

# ITALY AND TURKEY IN KEMALIST TIME: RELATIONS AND COMPARISONS



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## Abstract

This paper aims to propose reasons and arguments about relations, contacts and differences between Italy and Kemalist Turkey since 1918 to 1939. These relationships will be situated in an international context of foreign relations after World War I. Of course the heritage of Lybian War (Tirabuluš Savaši) will be greatly considered, like a preface of future contrasts and evident conflicts among the two countries. This heritage will be continuously considered like a hostile beginning, in XXth century, for Turkey and Italy. The failure of every rapprochement in Turkish-Italian relations will be studied in the light of the very different ways of their foreign politics: during the fascist period, Italy tried to a deep destabilization of Mediterranean area, aiming to a renovation of an Italian or fascist Roman Empire, while Kemalist Turkey aimed to a national political attitude, regarding Turkish interests in the area, in the sense of a stabilization. Two different approaches to nationalism and to authoritarian regimes: Kemalist Turkey, regarding to a peaceful nation into a world in progressive conflict; Italy, to an aggressive and bellicist power of expansion. This paper will examine in a comparison Italian-Turkish relations among Twenties and Thirties Years of XXth century, moving from expansionist intentions of Italy, since 1912-1914, looking at Balkan Area and Aegean Islands, just to occupation of Albania in 1939, just before World War II, regarded from Ankara point of view, like an evident aggression; on the other side, will be considered Turkish research of balancing among the Nations and a new order, after I World War Turkish defeat. Balkan difficulties, research of new economic stability and regional influence were invisible but powerful reasons of new misunderstanding and contrasts for Rome and Ankara. As a conclusion, residual different perspectives and new conflicts between Kemalist Turkey and Fascist Italy, will be regarded also from the privileged point of view of a distinguished German observer: Ambassador Franz von Papen, who served Nazi-Germany from 1939 to 1944 in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Italian-Turkish relations, Fascism and Kemalism, First and Second World War

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The establishment of the two regimes, in Fascist Italy on October 1922, and of Turkish Republic in October 1923, can approximately define a difficult period, because of Italian colonial aims on Anatolian Coast, followed by a rapprochement and attempts of an alliance among the two Nations, against the aggressive foreign policy of France in the Region, and more widely on Balkans. After this period, the relations between Turkey and fascist Italy will improve, but their failure will be suddenly caused by fascist aggression on Corfù in 1923. The main reason of this failure will be caused by Italian different way of power in Adriatic Sea and in the new Balkan Policy of Mussolini.

Conflicts among nationalist regimes were normally based on national interests: Italy renounced in 1921-22 to any ambitions on Anatolia, but it didn't mean a rapprochement among the two Parts, and not at all new and wider projects of alliance. As a matter of fact, Ankara was aiming stability "into world and country", trying to manage a new peaceful relation all over the area, while fascist Italy tried to conquer new space and power on Mediterranean Sea and into Balkan region, becoming an element of disorder and destabilization all over the same zone.

Turkey tried to realize stability in a peaceful behavior, in regard to League of Nations; on the contrary, Italy was looking to new politics and to an exit from that international agreement. Italy had since long time cultivated ambitions on Balkan Region, especially on Albania and Eastern Mediterranean, moving from the occupation of Dodecanese in 1912. Italy was between the winner of I World War, and Turkey, although the end of the Ottoman Empire, was a loser. Therefore, Turkey looked for wider security and a peaceful stability, also to preserve the rest of Anatolian Peninsula. Italy tried initially to conquer new positions in the post-war establishment, as a victorious Great Power, like and within France and Great Britain, in consequence of London Pact and Treaty of Versailles. Turkey had lost most of the ancient imperial territories, and was obliged to preserve her own life against Greece, but also against allied occupations troops on her own national ground.

But above all, Italy and Turkey had completely different ways to approach on international relations, and other aims in order to foreign policy of their regimes.

