

The Activity of the Islamic Order al-Sanūsīyah at the Turn of the 19th Century

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Ever since the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, North-Eastern Africa and the Middle East have attracted a great deal of attention. As a consequence of this event, the unavoidable process of rivalry has emerged; mainly between France, Great Britain, Italy and then Germany, after this country had been unified in 1871. The purchasing by the British government 44% shares of the Suez Canal from Egyptian khedive Isma‘īl in November 1875 brought another significant factor which accelerated the challenge for these regions of the world. However, having established its domination over Egypt in 1882, Great Britain intensified the creation of its famous ‘Imperial route’ which facilitated better connections of the Mother country with her vast and remote colonies in India, Australia and the Far East. Having achieved political domination over the Suez Canal region, the British initiated another significant process, a new stage of rivalry over the African territories. Thus, the so-called “scramble for Africa” had begun.

What also needs to be mentioned are the social processes that began to take place among the Arab tribes at the turn of the 19th century. Mainly, the ruling sheikhs and tribal elders embarked on breaking off the ties with Constantinople with a view to creating an Arab state, or some states when the decaying Ottoman Empire was expected to collapse. The above factors and the approaching turmoil of war, which involved the whole region in 1914-1918, was to determine the objectively existing background of the al-Sanūsīyah question, which is going to be discussed. The prime aim of this paper is to find an answer to this issue. The scope of the deliberations here is narrowed down the religious, political and military aspects concerning the warlike and influential religious order.

The main ideologist and creator of the fraternity, Muḥammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī (full name Sīdī Muḥammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī Al-Mujāhirī Al-Hasanī Al-Idrīsī) was born in 1787 in Tursh, a small village close to the Mediterranean port town Mostaganem (Mustaghānam) in northern Algeria. Having not accepted Ottoman officials’ nepotism and corruption in his fatherland, he made up his mind to leave for Fez in Morocco where he enrolled in a Koranic school. The observation of the Muslim’s style of life, particularly in comparison to the modern, European French society, (Morocco was a nominal French colony at that time) gave rise to a deep spiritual and intellectual transformation in his mind. Since then he began to propagate a philosophical ideology according to which social and economic progress of the Arabs was

possible, but the only way to achieve it was by following very strictly all the ideas that had been put in the Quran.

In 1828 Muḥammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī arrived in Mecca for the first time. Then he left for Algeria, Tripolitania and Egypt where he joined some Islamic fraternities living in the desert oases to explore the secrets of their functioning, style of life and ruling. In 1883 he arrived in the Hejaz; to study the Koranic knowledge at the most eminent ulemas of Mecca. The head of Moroccan fraternity al-Khadiriya, Sayyid Ahmad bin Idris al-Fasi was the man who influenced him most. After his teacher and spiritual leader's death, Muḥammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī established in 1837 his fraternity in Abu Cobes (Mt. Abu Qubais), the place situated not far away from Mecca 1.

Acting in the sphere of Sunnism, the Sūfīs fraternity *al-Sanūsīyah* preached the necessity of returning to the human "pure" principles of conduct which should conform to Wahhābī's ideology created in the 18th century. Soon, ideas of this militant mystical movement began to catch up among the Bedouin tribes dwelling in the Hajaz. Therefore, the Ottoman authorities, supported by jealous Muslim spiritual leaders of Mecca, expelled the Sanūsīs from there. Muḥammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī and his ardent followers moved to Cairo and then to Siwah oasis. In 1842 the fraternity came to Tripoli for a short time and then they arrived in Cyrenaica were not far from Benghazi, in a ruined ancient place named Cirene, the Sanūsī family developed their spiritual, ideological, doctrinal principles. The requirement of studying the Quran and devoting to meditation in secluded hermitages called (*Zāwiyah pl. Zāwaya*) 2 was put into practice by Muḥammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī there.

In 1856 the Sanūsīs returned to Egypt for a short time, but afterwards, they moved to Cyrenaica again and then to al-Jaghbūb, the oasis situated on the pilgrimage and merchant crossroads that existed there since ancient times. In al-Jaghbūb they established their headquarters. It was the best place to choose. Situated in Egyptian territory, not far from the western border, the place was almost out of Egyptian and Ottoman control. Additionally, the contemporary French colonial pressure in this territory was also very slight.

There was an additional but exceptionally significant factor that had to be considered. The vast deserted territory was inhabited by plain, poor nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes. Those scarcely forgotten by the world people were particularly impressionable on the Sanūsī's

1 See: Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, London, file FO/882/11/ID/18/1; A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, New York 1992, p. 312

2 See: PRO, FO/882/11/ID/18/1 and Capt. M. S. Mac Donell's report [in] PRO/FO/882/14/NA/18/1.

ideology and propaganda. These circumstances were to bring some of the most far-reaching consequences in the process of future state creation.

In the meantime, al-Jaghbūb spread out and was slowly becoming the Sanūsī's ideological and political centre. On the basis of the Koranic school, which had been founded earlier, Muhammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī established the second, after al-Azhar in Cairo, University in Africa. Many ardent disciples and 'apostles' being educated there went separate ways as far as the Fezzan province and Equatorial Africa to preach the Sanūsī's puritan, orthodox ideology and propaganda throughout all tribes dwelling in the vast desert territories.

Muhammad Ibn Alī As-Sanūsī, also called the Grand Sanūsī (as-Sanusi al-Kabir) died on September 7th 1859. He was succeeded by the elder of his two living sons Sayyid Muhammad Idris al-Mahdi al-Sanusi (Sīdī Muḥammad Idrīs al-Mahdī). Following his father's way of reasoning, the new leader maintained the discipline in the fraternity's structures and developed the ideological and doctrinal principles of the professed faith.

He was both an able organiser and an inspired leader so, after ten years of his ruling, the order's significance arose in the Arab world a great deal, therefore kindling the flames of the Islamic revolution in Sudan. Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdullah, commonly known as "Mahdi" offered Sayyid Muhammad the title of Khalifa for that part of Africa which had been influenced by the fraternity structures. However, if the honour had been accepted, the Sudanese prophet's superiority would have been acknowledged, and then, the fraternity would have had to enter the war with Egypt and finally with Great Britain too. So, the Mahdi's proposal was rejected.³

Meanwhile, the Ottoman authorities were getting seriously anxious about the al-Sanūsī's economic, religious and political rising in the region. Their suspicions were getting stronger ever since Sayyid Muhammad had not fulfilled the sultan Abdūlhamid II's request for military help during the ardent and bloody actions against the Russian Army in the First Balkan War, 1877-1878.⁴ The moment was crucial for the Ottoman Empire because this country had been extremely threatened by the "infidels" and was at the edge of its decline.

³ Likewise the Prophet Muhammad, Mahdi was eager to give the title of khalifa for his four most faithful and outstanding disciples. One of them was to be Sayyid Mohammad. See: A. McGregor, *A Military History of Modern Egypt. From the Ottoman Conquest to the Ramadan War*, Westport, Connecticut-London 2006, s. 179.

⁴ Sultan Abdūlhamid II's asking for military help was fulfilled by the Egyptian khedive Isma'il who in May and June, 1877 sent to the Balkan front Egyptian Expeditionary Corps consisting of 8 000 troops. See: A. Mc Gregor, op. cit s. 157.

Several years later, the Sanūsīs acted in the same way during Urabi Pasha's revolt against the British in Egypt. When in August 1882, the Colonel asked them for help, his requests were turned down. They also refused any military help for the Mahdi of Sudan in 1883.⁵ It was also the time when the Head of the Order was asked by Germany and Italy to cooperate. Notwithstanding, likewise, the previous ones, those political offers were also rejected. However, the attitude, particularly towards the Germans, was to change in the years to come.

The Sanusi's attitudes towards their Islamic brothers were conceivable while considering the main context of their two first leaders', far-reaching political plans. As early as the al-Sanūsīyah Order was brought into being, its founder and spiritual leader, the Grand Sanussi made up his mind to create a theocratic state on the Egyptian and Libyan borderland.⁶ Therefore, he and his son and successor Sayyid Muhammad adopted a policy of neutrality towards their nearest neighbours as well as the European powers. They would rather not have got involved in political, as well as regional military conflicts. Instead, they would prefer to have their power for the events to come.

Meanwhile, in the last decade of the 19th century, France made good use of Britain's participation in the Boer War and intensified its penetration of Equatorial Africa. Soon after, the French came out on the situated south of the Libyan frontier territories Tibesti and Chad. The Ottoman, Egyptian and British authorities became very concerned about the French actions. Nevertheless, al-Sanūsīyah was the first to whom the French political and military action was directed to. Having foresight the increasing threat from the north of his theocratic empire, Sayyid Muhammad decided in 1895 to move the order's seat as far as the Al-Kufrah oasis in Fezzan province, close to the Sudanese and Egyptian borders. There were some other significant circumstances that Sayyid Muhammad had considered before e. g. a) the urgent need of personal supervising over the rapidly developing order's structures (Zāwaya/lodges) in this area, b) arising opportunity of taking over considerable parts of long-distance caravan trade routes, particularly in the circumstances, when the exchanging of goods via the Nile route had been blockaded during the Mahdi's uprising, c) the Ottoman and Egyptian authorities' encouragement. Both governments expected the warlike fraternity would hamper the French colonialism.

As it was easy to foresee, soon after, almost all Egyptian and Libyan borderland, from the Mediterranean coast as far as to the Sudanese frontier, was, to a considerable extent,

⁵ See: *ibidem*, p. 169

⁶ See: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, Oxford University Press 1949, p. 8

controlled by al-Sanūsīyah. The Al-Kufrah oasis became their chief spiritual and political centre. Since then, the orthodox ideas, missionary efforts and propaganda were being successively spread out among the Arabs, Berbers, Tuaregs and Negroes dwelling in the territories of Kawar, Tibesti, Borku, Ennedi, Darfur, Wadai, Kanem, Chad, the Azger, the Airu, Baghrimi as far as to Senegal.⁷

As it was inevitable, the order began its military action against the French soon. The skirmishes were so tiresome, ardent and bloody that the French colonial army tried to avoid them in the initial phase of war. They often wanted the Sanussis to be left alone. However, being so successful, Sayyid Muhammad decided to move the seat of the order more south, as far as Quiru (Quru).⁸ It was the period when al-Sanūsīyah, ruled by able, skilled and open-minded Sayyid Muhammad, succeeded in political, military and economic fields of its broaden activity.

