the combination of multiple mobile groups and a reserve component in an “operations group” for major operations. See also Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 186, 314.

<sup>128</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 91-92.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 87.

<sup>130</sup> Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 89-91. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 104-108; Basilio Di Martino, “Capitolo IV: Il contributo della Regia Aeronautica” [Chapter Four: The contribution of the Royal Air Force], in *L'Esercito alla macchia: controguerriglia italiana 1860-1943: l'esperienza italiana di controguerriglia dal brigantaggio alla seconda guerra mondiale*, 379-380.

<sup>131</sup> The amphibious seizure of Misurata Marina (25 January 1922) represents a first evidence of the joint use of naval assets in support of COIN operations. See Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 187-192. Another example is the Italian debacle of Bir-Bilal and Marsa Brega (Cyrenaica) of 10-11 June 1923. After an ambush, an Italian column in dire straits withdrew under insurgents’ pressure towards the coast, covered by the gunboat *Berenice* of the Italian Navy. See Military Operations in Cyrenaica—Current Events Report, 25 June 1923, ODI, G2 Report, War Department, RWDGSS, RG165, NARA, Washington, DC.

<sup>132</sup> Davis, *Clausewitz on Small War*, 18.



insurrection needs to take stock of the rebels' aims, the insurgents' social identity, and the military means adopted by the dissidents.

Drawing from a wide array of insurgent leaders' memoirs and oral histories, Professor Ahmida identifies religion and nationalism as the two main factors underpinning the anti-Italian struggle in Libya.<sup>133</sup> The Italian historian Rochat seems to corroborate this idea, adding another small nuance. He maintains that “[t]he Libyan [man] saw in peril not only his faith and civilization, but also his sources of subsistence; and he really fought for his land and home, even if in the Europeans' eyes those were only hostile deserts.”<sup>134</sup> In essence, the insurgents of both colonies opposed the Italian government to establish an independent Libyan Emirate, as showed by the initiatives of the Tripolitanian Committee of Reforms in concert with the Sanusi Order.<sup>135</sup> Nonetheless, it is essential to consider the different interpretations and agendas of various groups at the local level. As posited by Ahmida, “In action, the meaning of religion and nationalism was conditioned by class and tribal and regional interests.”<sup>136</sup>

With this premise, it becomes paramount to assess the insurgents' identity, looking at their tribal structure and the underlying interactions. Historically, the Tripolitanian tribes did not have a unified political structure, nor an internal hierarchical organization. Those social constructions would have been scarcely compatible with the nomadic culture of the tribes that lived in the interior.<sup>137</sup> Even the so-called “Republican coalition” of tribal chiefs underpinning the proclamation of the *Giamhuriyya el-Trabulsia* proved to be inherently fragile.<sup>138</sup> In contrast,

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<sup>133</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 127. The Italian historian Saini Fasanotti further corroborates this point. See Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 146. A third reference, more specific for the situation in Cyrenaica is Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 166.

<sup>134</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 17.

<sup>135</sup> Colonel Nasi also defines independence as the foremost political objective of the insurgency in his analysis. See Nasi, “La Guerra in Libia,” 71.

<sup>136</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 127.

<sup>137</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 17. See also Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 127; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 185.

<sup>138</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 127.

in Cyrenaica, “[t]he Sanusi had managed to integrate different tribes and ethnic groups in anticolonial solidarity through pan-Islamic ideology.”<sup>139</sup> The Sanusi Brotherhood was a Sufi (mystical) order of orthodox Sunni Muslims with a pronounced missionary proclivity.<sup>140</sup> Initially founded in the Hijaz region (Saudi Arabia) in 1837, the order subsequently moved to Cyrenaica in 1843 and took root there, establishing its capital in the oasis of Giarabub.<sup>141</sup> The isolated nature of this land and the scarce degree of control of the Turkish administration on the interior favored the brotherhood’s gradual transformation in a politico-religious movement integrated into the Arab-Bedouin society.<sup>142</sup> In the following decades, the Sanusi Order gradually expanded throughout North Africa, developing stronger links with Egypt, Fezzan, and Sirtica.<sup>143</sup> The brotherhood extended its influence by establishing a network of lodges (*zawiya*) on the main caravan routes, especially across the Sahara and into Sudan.<sup>144</sup> These lodges were critical nodes of the Sanusi organization, fusing economic, religious, and administrative functions.<sup>145</sup> The final point to highlight is the relation between the Sanusi’s role in shaping a unitarian identity for the Cyrenaican tribes and the insurgency’s leadership. The Sanusi royal family had a marginal function in the anti-Italian struggle. However, the Sanusi sheiks, namely the Bedouin tribal leaders affiliated with the order, played a critical part in maintaining the resistance cohesive and the fighters’ morale high. Among them, Omar al-Mukhtar came to assume the mythical status of a charismatic leader that embodied the most virtuous qualities of both the Sanusi Order and the Bedouin society.<sup>146</sup> In essence, “His [al-Mukhtar’s] militant, anticolonial ideology was rooted in

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<sup>139</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 135.

<sup>140</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 1, 6.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 14.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 71.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 23.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 78.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-169. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 146-147.

a specific socioeconomic organization that enabled the resistance to continue for 10 years in the face of a brutal, modern, fascist army.”<sup>147</sup>

Although it is difficult to estimate the insurgents’ strength, certain reports shed light on the number of rebels in each colony. At the beginning of the 1920s, Tripolitania had an overall population of 500,000.<sup>148</sup> A study published by the Italian *Rivista Militare* (Military Review) in 1907 suggested an overall number of 166,000 indigenous fighters for Tripolitania.<sup>149</sup> The historian Mario Montanari gives a different estimate of 5,000 to 13,000 fighters of the Tarhuna tribe opposing the initial opening of the Italian COIN campaign in northwestern Tripolitania at the beginning of 1923.<sup>150</sup> Concerning Cyrenaica, the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard reports a regular Sanusi army of 2,000 soldiers, equipped with modern rifles, limited machine guns, and artillery pieces, out of a total population of 200,000. The Sanusi could also count on an additional strength of 4,000 “rifles” spread among the tribes.<sup>151</sup> Numbers notwithstanding, all the Libyan tribesmen were used to bearing arms. To make things worse, they could easily acquire weapons from a thriving smuggling network and the military stocks left over by the Turks and Germans at the end of the Great War.<sup>152</sup>

The insurgent forces of both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were of two types: regular forces and irregular bands. The regular forces comprised all the soldiers organized and equipped by the political organization instigating the revolt (Committee of Reforms for Tripolitania and Sanusi Order for Cyrenaica). The irregular bands, instead, included all the fighters of the tribes that

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<sup>147</sup> Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 136.

<sup>148</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 187.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>150</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 115.

<sup>151</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 159. The data concerning the consistency of the Cyrenaican population are drafted from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 243.

<sup>152</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 145. The specific reference to the military stocks left over by the German and Turkish forces is from Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 471.

adhered to the rebellion. Each war band had an average strength of 100 to 300 fighters, drew its resources from the tribe of origin, was under the authority of the tribal chief, and habitually tended to defend its tribal territory.<sup>153</sup> The Tripolitanian war bands were called *mehalla* and usually did not comprise any support element. In contrast, the Cyrenaican bands, known as *duar* (sing. *dor*) or *adwar*, typically moved with their own families and cattle.<sup>154</sup>

The Libyan insurgency followed a common operational approach, based on guerrilla warfare with the military objective of exhausting the Italian forces in the colonies.<sup>155</sup> The insurgent bands could count on an effective intelligence and early warning network. They tended to maintain contact with the opposing forces, constantly trying to exploit the element of surprise to their advantage.<sup>156</sup> The local fighters knew the terrain, could move quickly, strike, and vanish without conceding battle to the adversaries.<sup>157</sup> The preferred form of maneuver adopted by the insurgents was the flanking attack. In this way, they could easily tie down and exhaust opponents enjoying numerical superiority, only to disappear at the crucial moment of the enemy counterattack.<sup>158</sup> The rebels had three principal vulnerabilities at the tactical level. First, they tended to break down when threatened on the flanks and rear because the war bands did not usually fight echeloned in depth. Second, the Libyan fighters were easily scared by machine guns,

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<sup>153</sup> Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 69. See also Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," 87; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 169. As maintained by Evans-Pritchard, in Cyrenaica, it was not uncommon for tribal bands to enlist volunteers from other tribes and even foreign fighters from Sudan.

<sup>154</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 106. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 169-170. Another term in the Italian colonial vocabulary to designate fighting units composed of members of the same tribe was *cabila* (pl. *cabile*). This term applied both to insurgent and allied irregular bands. See Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 12.

<sup>155</sup> Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 70. See also Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," 89.

<sup>156</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 46. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 170-171.

<sup>157</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 171. See also Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 69-70; and Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," 89.

<sup>158</sup> Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 79, 81.

artillery, and aircraft.<sup>159</sup> Third, once committed to a particular course of action, insurgent groups lacked the flexibility to adapt to changing tactical conditions. Without a clear overarching chain of command, the insurgent leaders needed a long process of negotiation when cooperating with other chiefs.<sup>160</sup>

General Ottorino Mezzetti, one of the most experienced Italian commanders in colonial warfare, identified two main sets of tactics adopted by the insurgent war bands. The first model envisaged surprise attacks against critical infrastructures along the main lines of communication (LoC) (such as the railway, wells, or garrisons) and ambushes on military columns and logistic trains. These actions usually entailed the participation of a high number of fighters. The second set of military activities included raids against the tribes loyal to the Italian government, conducted by small numbers of rebels, to scare them into submission and confiscate their resources.<sup>161</sup>

## Campaign Overview

Libya's pacification emerged as the necessary segue to the disastrous attempt of "colonial cooperation" with the most prominent tribal leaders enacted between 1917 and 1921.<sup>162</sup> Count Giuseppe Volpi, Governor of Tripolitania since July 1921, pioneered this process. His work reflected the growing awareness in the Italian political circles that Italy could not settle for a theoretical and legal authority over its colonies. Instead, it needed to concretely control the entire Libyan territory.<sup>163</sup> Two other principles completed the political and military-strategic guidance that informed the Italian pacification campaign, christened by Volpi as "*riconquista*"

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<sup>159</sup> Nasi, "La Guerra in Libia," 79, 86-87. The specific mention to the effects of air power is from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 106.

<sup>160</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 49.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 55, 57.

<sup>162</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 147.

<sup>163</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 107.

(reconquest).<sup>164</sup> The reaffirmation of Italian authority needed to be gradual and the control of Tripolitania took precedence. In other words, this guidance envisaged an initial consolidation over Tripolitania, avoiding a two-front effort from the onset. In this way, Italian forces could optimize the available resources and minimize the tribes' attempt to establish a common front in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.<sup>165</sup> Deriving from Minister Giovanni Amendola and Marshal Pietro Badoglio's strategic vision, this approach would remain almost unvaried throughout the entire pacification campaign. The only change under Mussolini's direction was a significant acceleration of military operations in Cyrenaica.<sup>166</sup>

At what is known today as the operational level of war, the pacification process did not follow an organic and comprehensive plan. Instead, the Italian commanders adopted a step-by-step methodology, reframing each phase upon the conditions that emerged at the end of the previous stage. The main imperative at the beginning of the campaign was to enlarge and consolidate the bubble of Italian influence and control that, for both colonies, embraced only a narrow sector along the coast in 1921.<sup>167</sup> As maintained by historian John Gooch, "[the] detailed design of that strategy would go through a number of iterations as they [the local commanders] faced changing circumstances in the different stages of the campaign and developed operational methods with which to achieve their [the Italian] goals."<sup>168</sup> The wide degree of autonomy bestowed upon the Italian governors and military leaders by the Italian political authorities (both

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<sup>164</sup> Dotolo, "A long small war," 170.

<sup>165</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 147. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 111; and Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 483.

<sup>166</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 148-149. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 221-222.

<sup>167</sup> Montanari, preface to *Libia 1922-1931*, 5.

<sup>168</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1007.

liberal and Fascist ones) was critical to enable such a kind of operational methodology, in some respect very similar to the current concept of operational design.<sup>169</sup>

By and large, after an initial process of consolidation on northern Tripolitania and Cyrenaica between 1922 and 1927, the Italian priorities shifted on connecting the two colonies, with the clearing of the Sirtica region and the oases located along the 29° parallel (Zella, Giofra, and Gialo) in 1928. At the beginning of 1929, Mussolini nominated Marshal Badoglio as governor of both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. This nomination constituted a critical turning point in the campaign. A unified command facilitated the last steps needed to seize the region of Fezzan and the southern part of Cyrenaica, *conditio sine qua non* to ensure the insurgency's defeat.<sup>170</sup> (see Figures 4 and 5).

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<sup>169</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 148. For more details on the operational design process see US Joint Staff, JP 5-0 (2017), chap. IV.

<sup>170</sup> Montanari, preface to *Libia 1922-1931*, 5-6.

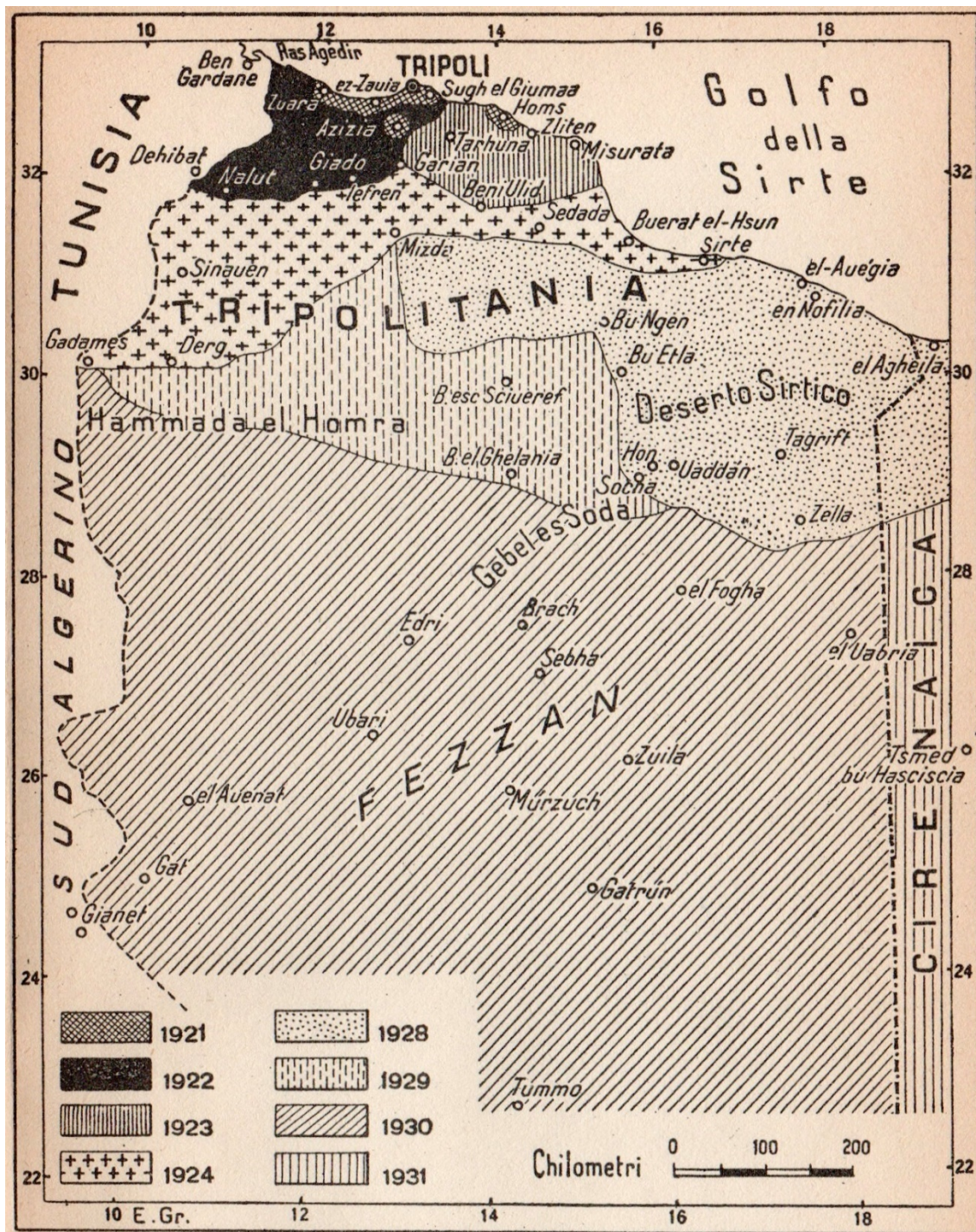


Figure 4. Le tappe della progressiva nostra occupazione della Tripolitania [The phases of our (Italian) progressive occupation of Tripolitania]. Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia Contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, Map 4.



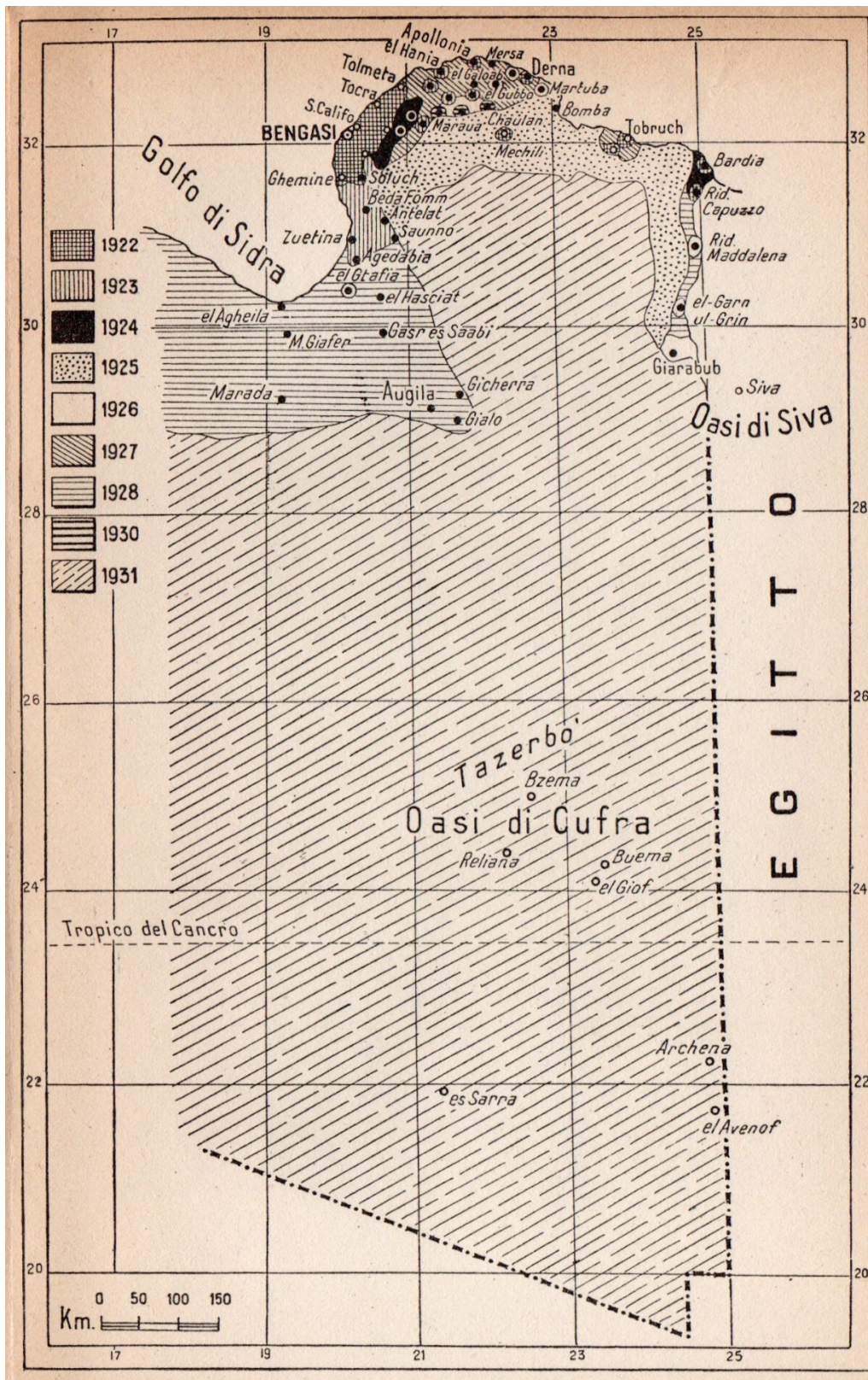


Figure 5. Le tappe della progressiva nostra occupazione della Cirenaica [The phases of our (Italian) progressive occupation of Cyrenaica]. Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia Contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, Map 5.