The myth of a partial victory ("*vittoria mutilata*") promoted by D'Annunzio, according to mussolinian policy and nationalist elites and the Treaty of Versailles, had reduced Italian participation to allied victory of

1918, requiring compensation and revanches. After Mussolini's assumption of power, Italy begun to reclaim possession on Adriatic Coast and islands, on Albania, Greek Islands and in various ex Ottoman territories. Nevertheless, Rome tried from one side to hold up the victorious balance of powers, from her position of winner; on the other side Mussolini tried to approve territorial ambitions and aims of expansion of defeated countries, as Bulgaria, aiming to become in Eastern Europe the leadership of an *entente* of nations according to Bulgaria, Hungary and also Turkey, with a particular position against Yugoslavia.

In the same period, Ankara was engaged in a hard struggle against Greece to safe her own survival and borders, winning for her national independence thanks to Atatürk and İnönü, and renouncing to every imperial ambition. The Republican Turkey based her independence on Anatolian borders, only contesting some bordering and extern contests, like Aleppo in Syria and on Hatay.

After Sèvres Treaty, the new Treaty of Lausanne gave to Turkey a complete independence, while the Allied renounced to their old secret ambitions and pacts for any partition of Turkey.

The Italian Dodecanese was too close to the Turkish coasts to be tolerated by Ankara. In the Turkish view, it was a perfect point of approach for the invasion of Anatolian territory. On the other hand, in Rome's view, the proximity of the Anatolian coast to the archipelago was a reason of particular interest from a strategic point of view. This Italian ambition was expanded in 1925 with the purchase of the islet of Castellorizo (Castelrosso), very far east of the Dodecanese and also so close to the Turkish coast around Kaş, as a potential point of influence and invasion in direction of the inner region of Konya. All these islands were largely inhabited, after the end of the war in 1912 between Italy and the Ottoman Empire, by a very nationalist Greek population. In this way, Ankara could easily see in the agreement between the Italian occupiers and the Greek population a potential double factor of risk for its own territorial safety. In fact, all the Greek and Italian islands a few miles from the Turkish coast were so many bridgeheads for potential landings for occupation troops for military operations on the Turkish soil. Probably fascist Italy was not in the condition, nor did it want to immediately declare war on Turkey. But Mussolini could well think of a crisis in international relations in the area of the Eastern Mediterranean, to advance new demands on the entire region. All these reasons were causes of

high tension between the diplomats of the two countries, as it appears from the reading of the Italian diplomatic documents in that period, and for all the Twenties years. Turkey was complaining against the Italian military preparations on its borders, but in fact an invasion plan had been prepared by the Italian War Minister in 1924, with the approval of Mussolini.

Dilek Barlaš wrote that the key to Italy's strategy against Turkey was to keep the tension high, pending the dispute between Turkey and Great Britain over the province of Mosul, which had been submitted to arbitration, and on which the Ankara government had insisted so much, that it risked its own fall. Italian diplomacy had maintained this position, which was as aggressive as it was unclear and ambiguous. Rome supported the British arguments on Mossul, because it could hope for territorial gains or border offsets in Libya and Somalia, as in fact it would have been in 1925. Rome also hoped to maintain a position of occupation in Anatolia after the possible conflict between Turkey and Great Britain, due to Mossul or other border disputes. The Corfù crisis of 1923 dissuaded Mussolini from ventures of expansion, destined to fail without the consent of the Allies, and especially of London. In short, the Italian strategy regarding the Mossul crisis was a strategy for the future, not the present, in the case of a boarder crisis in the region. In 1926, at the height of the Mossul crisis, Italy confirmed its trust and friendship with Turkey, denying or concealing any aggressive intention against Turkey. The Commission's proposal for a Council Directive on the approximation of the laws of the Member States, relating to the carriage of goods by road was in that time being discussed. In the Italian diplomatic documents it seems that the purpose of Italy was not a war directed to Turkey, but wait for the Mossul issue, to bring Turkey out of defeat and humiliation by Britain. This would have created the conditions for a possible and advantageous agreement between Rome and Ankara, for the control of the Eastern Mediterranean, obviously favorable to the Italian presence.

