THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL SOCIALIST GERMANY AND THE ARABIAN WORLD

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the relationship between National Socialist and the Arabian world, from 1933 to 1945. Particular attention will be given to the reasons which brought Nazi Germany to provide large ideological support to pro Nazis Arab groups, but only small amounts of material support such as troop deploy. This behaviour will be called “friendship with little commitment”. The method used is the analysis of official acts, letters and newspapers of this period of analyzed study.

The first chapter is an analysis of the Arabian world, its situation after World War One, and how the Arabian world and its problems were perceived in Nazi Germany.

The Arabian world is formed by all those area where the majority of the populations belongs to the Arabian culture and speaks Arabic language. This means all the states included between Morocco and Iraq, even Arab peninsula, Sudan and Somalia. In 1933 there were only four independent states: Egypt, the Kingdom of Iraq, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. All of them were highly influenced by the United Kingdom. The rest of the Arab world was under different types of colonial domination.

The three main problems in this area after World War One were: colonialism, Zionism and pan-Arabism. They are consequence of the ambiguous policy of United Kingdom in this area; during the war the colonialism logic keeps working after the war in the mandate formula. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 16 May 1916 divided the Middle East in area of influence between Great Britain and France. Zionism was the
expression of certain Jewish lobbies who wanted to establish a national home in Palestine. Their request was received by the English government with the Balfour Declaration, dated 2 November 1917. Pan-Arabism derives from British anti-ottoman policy, finalized to create an Arabian guerrilla against the Sultan of Istanbul. British people originated the Arabian nationalism promising the creation of a great Arabian state in the Middle East.

Concerning how the Arabian world was perceived in Nazi Germany, we must take a look to Nazi ideology. According to “Mein Kampf” the only way Germany could survive was creating his own “lebensraum” in Eastern Europe. There was no interest into recreating the colonial system of the Second Reich. This idea will influence, on the one hand, the possibility of Germany to look at the Arabian world not as a land to conquer and appearing to the Arab population as a friend, but on the other hand it will justify the least commitment of Germany in the Arabian theatre during the war. Biological racism was never a problem in the relationship between Arabs and Nazis. About realpolitik Arabs who lived in Germany were never included in the racial laws, the only enemy of German race where the Jews, common enemy between Arabs and Nazis. Furthermore the Islamic religion was the only one toward which Nazis high hierarchies had a fondness. Moreover Arabian and German nationalism had many points in common: both were linked to a common culture and language and share a great ethnical fragmentation, which was not present in France or Great Britain. From an economical point of view Middle East was a source of crude oil, in particular during the years of the war. It is also important to remember that the foundations of the friendship between Germany and the Arabian world were laid by Kaiser Wilhelm before and during World War One. Thanks to his relation with the Ottoman Empire a large number of German officers entered in contact with the Arabian world, leading and training the troops of the Caliph. The last aspect which must be taken in consideration is the relationship between Germany and Italy. The Mediterranean was always included in the Italian sphere of influence, and so the Arab world too. From the Germany point of view it was useful to increase Arabian
nationalism and to use it against France and the United Kingdom, but always within some limits. These limits were the friendship between Berlin and Rome. The Arabs at the same time feared that Italy could have taken the place of France and England as colonial power.

The second chapter is an analysis of the Palestinian tangle and which were the relationships between Zionism, Arabian nationalism and Hitler’s Germany.

During the first years of the Nazis regime in Germany the relationship of NSDAP with Zionism was cause of friction between Arabs and Germans. With the purpose of causing troubles to the British Empire, Germany found an agreement with the Zionist association, called “Haavara” which allowed German Jews to emigrate in Palestine. The aim of the Nazis was not to allow the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, as the deal was interpreted by the Arabs, but to make Germany “judenfrei” without violent actions. The task to eliminate Jews was left to the Arabs, jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire. This position will change in 1937, when the British commission led by Lord Peel recognized for the first time the possibility that Palestine should have been divided in two states (one for the Arabs, one for the Jews). The fear caused by the concrete creation of a Jewish state brought Germany in a determined anti-Zionist position, strengthening further the relationship between Arabs and National Socialism.