Sayyid Muhammad Idris al-Mahdi al-Sanusi's death on January 1st 1902 brought some significant changes for the entire fraternity's structure, but chiefly for his closest family. He left two minor sons. Both of them, the elder Sayyid Muhammad Idris and his younger brother Sayyid Muhammad al-Rida, were still in al-Jaghbūb studying at university. None of them was able to carry the burden of the power and responsibility for the order, particularly in the turbulent years that were expected to come. Notwithstanding, before his death, Sayyid Muhammad handed down the leadership over the fraternity to his nephew Sayyid Ahmed al-Sharif.⁹

Soon after, the new leader had to take up a heavy burden of responsibility for the order in hard times that were to come. The last two decades closing the 19th century and two first decades of the 20th century were to bring many important events on the international political arena. At the end of the 1880s and at the 1890s the leaders of the order were getting more and more apprehensive about European colonialism that had reached Africa. Having defeated the Mahdists at Omdurman, the British regained their influence over Sudan, which they had lost before. They also took up Socoto in Nigeria. The French captured Timbuctu, and from 1881 they occupied Tunis. The Italians took control over Somaliland (1889) and Eritrea (1890). They also attempted to penetrate Abyssinia from there. In the light of the rising threat of European

7 See: *ibidem*, p. 21-22

8 See: *ibidem* ; G., Young, *Egypt. From the Napoleonic Wars Down to Cromer and Allenby*, Piscataway, NJ, USA 2002, p. 211

9 See: PRO/FO/11/ID/18/1

conquest in Africa, Sayyid Ahmed asked the Ottoman authority to reinforce the Turkish troops, which were stationed in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. He wanted them to be strengthened so that they would be able to stop French and British pressure upon the Saharan territories. Nevertheless, the government in Constantinople refused, arguing in favour of maintaining good relations with France and Great Britain. Having felt cornered, the leader of al- Sanūsīyah turned towards the Italians.

At the outset of 1902 two al-Sanūsīyah's representatives arrived in Cairo to have talks with the Italian consul there. They put out the question openly:

“... what his country's intentions were with regard to the Ottoman province.¹⁰ His ambiguous answer was: ‘...Italy wanted only to prevent the encroachment of other European powers.’¹¹

Lapping Italy's consul answer up, al- Sanūsīyah's leader Sayyid Ahmed asked the Italians then to sell him arms. As expected, his request met with their approval because the

The other challenge that Sayyid Ahmed “inherited” after his uncle's death was the tiresome war with France. Some arduous military actions, particularly on the soil of what later became known as French Sudan, was being waged (with short intervals) as long as until 1914. The French took over the following provinces and oases: Kawar and Bilma (1906), ‘Ain Kalak (1907), Abaish (1909), Tibesti, Borku, Wajanga i Eneidi (1913-1914). Wherever they arrived, they made their utmost to destroy and eliminate all the Sanūsīyah's structures. ¹²

At the eve of World War I, al-Sanūsīyah Order, but chiefly its leader, had to face more serious challenges. In the years when Italy's colonial process towards Cyrenaica and Tripolitania was being intensified, al - Sanūsīyah had to face an even far more ardent military conflict with this country, than with France before, and then, at the beginning of World War I, with Great Britain as well. Their military efforts, undertaken against these three great European powers, should be analysed in the context of increasing fraternity leaders' aspiration to create an independent or semi-independent state. They attempted to make good use of the coming opportunity.

10 Anderson L., *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980*, Princeton University Press 1986, p. 110

11 ibidem

12 See: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, op. cit. pp. 27-28

All in all, the accomplishment of such ambitious dreams brought the necessity of an extraordinary inner consolidation of entire fraternity, which, while talking of mystical or religious sects' rules and methods of activity, was possible to achieve, particularly when its leader was strong enough and successful.

These events should be viewed in the context of the contemporary situation at home. His predecessor left two young sons, who were maturing, and, in some favourable circumstances, they would be able to take over the power and position of their father's. Sayyid Ahmed recognised it well and therefore having considered all aspects of the fraternity's inner and foreign situation, he adopted for closer co-operation with the Ottoman Empire. He assumed that reproaching with Constantinople would bring him some political profits, and even autonomy or semi-autonomy of his future country, yet, within the Ottoman Empire.

At the beginning of the first decade of the 20th century, the European powers' policy brought them on the edge of war. The rising antagonism, which occurred between them, crossed Europe's borderline and spread over North Africa and the Middle East. In such hard times, Italy was the country that displayed increasing interest in North-East Africa. Having occupied Somaliland and Eritrea, which has already been mentioned before, Italy turned its look at Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. It was not a new interest. Italy's claim regarding these two Ottoman provinces dates back to 1887 when the government of the Second German Reich gave Italy secret assurances of support. In the first decade of the 20th century, the government in Rome presented its plans of annexation Cyrenaica and Tripolitania to Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, France and Russia. Having received European powers' approval, Italy began its peaceful penetration of these provinces. The other significant landmark was the Alliance with France, which was formed in the years of 1900-1902. Both countries decided to coordinate their policy towards North Africa and were eager to take over some provinces being under nominal Ottoman's control.

Being assured of her ally's strong support, Italy declared war on Turkey on September 29th, 1911¹³. The next day the Italian Navy began a heavy bombardment of the coastal towns and ports, e.g. Darna and Tripoli. Soon after, Expeditionary Forces consisting of about 34-35 000 troops attacked several weak Ottoman units, some of which comprised fewer than 5 000

13 See: J. C. Hurewitz., *Middle East and North Africa in World Politics. A Documentary Record. European Expansion, 1535 -1914*, Vol. I. New Haven and London, Yale University Press 1975, Doc. No. 157, *Entente on Morocco and Tripoli: France and Italy. 14 December 1900-1 November 1902*, pp. 477-482

men.¹⁴ Poorly equipped Turks were defeated and expelled from the towns and fortifications in no time. It seemed that the victory was at hand. The Italian Army took over the territory around. However, much to its commanders' astonishment, the Italian troops were not able to move further forward, even to catch up with the retreating Turks. Al- Sanūsīyah warriors reinforced the retreating enemy's forces.

Ever since Italy attempted to establish good relations with al- Sanūsīyah (1902), in her plans, the order was expected to give a sympathetic response to her Ottoman-Libya affairs, but particularly to the future colonising process which was planned. Nevertheless, the course of events was different. One should agree with Professor E.E. Evans-Pritchard's opinion:

'...it is difficult to understand how the Italians could have imagined that Sanusiya Shaiks would have preferred them to the Turks who, after all, were Muslims, if not very good ones, and sometimes personal friends as well; especially in view of the low opinion the Arabs of the Near East generally had formed of Italians in comparison with other Europeans.¹⁵

To the great Italian headquarters' surprise, the almost defeated Ottoman units received immediate al-Sanūsīyah warriors' support, even while retreating beyond the range of the Italian long-range naval artillery fire. Many Bedouin warriors led by sheikhs of al- Sanūsīyah Lodges were rushing to relieve their Muslim brothers who were fighting at Banina, Darna, and Benghazi.

The al-Sanūsīyah's help was so priceless at that moment of the war that the authorities in Constantinople decided to make good use of this opportunity. Soon after, they dispatched one of the most outstanding activists of the Young Turk movement, Enver Bey to Cyrenaica littoral. This officer arrived at the Sayyid Ahmed's camp, and under his supervision, he dealt with organising and training of al-Sanūsīyah and Beduin tribal military forces in the Turkish army's style. The matter looked so promising for the Ottoman authorities that in the early months of 1912, a group of Army officers were sent out to join Enver. In the group, there were: his younger brother Nuri Bey, Mustafa Kemal, Aziz Ali al-Misri, Sulayman al-Baruni and others. Co-operating with the Head of the Order, they established the joined staff of Ottoman - Sanūsi military forces which during the following spring and summer effectively stopped the Italian army's advance to the African interior. They also arranged a siege and attacked Italian garrison at Derna. On March 1912 they launched an assault on Benghazi, and on September,

¹⁴ See: E.E. Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., p. 108; H. Chapin Metz., *Libya*, Kissinger Publishing's Rare Reprints p. 42

¹⁵ E.E. Evans - Pritchard, op. cit., p. 109

17 they fought a bloody battle of Ras al-Laban and then they blockaded Tubruq. Commanded by Gen. Caneva, the Italian army managed to seize only a coastal strip of land before it was stopped almost all year long. In these circumstances, the Italian troops were forced to remain in the same positions for a long time. As a consequence, the apprehensive Italian government dismissed the General at the beginning of September and soon after two other generals were appointed to carry out the task in Africa: Gen. Ragni in Tripolitania and Gen. Briccola in Cyrenaica.

Meanwhile, the Italo-Turco war continued out. In the early months of 1912, the Italian Navy shelled Beirut several times as well as some Turkish forts at the entrance to Dardanelles. Then, in April and May, the Italian troops seized the Dodecanese Islands blockading almost all Turkish Mediterranean western coast. These events worsened the international situation considerably in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The warlike Italians had not been expected to stir up the long-lasting order in this region of the world. Therefore, the mediatory effort was made up by the major European powers, which wished to prevent the war from spreading over the whole region, but mainly into the Balkan's powder keg. Given the whole situation, the belligerents decided to sit down and talk at the table. Direct talks in Switzerland reached the settlement. Both countries set the peace treaty, signed on October 12th 1912 in Ouchy (secret), and officially, signed three days later in Lausanne. As a consequence, Italy promised to give back Turkey the Dodecanese Islands whilst the latter promised to withdraw its army from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and to waive the territory for the winner.