## Pacification of Northern Tripolitania (1922-1927)

In 1921, the situation in Tripolitania was assuming a grim perspective for the Italian colonial authorities. The Committee of Reforms had started to raise its level of ambition after the settlement of the internecine struggle resulting in the assassination of Ramadàn esc-Scèteui in August 1920. On the one hand, the insurgent forces, now led by Ahmed el-Mràied, chief of the Tarhuna tribe, highlighted repeated efforts to join their cause with the Sanusi. On the other hand, since the beginning of 1921, the rebels had intensified their activities in northern Tripolitania. In January 1921, a 200-man *mehalla* attacked the critical railway node of Azizia, putting it under siege. In October and November, the Arab rebels persecuted the Berber minorities in Nalut and on the Gebel Nefusah (north-western Tripolitania), expelling about 10,000 Berbers to the Gefara, where the Italian authorities protected and housed them. These *cabile* were supportive of the Italian rule and had historical enmity with the Arab tribes. Finally, at the end of 1921, the insurgency started a major surge against the Italian positions and garrisons that, at the time, were concentrated around Tripoli, Zuara, Azizia, and Homs.<sup>171</sup>

Risking the loss of their footholds in Libya, Italian authorities could no longer delay an armed response. The Italian political and military awakening, the *riconquista*, started in January 1922 under Count Giuseppe Volpi's leadership and continued with Lieutenant General Emilio De Bono from July 1925 to December 1928. Brigadier General Alfredo Taranto supervised the military operations as the commander of Italian colonial forces until September 1925, when Brigadier General Giuseppe Malladra took over. From July 1926 to the end of 1927, Major General Luigi Cicconetti was in charge of COIN operations.<sup>172</sup> This phase of the Italian campaign also saw the rise to prominence of a small group of skillful, adaptive, and energetic

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<sup>171</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 471-475. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 185-188; and Dotolo, "A long small war," 169.

<sup>172</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 332, 335. Historian Mario Montanari maintains that, over time, the Arab rebels had expelled a total of 30,000 Berbers from their lands, pushing them towards the Italian-controlled coastal plain. Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 107.

tactical-level commanders. In particular, Colonel Rodolfo Graziani and Colonel Ottorino Mezzetti provided a crucial contribution later in the campaign as operational-level commanders, both in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.<sup>173</sup>

The anti-Italian forces included fighters from the tribes of Tarhuna, Misurata, Orfella, and Sirtica under the command of the Tarhuna chief Ahmed el-Mràied. This leader had started to act as a *de facto* head of state, claiming the rights of collecting taxes, raising armed forces, and administering justice in northern Tripolitania. After the Convention of Sirtica (November 1921), he became the Sanusi Emir's official representative in Tripolitania, confirming the Italian fears that the rebel tribes were rallying under the Sanusi flag.<sup>174</sup>

By and large, this phase of the Italian pacification campaign unfolded in seven operational cycles, between January 1922 and December 1927. The first six cycles (January 1922-December 1924) essentially focused on retaking northern Tripolitania while defeating the insurgent forces.<sup>175</sup> The last one, spanning over three years, basically aimed at maintaining a sufficient level of security in the newly-taken territories, necessary for the consolidation of the Italian civil control and the construction of crucial infrastructure. In this backdrop, the Italian authorities emphasized political action and security operations while protecting the population from insurgent raids originating in Fezzan and Sirtica.<sup>176</sup>

The first operational cycle, executed between January and May 1922, sought to contain the insurgent surge and dislocate their system. The Italian operational approach included the amphibious seizure of Misurata Marina followed by a counteroffensive to create vital breathing space around the Italian garrisons and achieve undisputed control of Azizia.<sup>177</sup> On 26 January

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<sup>173</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1007; Saini Fasanotti, "*Vincere!*" 36; Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 149.

<sup>174</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 475, 498.

<sup>175</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 150.

<sup>176</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1009-1010; Dotolo, "A long small war," 171.

<sup>177</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 150; Dotolo, "A long small war," 169-170.

1922, an Italian task force of two Eritrean battalions and one section of combat engineers (1,500 men), including four mountain artillery pieces, thirty-four machine guns, supported by multiple navy vessels, conducted a surprise amphibious attack on the port of Misurata Marina.<sup>178</sup> This location had been on the Italian priority target list for quite a long time since it was a critical commercial node. Furthermore, Misurata Marina had been the cradle of the first Tripolitanian Republic under Ramadàn esc-Scèteui, and supposedly housed a massive depot of war materials.<sup>179</sup> Although the Italian contingent was quickly able to seize a foothold, an intense insurgent counterstroke made the enlargement of the lodgment more difficult. Following the arrival of reinforcements on 9 February, the Italian forces could expand their perimeter and consolidate their control over the city, arriving at a temporary truce signed on 28 February.<sup>180</sup> The insurgent replied in kind with a new offensive surge in all the Gefara, focusing on the critical nodes of Azizia and ez-Zauia, in open violation of the established truce. After a hasty reinforcement of Azizia using airlift, Governor Volpi unleashed the entire colonial contingent to repel the insurgent offensive (fifteen infantry battalions supplemented by ground and air combat support units). Organized in small columns of about 2,000 men, the Italian forces methodically cleared the coastal plain, reacquiring control of Azizia and the Gefara between 6 April and 16 May 1922.<sup>181</sup>

After a brief operational pause and political preparation executed with the spread of pro-Italian leaflets, Italian offensive operations resumed on 28 May 1922, at the beginning of the second operational cycle. The military objective was to clear the Berber lands of the Gebel

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<sup>178</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 189; Dotolo, "A long small war," 169.

<sup>179</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 189; Dotolo, "A long small war," 169. Ciasca reports that Ramadàn esc-Scèteui, chief of the tribes of Misurata, controlled all the military stocks and money left behind by the Turks and German advisors at the end of the Great War. Although this tribal leader had died in August 1920, it is likely that he could have stored these resources in Misurata Marina. Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 471.

<sup>180</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 189-192.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-200; Dotolo, "A long small war," 170.

Nefusah (occupied by Arab rebels) and facilitate the return of the rightful inhabitants, winning the allegiance of a powerful native defense force. Operating on multiple mobile groups, supported by Berber irregular bands and aviation, the Italian forces quickly pushed to el-Giosc (seized on 12 June) and liberated Giado and Nalut (19 June). This cycle allowed the Italian forces to consolidate their alliance with the Berber forces while also clearing the northwestern part of Tripolitania and enabling its control by, with, and through the Berber indigenous forces.<sup>182</sup>

The next step after the summer envisaged a thrust into Tarhuna, the heart of the insurgent forces under the Committee of Reforms. This territorial objective constituted the focus of the third operational cycle, with the intermediate goals of seizing the rebel bastions of Jefren and Garian. Between 28 and 31 October 1922, the mobile group “Gebel,” commanded by Colonel Graziani, enveloped the city of Jefren from the south, moving from a forward staging area in Giado. Overwhelmed and under pressure, the insurgent forces withdrew to the Gefara, where another column, under Colonel Pizzari, was waiting for them. This action ended with the city’s occupation and the extension of Italian control eastward, along the *gebel*. On 15 November 1921, three columns converged on and occupied Garian moving along exterior lines, so closing the Italian vise around Tarhuna (see Figure 6). Following this last development, The Italian forces interdicted the insurgent LoC between the eastern and western parts of northern Tripolitania, identified and arrested the middle and low-level insurgent commanders operating in the area, and sequestered more than 1,600 weapons. The capture of Tarhuna, completed on 6 February 1923, closed the third operational cycle. On 29 January 1922, three columns moving from Garian, the Gefara, and Msellata (also known as Kussabat, located eighty-five kilometers south-east of Tripoli), for a total of about 6,000 men, executed a convergent maneuver on Tarhuna. Navy armed vessels supported the Italian advance by shelling Sliten (also known as Zliten) and Misurata and interdicting possible insurgent reinforcements. The three columns progressively

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<sup>182</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 200-202; Dotolo, “A long small war,” 170-171.

defeated the insurgent *cabile* opposing their advance, finally seizing the city with minimal losses. The fall of Tarhuna, the capital of the Committee of Reforms, inflicted a decisive blow to the rebels' morale.<sup>183</sup> This action also ensured the Italians control of one of the most fertile areas of the colony. Ahmed el-Mràied escaped from the city on 3 February, abandoning any further intention of resistance and suggesting to the other tribal chiefs to surrender to the Italian authorities. Overall, this operation resulted in the capture of a sizable quantity of weapons (including artillery pieces, machine guns, and light mortars) and about 1,500 fighters, pushing the remaining opposing forces towards Misurata.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 204-210; Dotolo, "A long small war," 171; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1007-1008; and Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 490-491.

<sup>184</sup> Whereas Dotolo reports only 1,500 prisoners, Ciasca asserts that the Italian killed 1,500 rebels and captured about 3,000. In addition, Ciasca specifies that the Italian losses amounted to forty-seven killed in action (KIA) and 240 wounded in action (WIA). Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 491; and Dotolo, "A long small war," 171.

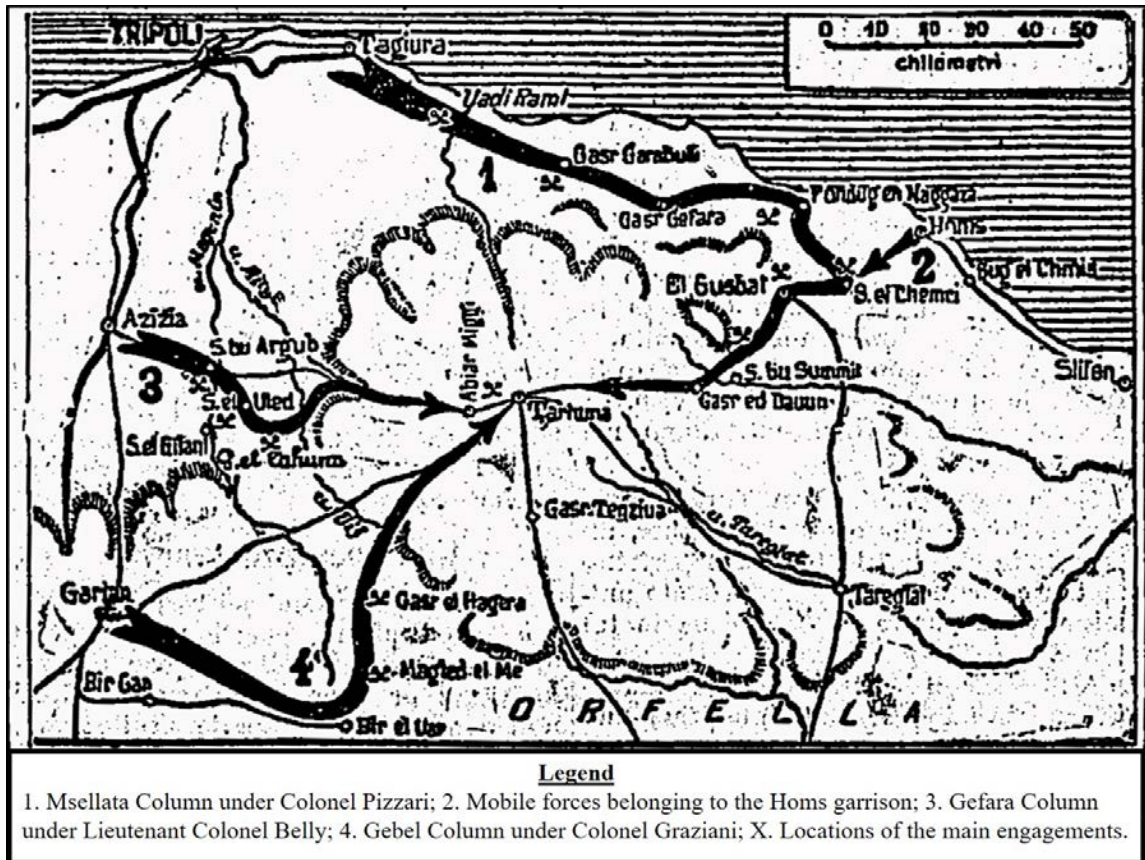


Figure 6. The Capture of Tarhuna, 29 January-3 February 1923. Map from Military Operations in Tripolitania, 13 February 1923, ODI, G2 Report, War Department, RWDGSS, RG165, NARA, Washington, DC. Legend created by author.

The fourth operational cycle inflicted the *coup de grâce* to the rebel network in northern Tripolitania. The Italian authorities started their consolidation and a methodical clearing of the territories conquered in the last cycles.<sup>185</sup> At the same time, the RCTC reorganized the allocated forces into two main elements, under Colonels Graziani and Pizzari. On 21 February 1923, the Italian forces conducted a two-pronged attack from Tarhuna and Msellata. The colonial columns pushed through the Sahel of Homs and Sliten, seizing the latter on 23 February and the surrounding oases on the next day. The Italian mobile groups converged on Misurata from those positions, overwhelming all the rebel defenders by 26 February. At the end of this cycle, the

<sup>185</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 491.

Italian authorities completed a broad sweep of all northern Tripolitania, finally asserting their power on the insurgency's original capital, the birthplace of the *Giamhuriyya*.<sup>186</sup>

The fifth operational cycle would start at the end of 1923. In the meantime, the Italian forces had to tackle three main issues. First, the remaining insurgent leaders asked for support from the Sanusi commander Safi ed-Din. The latter sent a contingent of reinforcements to Tripolitania in July 1923.<sup>187</sup> As a result, the local insurgency found the will and the strength to conduct a large counteroffensive against the Italian garrisons in Misurata, Tarhuna, and Kussabat.<sup>188</sup> The territorial organization put in place during the fourth cycle, together with the integration of five reinforcement battalions sent from Italy, allowed the Italian forces to repel the insurgent attack. The insurgent forces fell back to the valley of Sedada, reorganizing for further operations under the brothers Ibrahim and Ahmed esc-Scèteui. The Orfella tribe, under the command of Abd en-Nebi Belker, did not take part in the last surge, maintaining a neutral stance inside their territories.<sup>189</sup> Second, while defending the newly-acquired lands, the Italians had to prepare their forces for the next operational cycle. On the one hand, the Italian units conducted an intense reconnaissance activity to identify possible pockets of resistance.<sup>190</sup> On the other hand, the RCTC adjusted its posture and basing to extend its operational reach in anticipation of the next cycle. For example, the Italian authorities built a new airfield in Tarhuna to supplement the already existing infrastructures in Tripoli, Misurata Marina, and Homs.<sup>191</sup> Last, the Italian

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<sup>186</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 492; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 210; Dotolo, "A long small war," 171; and Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1008.

<sup>187</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 115.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 115; Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 492; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 210-211.

<sup>189</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 115.

<sup>190</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 210.

<sup>191</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 493.



authorities facilitated and supported the repopulation of the newly-acquired areas. To provide an example, in this period, 19,000 locals returned to Misurata and 13,600 to Sliten.<sup>192</sup>

The preparation of the fifth operational cycle started in September 1923. The main objectives were the clearing of Sedada Valley and the subjugation of the Orfella tribe. The Orfella territories were a critical node in the caravan route networks connecting northern Tripolitania with Sirtica and Fezzan. Furthermore, the Italian authorities could not ignore the potential threat represented by the still untamed Orfella tribe.<sup>193</sup> Colonel Mezzetti received the task of attacking Sedada, while Graziani, now wearing the rank of brigadier general, had the political responsibility of disarming the Orfella and occupying their territories.<sup>194</sup> As maintained by historian John Gooch, “The action now planned in Tripolitania reflected a combined military and political strategy which made optimum use of Italian force in a situation in which tribal rivalries could be utilised to advantage.”<sup>195</sup> On 23 December 1923, Mezzetti’s forces, operating in three columns, enveloped the valley of Sedada from the south, overwhelming and defeating the insurgent forces (see Figure 7). On 23 December 1923, after a converging maneuver on Ben Ulid, Graziani’s columns encircled the city and ultimately occupied it on 27 December. The ground and air elements of Graziani’s assault force received precise rules of engagement to facilitate the submission of the local population. The insurgent forces survived to the Italian sweeps repaired to Sirtica, at that moment outside of Italian reach.<sup>196</sup> During this operational cycle, the RCTC command experimented with small mobile groups, operating at support distance and resupplied

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<sup>192</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 210.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 213; Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 115.

<sup>194</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 115; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 213-216; Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1008.

<sup>195</sup> Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1008.