Regarding the Arabs of Palestine and Arabian nationalism it is important to consider a non-state actor which was the “favourite interlocutor” with Germany for the Palestinian question and later for the Arab world: Hajji Muhammad Amin al-Husayni, Grand Mufit of Jerusalem. Born between 1893 and 1987 he belonged to a wealthy Palestinian family. In 1920 was one of the greatest leaders of the Nabi Musa uprising against the Jews. In 1921 he became Grand Mufit of Jerusalem, a juridical figure with the task of being interpreter of the Sharia, the Islamic law. In 1929 he was once more leader of another uprising against Jewish settlers. Since 1933 he was a great admirer of Adolf Hitler, that Arabs called Abu Ali (The Redeemer). In 1934 he
visited for the first time the German consul in Jerusalem, offering his service to the Third Reich. In 1936 he led the great Arabian revolt against the British Mandate and the Jewish colonists. In 1936 the British authorities emitted an arrest warrant against him, which forced the Mufti to exile.

The German foreign office was always alert about the activities of the Mufti. In 1937 the Abwher, the German military intelligence, thought to recruit him as a collaborator. In September 1937 the Mufti met Adolf Eichmann, high officer of the SS. In 1938 al-Husayni received armaments, money and advisers from the unit “Judenreferat”. The amount of material sent to help to the Arabs during their uprising was always very little. Until the Monaco Conference Hitler did not want to risk a crisis with Great Britain, interfering too much into the colonial possessions of his majesty.

The third chapter is an analysis of different areas of the Arab world and the relationship between these areas and the Third Reich. It is divided in four parts: Maghreb, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt.

The Maghreb is formed by Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, which were under French control in the 30s. The greatest support to anti-French movements was between 1937 and 1939, in particular during the great uprising of three most important cities of Morocco: Fez, Meknes, and Khemisset. From 1940 to 1942 the relationship froze. Germany was interested in avoiding any kind of interference in the colonies of the friendly regime of Vichy. As a consequence of the allied landing in Morocco and Algeria in 1942, and the defection of local French troops, decided to use in Tunisia the collaboration of the Arabs. But Hitler’s government was not able to declare the complete independence of the Maghreb for three reasons: the maintenance of a good relationship with Petain’s government in continental France, the maintenance of a good relationship with Franco’s Spain, that was in control of good portion of Morocco, and avoiding to interfere with the sphere of influence of the Italian ally.
Nevertheless the Bay of Tunis maintained a good relationship with Afrika Korps. Germany found a great ally in Tunisia in the Arab party Neo Destur.

Saudi Arabia was one of the few independent Arabian states, even if Great Britain used to exercise a great influence upon the country. The country was in fact surrounded by British possessions and feared for its territorial integrity. In 1938 lasting diplomatic relations were established between Saudi Arabia and Germany. In a series of diplomatic meetings with the German ambassador, Fritz Grobba, the Saudis affirmed that their purpose was to strengthen their country from inside to be able to resist British influence and cooperate with Germany. The Third Reich prepared six millions of marks in armaments to be send in Saudi Arabia, but they never get there as a consequence of the beginning of WWII.

Iraq was formally independent from 1932, but the British maintained two important military bases in the cities of Habbaniya, near Baghdad, and Shaibah, near Basrah. In case of war British troops had a complete military access to the country. After his exile from Palestine, al-Husayni fled to Iraq, where he used the money of the Abwher to help Rashid ali al-Giliani, an Iraqi nationalist and a pro-German. In 1940 Rashid offered to Germany regular supplies of crude oil in exchange Germany should recognize the unity and independence of the Arab world. The spring of 1941, with the great victories of the Wehrmacht in North Africa and in the Balkans, saw the rebirth of anti-British feelings. The first of April 1941 al-Giliani led a coup d’état against the government of Iraq and became prime minister. In response to this the British troops decided to invaded Iraq. The Iraqi troops were unprepared and were easily defeated. Germany, Italy and the French of Vichy in Syria sent helps to the insurgents. In particular 41 planes of the Luftwaffe were sent to Mosul, in the north of Iraq. But even in this situation the helps were minimal because of both logistic and realpolitik, according to the “friendship with little commitment”.

Egypt became formally independent in 1922 but, for the presence of the Suez Canal in the country, the British maintained a large political and military influence. The
nationalist feelings were strong, even in the royal family, led by King Faruq I. In 1936 a large number of young Egyptians took part of the Nazi party rally in Nurnberg. The situation became paradoxical with the beginning of World War Two. Egypt became a battlefield between the Axis power and the Allies, and while the allied forces stroke to defend Egypt, the 40.000 Egyptian troops remained strictly neutral. In April 30 1941 Joachim Von Ribbentrop sent a telegram to Egypt where he stated that the future of Egypt was as an independent nation. Great demonstrations in favour of the Afrika Korps were held in the first months of 1942, when Rommel reached the city of El-Alamein. In February 1942 a short but intense crisis between Egyptians and British broke out in Cairo. The reason was the reassembling of a new cabinet, in which King Faruq wanted to put in charge a pro-German element. The British surrounded the royal palace to avoid this possibility. Even Nasser and Sadat, future presidents of Egypt, together with 5.900 other people were arrested for collaboration with Germans. The relationship between the Reich with Egypt and the dream of conquest all Middle East ended in November 1942, with the defeat of the Afrika Korps in El-Alamein.