Ever since the settlement was reached in Ouchy/Lausanne, the very ambiguous situation between Italy and the Ottoman Empire came into being. Even defeated, Turkey refused to give up its influence over Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, regarding their religion as well as politics. So soon after, the sultan expressed his will to keep up his religious superiority over the Libyan Muslims. He wanted to maintain his influence throughout the Grand Qadi of Tripoli whom he had a right, as the Caliph, to nominate. As it turned out soon, the sultan's secular authority was quite easy to exclude from the defeated country, but it was impossible to exclude his spiritual power over the Muslim followers living there, was impossible. Professor Evans-Pritchard noticed:

“...the sultan had gone out by the front door only to return by the back. 16

16 E.E. Evans - Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p.114

The situation got even more complicated when Sayyid Ahmed did not accept the Turco-Italian settlement of Ouchy/Lausanne. Al-Sanūsīyah's leaders made up their minds to continue their struggle against the Italians. The Government in Constantinople caught the wind in the sail and wanted the militant order to become a tool in its hands. Though the ink of the mentioned treaty was scarcely dry, Enver arrived in al-Jaghbug on September 12th. He met Sayyid Ahmed to let him know that the sultan Mehmed V Reşad had appointed him as a ruler of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in his Majesty's name, in exchange of this, Sayyid Ahmed was expected to declare war against Italy as soon as possible. The al-Sanūsīyah's elders approved of the rapprochement with Turkey. Soon the order's representatives paid a visit to Constantinople to render homage to the sultan as a Caliph, which was received very heartily by metropolitan politicians and society.

After the Ottoman authorities had won favour with the fraternity's head its elders began to direct some small groups of professional army officers to Cyrenaica. They, and those who stayed in the country since the end of the Italo-Turco war, were placed under Aziz Ali al-Misri's command. A new power was beginning to arise at the shade of the Italian forts and strongholds in Libya.

The consequences were visible shortly. On April 13th 1913, the first Italo-Sanusi war broke up when Gen. d'Alessandro launched an attack on the Turco-Sanusi camp at Banina. After a very heavy, ten-hour fighting, the Turco-Arab forces were defeated. Being so successful, just at the very beginning of this war, full of good hope, the Italians set off with their two columns trying to sweep away any Arab flocks that might have been met on their way. Thus the 2nd Division took over places one after another: Bu Mariyam, al-Abyar, Taukra, al-Baniya, Jardis al-'Abid, while the 4th Division took control of the village al-Marj. Both divisions met at Jardis al-'Abid, and then the 4th Division moved eastwards taking over the places that were met on its way: Marawa, Slanta, Shahhat (Cirene) and Marsa Susa.¹⁷

Having been seriously afraid of this situation, Sayyid Ahmed left Al Kufrah in mid-May and soon arrived at al-Jaghbug to command over his armed forces. He hoped that his presence, at the heart of such so tumultuous events, would strengthen Arab peoples' will of resistance against the enemy on the coastal zone of Cyrenaica. Soon, he arrived at Turco-Arab war camp at Sidi 'Aziz, not far from Derna, where he took command over several thousands of Turkish and Arab soldiers and warriors who gathered there. Equipped with some field guns

¹⁷ See: *ibidem*, p. 117

and machine guns, they seriously threatened the Italians in particular, Gen. Tassoni's 4th Division, the columns of which were directed towards Sidi 'Aziz. The Italian headquarters decided to attack the enemy. On May 16th the strong units, around 5 000 men, under Gen. Mambretti, launched an assault on the Turco-Arab camp, but after the fierce fighting, the Italians suffered an ignominious defeat. They lost, the so-called, battle of Sidi al-Quarba.¹⁸

Some serious consequences emerged as the result of this battle. First of all, encouraged with enormous success, the winners strengthened their resistance against the European invaders. It was so effective that during the following summer their advancement was scarcely stopped, although many small assaults were launched here and there, during which the belligerents on both sides suffered heavy losses. The Italians have estimated a 100 soldiers fallen, although the Sanusi's losses were even more substantial.

In the early days of autumn 1913, the tension of fighting escalated. On October 6th, some large Italian military forces attacked Turco-Arab camp at 'Ain abu Shimal. It is estimated that about 3 000 soldiers and warriors were defeated. Since then, the Sanūsīs gave way to the guerrilla tactic of warfare rather than holding a line. So, the Italian headquarters was forced to put small units into operation, whose duties were to chase guerrilla fighters and escort caravans.

In February 1914 ardent fights began at Shahhat, and then the war spread out as far as Benghazi zone. The belligerents fought two battles there: one at Umm Shakhanab and the other one at al-Shlaidima, but the next month at Ajadabiya and Al-Zuwaitina. Within two months of heavy and bloody fights, the Sanūsīs lost about 500 men.¹⁹ Until the end of the spring that year, military activities spread out as far as al-Marj and Darna. However, since mid-July, they began to cease slowly. Having lost their main camps at al-'Arqub, Marawa, Taknis, al-Shlaidima, Ajadabiya the Sanūsīs were forced to abandon almost all central and western territory of Cyrenaica. Defeated, they retreated southward. Running after them, Italian troops entered the desert zone. The first Italo-Sanusi war was over.

Meanwhile, fighting the war with Italy, 1913-1914, Al-Sanūsīyah's family suffered hefty losses. The most severe ones were those which affected all the fraternity's population. Some Italian sources showed that their population had been reduced from about 300000 to 120000 people between 1911-1915.²⁰ Nevertheless, this estimation, more or less reliable, depicts that al-Sanūsīyah really suffered a great deal. Many of their Lodges were utterly

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 118

¹⁹ See: Ibidem

²⁰ See: ibidem, p. 120

destroyed. In addition to heavy war casualties, many people lost their lives because of hunger and diseases. Their economy also suffered considerably. Many crops, many palm and olive groves were destroyed entirely and long-range caravan routes blockaded. Moreover, some other misfortunes occurred. Expecting al-Sanūsīyah's inevitable defeat to come, the Turks decided to abandon their ally. At the early beginning of the year 1914, the chief Ottoman commander within the fraternity's forces, 'Aziz Ali al – Misri left for his country taking artillery and many Turkish officers with him.

Until the outbreak of World War I, but mostly at the turn of 1913, the relationship between al-Sanūsīyah and Great Britain, as well as her ally Egypt, was regarded as good. The fraternity was allowed to develop its religious structures in some oases on the western Egyptian territory as well as use caravan routes and Mediterranean ports for its trade. In far-reaching political plans, Great Britain was viewed by the fraternity as an ally whose support would be needed to gain independence in the future. For the al-Sanūsīyah elders, such an idea seemed right, because Great Britain was regarded in the Arab World as a protector and defender of Muslim's civil and religious rights.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of World War I, the governments in Whitehall as well as in Cairo recognised al-Sanūsīyah fraternity as a foe would-be and closed the western Egyptian frontier for them. Soon after, this decision brought about some severe consequences for the order. The contacts with its members, living in this country, as well as its access to the Egyptian seaports, were lost. Shortly, some economic difficulties and organisational disturbances increased. In May 1915, Italy officially joined the war.²¹ Making good use of this event, the British Navy blockaded the Libyan coast cutting off the al-Sanūsīyah's only routes of supplying from Turkey. Having its economy destroyed during the Italo-Sanusi war, the fraternity found itself in an extremely difficult situation. Surrounded by the enemies, it had no other option but to renew its old alliance with the Ottoman Empire. The government in Constantinople, having recognised al-Sanūsīyah's grave situation, offered its friendly co-operation and help.

On October 29/30, 1914 the Sublime Porte, launching an attack on the Russian Navy, as well as on the Black Sea coastal ports, entered the Great War on the side of Central Powers. As a result of this incident, the rest of the Entente Cordiale participants, Great Britain and France declared war on Turkey on November 6th. At that moment the Ottoman Empire found

²¹ Italy entered the war on the Allies side officially on May 15, but only in July this country declared war on Turkey.

itself at war with Italy again. The new political and military situation, which had emerged in the Mediterranean region, stretched out to Africa and influenced all the al-Sanūsīyah's position a lot.

There is another issue which has to be raised. At the beginning of the Great War, not only Turkey but particularly her leading adviser and supporter Germany recognised the warlike al-Sanūsīyah as a future valuable ally, which could have been an instrumental participant in their Near Eastern policy and military effort. The well-known al-Sanūsīs' hostility towards Italy, France, and increasingly also towards Great Britain was recognised as an important factor worth considering. It was even more crucial in the context when both governments decided to inspire, support and develop the political and military sabotage of the Arab communities which inhabited the areas just behind the posts of the Italian Army in Libya and the British Armies in Egypt.

Nevertheless, the authorities in Berlin as well as in Constantinople did not expect that the co-operation between them and al-Sanūsīyah, and in consequence with the Arab World, would imply very similar issue on the opponent side. Having foreseen some possibilities of Germano-Turco-Sanusi rapprochement, the British consul in office in Cairo Lord Herbert Horatio Kitchener entered secret talks with the Amir of Mecca Sharif Hussain ibn Ali's family. As far back as 1912-1913, the Sharif's son Abdullah was inquired, while visiting Cairo, about the possibilities of instigating the Arab revolt against the Turkish rule in the Hejaz. However, as soon as World War I broke out, the authorities in Whitehall were unable to support the Arab emancipation movement neither did they wish to admit that they were eager to do it. Meanwhile, after the military actions of World War I, had begun, the mentioned circumstances significantly changed. The real Germano-Turco-Sanusi rapprochement brought an urgent need to be counteracted in the Hejaz.