<sup>196</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 215-218; Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1008-1009; Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 115-116.

by mobile logistical columns, to achieve multiple and simultaneous politico-military objectives over a large swathe of territory.<sup>197</sup>

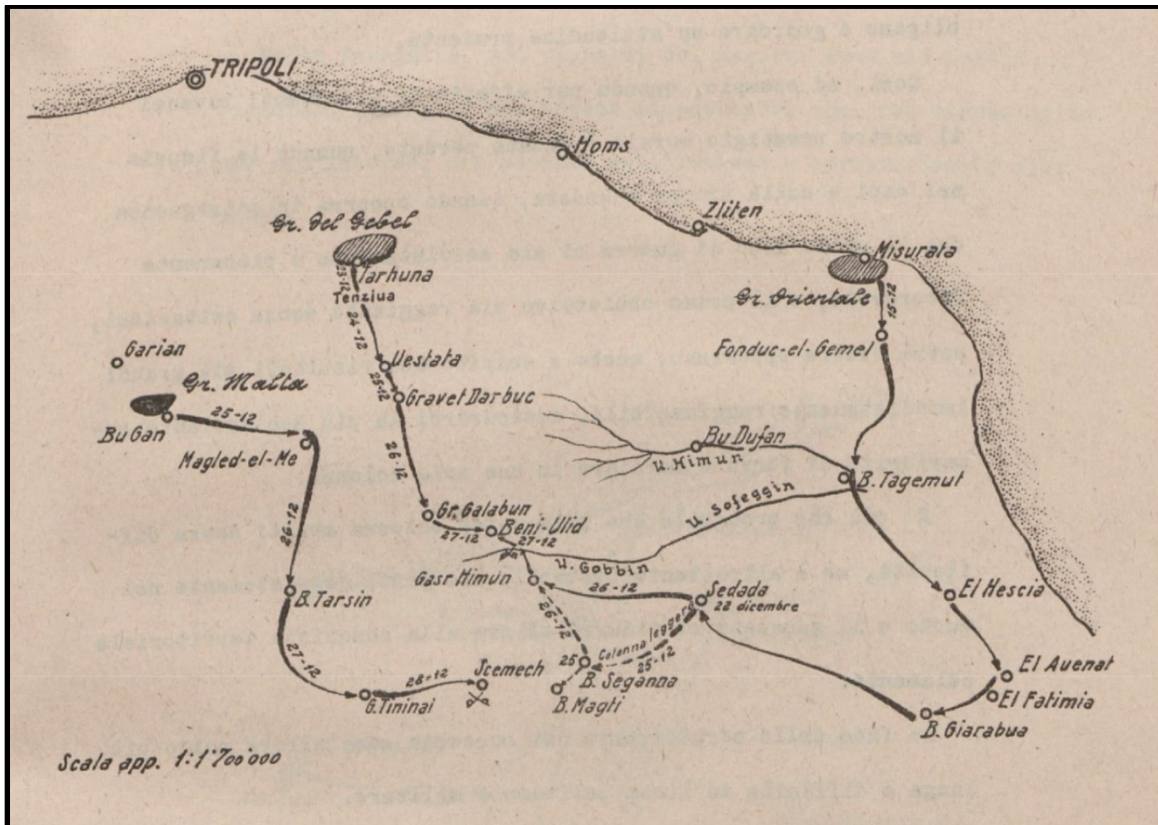


Figure 7. The Capture of Beni Ulid, from 15 to 29 December 1923. Sketch from Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 183.

Covering the entire span of 1924, the sixth cycle focused on consolidating gains and creating a strong perimeter around the territories of northern Tripolitania. In the first half of 1924, the RCTC shifted its attention westward, down to the border with Tunisia. First, an Italian task force, composed of a reinforced Eritrean battalion, a colonial cavalry squadron, and a *Meharist* squadron, moved from Nalut on 7 February, reaching Derg on 12 February and Gadames on 15 February. In this way, the Italian authorities could better enact border control and interdict insurgent ratlines to and from Tunisia. A series of raids conducted by an irregular band at the command of Major Ettore A. Galliani followed up with the intent of subduing the insurgents of

<sup>197</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 216; Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 152-153.

the Zintan tribe in the Ghibla.<sup>198</sup> In the second half of 1924, the RCTC directed its efforts eastward, thrusting into Sirtica to disperse the last insurgents' pockets in and around Sirte. Colonel Mezzetti was responsible for this task. Leveraging political action to negotiate a surrender with Ibrahim esc-Scéteui, he simultaneously closed the Italian vise around Sirte.<sup>199</sup> On 20 November 1924, an assault force commanded by Mezzetti moved in to deal the final blow against the insurgents in Sirtica. After a brief battle to occupy Sirte on 27 November, the column keyed on esc-Scéteui's camp in Gasr Bu Hadi (eighteen kilometers south-east of Sirte). After a forced march, Mezzetti's detachment closed in and defeated the rebel forces. Capitalizing on this engagement to establish a firm foothold in this location, the Italians also severed the primary connection between the Tripolitanian insurgency and the Sanusi.<sup>200</sup>

The seventh cycle started on 1 January 1925. At this time, Governor Volpi suspended the Fundamental Charter and reorganized the colonial territory. The governor assigned Jefren, Garian, and Tarhuna to colonial civil authorities while keeping the southern part of Tripolitania under General Graziani's responsibility.<sup>201</sup> Volpi also initiated the build-up of critical colonial infrastructures, especially garrisons and road-railway networks. These measures were necessary to valorize the colony and enhanced Italian operational reach in anticipation of future operations in the southern desert wastes of Tripolitania.<sup>202</sup> In thirty-six months of operations, Italian authorities had effectively extended their control span, securing the most vital areas of

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<sup>198</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 219.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 118-119.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 119; Dotolo, "A long small war," 171.

<sup>202</sup> Dotolo, "A long small war," 171. Historian Raffaele Ciasca mentions the impressive build up of critical infrastructures enacted by the Italian authorities in his work. However, he does not reference it to a specific period, but he makes more a general appraisal related to Tripolitania for the period 1921-1932. Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 538-542.

Tripolitania while disrupting the fragile alliance known as the Committee of Reforms.<sup>203</sup> During the seventh operational cycle, the Italian focus shifted from combat to security and stabilization. Lieutenant General De Bono, who succeeded to Volpi in July 1925, initially appealed to Mussolini to fund an expedition to pacify Fezzan and control the border between Tripolitania and Algeria. The *Duce* repulsed this proposal, supposedly for lack of resources. It is important to remember that, at this time, the pacification campaign in Cyrenaica was ongoing and the Italian political authorities had now to sustain operations on two fronts.<sup>204</sup> For this reason, De Bono articulated and implemented an operational approach focused on three principles. First, the Italian authorities had to exert constant political pressure on the tribes to keep them divided, according to the classic principle of *divide et impera*.<sup>205</sup> Second, the colonial forces had to maintain incessant territorial control, granting security for the Italian installations and protecting the subdued population from rebel raids, primarily from Fezzan.<sup>206</sup> Last, Italian authorities had to enact a civil action program to reassert “Italy’s superiority and right to rule, while respecting local customs and religion.”<sup>207</sup>

By and large, this last operational cycle did not see dramatic evolutions. Italian authorities succeeded in maintaining control of the situation.<sup>208</sup> However, during 1926 and 1927, Italian leadership (both in Libya and Italy) increasingly grasped the inevitable necessity of countering insurgent forces of the brothers Sef en Nasser, operating from the oases of the 29°

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<sup>203</sup> During this period, the RCTC suffered a total of 620 KIA, 1924 WIA, and 38 missing in action (MIA). On the other hand, the rebel forces losses supposedly amounted to 6,500 KIA and 13,000 WIA. Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 119.

<sup>204</sup> Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1009. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 221-222.

<sup>205</sup> Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1009-1010. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 222-223; and Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 494.

<sup>206</sup> Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1009. See also Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 494.

<sup>207</sup> Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1009. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 223; and Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 494.

<sup>208</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell’Italia contemporanea da Assab all’impero*, 494.

parallel. Together with the submission of the Mogarba tribe in southern Sirtica, this measure was a necessary precondition for a further push in the remote area of Fezzan. As long as this region remained out of Italian reach, Nasser's forces would retain sanctuary to harass the Italian garrisons and the local populations in northern Tripolitania.<sup>209</sup> In the meantime, however, in light of the limited economic resources allocated to the colonies of North Africa, the operations in Cyrenaica would retain priority over the final pacification of Tripolitania.<sup>210</sup>

### Initial Operational Cycles in Cyrenaica (1923-1927)

At the beginning of 1923, the situation in Cyrenaica was still relatively stable, although not favorable to the colonial authorities. Italian forces held only a fifty-kilometer-deep strip of land along the coast from Ghemina to Tolmeta. Furthermore, there were Italian-controlled enclaves in Apollonia, Derna, and Tobruk, surrounded by five Italo-Sanusi mixed camps.<sup>211</sup> Following the treaty of bu-Mariam, the Sanusi had committed to close those camps in eight months. However, more than a year later, these garrisons were still active. Even worse, the Italian authorities were aware of the proliferation of several illegal military camps under Sanusi rule. In essence, not only the Sanusi Brotherhood evidenced continuous efforts to join forces with the Tripolitanian insurgency, but it also instigated a surge of violence against Italian patrols and infrastructure during 1922.<sup>212</sup> See Figure 8 for the distribution of Italian and Sanusi forces in early 1923.

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<sup>209</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 222-226.

<sup>210</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 123.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 173-174; *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 499; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 38.

<sup>212</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 10. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 112-113, 115, 118; and Dotolo, "A long small war," 172.

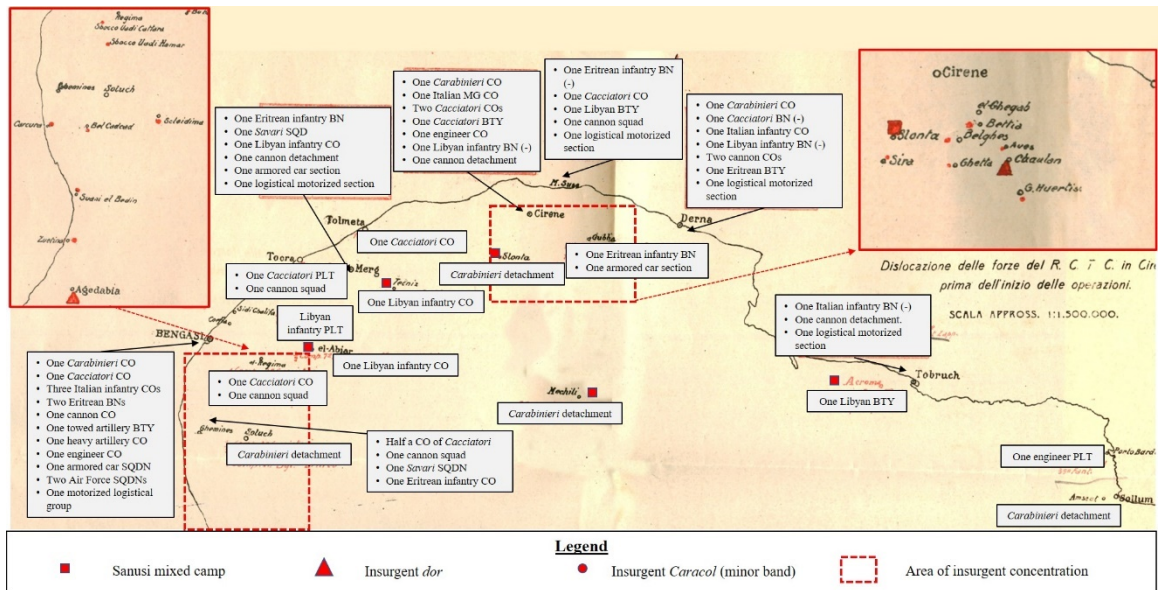


Figure 8. Distribution of Italian and Sanusi Forces before March 1923. Background image from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 392-393. Clippings in the call-out boxes and additional information from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 390-391. Text boxes and legend created by author.

Before escaping to Egypt in December 1922, Mohammed Idris had delegated his brother, Mohammed er-Redà, and his cousin, Safi al-Din, as political and religious representatives of the brotherhood.<sup>213</sup> At the end of 1923, however, the Omar al-Mukhtar, an old and respected *akuan* (Sanusi chief), emerged as the order's *de facto* military and political leader, namely the General Representative (*En Naib el-Am*) of the Emir.<sup>214</sup> During the pacification of Cyrenaica, the Grand Sanusi continued to direct the resistance, although maintaining a low profile to avoid issues with the Egyptian and British authorities.<sup>215</sup> The historical Sanusi connection with Egypt represented a critical factor in the survival and support of the Cyrenaican efforts. The village of Sollum and the oases of Giarabub and Kufra were, in this sense, critical nodes of the Sanusi traffics with Egypt. These activities did not only provide precious resources for the insurrectionists. Rather,

<sup>213</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 155.

<sup>214</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 121. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 12, 58; Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 169-170.

<sup>215</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 155.

contraband with Egypt implied financial speculation on a black market network that drafted precious resources away from the Italian coffers.<sup>216</sup>

Lieutenant General Luigi Bongiovanni became the Governor of Cyrenaica in January 1923. During this phase, two other superior officers would replace Bongiovanni in this role: Lieutenant General Ernesto Mombelli, who took over from Bongiovanni in May 1924, and Lieutenant General (MSVN) Attilio Teruzzi, who supplanted the latter in November 1926. The colony in Cyrenaica sported a peculiar politico-military structure since Bongiovanni and Mombelli were double-hatted as commanders of troops during their mandate. In contrast, the newly-promoted Brigadier General Ottorino Mezzetti became Cyrenaica RCTC commander with the advent of Teruzzi.<sup>217</sup>

General Bongiovanni arrived in Benghazi with a clear political mandate from Mussolini: the time for compromise in Cyrenaica was over and the Italian forces had to take the initiative.<sup>218</sup> Therefore, the newly-appointed governor asked Mohammed er-Redà to comply with the terms of the treaties in effect as a demonstration of his *bona fides*. The Sanusi leader's reply was evasive at best. In light of the Sanusi default and indifference, Bongiovanni decided to act, giving tangible

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<sup>216</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 16, 60-64, and 209. With respect to the important role of Giarabub as a caravan node between Egypt and Cyrenaica, see Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 503; and See Italy's Right to Giarabub and Egyptian Nationalism, 20 March 1925, ODI, G2 Report, War Department, RWDGSS, RG165, NARA, Washington, DC. The role of the oasis of Kufra as a node of the trade network between Egypt and Cyrenaica in 1929 is from Ralph A. Bagnold, *Lybian Sands: Travel in a Dead World* (London: Eland, 2012), chap. 7. Kindle edition. For a specific reference of the Sanusi draft of supplies from Egypt see Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 155. Historian Ali A. Ahmida highlights the exploitation of the Sahara trade enacted by the Sanusi order in *The Making of Modern Libya*, 101.

<sup>217</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 333-335. The MSVN (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*) was the Voluntary Militia for National Security, better known as the Blackshirts, was the paramilitary force of the Fascist Party. After 1923, it evolved into a volunteer militia.

<sup>218</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 148-149. Although not mentioning specific instructions from Mussolini, General Graziani asserts that the Fascist government sent General Bongiovanni to restore the Italian prestige and authority. Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 11.

evidence of the Italian determination. The process of pacification in Cyrenaica had finally begun.<sup>219</sup>

Four main operational cycles summarize the entirety of Italian COIN operations in Cyrenaica between 1923 and 1927. Bongiovanni's decision to attack the Sanusi initiated the first cycle that lasted from March to September 1923. In this period, the Sanusi opposed "organized resistance" to the Italian measures. In other words, they fought similarly to the Tripolitanian insurgency with poor results. Towards the end of the cycle, however, the Sanusi-led insurgency changed its tactics, embracing guerrilla warfare in full to offset the Italian numerical and technological superiority.<sup>220</sup> Bedouin tribes were the principal adherents to the Sanusi irregular struggle, whereas the Arab inhabitants of the coastal region remained neutral. However, as maintained by Evans-Pritchard, these townsmen most likely sympathized with the rebel cause. Moreover, the Bedouin community was not a monolithic block. The Cyrenaican semi-nomadic tribes (Baraghta, Arafa Auaghir, part of the Dorsa, most of the Abeidat), historically linked to the coastal region, tended to be more passive to the Italian influence. In contrast, the Bedouin nomadic tribes (Mogarba, Southern Auaghir, most of the Abid, and part of the Abdeidat), historically more independent from the Ottoman authority due to their itinerant existence, emerged as the staunchest supporters of the Sanusi struggle. Overall, the Italian-Sanusi duel for population control revolved around the semi-nomadic tribes.<sup>221</sup>

Bongiovanni's opening move for the first operational cycle was a surprise attack to disband the Italian-Sanusi mixed and illegal camps in the proximity of the colonial defensive perimeter. Between 6 and 10 March 1923, two columns, including seven infantry battalions, two

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<sup>219</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 11. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 120; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 38-39.

<sup>220</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 245. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 159; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1012; and Dotolo, "A long small war," 173.

<sup>221</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 159-161.



cavalry squadrons, and two bands, systematically overpowered the rebel camps.<sup>222</sup> Overall, this first offensive was only a partial success: the Italians were able to kill only 12 rebels, capturing 168.<sup>223</sup> The next step was the seizure of Agedabia, the main center of power of the Sanusi Order. Between 19 and 21 April, two columns conducted an enveloping maneuver from the east, seizing the city. The defenders offered a weak resistance and the Italian units dispatched seventy-two Sanusi fighters. On 1 May 1923, with the Sanusi capital under control, General Bongiovanni declared the treaties with the Sanusi as void and proclaimed a state of siege.<sup>224</sup>

The last step included reconnaissance, clear, and search operations in the territories of the Abid tribe (south of Al-Marj) and Mogarba (Cyrenaican Sirtica, south-west of Agedabia) tribe, conducted from the end of April to September 1923. Two points are of particular interest. First, the Italians suffered a heavy defeat in Bir Bilal and Mersa Brega on 10-11 June. Inaccurate information, adverse weather limiting air support, and sandy, severely restricted terrain contributed to the decimation of two mobile columns (one mounted and the other dismounted). These were poised to attack what the Italian command had assessed as two small Mogarba camps. Prey of the surprise attack from a large Mogarba band, the colonial troops lost 332 men, with 77 wounded service members, at the price of 200 enemies KIA and 400 WIA.<sup>225</sup> This episode highlights that the insurgent fighters were by no means adversaries to underestimate, especially when terrain, weather, and human mistakes nullified the advantage of technology and superior firepower. Second, recognizing the limited effectiveness of more conventional tactics and the enemy's elusive nature, the Italian units resorted to the typical Arab scheme called *razzia*

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<sup>222</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 247. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 11; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 174.

<sup>223</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 34.

<sup>224</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 247-248. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 12; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 174.

<sup>225</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 248. See also Military Operations in Cyrenaica—Current Events Report, 25 June 1923, RG165, NARA.

(raid).<sup>226</sup> One of the first forms of population-centric tactics, this traditional Arab method of warfare envisaged surprise incursions on Bedouins camps to search for insurgents.<sup>227</sup> When the raiding troops detected rebels' presence or affiliation, the soldiers proceeded to confiscate cattle and destroy crops and tents in concert with the ground commander's decisions or, in more delicate instances, of accompanying political officials' orders.<sup>228</sup> As Professor Thomas Rid maintains, this methodology represented one of the first rudimentary forms of economic warfare against the insurgents and aimed at intimidating the population and weakening the rebels' support base with their own tactics.<sup>229</sup>

In the aftermath of the first operational cycle, almost 21,000 indigenous people from the areas of Benghazi, Agedabia, and al-Marj submitted to Italian rule. However, Italian operations did not attain a decisive defeat of their opponents. During the winter season, the Sanusi fighters retreated to the south-eastern part of the Gebel Akhdar, one of the most impervious and compartmentalized zones, to reorganize their forces.<sup>230</sup> The second cycle covered the period 1924-1925 and saw repeated Italian efforts on the *gebel* to search and destroy the *duar* of the various nomadic tribe, so protecting the coastal zone. At the end of 1923, RCTC Cyrenaica received two Eritrean battalions and one MSVN legion (battalion-level unit) as reinforcements

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<sup>226</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 175.

<sup>227</sup> Professor Thomas Rid defines the *razzia* as “a turning point in modern strategy.” First adopted by the French colonial units in Algeria in the 1840s, this new tactic was part of “the first operational concept in modern expeditionary warfare that put the local population front and center.” Thomas Rid, “Razzia: A Turning Point in Modern Strategy,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 4 (September 2009): 617-618, accessed 21 November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903153449>.