Ankara's possible objections prevailed over Italian ambitions, and Ankara, always attentive to international politics, was changing its strategy, even in the expression of words by Mussolini. In the case of the southern Turkish coast, however, the Italian government in 1921 was the first among the occupying nations to abandon any ambition in this regard on land once belonging to the Ottoman Empire. But the aggressive ambition of Mussolini's government along with the rethoric about the disappointment at Versailles, along with the recent Italian military presence in southern

Anatolia between Smyrna and Antalya, was obviously feared by Ankara, as an open declaration of hostility.

In 1926, Turkey had accepted the international Resolution on Mossul, which assigned it to the British mandate in Iran. This resolution in fact left Turkey disappointed and isolated, exactly as Mussolini had hoped. This condition of isolation was seen by Rome as preliminary to agreements between Italy and Turkey for political arrangements and friendly relations. Turkey, on the other hand, was only able to move in the direction of Italy after the conclusion of a treaty of cooperation and understanding between Yugoslavia and the Allies in 1927, effectively pushing Rome towards Ankara. Italy feared an hostile presence on its borders and Turkey saw the renewal of the unforgotten Balkan League against the Ottoman Empire, but now with the support of France.

At the same time, Ankara saw the realization of the old slavic ambitions against Bulgaria, which would soon turn to the European region of Turkish Thrace. This pushed Turkey, for its part, towards Italy, to face the anti-Turkish French blockade in the Balkans.

The project of a Mediterranean alliance between Italy and Turkey against the French Entente or Little Intesa, excluded Greece for the present. However, the rapprochement between Athens and Ankara, and the reconciliation with Italy, left hope for a tripartite agreement between Turkey and Italy, with the accession of Greece. In the vision of Mussolini, the Dodecanese was to be an element of reassurance and relaxation in the area of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Between 1926 and 1928 diplomatic relations with Turkey improved and led, after several political talks between Italy and Turkey, to the signature of a treaty of mutual neutrality between Ankara and Rome. Mussolini defined Turkey as a nation capable of rebuilding "its spirit with courage", in the sense of the rebirth of the national spirit and the feeling of independence.

Shortly after, Italy established a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Greece, pushing for the same end on accession or similar behavior by Turkey. Only in October 1930 Ankara and Athens established a pact of collaboration and friendship and in the Turkish Parliament Italy was thanked for its mediation in the reconciliation between the two countries, because they had been enemies for a long time. In this way, Italy became a sure reference point for the foreign policy of Turkey.

Political agreements and commercial arrangements were followed by military contracts, especially in the naval field, so that, according to Mussolini, Turkey would become an area of Italian influence and a favorable partner for the control of Eastern Mediterranean.

On the other hand, Ankara looked at naval agreements as a strengthening of her national security, not of an external control over the sea, something that Italy wanted with the rearmament of Turkey. Similarly, Turkey was now certain about the security of its eastern and southern borders, and absolutely wanted to avoid a financial dependence on foreign countries, as it had been for the Ottoman Empire, and the friendship with Italy did not seem to propose those so feared conditions again, which had dragged the Empire towards a complete ruin.

At the same time, during the period of good relations with Italy, the Italian political model could provide new opportunities for development to Turkey, especially to the military class. These occasions were acquired during visits of military and civilian personnel to Italy in the early 1930s. This could provide some argument of imitation of fascism to the military and administrative top in the Turkish Republic, also in the field of law and legal codes, as well as in the authoritarian management of society and the internal management of economic crisis.