Nevertheless, being supported with material, financial and political means, Sayyid Ahmed was offered to enter the war on the side of Central Powers. In that case, he was also assured to be supplied with money, food and munitions. The decision was very difficult to take up because it would bring about some severe and far-reaching consequences. Sayyid Ahmed hoped he would drive the European intruders out of his country while they were involved in the Great War in Europe. The three side agreement was achieved.

Meanwhile, from the last days of 1914, the German submarine "UC12" began supplying the Al-Sanūsīyah fraternity with arms and money. In this way, German and Turkish

intelligence agents, as well as several army officers, were transferred to the Cyrenaica littoral, who, shortly was to appear as the order's advisers and the commanders of their military units 22. Among many officers despatched, there were three outstanding ones: Nuri Pasha, colonel Ja'afar Pasha al-'Askari, and Suliman al-Baruni of whom there was to be heard a lot very soon.

They were being supported by the two powerful allies al-Sanūsīyah joined the war against Italy, Great Britain and France. Within a short period, when they attacked and defeated the Italians at Qasr bu Hadi on April 29th 1915 in Tripolitania. Their decisive victory over the Italian army units at Qasr bu Hadi allowed them to gain a leading role among the Bedouin tribes, and soon after, they stood at the head of the Arab resistance in guerrilla-style fighting in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Their pressure on the enemy's outposts was so strong that the Italians managed to keep up only small stripes of land around Tripoli and some on the Cyrenaica littoral. It was the time when the Italians were just about to be driven out of Libya.

Nevertheless, in the early months of 1915, the Ottoman armies found themselves in a challenging military situation. On several fronts, they were fighting an ardent and bloody war to defend their country. Nobody could have predicted the final results of the hazardous battles that were being fought against the British and the French in Dardanelles and on Gallipoli; against the British in Mesopotamia; against the Russians in the Caucasus and on the Black Sea. Launching in January-February 1915 the joint Turco-German attack on the Suez Canal they suffered an enormous disaster. All those crucial moments persuaded the authorities in Constantinople as well as in Berlin to take advantage of the al-Sanūsīyah power as soon as possible. Both headquarters, Turkish and German, recognised that their inability to inspire the anti-British feelings amongst the Arabs in the Near East would cause some serious repercussions. The Chief of Staff of the German Army Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn in office then noticed:

“ In Salonika, at the Suez Canal and in Iraq and elsewhere in the Near and Middle East, our military success will be possible to achieve as soon as we are able to arise strong doubt against Britain's stability among the peoples living in Mediterranean littoral as long as in the Arab World, and as soon as they are able to act against her power on those remote territories.23

22 See: G. Young, *Egypt. From the Napoleonic Wars Down to Cromer and Allenby*, Piscataway, NJ, USA 2002, s. 21. Gibson, Prendergast, *Giermanskaja podwodnaja wajna 1914-1918*, Moskwa 1938, s. 87; C.M.R.F. Cruttwell, *A History of the Great War*, London Toronto Sydney New York 1982, s. 352 Gibson, Prendergast, *Germanskaja podwodnaja wajna, 1914-1918*, Moskwa 1918, p. 87 (During WWI all the German supplying submarines used to land close to the ancient town called Cirene).
23 Erich von Falkenhayn, *Niemieckie Naczelne Dowództwo w latach 1914-1916*, Warszawa 1926, p. 175.

Being assured of the Ottoman and German support, the Sanūsīs successfully intensified their military actions against the Italian Army in mid-summer 1915, but at the outset of November, after *jihad* had been announced, they declared war on Great Britain. Their strong military units, under Nuri Pasha command, assaulted and seized the British military post at Sollum (Es-Sallūm), the Egyptian place, close to the Libyan border and then Sidi Barrani and other smaller settlements inhabited on the western coast.

All the circumstances concerning the capturing of those small Egyptian places and sites by the al-Sanūsīyah indicated a growing serious threat for British positions in the Suez Canal zone and then in Northern Africa as well. The whole matter needs to be viewed in the context of an Arab national movements' revival in Egypt. Its creators and activists used to preach anti-European ideology which was parallel to that of the Al-Sanūsīya's. Therefore both ideologies were extremely convenient for both movements, and both could have been used as a strong base for the future co-operation. Besides that, soon the first months of the Great War were on, the entirety of the al-Sanūsīya's ideological and dogmatic principles were attracting the Egyptian nationalists' minds. The figure of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Azzam serves as a good example. He emerged in the Sayyid Ahmed al-Sharif's closest circle in 1915, worked for him faithfully and then was to stay with him till Sayyid Ahmed's death on exile in Turkey in 1923.²⁴

Thanks to him and many others, the Egyptian nationalists influenced tremendously the tribesmen living in the sparse sites in the deep province of their country as well as many of the Egyptian army troops, in order to diminish their usefulness in the British commanders' hands. One did not need to wait long for the results. In this way, three-fourths besieged by the Sanūsīs at Es-Sallūm garrison soldiers abandoned the Egyptian Army and joined the opposite side. The traitors' leader Muhammad Salih al-Harb became the would-be Sayyid Ahmed's close follower, co-operator and one of the bravest fraternity's commanders.

At the turn of 1915, soon after the British stronghold in Es-Sallūm had been captured, the al-Sanūsīyah fraternity gained their top political and military significance during the whole period of World War I. Inspired and supported by the Turks and Germans, relished with their own military achievements over the two strong European armies' units, they resolved to realise some more ambitious plans in the region. First of all, they were eager to remove the British from Egypt and therefore, they were trying to incite an anti-British rising. In no time, the

²⁴ Anthony Bruce remarked that there were about 70 000 Turkish nationalists living permanently in Egypt. See: A. Bruce, *The Last Crusade. The Palestine Campaign in the First World War*, Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc 2003, p. 12

fraternity sent off many of its emissaries to the western provinces of the country, where they attempted to make the Arab communities revolt against European domination. It was also the time, when in order to encourage the warlike fraternity to undertake more serious military actions, the sultan, by his *firman*²⁵ issued in July 1915, nominated Sayyid Ahmed a Governor of Tripolitania.

On a dark foggy night of 8/9 January, the last British soldiers abandoned the Gallipoli Peninsula. The bloody battle was over and lost. It was lost not only on military grounds but also on the political arena. For Great Britain, it also meant the loss if not a severe fall in her prestige in the Arab World. In these circumstances, the al-Sanūsīyah fraternity was expected to intensify their hostilities towards the British. Soon the predictions were to turn out correct.

Meanwhile, the Head and the elders of the order deliberated when and where the British Army should be attacked. Muhammad Salih al-Harb, Colonel Jaafar Pasha al-Askari as well as Nuri Pasha's opinion prevailed that the British should be assaulted in the east, along the Mediterranean coast, towards Alexandria and finally towards the Suez Canal. Having stricken on this direction, the fraternity's armed forces would support the second Turco-German attack on the Suez Canal. The assault was being prepared since November 24th 1915 and was planned to be put into operation in February 1916.

From the early months of 1916, several Turkish Divisions were concentrated on the Sinai Desert as well as some modern and well equipped German units, e.g., the "Pasha Corps", the air squadron "300", several field artillery battalions, and some units for special purposes. Gathering such strong military power on the outskirts of the Suez Canal by the enemy induced the British authorities', but mainly the C-in-C in Egypt Gen. Sir John Maxwell's strong suspicions of an oncoming attack. The General demanded that the War Office should reinforce the imperial forces stationed along the Suez Canal. He asked them to send him two extra Divisions, which were needed to keep peace and order at the back of the commanded army, as well as two composite brigades to protect the western Egyptian frontier against the al-Sanūsīyah's assaults. The two latter demands indicated that the British General was right, particularly when the Turks and the Germans hoped that the Egyptians might rise against Great Britain's ruling over their country. Also, the anti-British feelings and actions were expected in the Sudan and Yemen to act. As a result, the British forces stationed in Egypt were strengthened to 8 infantry Divisions, 19 batteries of heavy artillery, five cavalry battalions and supplied with

²⁵ *Firman* means monarch's decree

necessary air squadrons, tank units, some armoured trains and others. The Board of Admiralty ordered some additional Royal Navy squadrons to be sent to the waters surrounding the battlefields to be.²⁶

The al-Sanūsī strike on Es-Sallūm itself opened an 18 month-long period of arduous fights on the Egyptian and Libyan borderland, where the regulars of the world Great Power's Army suffered some losses inflicted from the poorly equipped but fanatical and active desert riders. A French historian, Jean Béraud-Villiers, remarked:

“It was difficult to understand that these small number of shabby individuals forced an outstanding and excellently equipped Army to put a lot of effort to render them harmless. ²⁷

The matter was getting embarrassing for Great Britain's image, but especially for the opinion and feelings of many of King, George V's Muslim subjects.' Action was needed to be taken. The political and military necessity made the fight with the al-Sanūsīyah a very urgent matter. It was obvious that if the Ottoman army was successful in Mesopotamia, particularly in the Suez Canal zone, it would help to spread the al-Sanūsīya's case over the peoples' objecting to the British rule in Africa and Asia. The described events gave rise to some additional threats, as they had been developing themselves at the back the British Army standing in Egypt, in the Canal Zone. The army was ready to strike towards the Ottoman territory via Palestine and Syria towards Constantinople. That was the moment in which the Islamic fraternity seriously endangered the British rule in Egypt. So the politicians and army commanders of such a high level as the prime minister Herbert Asquith or field marshal Horatio H. Kitchener were afraid of the al-Sanūsīyah.²⁸