<sup>228</sup> Historian Saini Fasanotti specifies that the *razzia* was a traditional Bedouin tactic, recognized in the Arab war laws. The consulted historiography on this subject highlights a debate on this kind of Italian actions. On the one hand, Saini Fasanotti, drawing from directives, orders, memoirs of Italian commanders, stresses strong efforts of the colonial officers to contain the level of violence, protect the population, and avoid atrocities in this kind of offensive activities. On the other hand, anthropologist Evens-Pritchard tends to underscore a more brutal side of the Italian behavior. See Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 52-55, 248; Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 175.

<sup>229</sup> Rid, “Razzia,” 619-620.

<sup>230</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 175-176; Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 12. See also Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1012; and Dotolo, “A long small war,” 173.

from Tripolitania.<sup>231</sup> During 1924, Italian operations converged around Maraua, el-Derg, and the Auaghir territories (on the plateau), totaling around 600 insurgent losses, the capture of 97 rifles, and the confiscation of 25,000 head of cattle.<sup>232</sup> In the winter of 1924, the RCTC's focus shifted on eastern *gebel* to interdict the Sanusi smuggling routes leading to Egypt.<sup>233</sup>

In this period, Lieutenant General Mombelli took over from Bongiovanni as governor and military commander, introducing innovative operational measures. First, he emphasized the reduction of the columns' size and the collection of information. These were essential requirements to build up tempo, speed, and mobility, enabling the Italian mobile forces to detect and encircle insurgent camps before the rebels could disperse.<sup>234</sup> Second, he mandated the construction of a network of small outposts covering the main wells on the *gebel*, called "marginal line," with the function of cutting off the *duar* from the subdued tribes but also to provide sustainment and refuge for the columns continuously operating on the plateau coordinated by aviation. In historian John Gooch's words, "[T]hen new governor, Gen. Ettore Mombelli, switched to a fresh strategy which combined stasis with movement: a chain of fixed garrisons was established to isolate the 'zone of dissidence' from the hinterland and to act as logistical bases from which convergent columns using aircraft to achieve surprise and radio to coordinate their movements could strike at enemy concentrations."<sup>235</sup>

Mombelli's new methodology paid great dividends in 1925. The RCTC executed two major sweeps, one in February, concentrated on the central plateau, and the second in April, with a further thrust into the southern slopes of central *gebel*, around Serual and Sciaafa (see Figures 9

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<sup>231</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 12-13. See also Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1012.

<sup>232</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 249; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1012.

<sup>233</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 502.

<sup>234</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 250, 252.

<sup>235</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1012-1013. General Attilio Teruzzi also list the creation of the outpost network on the *gebel* as one of the pivotal measures of Mombelli's approach. See Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 25. The concept of marginal line is taken from Graziani's account regarding this specific matter. Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 13.

and 10). Aviation and signals were crucial. While the Italian Air Force provided coordination, reconnaissance, surveillance, and kinetic strikes, radio stations allowed the Italian columns to maintain contact and expedite ground maneuver. The total tally for these operations was 500 insurgents KIA, 40 camps destroyed, and about 35,000 heads of cattle captured or butchered at the price of limited Italian losses. Furthermore, as a further result, the colonial authorities received the submission of around 11,000 tribesmen.<sup>236</sup>

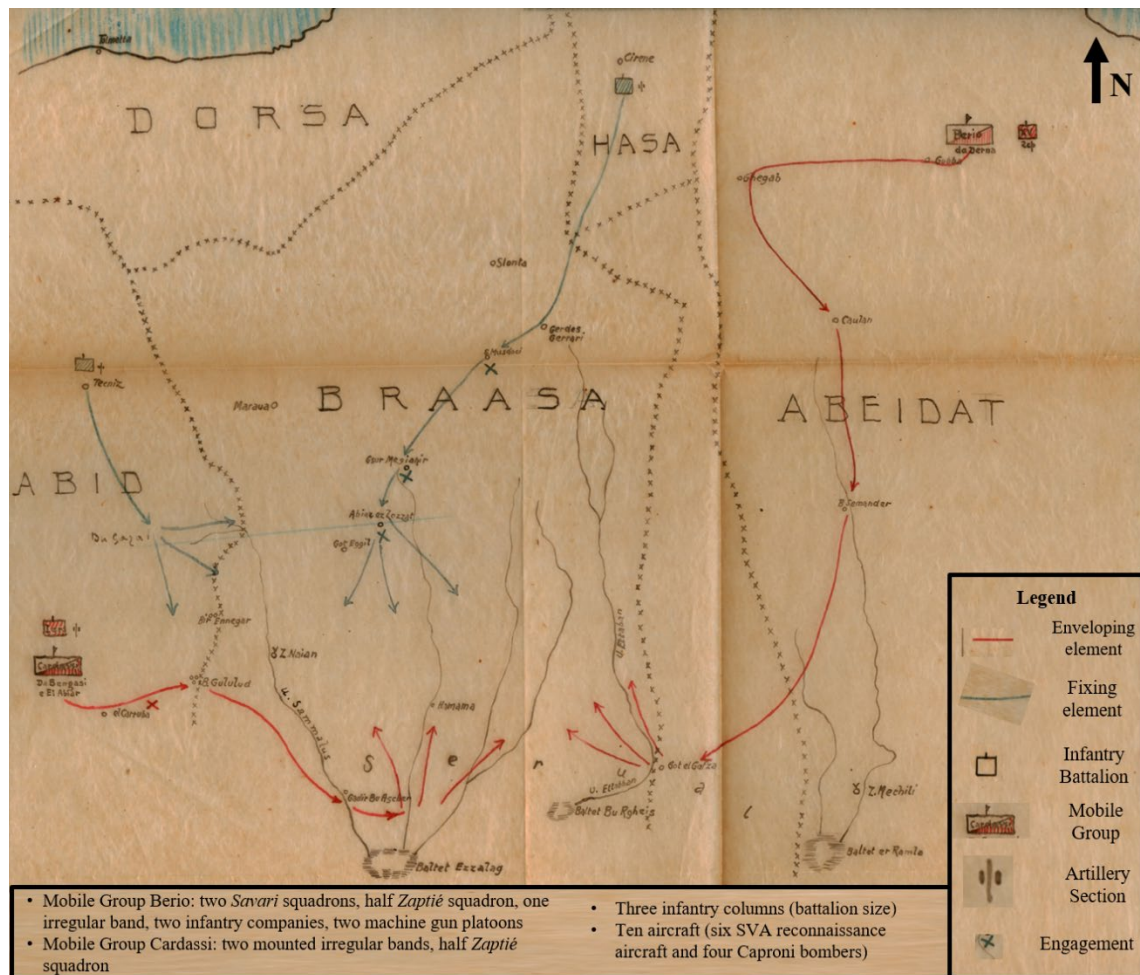


Figure 9. Clearing Operations on the *Gebel* in February 1925. Sketch from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 398-399. The author created the legend and task organization with data from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 250.

<sup>236</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 250-252. The data illustrating the overall results of the 1925 operations are from Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 121. Historian John Gooch also depicts a comprehensive description of the 1925 operations in “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1013-1014.

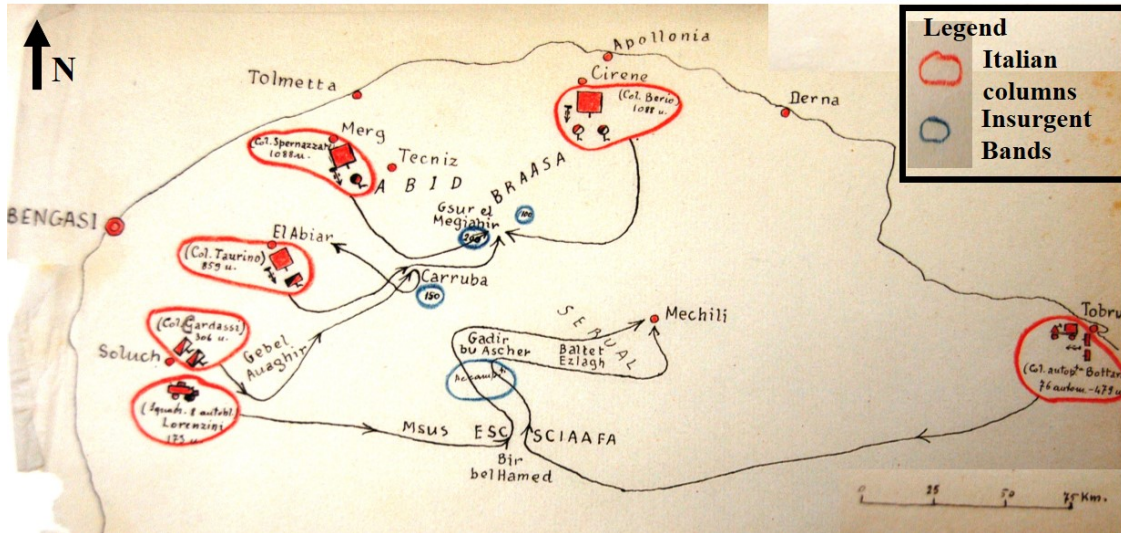


Figure 10. Clearing Operations on the *Gebel* in April 1925. Sketch from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 400-401. Legend created by the author.

Notwithstanding the positive outcome of the second operational cycle, the insurgency did not collapse. Omar Mukhtar was able to withstand the Italian heavy blows exploiting the Sanusi network operating in Egypt. Thanks to this external support, the rebels could count on a continuous flow of supplies.<sup>237</sup> Therefore, Mombelli structured the third operational cycle to address this issue. More specifically, the main objective was the seizure of the oasis of Giarabub, a critical node of the insurgent smuggling network, while keeping the *duar* under pressure on the plateau.<sup>238</sup> This cycle is interesting because it highlights the combination of diplomatic and military instruments of power to achieve an operational objective. Italian colonial authorities had been working for some time to redesign the Cyrenaican eastern border, bringing Giarabub into Italian reach. These efforts culminated with an Italo-Egyptian treaty on 6 December 1925, which decreed Italian control over the Sanusi critical node, linking Cyrenaica to Egypt through the caravan route passing through the Siwa oasis.<sup>239</sup>

<sup>237</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 122.

<sup>238</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 14. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 253-254; and Dotolo, "A long small war," 174.

<sup>239</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 503; Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 14; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 252-253; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 122.

With these conditions in place, the Italian colonial authorities mounted a long-range desert operation from Bardia to Giarabub. The preparations included measures to extend the RCTC's operational reach, such as establishing new airfields and an intermediate staging area in Bir esc-Sciegga (100 kilometers south of Bardia, along the border).<sup>240</sup> The 2,000-strong expeditionary column, under the command of Colonel Riccardo Ronchetti, included two Eritrean battalions, one *Meharist* squadron, two armored car squadrons, one light tank squadron, one light artillery battery, three motorized sections, and lorry-borne logistical trains. Aviation provided reconnaissance, coordination, and leaflet drop on the oasis before the Italian arrival. Departed from Bardia on 31 January 1926, the column arrived in Giarabub on 7 February, covering around 230 kilometers, most of which was open desert. Seized the oasis without opposition, the Italian forces established a garrison and conducted a large sweep around Giarabub, clearing the main caravan routes.<sup>241</sup> In addition, the Italian authorities put under their protection the local mosque and the Sanusi founder's tomb, both holy places for the greater Islamic community.<sup>242</sup> The conquest of Giarabub assumed strategic relevance because it allowed the Italians to interdict the insurgent smuggling network while impairing the prestige of the Sanusi order.<sup>243</sup>

The loss of Giarabub and the Italian clearing operations conducted throughout the *gebel* in the first part of 1926 were not sufficient to wear out the Sanusi resistance. However, the RCTC's actions weakened it considerably. Mukhtar's fighters conducted a wide array of harassing actions throughout the coastal area during the summer season, even arriving in the vicinity of Benghazi. This relapse caused General Mombelli's substitution by Lieutenant General (MSVN) Attilio Teruzzi in November 1926, at the behest of the new Minister of the Colonies,

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<sup>240</sup> Dotolo, "A long small war," 174; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 254.

<sup>241</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 254-255. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 14-15.

<sup>242</sup> Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 503.

<sup>243</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 122. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 15; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 256.

Luigi Federzoni.<sup>244</sup> This event marked the transition to the fourth and last operational cycle of this phase that lasted until late 1927. The new governor immediately started a large-scale reorganization of the RCTC, focused on improving soldiers' conditions, reconstituting units' strength, increasing the troops' logistical autonomy, and suppressing redundant garrisons.<sup>245</sup> Furthermore, Teruzzi revitalized the colony's civil and political sector. The Italian general emphasized continuous contact with the local populations, greater involvement of the Cyrenaican notables in civil administration and public events, and the commissariats' reorganization to facilitate civil-military synergy.<sup>246</sup> In this backdrop, he mandated a further development of security checkpoints, manned by locals, to stem the tide of the rising insurgent raids that damaged the subdued population.<sup>247</sup> However, these new measures did not suffice to keep the insurgency at bay. By March 1927, Omar al-Mukhtar had massed three strong *duar* (for a total of 1,200 dismounted fighters and 400 horsemen) in the heart of the Gebel Akhdar. Small bands screened the main camps along the plateau's southern slopes, with the families safely sheltered in the pre-desert zone just south of it. The insurgent pressure on the Italian forces progressively increased, reaching its climax with the Italian debacle of er-Raheiba. On 28 March, a strong Sanusi force ambushed an Eritrean battalion, inflicting 310 casualties.<sup>248</sup>

In the face of this predicament, Teruzzi obtained the recently-promoted Brigadier General Ottorino Mezzetti as RCTC commander in Cyrenaica. Mezzetti was a veteran colonial officer,

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<sup>244</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 259, 261. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 161. General Attilio Teruzzi takes stock of the partial results brought over by Mombelli's approach in *Cirenaica verde*, 26-27, 69.

<sup>245</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 70-72, 111-113. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 262.

<sup>246</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 49-52, 60-63.

<sup>247</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 263.

<sup>248</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 263-264. See also Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 85-96, 98-100; Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 34-35; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 177, 180-181.

having built up considerable experience in Tripolitania.<sup>249</sup> Under his lead, the RCTC planned and conducted a summer counteroffensive aimed at dominating the *gebel*. Involving six mobile combined arms columns with aviation in support (comprising motorized elements and a *Meharist* squadron), this large-scale action started on 9 July. The operation went on until 13 September, focusing on the clearing and the destruction of the Sanusi forces sheltered in the area of Wadi al-Kuf, a critical insurgent political and logistical node between Tolmeta and Hania (see Figures 11 and 12). This safe haven, renowned for its rugged and inaccessible terrain, allowed the rebels to coordinate their activities throughout the plateau.<sup>250</sup> Mezzetti's intent envisaged three pillars: (1) an increased logistical autonomy of the mobile groups (especially regarding water); (2) a task organization that balanced combat power with the requirement of dispatching smaller patrols to pursue the insurgents; (3) enhanced mobility, obtained through an accurate logistical preparation and the exploitation of the periods of darkness for approach marches.<sup>251</sup> This operation was a success: the Italians asserted their control over the Wadi al-Kuf, broke the insurgents' concentration, and regained the initiative.<sup>252</sup> The RCTC's forces cleared one of the main insurgent safe heavens on the plateau, interdicted the rebels' access to the coastal area, and scored a decisive blow against the Abid and Brasa tribes, among Omar's staunchest supporters.<sup>253</sup> On 1 January 1928, the Grand Sanusi's delegate in Cyrenaica, Mohammed er-Redà, surrendered to the

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<sup>249</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 64, 101, 103. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 265; and Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 36.

<sup>250</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 114-117, 122-128, 130-133, 136-142. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 266-269; Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 36; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 181.

<sup>251</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1014.

<sup>252</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 182.

<sup>253</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 142-147; Dotolo, "A long small war," 174; Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 182; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 268-269. Mezzetti's summer counteroffensive resulted in only sixty-eight Italian losses. In contrast the insurgents suffered 1,300 KIA, 250 women and children captured, and lost a significant amount of livestock. However, the Italian forces recovered only 269 rifles. As maintained by both Rochat and Gooch, this could imply that the operations chiefly impacted the population or the followers in the *duar* and not the main core of the Sanusi fighters. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 36; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1014.



Italian authorities. This sudden development evidenced rising fissures in the Sanusi leadership's cohesion. However, this defection did not have significant effects. Minister Federzoni shortsightedly ordered the immediate deportation of er-Redà to Ustica, Sicily. In contrast, Teruzzi had hoped to exploit him to lure his sons into Italian custody, severing the head of the Sanusi leadership. Ultimately, Hassan er-Redà, the chief's older son, took Mohammed's place at Omar Mukhtar's side.<sup>254</sup> Historian Giorgio Rochat accurately captures the effects of the first operational cycles in Cyrenaica: "[t]he increased efficiency of the Italian forces marked the end of big concentrations of rebels in arms, capable of conducting offensives in grand style, but it did not undermine their population base, and therefore the Sanusiya's power and the guerilla's vigor."<sup>255</sup>

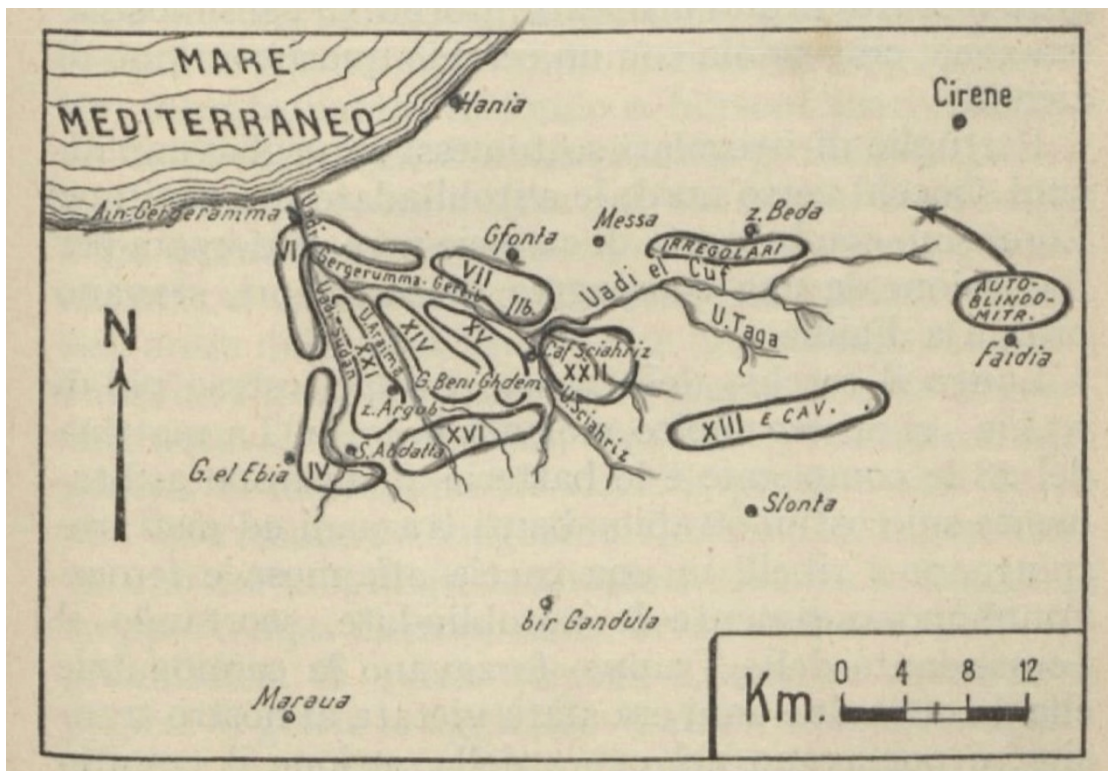


Figure 11. Operazioni nell'uadi el Cuf, 26 luglio-1 agosto 1927 [Operations in the area of Wadi al-Kuf, 26 July-1 August 1927]. Sketch from Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 131.

