



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

# MOHAMED FEKINI AND THE FIGHT TO FREE LIBYA

ANGELO DEL BOCA  
TRANSLATED BY ANTONY SHUGAAR



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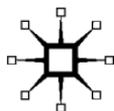
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*Translated by Antony Shugaar*

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Odyssey of the Fekini Family from 1926 to 1932

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## Illustrations

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**Image 1** Hajj Mohamed Khalifa Fekini, chief of the Rojeban, age 53, at the time of the Italian landing in Tripoli

**Image 2** Hassan Fekini, Mohamed's firstborn son

**Image 3** Hassan Fekini's identity card, issued in 1917 by the University of Turin

**Image 4** Hussein Fekini, Mohamed's second-born son

**Image 5** Tripoli, September 1919. In the car are Mohamed Fekini and the Italian General Tarditi, who played a decisive role in the negotiations for the concession of the Libyan Statute. In the foreground is Ugo Niccoli, the secretary general of the Libyan government

**Image 6** Tripoli, February 1920. A group of Libyan notables visiting the airfield of Mellaha

**Image 7** Sidi Rahuma, June 19, 1929

**Image 8** A document demonstrating that, even in exile, Mohamed and his son Ali Nouredine collaborated with the French against the Axis powers

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**Image 14** Tunis, 1963. Mohieddine Fekini, prime minister under King Idris, in conversation in Tunis with the Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba

**Image 15** Algiers, 1963. The Libyan prime minister Mohieddine Fekini on a state visit to Algeria, shaking hands with Ahmed Ben Bella, the first president of an independent Algeria

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## Abbreviations

AAF	Archivio Anwar Fekini
ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato
ASMAE	Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri
ASMAI	Archivio Storico del Ministero dell’Africa Italiana
AUSSME	Archivio Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito
BMA	British Military Administration
CMPA	Carte Miani presso l’Autore
DDI	Documenti Diplomatici Italiani
DLPA	Documenti sulla Libya presso l’Autore
ISIAO	Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente
RCTC	Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali
RD	Regio Decreto
b.	box
env.	envelope
f. file	ff. files
ph. sect.	photographic section
pos.	position
tel.	telegram
telespr.	telexpresso (literally, “telexpress”)

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## Foreword

This book would never have been written had it not been for the determination and persistence of Anwar Fekini, Esq., a Libyan citizen with a degree from the Sorbonne and law offices in London, Paris, and Tripoli. Through Philippe Preti, Esq., of Geneva, Anwar Fekini contacted me to learn if I would be willing to “*rédigier une étude historique retraçant la vie et le combat*” (“write a historical study of the life and battles”) of his grandfather. Subsequently, when we met in Turin, Anwar Fekini informed me that, in order to facilitate my research, he was willing to give me access to his grandfather’s memoirs,<sup>1</sup> as well as to a series of 335 documents consisting of letters that his grandfather wrote and sent to Turkish and Italian authorities (quite a few, in particular, to the Italian general Rodolfo Graziani) and to a number of Libyan chieftains. Last of all, he presented me with a substantial collection of photographs of the Fekini family and of places where his grandfather had lived and worked.

As a historian of Italian colonialism, I was familiar with the life and deeds of Hajj Mohamed Khalifa Fekini. I had written extensively about him in both volumes of my book *Gli italiani in Libia*,<sup>2</sup> and I knew that he had been one of the most stubborn opponents of the Italian occupation of Libya. He was the *mutasarrif* of the Rojeban tribe during Ottoman rule in Tripolitania; the *kaymakam* of Fassatu during the early years of the Italian occupation; and the *mutasarrif* of Fezzan during the brief existence of the *Jumhuriyah et-Trabulsiyya* (or Tripolitanian Republic). Mohamed Fekini<sup>3</sup> soon entered into a head-on collision course with the Italian government. In September 1916, the Italian governor Giovanni Ameglio issued a reward of 10,000 francs for his capture.<sup>4</sup> It was, however, particularly in the period beginning in 1920, after the Italians broke their promises and abolished the Statute that had been conceded to the Libyans, that Mohamed Fekini, indifferent to the repeated calls for his surrender,

took up arms with the 2,500 men of his *mehallas* to block the Italian attempts to penetrate into the mountainous region of the Jebel.

On September 13, 1920, in one of the numerous battles against the Berbers fighting under Khalifa ben Askar, who were frequently Italian allies, Mohamed Fekini lost his eldest son, Hassan, who had completed high school in Damascus and had gone on to study law at the University of Turin. Two years later, in an effort to fight back against Graziani's Gruppo Mobile—or mobile group—which was attempting to reoccupy the Jebel and resettle it with Berber tribes, Mohamed Fekini won a clear victory at the wells of el-Uchim, only to be harshly defeated in the days that followed on the outskirts of the oasis of el-Josh and at the Gorge of As Salamat. During this fighting, he lost a second son, Hussein, who had just turned 20.

Driven out of the Jebel, Mohamed Fekini made a fighting withdrawal into the Ghibla, and from there into the Hamada al Hamra, and from there into Fezzan. In 1930, he was finally driven over the border into Algeria, under a hail of bombs, at the end of a conclusive offensive unleashed by General Graziani. By now 72 years old and verging on blindness, Mohamed Fekini was forced to abandon his country after ten years of being relentlessly hunted through one of the most inhospitable regions on earth, as well as being reduced to hunger by a merciless embargo of all provisions. He and his *mujahideen* had fought for ten years against a powerful enemy, occasionally managing to strike lucky blows at their foe but more frequently themselves receiving tremendous blows. They left shreds of their flesh everywhere they passed, from the Mediterranean coast to the southernmost borders of Libya, along 1,500 kilometers (a thousand miles) of dunes, serir, and lunar mountains. They only left their country when they felt the hot breath of their adversaries on the back of their necks. Then, and only then, with tears in their eyes and fury in their hearts, did they reluctantly cross the invisible desert frontier.