26 At the beginning of 1916 German intelligence estimated the British forces gathered close to the Suez Canal for about 150000 soldiers. These data are the highly likely because at this time the following British tactical units were deployed there: directly by the Canal, *British Expeditionary Forces*, commanded by Gen. Archibald Murray. Their headquarters and main base was in Ismailia; in Alexandria zone there were *Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces* under Gen. Sir Ian Hamilton; around Cairo, strong units of *British Army in Egypt* were deployed. Its commander Gen. John Maxwell was at the same time the C-in-C of the whole British forces enumerated above. See: B Westrate., *The Arab Bureau. British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920*, Pennsylvania University Press 1992, p. 24; J. Gozdawa-Gołębiowski, T. Wywerka-Prekurat, *Pierwsza wojna światowa na Morzu*, Gdańsk 1973, p. 550; C. M. R. F. Cruttwell estimated the British army standing at the Suez Canal zone for 15 divisions in total. See; C.M.R.F. Cruttwell, *A History of the Great War*, London Toronto Sydney New York 1982, pp. 252-253

27 J. Béraud-Villars, *Pułkownik Lawrence czyli poszukiwanie absolutu*, Warszawa 1960, p. 107

28 See: D. Lloyd George, *Wspomnienie wojenne*, t. I, Warszawa 1938, p. 281; Y. Sheffy, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign 1914-1918*, London-Portland Or. 1998, pp. 44-45, 111

Meanwhile, the fraternity's armed forces had been developing old traditional tactics of lightning rides. They would flee away in the face of numerous, suitably equipped and modern armed troops but when the European disappeared behind the walls of their defensive fortifications and strongholds, the Arab warriors would return to control a nearby terrain. This cat and mouse play caused some serious losses for the occupants of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Soon it became obvious that they were unable to colonise the captured provinces. In that situation, the Italians found it almost impossible to settle colonists, to build irrigation systems and to establish a suitable agricultural and social infrastructure. Did this very costly enterprise, generally speaking, pay off to them? This sort of question was not raised in Italy. Thus by 1916, the Italian colonial effort in Libya cost about £80 000 000.²⁹

Just like towards the Italians, the Sanūsīs implemented the same kind of guerrilla tactics towards the British. Therefore, at the turn of 1915, the military authorities in Cairo were forced to intensify military actions towards them. So, Gen. John Maxwell established the *Western Command* task forces, under Major-General of Cavalry, Sir Charles Dobell, to deal with the Al-Sanūsīya case. Because a water shortage used to restrict the range of the desert cavalry rides and actions, and only this formation was effectively able to fight with the Arabs, Gen. Dobell implemented some kind of new tactics. Namely, he ordered his cavalymen to move from horses and camels to cars. Having applied this solution, he multiplied his troops' mobility, effectiveness and the range of military activities.³⁰

The serious British counter-offensive began in January 1916. As it was to be expected, the most important skirmish in Sanuso-British war was fought 'in old cavalry style'. On February 26th 1916 the *Queen's Own Dorsetshire Yeomanry* regiment commanded by General Peyton caught the Sanūsīs concentrated nearby Agagiya (al-'Aggagir), the place close to Marsa Maruth in north-western Egyptian territory. After some short fighting, the Sanūsīs lost the battle and their two commanders. Col. Jaafar Pasha al-Askari was captured by the British, but Nuri Pasha escaped to the Saharan interior.³¹ After some victorious skirmishes, the British regained Es-Sallūm and some other oases.

29 See: PRO/FO/882/10/ID/16/24

30 See: Y. Sheffy, op. cit., pp. 133 and 278.

31 Colonel Jaafar Pasha al-Askari was put to Cairo fortress as a prisoner of war. He would try to escape for several times but having learned that the Ottoman authorities had sentenced some Arab nationalists, and obviously friends, for death, he joined the British. Being relieved from prison he joined the Arab revolt in the Hejaz and soon became the adjutant of prince Feisal, the Sharif of Mecca Hussein's son and the real commander of his army. Then he was appointed to the rank of general which was the real reward for his struggle against the Turks. After the WWI he became the first prime

Being defeated at the ‘north front’ Sayyid Ahmed withdrew with his army as far as Siwa oasis (Wāhāt al-Sīwah), at the edge of the Libyan Desert. However, having been still threatened by the British *Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces*, he abandoned Wāhāt al-Sīwah and left, with his faithful soldiers and followers, for Farafir (Wāhāt al-Farāfirah). In this Egyptian south-western territory, he occupied Dakhla (Wāhāt ad-Dākhilah) and Kharga (Wāhāt al-Khārījah) oases.³²

Arriving at that territory, the Sanūsīs came closer to the Nile Valley, and in particular to the middle and southern Egyptian section of it. This time they seriously endangered the British rule, not only in this country but also in Sudan. Undoubtedly, al-Sanūsīs found themselves on the very central region of the British Empire in Africa, where its inhabitants, particularly in Sudan, were very impressionable for the fraternity’s anti-European ideology. Notwithstanding, the British colonial authorities were getting seriously apprehensive about their stay there, especially, when having been almost unknown until that time, the sultan of Darfur, ‘Ali Dinar was becoming a focus of Turkish and German propaganda. After the First World War had broken out, no one could rely on his loyalty. Now he was strengthened by the warlike fraternity. Considering all these circumstances, something had to be done with the militant order and the situation that resulted from it.

Being seriously worried about this course of events that, in his opinion, could have driven to an outbreak of the anti-British uprising, Governor-General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and the Egyptian Army sirdar Sir Reginald Wingate began to organise an expeditionary corps. From the end of 1915 to the end of 1916, the so-called *Darfur Field Force* was completed, and soon they undertook some severe military actions against the al-Sanūsīyah. The British Army began to press and attack them from the north, the Egyptian Army from the Nile Valley in the east, and the French Colonial Army from the south-west. Encircled from all the sides, deprived of any supplies, particularly of war materials, the Sayyid Ahmed ‘s groups were fighting all the summer long but in the autumn of 1916 they were driven back to the Siwa oasis. During this action, their ally, sultan Ali Dinar was killed.³³

minister of independent Iraq. [See] King’s College London Lidell Hart Centre for Military Archives/Grant:2/1/1-41; *Mons, Anzac & Kut* by Aubrey Herbert, Diary Thursday, March 9th, Cairo; H.V.F. Winstone, *The Illicit Adventure. The Story of Political and Military Intelligence in the Middle East from 1898 to 1926*, London 1982, p. 382; T. E. Lawrence, *Siedem filarów mądrości*, Warszawa 1998, sp 155; Jean Béraud-Villars, op. cit., p. 174; A. Bruce, op. cit., p. 174.

³² See: PRO/FO/882/11/ID/18/1

³³ See: A. A. Mc Gregor, *A Military History of Modern Egypt. From the Ottoman Conquest to the Ramadan War*, Westport, Connecticut-London 2006, p. 207; E.E. Pritchard–Evans, op. cit., p. 128

From the early months of 1916, after the retirement from Gallipoli and the Dardanelles, and being threatened with another Turco-German attack on the Suez Canal, the question of Egypt's defence was raised again in London as well as in the Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces' headquarters. The military and political situation in the Near East worsened drastically. In these circumstances, the High Commissioner in Egypt Henry McMahon, C-in-C in Egypt Gen. Sir John Maxwell, Gen. Sir Archibald Murray, as well as the chief of the Military Intelligence Department in Cairo Gen. Gilbert Clayton expressed their fear to the British authorities about Egypt's security and demanded not only the military forces to be strengthened but also suggested that the intelligence activity in this region should be strengthened too. The authorities in Whitehall acknowledged that the general situation in the region was really serious, but, particularly the First Lord of Admiralty Sir Arthur Balfour, the prime minister Herbert Asquith and Field Marshall Horatio H. Kitchener expressed their opinion that the al-Sanūsīyah's case had been exaggerated a lot.³⁴ All in all, directed by Gen. Gilbert Clayton, the Department of Military Intelligence in Cairo was split up in three during January and March 1916 i. e.: the Arab Bureau, the Egypt Intelligence Service and the Department of Military Intelligence, although the latter one was shifted soon under the control of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces Intelligence Department in Ismailia. So, secret civil service was separated from the military intelligence, and it was to serve particularly for the High Commissioner in Egypt for the Governor-General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan as well.³⁵

Nevertheless, in May 1915, British military intelligence established close co-operation with the Italian Army and Navy's intelligence. Since then, the both sides would exchange important information which was necessary to wage the war in the Middle East and in North Africa. The Italians handed over to Cairo many pieces of information concerning: Austro-Hungarian Navy's movement and German submarines' activity in the Mediterranean Sea, the relationship between the government in Constantinople and the al-Sanūsīyah, the Turkish and German spy network's development on the Cyrenaica littoral etc. The officers of the both intelligence services used to see each other to exchange information as the problems with the al-Sanūsīyah reached their climax. The need for co-operation was strong and soon became so significant for both sides, that in 1917, a special telegraphic line was built. It connected the

34 See: Y. Sheffy., *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign 1914-1918*, London-Portland Or. 1998, pp. 111-112

35 See: *ibidem*, pp. 44-45 and chart 3 in appendixes

Italian intelligence posts in Bardia (Burgi Soleimann/El Bardiya) and Bengazi (Ben-Ghazi) with the British one in Es-Sallūm.