<sup>254</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 209, 212-217. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 39; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 127.

<sup>255</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 36-37.

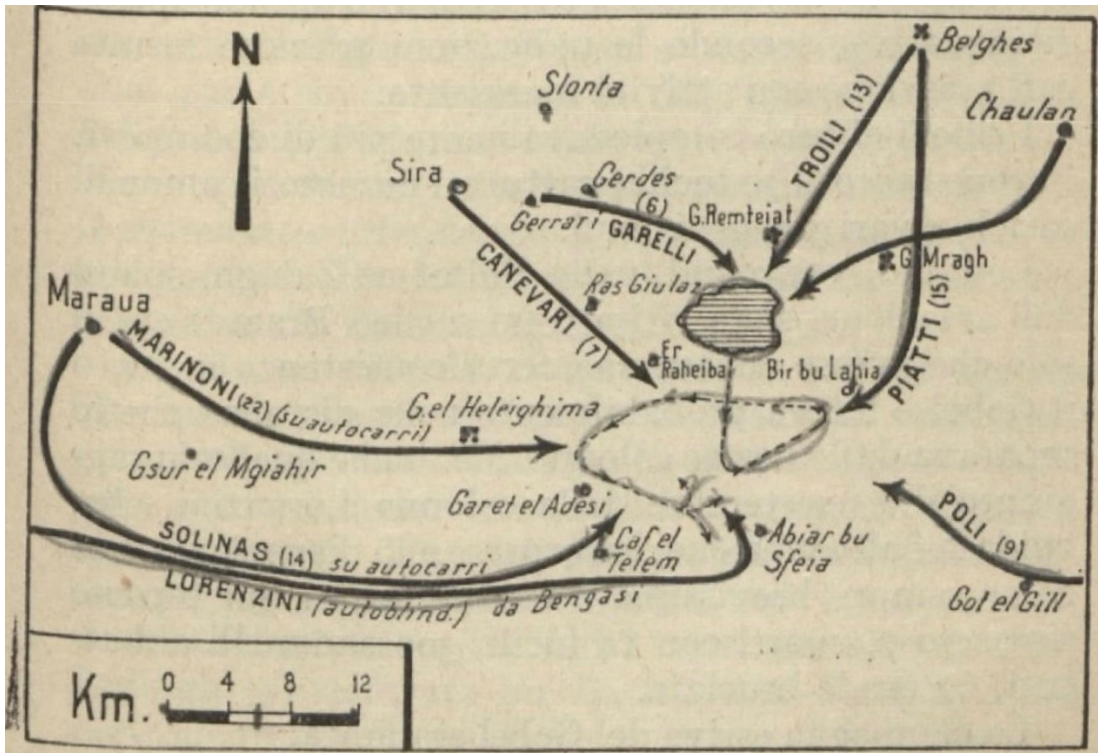


Figure 12. Azione al 4 settembre contro il dor Hasa-Abeidat [Action on 4 September against the Hasa-Abeidat dor]. Sketch from Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 141.

### Consolidation on the Oases of the 29th Parallel, Clearing of Fezzan, and Pacification of Cyrenaica (1928-1931)

The last stage of the pacification process saw the convergence of synchronized efforts in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, marked by the unification of the colonies under Marshal Pietro Badoglio. Since October 1925, a vigorous debate had persisted in Italian political and military-strategic milieus regarding a further push of the Italian forces on the oases belt located along the 29th parallel. On the one hand, the then Minister of the Colonies, Pietro Lanza di Scalea, lobbied for immediate occupation. On the other hand, the Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, stressed the necessity of a more prudent inter-colonial coordinated strategy. Badoglio recommended a previous consolidation of the Italian control on the western and eastern borders, followed by an offensive thrust in Sirtica to subdue the Mogarba tribe and the final consolidation on the 29th parallel. In turn, this intermediate objective would allow expansion into Fezzan and the oasis of Kufra, so bringing the Italian rule over the entire territorial expanse. Badoglio's

strategic plan combined the necessity to control territory with the imperative of progressively reducing the various pockets of resistance, aiming at an effective administration over a pacified Libya. In the medium term, this condition would allow the Italian government to reduce the allocation of troops in Libya, optimizing the management of the colonies with fewer expenses. The only obstacle to the implementation of this comprehensive strategic plan was the availability of financial resources.<sup>256</sup>

In November 1926, the newly-appointed Minister of the Colonies, Luigi Federzoni, finally obtained Mussolini's approval for the funding required by Badoglio's plan.<sup>257</sup> As maintained by historian Nicola Labanca, "The economic perspective is one not to be underestimated. The tight circumstances of the Fascist budget, despite the pompous colonial propaganda, had restrained the project [of linking the two colonies] for a long time."<sup>258</sup> During 1927, the Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican authorities refined a concept for coordinated operations in Sirtica at the beginning of 1928.<sup>259</sup> In these regards, Teruzzi's offensive on the Gebel Akhdar in the summer of 1927 also helped disrupt insurgent activities in Cyrenaica, creating enough leeway to shift the RCTC focus on Sirtica at the beginning of 1928.<sup>260</sup>

During the last chapter of Libya's pacification, the Italian players remained mostly unchanged, although the colonial command structure transformed at the beginning of 1929. More specifically, Marshal Badoglio assumed the role of Governor of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica on 21 January 1929, maintaining Tripoli as his primary residence. Thereafter, the military commander

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<sup>256</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 226-227. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 177-178; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 123.

<sup>257</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 226. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 177-178; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 123-124.

<sup>258</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 178.

<sup>259</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 220-223, 228. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 226; and Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 177-178.

<sup>260</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 114. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 124.

in Cyrenaica became also responsible for the colony's administration as vice-governor, keeping his main headquarters in Benghazi. After a brief stint of Colonel Domenico Siciliani, Rodolfo Graziani (at this point Major General) assumed this position on 13 March 1930. The expert colonial commander moved to Cyrenaica after a period as military commander in Tripolitania, replacing General Cicconetti on 1 June 1928.<sup>261</sup> On the insurgents' side, there were three leaders in the Italian crosshairs. First, Omar al-Mukhtar remained the primary concern in Cyrenaica.<sup>262</sup> Second, Saleh el-Ateusc, powerful Mogarba chief responsible for the Italian defeat in Bir Bilal, stood as the main obstacle to the Italian plans in the Sirtica region.<sup>263</sup> Last, the warlords of the family Sef en-Nasser, leading the Aulad Suleiman tribe, constituted the driving leaders of the insurgency in Fezzan.<sup>264</sup>

The first operational cycle included the Italian projection into Sirtica with the subsequent seizure of the oases located along the 29th parallel and a final sweep and consolidation over all the territories at that latitude. Overall, this cycle covered the period January-November 1928.<sup>265</sup> The first stage envisaged a series of operations around en-Nufilia (for the Tripolitanian forces) and el-Agheila-el-Merduma (for the Cyrenaican forces). The main military objectives were the occupation of these areas to establish a territorial connection between the two colonies and the subjugation of the Mogarba tribe. RCTC Tripolitania allocated three columns for this endeavor: Mobile Group A, under General Graziani; Mobile Group B, under Colonel Pietro Pintor; and

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<sup>261</sup> The unification of the Libyan colonies followed a progressive pattern. First, Marshal Badoglio replaced General De Bono as Governor of Tripolitania on 18 December 1928. Later, on 21 January 1929, Badoglio assumed also responsibility for the administration of Cyrenaica, becoming governor and uniting the political administration of the two colonies under a single head and office. As previously mentioned, the two Italian colonies had a common governor but separate colonial governments until 1 January 1934, when Tripolitania and Cyrenaica officially became the Italian colony of Libya, under Air Marshal Italo Balbo. Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 332-335. See also Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea da Assab all'impero*, 504, 522.

<sup>262</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 128-130. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 18.

<sup>263</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 229-231, 248.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-240. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 127.

<sup>265</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 125.

Mobile Group C, comprising the RCTC reserve elements. By contrast, RCTC Cyrenaica mobilized only one column led by Colonel Pietro Maletti. The operations in Sirtica started on 3 January and found a swift conclusion on 12 January. By then, the Italian forces were in control of the assigned territorial objectives and the Mogarba forces were in a rout. Whereas the Cyrenaican sections of the Mogarba tribe submitted quickly, the Tripolitanian ones put up a stiffer resistance and withdrew towards southern Sirtica, accompanied by other minor factions, such as the one composed by the remnants of the Orfella tribe. Mobile columns and colonial aviation received the task of pursuing and finishing these fleeing insurgent elements. In particular, Italian bombers conducted numerous runs against the escaping columns with explosive and mustard gas munitions. The insurgent losses were significant and the Italian mop-up forces were able to capture most of the survivors.<sup>266</sup>

The next step of this operational cycle involved the occupation of the main oases located along the 29th parallel. The Italian territorial objectives spanned the territory between Socna and Zella in Tripolitania and Marada and Gialo in Cyrenaica.<sup>267</sup> By and large, the RCTCs maintained the same task organization for the current operational stage. As posited by historian Frederick Dotolo, Italian intelligence expected a maximum of 6,000 rebel fighters in the area of the 29th parallel.<sup>268</sup> However, these numbers are indicative at best, considering the insurgents' high mobility rate to and from the Fezzan area. During this phase, the Italian forces abandoned the idea of synchronous operations, recognizing the diverse requirements impacting the operational tempo

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<sup>266</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 228-231. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 125. General Teruzzi provides an exhaustive description of this first phase, including the disarmament of the Cyrenaican Mogarba and the pursuit of the fleeing Tripolitanian Mogarba groups, from the perspective of RCTC Cyrenaica. Of note, the Cyrenaica main forward base for this part of the operational cycle, el-Agheila, was already under Italian control when the action started. This happened because Teruzzi and Mezzetti, anticipating the requirements of this cycle, had successfully seized this location on 29 September 1929, at the end of an extensive political shaping in the Agedabia sector initiated in May 1927. See Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 48, 182-185, 222, 226, 233-245.

<sup>267</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 125.

<sup>268</sup> Dotolo, "A long small war," 175.

of the respective colonial components (Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican). In particular, the Cyrenaican contingent had to balance the attainment of the new objectives with the operational requirements on the Gebel Akhdar.<sup>269</sup>

The operations on the 29th parallel started on 9 February 1928 in Tripolitania, with a two-pronged maneuver of the RCTC against the Giofra group's oases. While Pintor's column successfully occupied Socna, Graziani's forces seized Hon, Ueddán, arriving in Zella on 22 February with minimum insurgent resistance.<sup>270</sup> This achievement was particularly rewarding since the Sanusi leadership considered Zella as "unviolated and inviolable."<sup>271</sup> Later, Graziani's column, on the alert for a possible rebel concentration around the wells of Tagrift, moved north from Zella to investigate. Arrived there in the morning of 25 February, Group A successfully repulsed an ambush conducted by a 1,500-strong Aulad Suleiman element. After a bloody battle that lasted eight hours, the wells finally fell into Italian hands. The Aulad tribe suffered 249 losses and 50 prisoners, whereas Graziani's element only 60 soldiers KIA.<sup>272</sup>

To the east, Mezzetti's forces successfully occupied the oasis of Augila on 24 February and fought through a light rebel resistance in Gialo on the following day. The seizure of Marada on 18 March 1928 was the last act of the operations on the 29th parallel.<sup>273</sup> In the period January-March 1928, RCTC Cyrenaica had also to counter a new surge of violence in the area of the Gebel Akhdar and Marmarica. After the insurgent *duar*'s reorganization in February, Omar al-

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<sup>269</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 222-223, 240. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 125; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 231.

<sup>270</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 231-233.

<sup>271</sup> Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 127.

<sup>272</sup> The force ratio during this climactic engagement was three to one in favor of the Italian forces. As specified by Federica Saini Fasanotti, Graziani's group included 3,260 men, 420 horses, and 3,450 camels. However, this force had been constantly on the move since 9 February, so a minimum of attrition due to previous operations was undoubtedly a factor. In addition, the Aulad Suleiman had the vantage of surprise and attacked the column while it was exiting a canalized track that led to the wells from a 200-meter-high rocky terrace overlooking the valley of Tagrift. See Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 233.

<sup>273</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 245-250. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 234.

Mukhtar initiated a series of ambushes and raids, harassing the Italian outposts and the local population without conceding battle. At the end of March 1928, after a swift reallocation of forces from the 29th parallel, RCTC Cyrenaica executed a strong counteroffensive on the plateau, breaking an insurgent concentration in the Aghiret esc-Sciafa region.<sup>274</sup> In the summer (from 25 June to 29 August), a new series of minor engagements followed suit on the *gebel*, further attriting Omar al-Mukhtar's forces while pushing part of his fighters towards Sanusi safe havens in Egypt.<sup>275</sup>

The last stage of the 1928 operational cycle saw the Italian efforts concentrated along three main lines. First, both RCTCs organized the newly-acquired territories, systematically disarmed the local tribes, ultimately transferring control to colonial civil authorities.<sup>276</sup> Second, in June and July, the Tripolitanian colonial forces fought against the Misciascia tribe for the oasis of Gheriat esc-Sciargha. On 15 July 1928, the Italian troops finally closed their vise on this strategic location, essential to control the western part of the Ghibla region (the area between Socna and Gadames).<sup>277</sup> Third, between July and November, the RCTC operations revolved around the Giofra oases group, at the border with Sirtica. At this time, the Italian main focus was the containment of an insurgent infiltration from Fezzan in the triangle Zella-Tagrifi-Hon, led by Abd el Gelil Sef en Nasser.<sup>278</sup> At the end of 1928, whereas the situation in south-eastern Tripolitania was relatively stable, Sanusi forces were still active in Cyrenaica, and the last vestiges of the Tripolitanian insurgency controlled the region of Fezzan. Nonetheless, the Italian forces had

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<sup>274</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 40-42. See also Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 258-261.

<sup>275</sup> Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 262-271.

<sup>276</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 234. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 127; and Teruzzi, *Cirenaica verde*, 250-254.

<sup>277</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 234-235. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 17.

<sup>278</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 236-239.

successfully connected their colonies, depriving the opposing forces of the fertile oases along the 29th parallel and the rich grazing lands of the Ghibla in the process.<sup>279</sup>

Marshal Badoglio's advent as Governor of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica marked the beginning of the second operational cycle. This lasted from January 1929 to March 1930, when General Graziani took over Colonel Siciliani as vice-governor of Cyrenaica. In this timeframe, RCTC Tripolitania focused its efforts on the regions of Ghibla (territory between Gadames and Socna) and Fezzan. By contrast, the operations in Cyrenaica continued to focus on countering Omar al-Mukhtar's guerrilla actions, with a truce between June and October 1929 that saw a new round of negotiations between the colonial government and the Sanusi insurgency. The objectives of the second operational cycle clearly reflected the way Marshal Badoglio framed the operational problem when he assumed the new colonial role. In essence, the Italian efforts had to converge on the disarmament of the tribes in the Ghibla and the control of Fezzan, while keeping pressure on Omar al-Mukhtar's *duar* on the Gebel Akhdar and seizing the oasis of Kufra.<sup>280</sup> The last two points would be the main Italian lines of efforts in the third and last operational cycles.

Marshal Badoglio opened his regency with a proclamation to all the people of Libya. On one side, the new governor granted reconciliation and reintegration to all the dissidents willing to renounce their taking up arms. On the other side, Badoglio promised a "war without quarter" to all those Libyans that would continue to resist.<sup>281</sup> With this political expedient, Badoglio intended to keep pressure on the cohesion of the rebellion. However, he also intended to provide an external narrative depicting Italy's efforts to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict, despite

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<sup>279</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 239-240.

<sup>280</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 18. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 128.

<sup>281</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 19. See also Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 128; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 279.



having the legal right to govern Libya. However, this proclamation did not yield immediate and tangible results.<sup>282</sup> In General Graziani's words,

The miserable indigenous people, who were still a blind instrument in the hands of exploitative and inhuman chiefs, saw, indeed, opening a ray of light and hope in front of them; the chiefs, almost all resistant to any idea of submission, understood that it was necessary either to react decisively and at once to maintain their control over them [the indigenous people], and not to see their spirit and combativeness shaken; or [it was necessary] to yield. In the vain hope of being still able to beat the Government, some [tribal chiefs] dared to take arms once again, others maintained an ambiguous and uncertain behavior; only a few went as far as doing act of submission.<sup>283</sup>

Overall, Badoglio's new policy revolved around five points, intended as common guidance to the colonial apparatus in the struggle against the insurgency. First, it restated the vital importance of fully asserting control over the Italian colonies.<sup>284</sup> Second, Badoglio stressed the importance of an objective and impartial application of the law in every circumstance, maintaining the utmost respect for local customs and religious habits. Third, any kind of punishment to potential perpetrators needed the approval of an appropriate authority. Fourth, the new governor encouraged the civil and military leadership to enact a continuous control, especially of the local collaborators, through a network of local informants, to curb the locals' proclivity towards corruption.<sup>285</sup> Last, Marshal Badoglio mandated the reduction of Cyrenaica's military forces, envisaging a shift towards more distributed and dynamic counter-guerrilla operations by the RCTC. At the same time, the governor prioritized the valorization of the colony's infrastructure, particularly the road network on the Gebel Akhdar, using the funds resulting from the cut.<sup>286</sup>

In Tripolitania, the first response to Badoglio's proclamation did not take long to arrive. In March 1929, three *mehalla* (about 700 men in total) coordinated by Ben Sef en Nasser and

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<sup>282</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 19-20.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>285</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 277. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 43-44.

<sup>286</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 21-22.

Mohammad ben Hag Hassen (previous pro-Italian chief of the Misciascia tribe, turned insurgent in 1926) launched a three-pronged infiltration into the Gebel Nefusah, the Ghibla (including the Giofra area), and Sirtica. The objective of this counteroffensive was to instigate active anti-colonial resistance among the subdued tribes against the Italian rule and reacquire control of rich agricultural and grazing lands, especially the Ghibla.<sup>287</sup> RCTC Tripolitania organized the containment and, later, the counterstroke against this surge, exploiting six mobile groups supported by aviation. These units comprised infantry battalions, Saharan groups, irregular bands, *Savari* squadrons, with limited artillery support and other logistical elements. After an initial period on the defensive, the Italian units retook the initiative on 12 April. By the end of May, they had systematically tracked down and defeated all the intruders, pushing back the survivors into Fezzan.<sup>288</sup>

Marshal Badoglio capitalized on this temporary success to solve the problem of Fezzan at the root, sequencing two main operations for the rest of 1929. First, he mandated the complete disarmament of the tribes in the Ghibla region to preclude any possible relapse of violence against the Italian authorities and prepare the invasion of Fezzan. Under the expert lead of General Graziani, Italian mobile groups surrounded the camps of the Megarah, Aulad Bu Sef, and Misciascia tribes, starting from 10 June 1929. To retain surprise, Graziani deployed his forces simultaneously and compelled the locals to surrender their weapons only when they were in a condition of disadvantage. By 14 June, the Italian forces had sequestered 1,450 rifles without any opposition.<sup>289</sup> Second, Badoglio requested and obtained additional resources from Mussolini to fund a major sortie into Fezzan at the end of 1929. The preparation of this complex operation, requiring the Italian forces to cover 600 kilometers in a desert and compartmentalized territory,

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<sup>287</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 279-280. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 20.