The fourth and final chapter is an analysis of the collaboration occurred in Europe between Arabian elements and the Third Reich, and a brief description of the legacy of the Nazi-Arab relationship.

The collaboration in Europe began when Amin al-Husayni, after the failure of the Golden Square (the code name of the Iraqi revolt) fled first to Italy and then in Germany. It brought to the attention of the High Germans officers that with a wider help the revolt would not have ended so catastrophically. In November 28 1941 the Mufti met Adolf Hitler. Disappointed by the failure of the Golden Square, Hitler denied to launch a message directed to the Arab world to instigate a general uprising. Gottleb Bergen, chief of SS headquarter, convinced the Mufti that he could help the Reich also in other ways. Amin al-Husayni was put in charge of six radio stations to coordinate the German propaganda to the Arab world. Even the government of Japan
asked his help for its own propaganda to the Muslims populations of East and Central Asia.

The Mufti was not only employed in spreading propagandistic news, but also in coordinating and recruiting Arabian and Muslim division into the Wehrmacht, in particular in the Waffen-SS. The military corps, which much more than any other symbolized the strength of the Arian race to the world, accepted an element which aspect was absolutely not Arian. The dream of the Mufti was to train an Arab legion which should have been his personal army. Three different groups of Arabian volunteers were created, but they were few, divided ideologically and not suitable to modern fighting. They were deployed in North Africa and in the Russia campaign with poor results. Approximately 13.000 Arabs joined the Wehrmacht during the war. After 1943 the Germans decided not to form new Arabian military groups. From 1942 to 1944 the Mufti worked in the Balkans to recruit local Muslim elements, Bosnian and Albanians, inside the Waffen-SS to fight against the Tito’s followers. He reached a great success, and the 13th Mountain Division Handschar (for the Bosnian) and the 21st Mountain Division Skanderbeg (for the Albanian) were formed. They were allowed to wear the fez, pray five times per day, to respect Muslim diet and Muslim festivities. Each regiment had its own Imam. The success of this division can be found in three elements: firstly the territory was controlled by the Germans, secondly the hope of the local population to obtain political autonomy thanks to their cooperation, thirdly the fear of Tito’s followers. The Mufti was also involved into the Holocaust, as many German officers witnessed during the Nurnberg Trials. In 1944 he was able to stop an agreement with the International Red Cross finalized to release 5.000 children from the Theresienstadt concentration camp. In 1945 al-Husayni was arrested, but he never arrived to the Nurnberg Trials because the three states which could accuse him (France, Great Britain and Yugoslavia) feared too much the consequence of such action to the Arab and Muslim populations under their control.
After World War Two the influence of Nazism in certain part of the Arabian world kept strong. The birth of the state of Israel in 1948 was the fulfilment of all the fears of the Arabs. The USSR sent a large number of former Nazis captured during the war into the Middle East, to help the Arabian countries in their fighting against Israel and limited the influence of the US in that area. The purpose of these was to train the Arab troops and build weapons capable to annihilate the Jewish state. Yasser Arafat, was a relative of the Mufti and during his youth al-Husayni recommended him to study the Mein Kampf and to recruit former Nazism to help him, as Arafat did from 1968 and 1969. Even if al-Husayni was the symbol of cooperation between the Arab world and Nazism it is important to remember that many leaders of the Muslim and Arabian world decided to support the Allies in their struggle, such as the leader of the Indian Muslim League, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Even Arafat in 1988 will announce the end of terrorism and the beginning of a dialogue with Israel.

In conclusion this Thesis has shown the rise and the development of the relationship between National Socialist Germany and the Arab world, in the terms of the “friendship with little commitment”. The enemy of my enemy is my friend is surely a principle which could be applied to this case, but also the ideology used to influence this relationship a lot. Finally it is possible to affirm that this relationship developed only in limited form, in particular for the will of the Germans to avoid a too much involving commitment.