The war with the al-Sanūsīyah was full of interesting, sometimes very dramatic, episodes. The case of the crew of the British merchant vessel *S/s Tara* can be quoted as an example. The steamer was torpedoed by a German U-Boot close to the Libyan coast. All the crew were taken into captivity soon after when they had abandoned the ship and reached the shore. Imprisoned in a desert camp, hungry and exhausted they were relieved by the sub-units of armoured cars which had been sent for their rescue. Completely surprised the Sanūsīs did not put up so much resistance.³⁶

However, military activity of the roaming fraternity warriors would enforce the Italians to keep appropriate forces in Cyrenaica. Their troops were deployed in 19 forts and strongholds situated near or very close to the Mediterranean seashore. Looking eastward there were: 3 close to Ghemines; 6, i.e. most of them, on the Auaghir tribe territory around Bengazi; 3 close to Tolmetta (Tolmaytha); 4 between Hama and Darna; 1 at Tobruk (Tubruq) and one close to the Egyptian border in Bardia (El-Bardiya).³⁷ Inside of each of them, there was at least one battalion deployed or sometimes several ones.³⁸

The al-Sanūsīyah gathered around them ten armed groups, about 2 350 warriors. Their forces were strong enough to blockade the Italian troops' movement as well as they used to make the life of the collaborative Arab tribes very hard.³⁹

A member of the joint Italo-British mission, dispatched in July 1916 to negotiate with Mohammad Idris, Col. Milo George Talbot remarked in his report that the movements of troops had been made so hard and dangerous that:

“...when a battalion had to be sent to relieve the battalion in a certain station, it is necessary on account of the ‘brigards’ (sic), to send another battalion to accompany the movement out and back. I doubt if anybody of Italian troops smaller than a battalion is ever outside barbed wire at night.”⁴⁰

The Sanūsīs was also looking forward to sending Italian expeditionary units to the interior. The fighting against them would allow acquiring some materials they needed badly,

³⁶ See: C.M.R.F. Cruttwell, op. cit., p. 352

³⁷ See: PRO/FO/882/10

³⁸ See: PRO/FO/882/10/ID/16/24

³⁹ See: PRO/FO/882/10

⁴⁰ ibidem

e.g., military equipment, food, arms, munitions etc. They also acquired these items while plundering wrecked or damaged cars, armoured cars, planes or even abandoned forts. The abandoned fort Zuetina is a good example. The Arabs plundered it, and building materials were taken from the walls pulled down. According to the Italian estimation, the number of rifles in the Cyrenaica tribes' hands increased in 1916 to 70 000 pieces. They also had approximately about 50 rounds for each of them. Apart from these arms, the fraternity possessed some guns; some captured from the Italians and the others delivered by the German submarines⁴¹.

So, the fraternity's military forces appeared so strong and dangerous for the Italians in Cyrenaica in 1916 that their army headquarters considered the possibility of abandoning some of the weaker forts to concentrate the troops in the other forts, strong enough, but particularly in those, which were situated very close to the seashore. That would enable them a safer supply or even evacuation.

Meanwhile, since the war against Great Britain and Italy had been waged, but particularly when suffering some misfortunes, the Head of the Order Sayyid Ahmed al-Sharif began to lose his popularity amongst the al-Sanūsīyah. In the face of arising complications at home, he decided to remain as a religious head of the fraternity. However, his political and military power was handed over to his uncle's son Mohammad Idris (full name Sayyed Mohammad Idris ibn Mohammad al-Mahdi as-Sanusi). Aware of some possible complications to occur, he acknowledged Mohammad Idris in 1915 as a political and military governor in Cyrenaica. The rest of the provinces occupied by the fraternity were in charge of the other prominent fraternity's sheikhs. Sayyid Safi al-Din was responsible for the Sirtica; Sayyid Muhammad 'Abid for Fazzan and Sayyid 'Ali al-Khattab for al Kufrah oases. So, Mohammad Idris was not handed over the whole power over the fraternity yet.⁴²

Having achieved a relatively high rank in the order's structures, Mohammad Idris made up his mind to take advantage of the arising circumstances and to regain his father's position which had been lost in 1902 on behalf of his cousin. However, the matter was very delicate. To achieve this goal, he had to make good use of his diplomatic abilities, to manoeuvre skillfully between Sayyid Ahmed and the Turks, Italians, British, to gain his own people's support and to take into account the Arab World's opinion. Practically, since then, the two political centres of al-Sanūsīyah fraternity were created; one in the south, supported by Turkey and in fact anti-European, which was run by Sayyid Ahmed al-Sharif and his closest

41 See: *ibidem*

42 See: PRO/FO/ 822/10/ID/16/24; E.E. Pritchard–Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 128

surroundings and followers, and the other one, in the north of the country, run by Mohammad Idris who would try to hold out his hand to Entente powers, particularly to Great Britain and Italy.

Soon after, Mohammad Idris attempted to co-operate closer with Italy in exchange for this country's support to achieve semi-independence. If successful at this stage, he would strengthen his position in the fraternity's hierarchy and would hope to gain some Italian protection while competing with his cousin for the power over al-Sanūsīyah's fraternity. Nevertheless, the Italian government did not take up the matter, and in such circumstances, in December 1915 Mohammad Idris dispatched a letter to British High Commissioner in Egypt Sir Arthur McMahon offering some negotiations to be taken up. Yet, Sir Arthur McMahon's answer was delayed until March 1916. However, being informed that Mohammad Idris had asked the Italians for peace negotiations again, he answered this letter written in December where he clearly pointed out that '... it was not proposed to have any further dealings with those who had been responsible for the attack on Egypt'43 and then announced that France and Italy were Great Britain's Allies so then H. M. Government was not going to take any negotiations up behind their back.44 However, the letter was dispatched through the Italian authorities as late as on May, 9th, and then via Tobruk was delivered to Mohammad Idris on 27 this month.

Meanwhile, the Italian Government realised that Mohammad Idris was playing a double game. Soon after, some officers, disguised as natives, were sent off to talk to him. So, the first serious, and obviously ambiguous, peace negotiations between the Sanūsīs and the Italians had begun. In order to achieve peace, the Italian delegates were offered on May 21st 1916 thirteen unexpected hard terms. Declaring peace to Italy, Mohammad Idris announced he took his stand on the fact that he was granted full administrative control over Cyrenaica, Tripoli and Tunis, while Sayed Ahmed retained spiritual control as ahead of the fraternity.45 In the end, he clearly uttered: "... he had visions of the state to be created for him and the Sanusi family.46

Not waiting for Italy's reaction, on the same day he passed on to the delegates an official paper addressed to the government of this country in which he offered 13 original conditions of peace. If accepted, the full peace process between the two nations would begin. Mohammad

43 PRO/FO/ 882/10

44 See: *ibidem*

45 The telegram to the High Commissioner of Egypt, 29th May 1916, p. 2 [in] PRO/FO/ 882/10

46 *Ibidem*, p. 3

Idris demanded to be recognised and treated by Italy in the same way as Great Britain treated Sharif of Mecca Mohammad Ali and his family in the Hejaz, to retreat all Italian troops from the Libyan interior, to provide him with arms “... to protect our country from France and other countries,”⁴⁷ to deliver some Italian officers, if needed, to train al-Sanusia’s military forces, to defend the Libyan coast by the Italian Navy and Army against any enemy, to develop industry and railway net that after ten years of being put into service would go under Sanūsīs’ full control. He proposed that the Italians reduce the number of their military posts and garrisons to only five, situated on the seashore (Tripoli, Khoms, Benghazi, Derna and Tobruk) and expressed his demands that the Italian troops would not enter the al-Sanūsīyah’s territory without his permission.⁴⁸

It was becoming obvious that Mohammad Idris was trying to make good use of Italy’s presence in Libya as well as of the complicated political and military situation in the region to initiate the next stage of new state creation.

The government in Rome was not in a hurry to establish peace and co-operation with the al-Sanūsīyah’s on conditions that had been offered in Mohammad Idris’s paper. It was aptly noticed and properly foreseen that admitting some kind of their independence, even restricted, would initiate a new phase of the whole process, which, when completed, would force Italy to accept al-Sanūsīyah’s full independence in the future. It would also mean the retreating from Libya as well as a full *fiasco* of the Italian far-reaching colonial plans in this part of Africa. According to the Italian government’s point of view, taking over Cyrenaica and Tripolitania from Turkey was a result of the war and peace treaty signed in 1912. In consequence, Italy came into possession not only of the land but also of its inhabitants who became the Italian king’s subjects since that time. This is why Mohammad Idris’s paper was fully ignored.

Meanwhile, supported by the British Government, a great Arab revolt broke out in the Hejaz in July 1916. It created a new political and military situation in the Near East. Since then, in Arab’s opinion spread broadly, Great Britain became the real defender of their rights and an advocate of their national independence aspirations. Inspired by these events and accepting this line of reasoning, Mohammad Idris wished the peoples of Cyrenaica, similarly as the Arabs in the Hejaz, would gain Britain’s help. This, according to him, would accelerate the future independence process. Thinking about the far-reaching plans concerning the future state-building, he recognised the war triggered off against Great Britain by his cousin Sayyed Amed

47 Appendix D. I [in] PRO/FO/ 882/10; C. Hurewitz, op. cit., 66-67

48 See: *ibidem*

and his closest circle supporters as a significant political mistake committed by this society. So, he was getting eager to restore the Sanuso-British relations to those prior to the war. To bring these ideas into realisation, he began criticising his cousin's foreign policy more openly.

For some time, the British political authorities in Cairo attempted to be on good terms with Mohammad Idris, trying to make friends with him, thus, while on his way back from Mecca via Cairo in February 1915, he was received by lord H.H. Kitchener and Gen. John Maxwell. The Arab assured the prominent British commanders that he was slightly disappointed with his cousin's policy towards Great Britain. So now, in 1916, when the discrepancy between Mohammad Idris and Sayyid Ahmed was widening, the government in London tried to make good use of them. The High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Arthur McMahon offered unilateral talks to Mohammad Idris hoping that some of the most urgent military and political problems would be resolved. He wrote in a letter to the Arab prominent that:

‘... Great Britain is doing all her best to help the Arabs and the Muslims to preserve and protect them against any unjust and any attack on their rights.⁴⁹

However, it was difficult to negotiate with the al-Sanūsīyah behind the back of the allied Italians, power of whose, over Libya, Great Britain *de facto* had admitted before. Therefore, on June 25th 1916, a five – men group of English officers under the command of Col. Milo George Talbot set off from Alexandria to Rome. Upon their arrival there, they decided to set up a mixed Italo-British mission to negotiate with Mohammad Idris and, if possible, to form an agreement. The mission left the Italian territory and via Malta arrived in Tripoli on July, 13, and then it set off to Benghazi. After a few days' stay there, they stepped on board of an Italian submarine. At the dawn of July, 25 the ship surfaced about 1 000 yards from the abandoned fort Zuetina (Al-Zuwaytinah), ca. 80 miles south of Benghazi. The tents were pitched close to the site where Mohammad Idris had already been camped.⁵⁰

On the same day in the evening, the delegation paid the first visit to Mohammad Idris, his younger brother Sayyid Rida and his counsellors but the real negotiations began the next day. The Italians, as well as the British, presented their governments' separate preliminary proposals to Mohammad Idris and the whole fraternity.