<sup>288</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 280-283. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 20-21.

<sup>289</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 283. See also Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 21; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 129.

lasted from August to November 1929. This step included the creation of a fifth Saharan group, integrating the four already available, the conduct of specific refresher training in desert warfare, and the extension of the RCTC's operational reach through the improvement of intermediate staging bases, such as Hon, Derg, Gheriat, and Sciuref.<sup>290</sup>

The reconquest of Fezzan envisaged an Italian penetration along three main axes: Bir Gateifa to the east (a location just south of Hon), Sciuref in the center, and Derg to the west. The concept of operations included three main phases: a preliminary occupation of the Sciati Wadi (between Edri and Brach), a further push south into the Agial Wadi (between Ubari and Sebha), and, finally, the seizure of Mürzuch. Italian intelligence expected the opposition of elements of the Misciascia tribe (Mohammed ben Hag Hassen), the Aulad Suleiman tribe (Sef en-Nasser), Zintan tribe, Mogarba tribe (Saleh el-Ateusc), and Orfella tribe (Abd en-Nebi Belcher), for a total of 1,500 fighters. The RCTC organized its forces in three columns, for a total of 4,000 men, supported by aviation and an armored car squadron. Logistical planning received particular emphasis due to the necessity of increasing the autonomy of units on the ground (especially in terms of food and water). Marshal Badoglio put General Graziani in command of this operation. Of note, the latter structured his field command post with a military and a political component.<sup>291</sup>

The operations in Fezzan started on 28 November 1929. Graziani's column (central column) moved from esc-Sciuref to Brach. In contrast, Colonel Luigi Cubeddu's column (eastern column) marched from Hon to Sebha. The western column remained to guard the base of Derg (near Tripolitania's western border).<sup>292</sup> The Italian central detachment secured Brach on 5

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<sup>290</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 278, 284-287.

<sup>291</sup> In terms of logistical autonomy, every column transported thirty days of rations, seven days of water, and two days of forage (barley) for the camels. A logistic train supported the three columns, providing additional supplies. Considering the two Italian main components, the "eastern column," was under Colonel Luigi Cubeddu and the "central column" was under General Graziani. See Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 286-288, 291. The total numbers of the Italian expeditionary force are from Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 129.

<sup>292</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 288. The consulted sources do not specify the reason why Graziani decided to leave the western column to guard Derg. However, it is likely that this force had the function of an operational reserve, while at the same time covering one of the main nodes of the caravan

December 1929 without encountering any resistance, later linking up with Cubeddu's units on 9 December. The two columns took the critical caravan node of Sebha on 15 December, again with no significant opposition by the local tribes. At this point, the Italian expeditionary force consolidated in Sebha, building a hasty airfield for the relocation of aviation assets from the oasis of Hon. Graziani's next move was an assault to the known rebel outpost of Umm al-Araneb, where a 1000-man strong combined force of Mogarba and Aulad Suleiman was stationing. To maximize surprise, Graziani's command deceived the rebel early-warning network, spreading the voice that the next Italian target would have been Mùrzuch. On 6 January 1930, Graziani's column moved to Umm al-Araneb, reaching this location on 9 January. However, the rebels evaded the Italian units, falling back on the oasis of Uau el-Chebir, the traditional refuge of the Aulad Suleiman tribe. In response, Graziani launched a light element composed of one Saharan and one *zaptié* group in pursuit. Covering 270 kilometers in just four days, this exploitation force reached Uau el-Kebir, engaging and defeating the Aulad Suleiman with aviation support. At this point, the eastern part of Fezzan was relatively under control. Therefore, Graziani shifted his attention to the west, launching a two-pronged attack against Mùrzuch and Ubari, the last rebel strongholds in Fezzan. The Italian general exploited Sebha as an intermediate logistical node to enable this transition while keeping his command post in Umm al-Araneb. The Italian forces seized Mùrzuch on 21 January and secured Ubari on 28 January.<sup>293</sup>

The last two steps of the Fezzan expedition comprised the clearing of Ghat's area, at the border with Algeria, and a sweep of the Harugi Mountains, located between the oasis of Zella (to the north) and Uau el-Chebir (to the south). By 25 February, a small contingent of Libyan irregulars dispersed the last concentration of insurgents around Ghat. Nonetheless, some of the most notorious leaders, such as Mohammed ben Hag Hassen, slipped through the border into

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route network connecting western Fezzan to western Tripolitania proper, so constituting a sort of blocking force to intercept any rebel groups trying to escape north during the Italian sweep.

<sup>293</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 288-291.

Algeria, out of Italian reach. By 18 March, groups converging from Marada, Uau el-Chebir, and Zella completed multiple clear and search operations in the area of the Harugi Mountains, previously untouched by the Italian expansion. As a result of this operation, the Italian colonial forces captured or killed the last scions of the Aulad Suleiman tribe (especially of the Nasser family), with few survivors escaping towards Kufra. The reconquest of Fezzan was a very successful operation conducted in rugged terrain. Under the expert leadership of General Graziani, RCTC Tripolitania was able to negotiate long desert thrusts, maintaining a pressing operational tempo on the insurgent forces while avoiding culmination. This expedition ensured the final pacification of all Tripolitania. Overall, the Italian authorities received the submission of about 6,000 natives at the price of just one soldier KIA and eighteen soldiers WIA.<sup>294</sup>

During the second operational cycle, Italian efforts in Cyrenaica converged towards a potential compromise with the Sanusi. Despite an increase of insurgent raids in February-May 1929, Badoglio started secret negotiations with Omar al-Mukhtar in March. The governor cleverly exploited Mohammed er-Redà (in the meantime released from confinement) to cut a deal with the *akuan*. These negotiations reached their apex in June when Omar met Colonel Siciliani twice and Marshal Badoglio once. However, this initiative did not yield decisive results, except for a momentary truce.<sup>295</sup> In Labanca's words, "The [reciprocal] expectations were too different: domination on one side, autonomy on the other."<sup>296</sup> Nevertheless, the Italian colonial authorities did not come out from this process empty-handed. Skillfully exploiting nascent disagreement between Omar al-Mukhtar and Hassan er-Redà regarding the negotiations proper, Badoglio and Siciliani attracted Hassan and his forces (mainly from the Braasa Dorsa tribe) inside their sphere

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<sup>294</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 291-292. See also Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1018. General Graziani makes a brief mention of the last operations of the expedition in Fezzan in *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 47-48.

<sup>295</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 22-34. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 48-50; Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 184-185; Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 130-132; and Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 182-183.

<sup>296</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 185.

of influence.<sup>297</sup> At the beginning of November 1929, Omar al-Mukhtar reopened the hostilities, followed by a prompt Italian response on the *gebel* (see Figure 13). In the last part of the second operational cycle, the situation in Cyrenaica went back to pre-truce conditions. It was not long before Hassan started to drift back towards the insurgency. Thus, Italian authorities took him definitively out of the equation and promptly subdued his followers.<sup>298</sup>

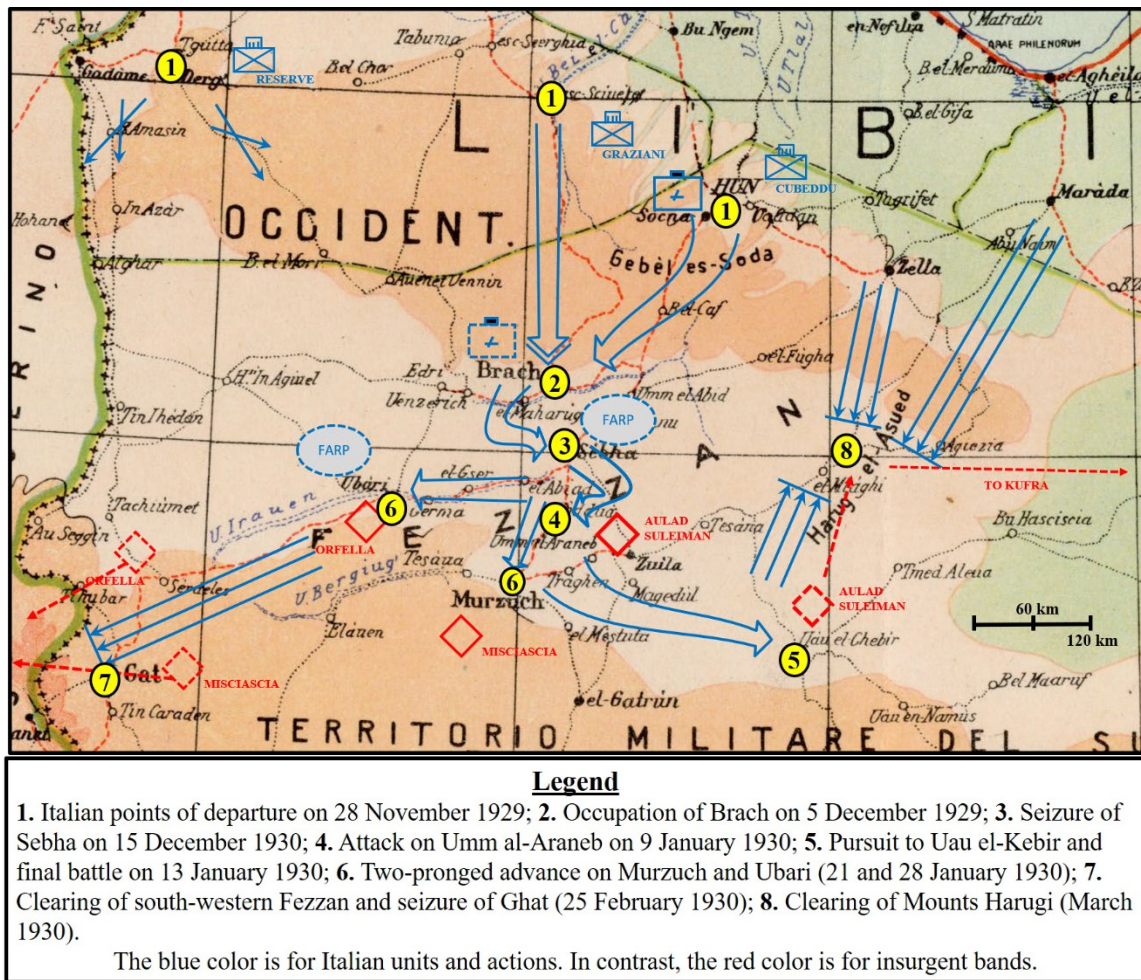


Figure 13. The Expedition in Fezzan. The background map is a clipping from F. Milani, “Libia,” [1930?], SALT Research, accessed 16 September 2020, <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/27789>. Graphics and text box created by author with data from Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 284-292; and Di Martino, “Capitolo IV: Il contributo della Regia Aeronautica,” 365-369.

<sup>297</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 33. See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 183.

<sup>298</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 34-35; See also Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 183; and Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 50-52.

Notwithstanding the swift Italian response at the end of the truce, the failed negotiations determined the political demise of Siciliani. General De Bono, Minister of the Colonies since September 1929 and one of the foremost critics of Badoglio's negotiation attempt, successfully lobbied with Mussolini for the removal of the Italian colonel. In light of this development, the governor nominated General Graziani vice-governor of Cyrenaica.<sup>299</sup> With these premises, the last operational cycle, spanning from March 1930 to the end of 1931, saw the final Italian efforts to eradicate the insurgency under the expert direction of General Graziani.

The newly-appointed vice-governor arrived in Cyrenaica with a specific strategic direction issued by Mussolini, De Bono, and Badoglio. The main objective was the complete eradication of the local insurgency. The directives stressed the necessity of discriminating between subdued elements of the population and rebels. While the colonial authorities had to control the former, military units were to disrupt the insurgent organization by executing continuous small-scale operations. Furthermore, Graziani dedicated particular attention to border control and the contrast of insurgent infiltrations among the Cyrenaican people. Lastly, the seizure of Kufra constituted a priority territorial objective, allowing the colonial government to assert its sovereignty over the entire area of Libya. The Italian political and military-strategic authorities bestowed their full support on Graziani in the attainment of these conditions.<sup>300</sup>

Graziani's first move was an assessment of the current situation. In other words, he gathered the necessary information and reframed his mental picture of the operational environment and the operational problem, adopting a systemic and comprehensive perspective.<sup>301</sup> Since 1913, the Sanusi Brotherhood had been the main driver of the Cyrenaican insurgency,

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<sup>299</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 52-55. General Graziani received the new assignment on 11 January 1930, while he was still deployed to Fezzan. After the end of the operations in Fezzan, the officer went back to Italy for a brief period, arriving in Cyrenaica on 27 March. By this time, Graziani had been promoted to the rank of major general. Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 47-51.

<sup>300</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 49-50.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 61.

harnessing religion and a strong anti-Italian sentiment to assert the order's secular power over the colony. As much as a means to sustain the rebellion, the order's structure was instrumental in protecting the Sanusi "political physiognomy" and perpetuating the secular power acquired after the Turks' defeat. In this scheme, the Bedouin tribes provided the bulk of the fighters. Up to that moment, the Italian authorities had categorized the subdued population as something distinct from the rebellion. Even when the Italian political and military leadership had detected signs of connivance with the insurgency, it had explained this phenomenon as the inevitable result of the rebels' threats and violence.<sup>302</sup>

In Graziani's new visualization, instead, the Italians confronted "all Cyrenaican populations that took part in the rebellion—on one side in a potential condition: the so-called subdued; on the other side overtly in the field: the armed [tribesmen]."<sup>303</sup> In other words, the population, not only the rebels, became a critical security concern of the Italian authorities. In this picture, the Sanusi Order was the web connecting the various tribal leaders and, with them, the entire population, animating the insurgency proper through a religious narrative of invincibility weaved around Omar al-Mukhtar.<sup>304</sup> The Sanusi network did not end in Cyrenaica but extended well into Egypt, where a large Libyan community and the former Grand Sanusi resided.<sup>305</sup> Whereas the population passively supported the order with information, tithes, commodities, and men, the Egyptian branch of the order facilitated continuous cross-border traffic, providing a second subsistence source for the rebellion.<sup>306</sup> This model explained why, despite the numerous tactical defeats, the insurgents not only survived but also maintained an apparently inexhaustible

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<sup>302</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, , 56-59.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59, 79. Some of the conversations that the journalist Knud Holmboe held with local Bedouins during his travel through Libya gives an idea of the narrative of invincibility revolving around Omar al Mukhtar. See Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 166, 211.

<sup>305</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 61.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.



numerical strength (around 600 “rifles” in the last two years).<sup>307</sup> In Graziani’s mind, “The essential foundation of a decisive program of action was...to tackle the situation in his entirety with courage, looking at it without preconceptions and biases of any sort.”<sup>308</sup>

As a result of this assessment, Graziani’s operational approach revolved around the neutralization of the Sanusi influence, seen as the origin of the rebellion. This solution presented six lines of effort: (1) reorganization of the territory and the military instrument to develop more effective ways to counter the rebel bands and increase civil-military synergy; (2) counter insurgent activities through the continuous patrolling of the areas under rebels’ influence; (3) separation of the local people from the Sanusi influence, disarmament, and population control; (4) border control; (5) legal action to stigmatize connivance among the population and desertion in the Libyan units; (6) improvement and extension of the local infrastructure.<sup>309</sup> The conquest of Kufra remained an additional line of effort, retaining the potential to further isolate the insurgency by depriving the Sanusi Order of its last uncontested safe haven.<sup>310</sup> As reported by Graziani, “The parallel and simultaneous application of these measures would engender that ‘marching organization’ that, in a more or less distant future, would lead...to the suffocation of what Omar el Muktar called ‘the Government of the night.’”<sup>311</sup>

The reorganization of the Cyrenaican territorial structure started on 31 March 1930. The main change envisaged the unification of Barce, Cyrene, and Derna into the *Gebel* commissariat,

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<sup>307</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 60. The estimated strength of the insurgents in the last two years of the campaign are from Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 57.

<sup>308</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 65.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 71.

<sup>311</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 66-67. The use of the term “marching organization” in Graziani’s memoir denotes a likely influence of Lyautey’s “oil patch” methodology. As described by historian Douglas Porch, the idea of “organization on the march” was a central tenet of Lyautey’s concept of colonial warfare. This envisaged the employment of “economic, political, and diplomatic weapons to minimize the violence of conquest.” See Douglas Porch, “Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 390.

responsible for the plateau and directly integrated with the *Gebel* Military Command. This was a critical improvement since it interfaced the military command structure with the commissariat network, responsible for political action, information collection, irregular bands, and local security. Furthermore, the Marmarica commissariat became a zone military command, with the local commander retaining military and political powers.<sup>312</sup>

A reconfiguration of the Cyrenaican military contingent followed the reorganization of the territory. This change followed two requirements. First, the new approach adopted by Marshal Badoglio envisaged a significant reduction of strength for RCTC Cyrenaica, passing from 23,000 to 13,000 men. Thus, an accurate optimization was necessary to maintain combat effectiveness in COIN operations. Graziani fine-tuned his forces, emphasizing quality instead of quantity and orienting tactical operations to counter-guerrilla-type actions instead of maneuver with larger formations.<sup>313</sup> Second, in light of Graziani's new frame of the human terrain situation, it was necessary to mitigate the risk of insurgent infiltration and connivance among the Italian colonial ranks.<sup>314</sup> For these reasons, the government of Cyrenaica progressively reduced the number of irregulars at its service, finally arriving at their total disbandment. To mitigate this loss, the Italians took advantage of irregular formations imported from Tripolitania.<sup>315</sup> In regards to the RCTC regular formations, the reorganization revolved around four main points. First, the upgrade

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<sup>312</sup> The Auaghir commissariat (Benghazi) remained unchanged, being already integrated with the Territorial Military Command for Cyrenaica. Sirtica (Agedabia) and the areas south of the *gebel* continued to be under military control. See Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 68-70, 76.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-76. See also Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 190; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 67-69.

<sup>314</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 76, 79-80. Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 190.