But very soon, starting in 1932, Italian-Turkish relations had begun to deteriorate. The limited possibility shown by Italy to be able to support Ankara economically and militarily, and shortly after the Ethiopian crisis and international sanctions, to which Italy had been subjected, isolated Italy at international level by an autarchic policy (“*autarchia*”). Initially followed closely by Ankara, these conditions contributed to the failure of Turkish aspirations towards Rome and showed the limits of Italian foreign policy. İnönü’s State Visit to Rome in 1932, despite the political success, did not provide Turkey with any concrete and stable Italian aid. The economic policy of autarchy had weakened the proposal for any Italian foreign policy, both on the financial level and moreover on the military and naval. This prompted Ankara to turn again towards France and in the near future also to England. French Prime Minister Briand’s proposals for a plan to stabilization of the European economy and the growing of mutual mistrust between Rome and Ankara strengthened Turkey’s adherence to policies of the League of Nations and caused an imbalance in relations with Rome. This political connection had therefore been involved in some completely provisional agreements between Italy and the USSR. Turkey proposed and

obtained an admission to the League of Nations, also with the negative vote of Italy; that saw in the League a French and English retention of their prevalence over the area and towards the nations of central and Balkan Europe. Obviously, after the negative vote of Italy in 1932, relations between Turkey and Italy fell into a marked deterioration. Italy was again manifesting a policy of aggression and expansionism, preparing for the future war in Ethiopia and proposing an agreement between the victorious nations of the war, that could eventually replace the League of Nations.

The resignation of Dino Grandi, too conciliatory and Anglophile according to Mussolini, led *Duce* to personally direct the Italian foreign policy. The relations with France and England have deteriorated, and Turkey had become increasingly anxious. Mussolini's ambitions "towards Asia and Africa", following the Italian "historical objectives" proposed new mistrust and hostility in Ankara, which once again were committed to the search for stability in the European and Mediterranean order, following the peaceful and balanced scheme of Atatürk and İnönü. The next approach of Italy to Germany after the seizure of power by Hitler, although not immediately, and even interrupted by new agreements with England and France in 1934, caused that Turkish government was again worried and worried. The subsequent and progressive accession of fascist Italy to the Nazi regime contributed to increase Mussolini's ambitions for a role of great power, but it had verified only the consequent isolation of Italy. This could only further alienate Ankara, which instead aspired to a contrary policy of pacification and balancing presence in the Balkans and into the Mediterranean Sea. The subsequent agreements of fascist Italy with Greece had not led to an alliance and had aggravated the destabilization of the Balkan region: that condition was wanted by Mussolini against Yugoslavia. Only Bulgaria remained sensitive to Rome, as a regional power revisionist of international peace agreements.

The Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans aimed at peace and stabilization, and was again opposed to that of Italy, who claimed instead to an hegemonic influence over the area and to new possible military expansions. In 1934, Turkey joined the Balkan Pact with Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania, against the revenge ambitions of Bulgaria and against the expansionist aims of Italy. It was the end of the difficult, quite impossible partnership between Atatürk's Turkey and Mussolini's Italy.

Therefore, the isolation of Turkey after the resolution of the Mossul question led to consider a progressive lack of security and stability in relations with the great powers and had produced a rapprochement with Italy, also because Italy had abandoned any claim to occupy Anatolia, and Mussolini had begun a brief phase of political moderation on the international scene, thanks to the policy of Foreign Minister Dino Grandi. Finally, the growth of French relations with Yugoslavia since the end of 1927 represented a double risk for both Ankara and Rome, contributing to their diplomatic and strategic rapprochement. Finally, the British interest to reduce French influence on the Middle East, could be a new indirect element to promote an understanding between Turkey and Italy, since London used Italy as a balancing element against France in the Mediterranean. It was probably the revival of Italian aggression, even if only nominally in Mussolini's speeches and not directed against Turkey, that aroused new mistrust and old resentments in Turkey. The regional policy of pacification carried out by Atatürk and after him by İnönü, was summarized in the historical motto "Peace in the Homeland and Peace in the World". It safeguarded the survival of the Turkish nation and dictated a completely different international political line, in contrast to Mussolini's aggressive and expansionist one. It was only during the brief period of moderation of Italian foreign policy, that relations between the two Nations could shortly reach an agreement, which soon proved to be fragile and precarious.



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