49 PRO/FO/ 882/10

50 See: PRO/FO/ 822/10/ID/16/24. The Italy's member of the group were: captain Medici Cassita, captain Galli, lieutenant Petrucci and Prof. Moreno[see] ibidem

Italy's original terms consisted of 14 points. The Italians assured their interlocutors that they had great respect for the Muslim religion, recognised the al-Sanūsīyah's leaders as Muslim religious heads, agreed to build five modern mosques, recognised Arabic equally with Italian as an official language. In addition, they promised to leave the administration of the Kufrah Oasis in the fraternity's hands, as well as to recognise the al-Sanūsīyah's leader as a Cyrenaica Governor's adviser. Finally, Mohammad Idris, his brother Sayyed Rida and all his cousins were promised to receive appropriate salaries and so on.⁵¹

On the same day in the afternoon, the British part of the joined delegation paid a visit to the Arabs. Mohammad Idris was offered the conditions of peace. The document contained three demands and three offers. The Anglo-Egyptian authorities wanted, among other things, what follows: all the armed members of the fraternity would be withdrawn from the Egyptian territory, all crew members, and passengers of the British ships, who were British subjects and had been captured and still detained by the Sanūsīs to be released, all German and Turkish officers and intelligence agents and other hostile persons to be removed from the al-Sanūsīyah's territory. When accepted, the Anglo-Egyptian Government assured that the fraternity would be allowed: "...to collect voluntary offerings from members of the Sect in Egyptian territory as before, ⁵² to use the Egyptian port in Sollum for their trade, and finally, the Anglo-Egyptian authorities offered to leave al-Jaghub to the al-Sanūsīyah's administration ⁵³. Col. M. G. Talbot remarked in his report that the atmosphere of the meeting was very pleasant. In the beginning, Mohammad Idris expressed his friendship towards Great Britain, condemned his cousin Sayyid Ahmed for waging war against the British and stated that

"He deeply regretted the attack on Egypt and begged that it should be regarded as a mistake and forgiven."⁵⁴

He also expected the British Government to conclude a separate treaty with al-Sanūsīyah and in a few words he expressed his point of view that in her traditional policy, Great Britain had never helped any power to enslave Arabs, so he hoped she would not help Italy to do that. Col. Talbot replied that since the al-Sanūsīyah had seized and occupied the Egyptian oases, Great Britain was forced to defend her territory. Next, he announced that it was the best moment to sign a treaty between the two sides. However, it would be accepted by

⁵¹ See details in: J. C. Hurewitz, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 67

⁵² PRO/FO/ 882/10, Appendix A. I.

⁵³ See: PRO/FO/ 882/10

⁵⁴ *ibidem*

the British if the Heads of the fraternity signed the treaty with Italy too. Mohammad Idris expressed his initial acceptance of the Talbot's preliminary proposals, emphasising that after some corrections and improvements they should be finally approved. Then, Col. Talbot asked the Arab about the fate of the *S/s Coquet's* crew members who had been captured and detained. He suggested that releasing them before the peace treaty had been signed would be recognised in London as an act of al-Sanūsīyah's goodwill towards Great Britain. Mohammad Idris said he would do his best to do it.⁵⁵

On July 27th in the morning, the Italian delegates were received by Mohammad Idris. During the meeting, he put forward his first revised terms to them. This time the Sanūsīs had slightly reduced their demands as compared to those of May 21st. Nevertheless, they included the following terms: to establish free trade on the Al-Sanūsīyah territory, to exchange the prisoners of war, to leave the Arab communities which had been under Italy's control, not to interfere with their Muslim religion, to help the fraternity with engineers and machines needed for the improvement of their agriculture, to leave some ports for their trade and so on.⁵⁶

The negotiations and informal meetings lasted till July 31st. On the same day, Great Britain and Italy signed an agreement to coordinate their joined policy towards al-Sanūsīyah. Both parties stated that their army and navy would co-operate against the rebels if necessary, that they would close the Egyptian and the Cyrenaica frontiers to diminish or eliminate supplying of the rebel fraternity.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the three points of this document were of special importance. Both parties stated:

“To make no agreement with the Sanusi without the previous understanding with one another” (A1), “Not to accord him independence or autonomy or in any way infringe the sovereignty of the State” (B 3) and “That is possible to accord to the Head of the Confraternity the administrative autonomy of certain oases always under the sovereignty of the State in possession” (B4).⁵⁸

Then, the Delegates left Al-Zuwaytinah, but as the matters were not resolved, they had decided to return and have a talk again.

Time was needed for all of them, but particularly for Mohammad Idris, who had to convince Sayyid Ahmed of his political plans and to discuss the Anglo-Egyptian preliminary

55 See: *ibidem*

56 See: See details in: J. C. Hurewitz, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 68

57 See: PRO/FO/882/10

58 See: J. C. Hurewitz, *op. cit.*, s. 73

proposals over with his broadened counsel. The problem was becoming urgent because the acceptance of the British terms would have determined not only the Anglo-Sanuso rapprochement but the Italo-Sanuso as well, then the fraternity would have to get rid of Turkish and German advisers. In consequence, Sayyid Ahmed's position would be diminished to a marginal one, and it would be a turning point to the whole contemporary al-Sanūsīyah's foreign policy. Such a line of a policy was not accepted by all prominent al-Sanūsīyah's sheikhs and elders. The Mohammad Idris's assistant on the Cyrenaica plateau Sayyid Hilal was a good example among them. All of the Anglo-Sanusi rapprochement opponents were supported by Nuri Pasha who had been still staying in the al-Sanūsīyah's territory.

Meanwhile, the general situation that existed on the Middle Eastern fronts of the Great War, but particularly the first Arab's military achievements over the weakening Ottoman Army in the Hejaz, as well as the increase of the British military activities on Egyptian Western Desert territory made the leaders of the al-Sanūsīyah treat the Anglo-Egyptian Government's proposals very seriously.

Shortly, the British authorities received Mohammad Idris's proposals to establish peace between both parties. The received document consisted of nine points, in which the fraternity's leader apologised to the Egyptian sultan Hussain Kāmil for the Egyptian soldiers' deeds who were acting on a religion impulse had joined the al-Sanūsīyah military units. He begged him not to punish the Egyptian citizens who had been supporting the order for the time being and suggested that the Anglo-Egyptian Government should recognise the two mentioned groups of people as those who had committed a mistake and should be forgiven.⁵⁹ Per the second point of the British Preliminary proposals of July 26th, he stated that the al-Sanūsīyah family had agreed to give back all the *S/s Coquet's* crew's and the passengers' belongings. He also expressed his willingness to expel all the German and Ottoman officers who had arrived before the war as well as those who joined the fraternity during the war. He also agreed to exchange the war prisoners, but he asked the British Government to let some of the captured sheikhs of Zāwaya, who had joined the Sanūsī military forces before, to restore them to their previous posts in the Egyptian state administration when they were released from prison. The fraternity asked the British Government to support them financially, which would help the order to maintain its current position among the Arab tribes.⁶⁰

59 See: PRO/FO/ 882/10, Appendix B.I.

60 See: *ibidem*

The Mohammad Idris's proposals were bringing the problem nearer the solution, but as the matters had not been resolved yet, so, in mid-August, the three parties decided to continue the negotiations at Al-Zuwaytinah. This time Mohammad Idris decided not to take part in the meeting, he stayed at Jedabia, although he sent his representatives there. More or less at the same time, the process of exchanging war prisoners began. However, it was going very slowly because the British, as well as the Italians, were very suspicious that the released Arabs would join the al-Sanūsīyah's military units and in such circumstances, the peace negotiations might collapse. So, Mohammad Idris in his letter to Col. Talbot, dated on August 16th, spoke reproachfully:

“You mention that you have sent our letter to the Delegates and say that it would be impossible to effect of Arab prisoners (in time). We do not know why this should be impossible. Is travelling by camel more prompt than travelling by boat?”⁶¹

The Sanūsīs acted it in the same way, and they were also using the delaying tactics. In the cited letter, Mohammad Idris announced:

“As to the prisoners, I have already sent for them. As you know, we have no railways and no telegraphs, and our only means of communication are the camels, and you know our difficulties. On my part as soon as the prisoners arrive from Jalu I shall send them to the Italian Delegates.”⁶²

As for the Italian delegation regarded the exchanging of the war prisoners as the main problem of this meeting, the negotiations were broken off soon.

Meanwhile, the European powers involved in the Great War were expected to resolve this nuisance problem of al-Sanūsīyah thoroughly. It drove them to the next meeting with the leaders of the warlike fraternity. This time the trilateral negotiations began in Benghazi on September 27th, Thursday night, and were held as long as Monday, October 2nd. This time, Italy was represented by Gen. Giovanni Battista Ameglio, who had been appointed Governor of Libya on July, 17th, and Maj. Riccardi. From the outset of the negotiations, the Europeans were trying to put pressure on the Al-Sanūsīyah leaders to expel the Turkish and German advisers and declared that on that condition the process of exchanging of war prisoners would accelerate. It was one of the most significant points of the negotiations because they were seriously in fear that the Turks and Germans would influence the relieved Arab prisoners if

61 Hurewitz, *op. cit.* s. 72

62 *ibidem*

these advisers were to remain.⁶³ Being pressed about this question, Mohammad Idris announced that he was personally engaged in it and he had already sent a letter to Sayyid Ahmed asking about the British and Italian prisoners to be let out. He wanted the second group of them to be sent back within four months.⁶⁴

During the next round of the meeting, Mohammad Idris was absent, but the representative fraternity's sheikhs and elders announced on behalf of him that Idris was determined to expel the Ottoman officers, to ratify the previous agreements when the Turks and Germans were out, and

“As soon as the first lot of Italian prisoners were exchanged for the Arab prisoners, Idris should send in his proposals for a general *modus Vivendi*.”⁶⁵

The Italians, but particularly the British, were genuinely surprised, chiefly because of the fact that Mohammad Idris had not been expected to agree to expel the Turks and Germans so immediately. The other very significant factor of his proposals was that he had declared he would take his personal responsibility for the Arab ex-prisoners. The three sides of the negotiations were seriously afraid of them. These religious fanatics might not obey their political and spiritual leaders' persuasions, and once back home, they would undertake a fierce fight against the hated enemies from whom they had suffered so much humiliation while being prisoners. The conditions, offered by Mohammad Idris convinced the Europeans about his sincerity.