<sup>315</sup> A further mitigation was the substitution of the armament of the irregular bands. Previously these formations adopted the Mannlicher-Carcano model 1891 rifle, which was the Italian Army standard issue. Over the years, the Cyrenaican insurgent formations had acquired a sizable number of these rifles, especially following the great surge of 1914. Therefore, the Cyrenaican government replaced all the weapons assigned to the irregular formations with an older model, the Vetterli-Vitali 70/87 rifle, which used ammunition of a different caliber. In this way, it was pointless to smuggle ammunition to the insurgents for the Sanusi supporters among the Italian ranks. Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 76-79, 152. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 58, 69; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 131.

of two *Meharist* squadrons into Saharan groups in anticipation of a long-range desert thrust to Kufra. The second measure included the disbandment of the Lybian infantry battalions and the reduction of the Lybian *Savari* squadrons and artillery batteries.<sup>316</sup> Third, the RCTC assigned to every zone command a package of forces tailored to their specific area of responsibility while maintaining a system to dynamically reallocate units in case of necessity.<sup>317</sup> Last, in 1931, the RCTC established a new information collection methodology revolving around small indigenous scout-tracker teams. These assets assiduously combed the *gebel*, directing aviation and mobile groups when they caught the scent of an insurgent *dor*.<sup>318</sup>

Concerning the civil domain, Graziani's new approach, defined by historian Giorgio Rochat as "the policy of rigor,"<sup>319</sup> centered on four essential measures. First, the new vice-governor prescribed the complete disarmament of all the tribes in Cyrenaica. Previously, the colonial government did not comprehensively tackle this issue. The Italian officials subscribed to the idea that the local population needed self-protection and that enforcing disarmament would push more people towards the insurgent cause. Clearly, in Graziani's new visualization of the operational environment and the human terrain, the previous preconception was not at all a factor. Between April and May 1930, the Italian forces enforced total disarmament, declaring the unauthorized detention of weapons as a capital offense.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> In 1930, at the end of the transformation, RCTC Cyrenaica included: eight Eritrean battalions, three armored car squadrons, one lorry-borne border company, two Saharan groups, four *Savari* squadrons, two artillery batteries (one on pack animals and the other one loaded on motorized vehicles), one signal company, one logistical battalion, and four aviation squadrons (thirty-five aircraft). In addition, the RCTC had available the following unit for stationary security tasks: one MSVN legion (battalion-size), one Libyan garrison company, and one *Cacciatori* battalion. See Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 81-83. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 59-60; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 68-69.

<sup>317</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 83-84.

<sup>318</sup> To mitigate the risk of insurgent infiltration, the RCTC accurately screened the members of these new reconnaissance formations. The candidates for these new teams were volunteers from the concentration camps (that the Italian established starting from the summer of 1930) or trusted collaborators that had shown a high degree of reliability in the past. See Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 232-233. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 70-71, 73-74.

<sup>319</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 59.

<sup>320</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 88-92.

The second fundamental provision supported the enactment of the colonial rule of law, combined with more assiduous controls on the local populations. More specifically, Graziani intended to give “to the action of the judicial system a swift and inflexible pace, with the immediate intervention of its bodies where a felony of revolt against the powers of the State would be committed.”<sup>321</sup> However, the significant distances, the lack of secure LoC, and the locals’ nomadic nature constituted a constant hindrance to the exercise of justice. Therefore, Graziani’s solution envisaged the creation of “flying tribunals,” operating in a special legal framework granted by the state of emergency that was in effect over Cyrenaica. In essence, the colonial government dedicated various types of assets for the transportation of judicial personnel in every location where the local security service detected an infringement of the law. In this way, the colonial authorities could carry out legal action without delay, enforcing the colonial law with minimal risk of abuse or misbehavior on the Italian side. This measure supported a narrative promoting the Italian government as impartial and relentless in prosecuting whoever stood up against its authority.<sup>322</sup>

The third measure envisaged a direct blow to the Sanusi economic, social, and political structure. More precisely, on 29 May 1930, Italian forces simultaneously enforced the closure of all the *zawiya* in Cyrenaica, except the holy pilgrimage site of Giarabub, and confiscated all the

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<sup>321</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 134.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-146. Journalist Knud Holmboe describes this Italian judicial system as shallow and hurried. In a passage of his work, Holmboe narrates the execution of a trial of a local who had been found guilty of giving food to elements of the insurgency. The journalist closes the passage reporting a quote of the Italian military judge, who supposedly affirmed that the military court knew only two sentences, namely acquittal or execution. Is it very likely that this assertion could be the result of an implicit bias. First, Holmboe did not speak nor understand the Italian language. Second, during the narration of his book, it is evident the development of a strong empathy with the local population, probably connected to the fact that this author, who converted to Islam during his travel in North Africa, had a particular conception of the European colonialism as a corruptive and abusive reality. As a matter of fact, having declared the state of emergency and considering the colonial customs of the time as a necessary context, the Italian authorities had no obligation whatsoever to try the locals who supported the insurgency. Therefore, it is more likely that the Italian attention to the correct implementation of the rule of law aimed at supporting the colonial narrative that depicted the Italian authorities as impartial and rigorous in preserving their legal prerogatives. See Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 160, 203, 206, 229, 242-245.

properties of the order. Additionally, the Italian authorities arrested all the leaders of the Sanusi lodges and deported them to Italy. Of note, Graziani synchronized this action with the diffusion of an official narrative leveraging the informational dimension to the adversary's detriment. In essence, the Italian messaging depicted the Sanusi as opportunist exploiters of the local population for their own selfish interests. In the previous years, the colonial government had refrained from such a drastic measure in the hope of preserving Italian relations with the other Muslim countries in the Mediterranean.<sup>323</sup> The overall intent was to weaken the rebellion by disintegrating its "socio-political order" and reducing the insurgents' economic base.<sup>324</sup> In other words, Graziani attacked the critical nodes of the Sanusi political and economic system.

The last and most drastic measure of the Italian authorities involved the resettlement of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes from the interior to the coast as a strategy for population control.<sup>325</sup> Notwithstanding the other political expedients, Badoglio and Graziani had realized the impossibility of further affecting the rebels' cohesion due to Omar al-Mukhtar's leadership. After

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<sup>323</sup> In his memoir, Marshal Graziani specifies how the confiscation touched only the properties of the order and did not involve the personal property of the lodge chiefs, who remained in possession of their families. In addition, the colonial government exempted the local population from the payment of the religious tithes (*zakat*) to the Sanusi order. Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 124-127. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 297-298; Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 58; and Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 190. As maintained by the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard and in contrast to what asserted by Holmboe, the Italian authorities never precluded the Sanusi Order to perform its religious functions. The closure of the lodges was a political act and did not involve any religious discrimination that could have been detrimental to maintain order inside the colony. See Edward E. Evans Pritchard, "Italy and the Sanusiya Order in Cyrenaica," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11, no. 4 (1946): 849, 853, accessed 14 August 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/608598>; Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 252.

<sup>324</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1018; Evans Pritchard, "Italy and the Sanusiya Order in Cyrenaica," 851.

<sup>325</sup> As suggested by historian Edward J. Erickson, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the forced relocation of the local population was not only an accepted practice in Western colonial warfare, but in many cases, this measure underpinned specific strategies and operational approaches in COIN. An example of that is the British COIN campaign in Malaysia, that became famous for the affirmation of the "hearts and minds" approach in modern COIN doctrine and theory. However, what is usually omitted from the presentation of this campaign is the fact that one of the main conditions that allowed the British Army to succeed was the relocation and concentration of the ethnic-Chinese populations. See Edward J. Erickson, introduction to *A Global History of Relocation in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). Kindle edition. See also Edward J. Erickson, "Practicing Operational Art in Countering Operations," 5-6.

all, the two Italian officers believed that the entire Cyrenaican population, in one way or the other, was involved in the insurgency. This realization put an end to any illusion of effectively distinguishing between rebels and subdued elements.<sup>326</sup> The resettlement aimed at “creat[ing] a broad and well-defined territorial separation between the rebel formations and the subdued population.”<sup>327</sup> In other words, the Italian authorities intended to discourage the connivance of the population with the rebellion and deprive the insurgency of the material support of the locals.<sup>328</sup> Starting from 25 June 1930, the Italian authorities progressively relocated Bedouin tribes of the *gebel* and the pre-desert area towards the coast. By February 1931, the colonial government had concentrated about 80,000 natives in fifteen camps between Benghazi and el-Agheila (Sirtica). Italian security forces maintained these enclosed facilities under constant control, rationing food, limiting grazing areas for cattle, and subordinating mobility to the possession of specific passes.<sup>329</sup> In mandating this measure, Marshal Badoglio was fully aware of the potentially deleterious consequences for the tribesmen. However, at that point, he probably did not believe there were other acceptable alternatives.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 92-93, 99, 101. See also Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1019; Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 304-307; and Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 60-63.

<sup>327</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 61.

<sup>328</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 99. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 306-307; Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 60, 62-63.

<sup>329</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 99. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 304, 308-311; Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 64-66; and Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1019-1020.

<sup>330</sup> Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 306. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 61. Although it is very difficult to determine the number of the deaths determined by the Italian policy of resettlement, Italian historian Giorgio Rochat makes a very lucid estimation, hypothesizing a total between 45,000 and 70,000 locals and an average of 85% of the cattle available to the natives before the relocation. In the past, some historians, including Nicola Labanca, have categorized the Italian resettlement as an attempt to commit a systematic genocide. However, as maintained by historian Saini-Fasanotti, the analysis of the sources available suggest the lack of a precise intent of extermination and, rather, the objective of breaking the Libyan resistance. Therefore, such a high number of deaths would derive from incompetence and shortsightedness of the Italian authorities in managing the so-called concentration camps. To further reinforce this point, the Italian authorities started to disband the camps in 1932, after the defeat of the insurgency and completed the dismantlement of the enclosures at the end of 1933. See Rochat, *Guerre*

Whereas the implementation of political measures held the promise of weakening the insurgency, General Graziani still needed military operations to defeat Omar's forces. In June 1930, RCTC Cyrenaica conducted a large-scale clearing of the area of Fayed (east of the outpost of Gerdes ul-Gerrari, on the *gebel*), where Sanusi bands had concentrated once again, threatening Italian garrisons and local villages. Apart from further scattering the rebels, the colonial forces did not capture Omar al-Mukhtar nor inflicted significant damages to the *duar*.<sup>331</sup> For this reason, the Italian forces shifted to a strategy of pure attrition, revolving around continuous high-tempo actions executed by small groups following the direction of scouts and aviation assets. The main focus was on the *gebel*. In contrast, the insurgent forces became more and more evasive.<sup>332</sup>

In the second half of 1930, while the Italian military efforts continued on the plateau, General Graziani anticipated the preparation of the following objectives: the seizure of Kufra and the contrast to the border smuggling with Egypt. Regarding the former, the Italian authorities had started an action of political shaping since the beginning of 1929, playing the tribe of Zueia against the Sanusi leadership in Kufra.<sup>333</sup> In November 1930, Graziani received the authorization and the funding to launch the actual operation.<sup>334</sup> In reality, Graziani had begun the preparatory phase in July 1930, with the air interdiction of the enemy stronghold of Taizerbo (with gas and explosive munitions), armed reconnaissance of the main avenues of approach to Kufra, and the establishment of intermediate staging bases in Agedabia and Gialo.<sup>335</sup> The operation proper began on 20 December 1930 and involved the projection of two strong combined armed columns

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*italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 80-82; and Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 192-199; and Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 311-313.

<sup>331</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 151-153. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 60.

<sup>332</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 155-166. See also Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 66, 69-70.

<sup>333</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 39-43.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

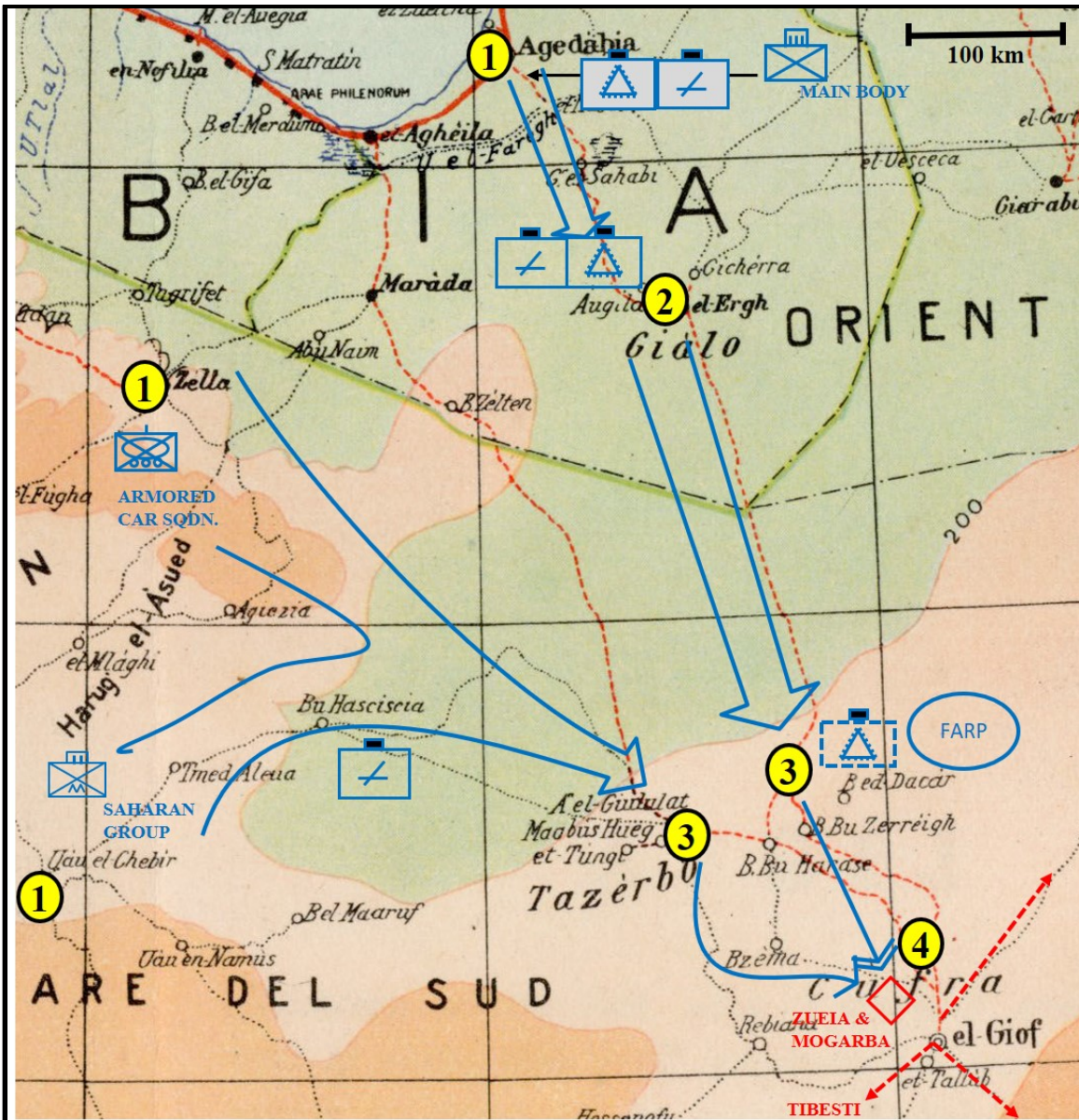
<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-171, 176-177. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 293.

(about 2,200 “rifles,” 300 trucks, and 3,500 camels), including Saharan groups and aviation assets, from Agedabia (Cyrenaica) and Uau el-Kebir (Fezzan) (see Figure 14). On 19 January, the Italian forces cornered a 400-strong insurgent defense force in el-Hauuári, north-west of the central oasis of Tag ed el Giof. The Sanusi forces, bested in combat, started a rout in all directions (see Figure 15), leaving a hundred guerrillas on the ground and fifty fighters in Italians’ hands. This operation constituted a remarkable feat of arms both under the tactical and logistical perspectives. In fact, the Italian forces projected and sustained an expeditionary contingent in desert terrain at a distance of 900 kilometers from Agedabia. The Italian authorities inflicted a significant blow to the prestige and the morale of the Cyrenaican rebels while ultimately acquiring control of a critical trading node with Egypt and Sudan. Finally, Italian reach extended over the entire Cyrenaica.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> During the battle for Kufra, the Italian forces suffered four soldiers KIA and sixteen WIA. See Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 178-207 and 219. The importance of Kufra to the Sanusi Order is also mentioned in Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 172, 187-188. The effects of the fall of Kufra are also evidenced in Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 292-295; Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1020; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 137.





### Legend

1. Italian points of departure on 20 December 1930; 2. Tactical pause of the Italian main body from 27 to 31 December 1931 in Gialo; 3. Arrival of the main body in Bir Zinghen on 9 January 1931; arrival of the Italian column from Tripolitania in Taizerbo on 11 January 1931; 4. Final Italian thrust into Kufra that began on 14 January and ended on 20 January 1931.

The blue color is for Italian units and actions. In contrast, the red color is for insurgent bands.

Figure 14. The Expedition of Kufra. The background map is a clipping from F. Milani, "Libia." Graphics and text box created by author with data from Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 178-206; and Di Martino, "Capitolo IV: Il contributo della Regia Aeronautica," 375-378.

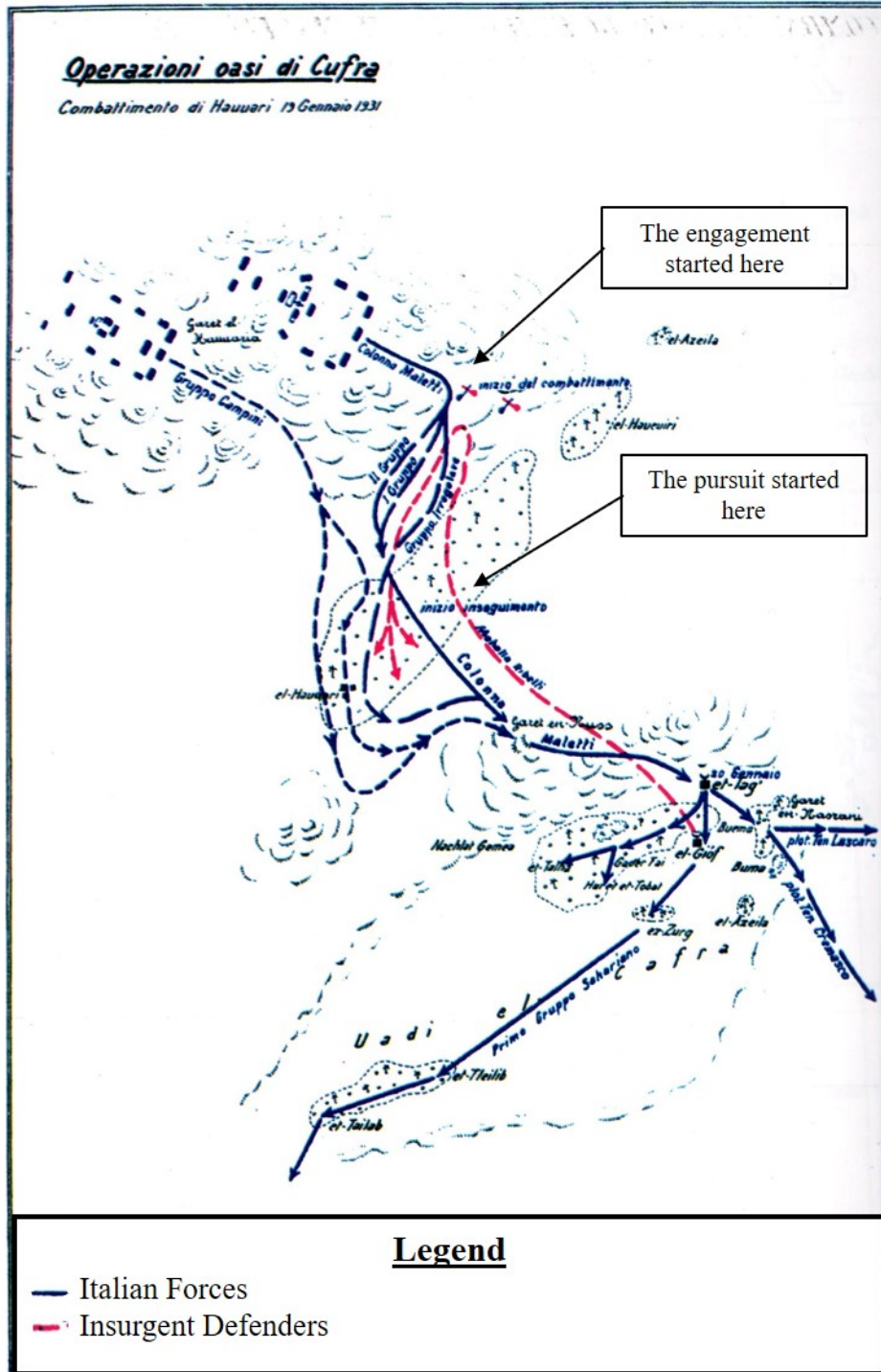


Figure 15. Operazioni oasi di Cufra [Operations in the oasis of Kufra]. Sketch from Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 316. Text box and legend created by author.

Despite the Bedouins' resettlement and the Italian success in Kufra, Omar al-Mukhtar could reorganize his forces, restarting his raiding activities in February 1931. At this point, the only source of subsistence for the rebellion amounted to the smuggling activities with Egypt. The

apparently unsuccessful efforts of the Egyptian authorities to contain these traffics played in Omar al-Mukhtar's favor.<sup>337</sup> Therefore, the last condition Graziani needed to achieve to defeat of his opponent was the complete interdiction of the Sanusi smuggling routes and control of the border. The Italian general solved this problem by constructing an imposing 270-kilometer wire fence from Bardia to Giarabub, established in record time between April and September 1931 (see Figure 16). Three forts and six outposts were responsible for controlling this passive obstacle, supported by one airbase and three smaller airfields.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 219, 223-224, 231. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 313-316; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1021; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 137.

<sup>338</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 228-229. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 319-320; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1021; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 137-138.

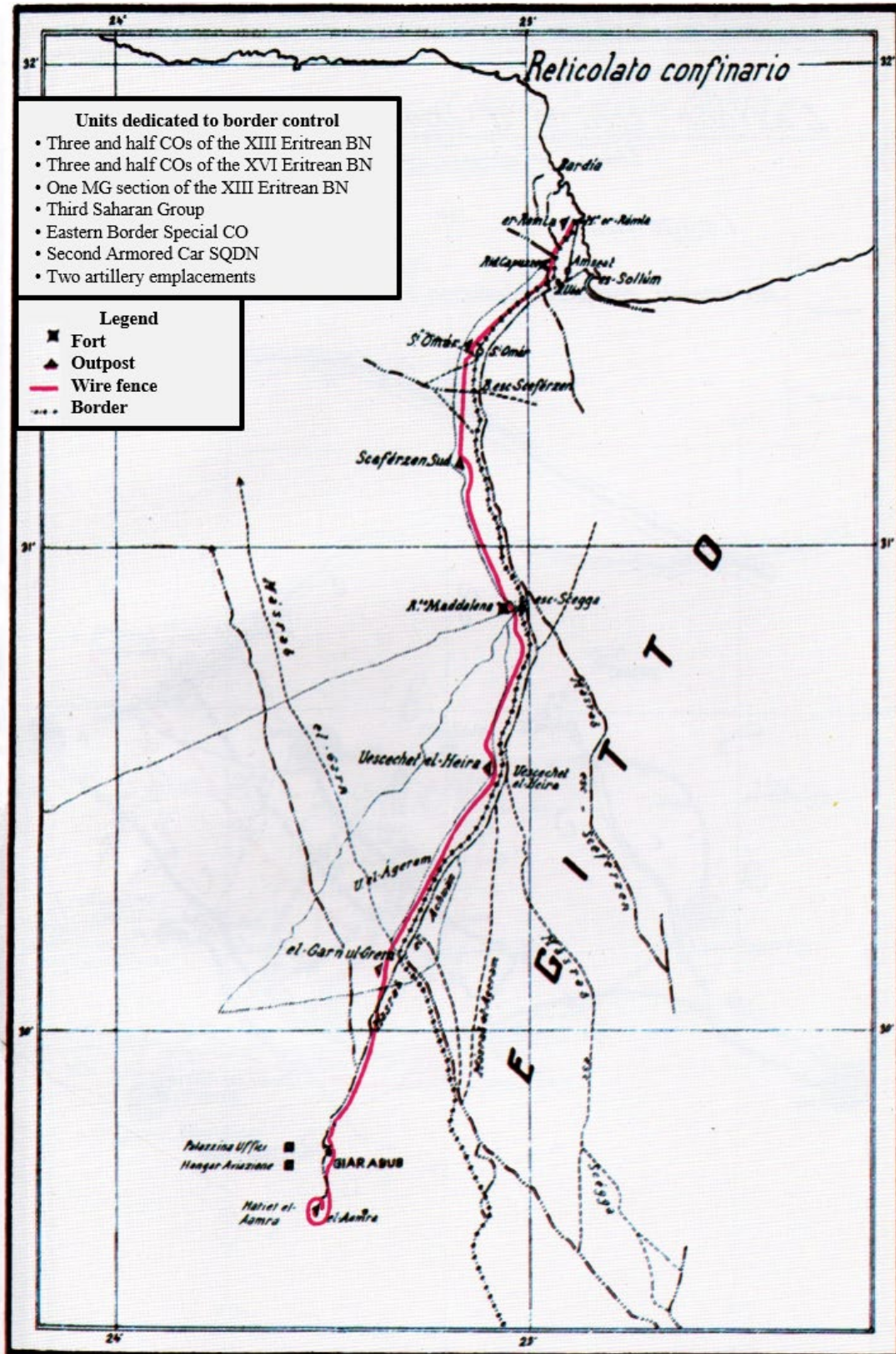


Figure 16. Reticolato confinario [Eastern border wire fence]. Sketch from Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 319. Unit list and legend are a translation of the original caption made by the author.

During the barrier construction, the Italian mobile forces had continued to counter Omar al-Mukhtar's *duar* in Sirtica and on the plateau, giving the adversaries no respite. In these regards, the integration of scout-tracker teams, aviation, and mobile groups was vital to maintain an appropriate tempo, increasing the pressure on the insurgents, by then isolated. In September, the Italian authorities finally apprehended, tried, and executed Omar al-Mukhtar.<sup>339</sup> After the old *akuan*'s demise, the Italian authorities sustained only minor engagements throughout the colony, although they faced a wave of intense anti-Italian propaganda brought forth by the international Islamic community.<sup>340</sup> But this last informational counteroffensive was to no avail. By then, Graziani had checkmated the insurgency. As anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard suggests, the Cyrenaica rebellion effectively succumbed with Omar al-Mukhtar's death.<sup>341</sup> Historian John Gooch poignantly describes the final spasms of the Sanusi insurgency: "Trapped, fragmented and with their caravans being hunted down by air and on land, some 60 guerrilla chiefs assembled on 9 December 1931 and agreed to end the struggle, leaving each individual to decide for himself whether he would surrender to the Italians or flee into Egypt."<sup>342</sup> On 24 January 1932, a public proclamation of Marshal Badoglio marked the official end of the insurgency in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. For the first time since the first Italian landings in Libya, the colonies were finally at peace.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 231-235, 266-267, 273. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 300-301; Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1021; and Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, 139.

<sup>340</sup> It is interesting to note that the work of the journalist Knud Holmboe was a cornerstone of the anti-Italian narrative. See Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 240-241, 245, 279-296.

<sup>341</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 190. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 320.

<sup>342</sup> Gooch, "Reconquest and Suppression," 1021.

<sup>343</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 307.

## Conclusion

The pacification of the so-called Italian Fourth Shore undoubtedly constitutes a subject worthy of attention. This campaign offers the example of a successful COIN approach that falls outside the classic case studies underpinning the current US doctrine and military education. In 1921, the Italian colonial authorities were at a complete disadvantage, following the disastrous attempt to address the causes of the insurgency with the sole diplomatic instrument. However, once the Italian government realized the necessity of military force to solve the problem, its legions eradicated a diverse and complex insurgent movement in ten years. The defeat of the rebellion, albeit by no means quick, arrived in a relatively short time if compared with some of the ongoing NATO and US COIN campaigns, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Italian campaign unfolded in the early twentieth century's European colonial warfare framework, a sensibly different context than today's operational challenges, with more permissive moral and legal sets of rules. Nonetheless, the analysis of the Italian operations in Libya reserves significant lessons for the modern military planner.

The Royal Army reaffirmed the Italian authority throughout the colonies by force of arms, attacking the insurgency from within and without its institutional and societal structure. More precisely, leveraging protracted political action, the senior Italian commanders kept the rebels' identity fragmented, so weakening their overall efforts. In Cyrenaica, where the Sanusi order provided cohesion to the traditionally segmented Bedouin tribal network, the colonial forces targeted the order itself as an institution and bested its mightiest champion, Omar al-Mukhtar. At the same time, the Italian forces employed combat actions to wear down the insurgency from without, specifically targeting its sources of subsistence, those being the local population and the smuggling network with Egypt. These measures coalesced in a skillful sequencing of operations in time, space, and purpose that took into account the Italian Kingdom's financial limitations and the local environment and the rebel threat.

US joint doctrine asserts that “[e]very insurgency is unique.”<sup>344</sup> As a completion to this statement, the Italian experience in Libya reinforces the point that insurgencies rarely are monolithic entities. Instead, they often present multiple networked subcomponents in their folds, with diverse sets of interests and a different interpretation of the ideals underpinning the insurgent cause.<sup>345</sup> Basing on this insight, Colonel Brian Reed, professor at the US Military Academy, maintains, “The modern insurgency represents an evolved form of warfare that takes advantage of the capabilities that certain tribal societies demonstrate, the pre-existing and affiliated social, economic, and military networks that are easily adaptable to combat, and often extending across traditional boundaries and borders.”<sup>346</sup> With this, Reed stresses the essential nature of collective identities inside an insurgent movement as a repository of social interactions that are fundamental catalysts for action.<sup>347</sup> In the Libyan campaign, the Italian commanders constantly targeted the insurgent fighters’ identity combining political action in their military activities, so preventing the consolidation of a unified front that would have acted as a force multiplier. Furthermore, the Italian authorities disrupted the Sanusi Brotherhood’s socio-political structure, which held the potential to promote the unification of the various tribes, not only in Cyrenaica but throughout Libya. With the Sanusi Order out of the equation, Graziani committed every resource possible to hunt down Omar al-Mukhtar, who retained the charismatic ability to unite the last rebellious tribal elements.

Whereas US Army doctrine envisages this notion in the framework “Identify, Separate, Isolate, Influence, and Reintegrate,” it emphasizes the separation of insurgent elements from the

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<sup>344</sup> US Joint Staff, JP 3-24 (2018), III-1.

<sup>345</sup> Professor Ali Ahmida clearly explains how the correlation between the insurgents’ ideology and reality was very complex. In his words, “In action, the meaning of religion and nationalism [identified as the main components of the rebels’ ideology] was conditioned by class and tribal and regional interests.” See Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya*, 127.

<sup>346</sup> Brian Reed, “A Social Network Approach to Understanding an Insurgency,” *Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 29, accessed 9 February 2021, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol37/iss2/9/>.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

population base. By contrast, this model only superficially addresses the exploitation fissures internal to the insurgent institutions as a means to weaken it and accelerate its collapse from within.<sup>348</sup> Social system analysis provides an effective way of mapping an insurgent network to visualize its composition and exploit its internal frictions.<sup>349</sup> The employment of modern information systems (cyber, social media, psychological operations, and electronic warfare) along the line of the Russian concept of “reflexive control”<sup>350</sup> could provide a way to bring the good old principle of *divide et impera* to the next level.

The various solutions engineered by the Italian commanders during the campaign evidence a population-centric approach to COIN operations.<sup>351</sup> This fact is undoubtedly remarkable for the early 1920s. However, given the utter incompatibility of the Italian and the insurgents’ political objectives, the forced taming of the tribes was the most natural method for the colonial government to regain the colonies. Later in the campaign, in the face of the impasse existing in Cyrenaica, Marshal Graziani better grasped the essential role of the subdued population in sustaining Omar’s bands. Even so, the Italian authorities intensified their control on the natives more to suffocate the resistance on the *gebel*.<sup>352</sup> Therefore, on the Italian side, there was never the intent to address the “root causes” of the insurgency in the sense implied by current doctrine.<sup>353</sup> Overall, the Italian colonial forces chiefly maintained an offensive mindset focused

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<sup>348</sup> US Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2014), 10-6 to 10-10.

<sup>349</sup> Reed, “A Social Network Approach to Understanding an Insurgency,” 27-29.

<sup>350</sup> Professor Timothy L. Thomas defines reflexive control as “a means to conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.” See Timothy L. Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17 (2004): 237, accessed 9 February 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040490450529>.

<sup>351</sup> Saini Fasanotti, “*Vincere!*” 74.

<sup>352</sup> Guglielmo C. Nasi, “25 anni in Africa” [25 years in Africa], unpub. ms., 5 October 1957, shelf 54, box 3, folder 6, Fondo Nasi at the Biblioteca dell’Accademia Militare dell’Esercito Italiano, 30.

<sup>353</sup> US Joint Staff, JP 3-24 (2018), III-1, III-4.



on territorial control and the rebels' neutralization, still not disregarding the critical role of the population.<sup>354</sup>

Instead, what is really instructive is how the Italian commanders could fight effectively in a new environment, with little previous experience in desert warfare, let alone starting the campaign from a position of disadvantage. This achievement was the logical consequence of two factors. First, although the Italian military leadership was not immune to the ethnocentric approach typical of European colonialism, some elements within its ranks, most notably Marshal Graziani, General Mezzetti, and Colonel Nasi, acquired a sufficient grasp of the local operational environment and adversary.<sup>355</sup> These senior commanders adjusted their mental models as the campaign progressed and they acquired more experience. Second, the Italian leadership capitalized on this knowledge and understanding to design and create an effective and autonomous fighting force. This new model combined indigenous troops, mechanized formations, aircraft, and long-range desert units capable of appropriate tactics against the insurgent tribal bands. In essence, the Italian colonial army displayed adaptive and learning traits essential to tackle a diverse and multifaceted insurgency manifesting different characteristics in different areas of the colonies.<sup>356</sup> On the downside, this adaptive and learning mindset chiefly resided in a distinct group of senior and junior leaders. It did not embrace the entire colonial organization, let alone the whole Italian Army.<sup>357</sup> The poor Italian performance during the 1940 thrust into Egypt clearly shows how these learning traits were short-lived in the Italian ranks, even though Marshal Graziani led that military campaign. In these respects, historian Simon Anglim hypothesizes that one of the reasons for this debacle is that Marshal Graziani did not believe his troops were

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<sup>354</sup> Dotolo, "A long small war," 176-177.

<sup>355</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 18-19. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 115-116.

<sup>356</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 151-155, 166-169.

<sup>357</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 21-22.

capable of executing effective desert operations, as they had been in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>358</sup>

Therefore, as much as developing a learning mentality is desirable in a military organization, in the long run, this is a partially effective measure if this mindset does not reach the distributed dimension of “team learning” advocated by the social scientist Peter Senge.<sup>359</sup>

Lastly, the Italian pacification of Libya evidence a successful application of operational art in COIN operations. The US Army doctrine defines operational art as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”<sup>360</sup> The Italian campaign saw the articulation in time of multiple operational cycles with specific intermediate objectives linked to precise geographical areas. In this regard, Lyautey’s “oil patch” methodology provided a suitable framework to sequence the Italian operations against an elusive nomadic enemy with no fixed territorial bonds.<sup>361</sup> Furthermore, this model enabled a progressive stretching of the colonial reach in line with the political objective of asserting the Italian sovereignty over the whole colonial expanse. A proper phasing, sequencing political and logistical preparation with kinetic activities, allowed the Italian forces to preserve operational reach. In turn, this approach offset the risk of culmination, not only at the tactical and operational levels but also in a more economic sense, especially for what concerned complex and resource-

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<sup>358</sup> Simon Anglim, “Callwell versus Graziani: how the British Army applied ‘small wars’ techniques in major operations in Africa and the Middle East, 1940–41,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (December 2008): 598-600, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310802462455>. As a further reference, historians Saini Fasanotti and Giorgio Rochat stress the lack of valorization of the experiences in desert warfare matured during the colonial period as the Italian Army approached the Second World War. See Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 21-22. See also Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922-1931*, 116.

<sup>359</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 9-11.

<sup>360</sup> US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 2-1.

<sup>361</sup> Historian John Gooch stresses this point, referring to the adoption of a strategy of “gradual expansion of control.” However, Colonel Nasi, in his unpublished memoir and doctrinal manual, specifically mentions Lyautey’s “oil patch” framework as a source of inspiration for the Italian colonial operations. See Gooch, “Reconquest and Suppression,” 1007; Nasi, “25 anni in Africa,” 23; Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 7, 174-175.

heavy operations. Paradoxically, as the campaign went on, the Fascist regime gradually reduced the funding of the colonies.<sup>362</sup> The fact that Marshal Badoglio decided to cut the RCTC Cyrenaica strength almost by half to gather resources for the development of local infrastructure is telling in this sense. The sequencing of the operational cycles took into account the necessity of stacking up political and military actions to create adding effects that maintained the Italian forces in a condition of relative advantage. For example, in 1922, the first step of the initial Italian pacification of Tripolitania saw the liberation of the Gebel Nefusah and the restitution of those lands to the rightful Berber inhabitants. The decision of prioritizing support to the Berbers over a strike to Tarhuna, the heart of the Tripolitanian rebellion, won the allegiance of a powerful and motivated local defense force to hold the lands just pacified. Similarly, in June 1930, Marshal Graziani stacked up the physical effects of resettlement, border control, and the Sanusi network's disruption with the moral effect deriving from the seizure of Kufra to bring down the last elusive vestiges of the rebellion. In essence, the articulation of the Italian COIN campaign in Libya is a testament of Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Robert Leonhard's statement that "[v]ictory in warfare is linked inextricably with positive control of sequence."<sup>363</sup>

In conclusion, Libya's pacification constitutes a significant chapter in the Italian Army's history that presents instructive insights for the international military community. The size and complexity of this campaign preclude exhaustive coverage of it in one single sweep. Besides, every historical work is by definition incomplete because it involves a work of selection and interpretation.<sup>364</sup> An analysis of the operational level of the campaign calls for precise research and formulation criteria. However, the opportunity remains for at least three other research

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<sup>362</sup> Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia*, 146-147.

<sup>363</sup> Robert L. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: KC, 2018), 130. Kindle edition.

<sup>364</sup> Jay Luvaas, "Military history: Is It Still Practicable?," *Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College* 12, no. 2 (1982): 4 and 7, accessed 9 February 2021, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol12/iss1/22>.

threads. First, this campaign represents a remarkable case study on the evolution of desert warfare, especially as a preamble to the operations in North Africa during the Second World War. Second, the Italian tactics adopted in Libya present interesting material for an analysis of combined arms and joint cooperation in the interwar period. Lastly, outside the pure historical context, the Italian *divide et impera* model could provide a meaningful starting point for a theoretical framework to fight insurgencies from within, taking advantage of the modern concept of information warfare. In essence, the Italian COIN operations in Libya during the interwar period are a treasure trove for all those officers in the modern military community who, like the ancient Japanese *ronin*, roam the world constantly seeking new opportunities to improve, as commanders and planners.

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