On September 28th night, Gen. Ameglio and Col. Talbot handed over to the fraternity's leader the letters in which they accepted his earlier proposals and presented theirs.

The next day, both chiefs of the mixed delegation were exchanging their points of view relevant to the discussed issue. They pondered over whether Mohammad Idris would accept their conditions and what would happen if they were rejected. The mood in which these bilateral talks were being held would shed some light on Italy's contemporary policy towards the al-Sanūsīyah. Roughly speaking, it was determined by the general situation that was becoming more complicated on the fronts of the Great War in summer 1916. At the turn of May and June, two Italian Armies (1st and sixth) having fought an ardent and bloody battle of Trentino repelled the two Austro-Hungarian Armies (3rd and 11th), which consisted of 14

63 See: PRO/FO/ 822/10/ID/16/24

64 See: *ibidem*

65 *Ibidem*

infantry Divisions and 60 batteries of heavy artillery.⁶⁶ In August and September the same year, two other bloody battles (6th and seventh) were waged on the Italo-Austrian front at Isonzo. Thoroughly exhausted, the Italian Army did not have enough forces and means to provide military support for her secondary African front. Nevertheless, this theatre of the war was essential for two European Allies, which the Turkish and German command had recalled in the first decade of August. Commanded by Col. Freiherr Wilhelm Kress von Kressenstein,⁶⁷ Turco-German composite corps launched the second in that war and more dangerous assault on the Suez Canal.

The factors mentioned above softened up slightly the Italian, as well as Britain's attitude towards the warlike order. General Ameglio expressed his opinion that he would be forced to remove the Italian troops from some weaker forts and gather them in Tripoli unless the negotiations with Mohammad Idris were satisfactory⁶⁸. However, the peaceful solution of that matter was in Italy as well as in Great Britain's interest.

Meanwhile, the British, in the face of war over Palestine to come, as well as over the other parts of the collapsing Ottoman Empire, inhabited by the Arab tribes, were striving for the peaceful solution of the strained relations with the al-Sanūsīyah, or at least, wanted them to be softened. The British Empire played a great political game, the stake of which was the broadening of its political and economic influence over the Near East which in consequence would protect their vital colonial interests in India and the Far East. In the perspective of these far-reaching plans, even a small dispute with any of the Islam followers would bring serious consequences, that is why the negotiations with Mohammad Idris were conducted very carefully and with full responsibility. The British, as well as the Italians, did not want the new wave of struggle to be triggered off.

On September 30th Gen. Ameglio received the Mahamamd Idrisi's answer. On October 1st morning, the General met Col. Talbot and announced to him that he was convinced of the Arabs' goodwill. He wrote Gen. Ameglio that he was ready to expel all the Turks from his territory. He also declared that he was eager to go to the interior himself to make sure that everything was going well. Both chiefs of the mixed delegation were satisfied. They were also convinced that Muhammad Idris's trip to the Desert would result in other important consequences. Thus he was expected to soften up the Sayyed Ahmed's attitude towards Great

⁶⁶ See: *The Viking Atlas of the World War I*, [Ed.] A. Livesey, London 1994, p. 94.

⁶⁷ The German noble title Freiherr" means baron in English

⁶⁸ See: PRO/FO/ 822/10/ID/16/24.

Britain and Italy as well as to speed up the process of exchanging the prisoners. The next round of negotiations was postponed until November when Mohammad Idris was expected to return to the Cyrenaica littoral.⁶⁹

The British Delegation left Benghazi on Monday evening, October 2nd and onboard of *S/s Tobruk* arrived in the port of Alexandria on November 5th.

However, the trilateral peace talks that were held in 1916 did not bring about many long-lasting results because the three sides had their own different national interests. For example, the Sanūsīs, having accepted the amounts of money which had been negotiated before, refrained themselves from the launching assaults on the Egyptian borderline. They also got rid of many Turkish and German advisers, but it seemed that not all of them. On their territory, there were still many foreigners suspected by the British Intelligence of a hostile attitude towards the British Empire.

Despite many meetings, peace talks and signed agreements the al-Sanūsīyah matter was still unresolved. There were still many opponents of the Anglo-Sanuso and the Italo-Sanuso rapprochements. Sayyid Ahmed presided over them. Nevertheless, his warriors' military actions were gradually ceasing, although they were a complete nuisance to all of the sides. Thus in October and November 1916, the British Army began to reoccupy some oases situated in the south of the country. Some small fights broke out again which led the English, but mainly the Italians, to the conclusion that Mohammad Idris had been in collusion with his cousin Sayyid Ahmed. Really, it was the time when many Bedouin tribes were hesitant, and they might leave Mohammad Idris and follow Sayyid Ahmed who still was the fraternity's actual spiritual leader. The threat of a larger scale fighting occurred again. The peace talks had to be resumed, particularly in the interest of Great Britain, Italy and Mohammad Idris. Since any rapprochement with Sayyid Ahmed was almost impossible to achieve, the only solution was to resume the talks with Mohammad Idris.

The three sides met in Marmarica January 1917 but to speed up this process in February 1917 some of the British armoured cars sub-units attacked Sayyid Ahmed's main lodge in the Siva Oasis. The Sanūsīs were defeated and forced to abandon the place. Their spiritual leader, Sayyid Ahmed al-Shariff escaped with a small group of his followers to the north of Libya. This time his moral power and political significance in al-Sanūsīyah structures was gone. He stayed in Cyrenaica for over one and a half year trying to find some supporters, chiefly against

⁶⁹ See: PRO/FO/ 822/10/ID/16/24.

the Italians, but being unsuccessful, he left for Turkey by a German submarine in September 1918⁷⁰. As Professor Evans-Pritchard assesses:

“The Sayyid’s departure was goodbye to many things: to British arms, to Ottoman rule, to the Sanusiya empire, and Ahmad al-Sharif al-Sanusi”⁷¹.

However, as the First World War was coming to an end and the Germano-Turco-Austrian threat of the Allied’s interests in the Near East and North Africa was slowly ceasing, at the same time the Anglo-Italian imperial rivalry for these territories increased. In the mid-summer of 1918, the British authorities recognised that Italo-Sanusi joined, or even inspired by the Italians, Sanūsī attack on Egypt would be possible. Theoretically, this kind of action was possible to be carried out because according to the agreements which had been signed before, the Italo-Sanusi hostilities had already ceased and every member of the fraternity had been subsidised by the Italian Government. Nonetheless, since that time, without consulting Great Britain, the Italians began to deliver arms, equipment, and more food and money for Al-Sanūsīyah. It was becoming evident that the warlike fraternity expected themselves to be more and more significant in Italian imperial policy towards Africa.

In looking at that situation with a dose of anxiety, the British authorities decided that bilateral negotiations with Mohammad Idris should be carried out. Maintaining top secrecy, Major M. S. Mac Donell and Captain L. V. A. Royle arrived in Cyrenaica on July 17th 1918 to talk to Mohammad Idris. During their stay there until August 8th 1918, they carried out some critical negotiations with the Arab leader. In consequence, Mohammad Idris agreed: a) to release all foreign prisoners but only under two sides consent and approval, b) to arrest all persons, of whom the British intelligence recognised to be enemy agents. The list of those individuals had been delivered, b) The Sanūsīs were to collect and hand over to the British all pieces of information about the submarine movement on the waters close to the Cyrenaica littoral⁷².

In exchange, the British authorities, through their emissaries, agreed to supply 100 tons of food and sugar delivered by ships to the port in Sollum⁷³. The British officers wormed some pieces of secret information out of the Sanūsīs, e.g. that the Italians had maintained about 10 000 infantry, cavalry and artillery troops in Tripolitania and since then they had managed

⁷⁰ See: A. McGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 207

⁷¹ E.E. Pritchard-Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 130

⁷² See: PRO/FO/ 822/11/ID/18/19

⁷³ See: *ibidem*

to supply with weapons and military equipment 1 000 of the Sanūsī troops. Another equally unit was being formed. The contemporary Mohammad Idrisi's military forces were estimated at 2 668 troops equipped with six cannons and six machineguns.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Major. MacDonell in his report to Gen. Sir Gilbert Clayton wrote:

A real joined Italo-Sanusi attack on Egypt is not possible, even if it would have been launched the Sanusis will not take part in it. Idris doesn't like the Italians⁷⁵

Meanwhile, World War I was over. The peoples all over the world heaved a sigh of relief. All of them suffered enormous losses. The destruction was calamitous. Even the victorious Entente won a Pyrrhic victory over the Central Powers. There was a very small number of real victors, but the Libyan fraternity should obviously be included. While being considered a rebellious and destructive sect at the outbreak of the war, it became a political factor which should be taken into account while analysing the Near Eastern policy. Increasing their political significance in the Arab World, particularly among the Bedouin tribes living in the Western Egyptian territory, (in the Fezzan province, in central Africa) as well as between the peoples in the Hejaz, but mainly in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, was of enormous significance.

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