After surrendering to the French garrison of Fort Tarat, Mohamed Fekini, with his wife Aicha Nouir, his four surviving children, and all that remained of one of the most daring and aggressive *mehallas* of all Libya (now disarmed), undertook a journey that would last for two long years. An authentic biblical exodus through desert regions such as the plateau of Tinrhert and the Great Eastern Erg. On a line with the city of Nefta, Fekini entered Tunisia and, after spending time in Tozeur, Al Hamma, Metlaoui, Degache, and Es Segui, he stopped at Gabes, where he spent the rest of his life, dying on March 28, 1950. He had once been the wealthy owner of houses, olive groves, orange

groves, and vast herds of livestock; his total assets, when he left Libya, consisted of 16 camels and the gold jewelry his wife Aicha wore. Just enough to stave off starvation. And yet, one of his sons, Mohieddine, graduated from the Sorbonne and later became prime minister of Libya under King Idris al-Senussi. Another son, Ali Nouredine, went into the field of diplomacy and served as Libya's ambassador to Tunisia.

I was quite familiar, then, through the documents in our archives, with the story of Mohamed Fekini and his family. It was also my opinion that the material I had already gathered was more than enough to assemble an exhaustive profile of this remarkable man: a warrior and a patriot. But what led me to accept so enthusiastically the offer made by the grandson of the irreducible freedom fighter was the opportunity to add to the already rich trove of Italian documentation a substantial quantity of Arabic documentation: documentation, moreover, that had been written or assembled by Mohamed Fekini himself. For the first time, an Italian historian would have an opportunity to study the thoughts, feelings, passions, and aspirations of the "others," and at the same time make a comparison of the two versions of events. Since this is a privilege that only a historian can fully value and appreciate, let me add only my heartfelt thanks to Anwar Fekini for the extraordinary opportunity that he has given me.

I am also grateful to Omar Saggi, who translated from Arabic into French Mohamed Fekini's *Memoirs*, and to Zahi Kaied, who translated out of Arabic the enclosures, providing us with a clear understanding of the texts. I would further like to express my gratitude to Jean-Pierre Milelli, who has already prepared a splendid French version of *One Step Away from the Gallows* (original Italian title: *A un passo dalla forca*; French title: *A un pas de la potence*). Let me also express my thanks for the invaluable information provided by Fadel and Mohamed Fekini, sons of Lamine Fekini; Embarka Nasr, wife of Lamine Fekini; Mariam Boubaker, daughter of Mohamed Fekini; and Manoubia Ben Hamida, second wife of Ali Nouredine Fekini. And finally, a heartfelt thanks goes to the historian Matteo Dominioni, who has carried out for me fruitful research in the archives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Rome.

*Turin, December 2006*

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## Introduction

*Ruth Ben-Ghiat*

“I am neither a head of state nor the supreme leader of the Jebel. What I wish above all other things is to serve the interests of my homeland,” wrote Mohamed Fekini to the Italian general Rodolfo Graziani in June 1922. “We desire peace. But I have absolutely no fear of your airplanes and I take full responsibility for my actions. None of us will live forever.”<sup>1</sup> These statements by a leader of the resistance to Italian occupation in the region of Tripolitania to the head of Italian anti-rebel military operations introduce us to the world and spirit of Mohamed Fekini, and through him, to the hardships that marked the lives of Libyans who opposed Italian rule. Prefect of the Rojeban tribe during the Ottoman era, Mohamed Fekini was one of the very first to organize an armed resistance against the Italian invasion. After the Turks signed a peace treaty with the Italians, Mohamed Fekini served as governor of Fassatu and the western Jebel but took up arms again during the Arab insurrections of 1914–1915 and remained one of the Italians’ most formidable opponents for the next 15 years. His letter to Graziani displays his commitment to defend his country, his courageous refusal to be intimidated by the Italians’ superior technology, and a philosophical acceptance of the risks of death that come with the life of a warrior. The 1921 arrival of the brutal Graziani pre-saged the escalation of violence against the resistance in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica during the rule of the Italian Fascists (1922–1943). Mohamed Fekini continued to wage war against the Italians for eight more years after this letter. It was not until 1930, at age 75, that he went into exile—settling eventually in Tunisia—where he remained until his death in 1950.

The Fekini family has played an important role in colonial and post-colonial Libya. Mohamed Fekini served as prefect of Fezzan during

the formative experience of the Tripolitanian Republic (1918–1922), as well as being a key protagonist in the armed struggle against the Italians. His son Mohieddine Fekini became prime minister of Libya in 1963, at only 38 years old, after having served as ambassador to Egypt and to the United States, while another son, Ali Nourredine, became ambassador to Tunisia in 1959. As a scholar of Libyan origin, Ali Abdullatif Ahmida has written, “one could not write the history of Italy without studying its colonies, especially Libya. Similarly, one could not write the history of Libya without studying the history of Italy.”<sup>2</sup> The history of Mohamed Fekini and his family, as narrated in this book by Angelo Del Boca, supports this view. *Mohamed Fekini and the Fight to Free Libya* is an account of some of the most dramatic and formative years of modern Libya, as seen through the lens of Fekini’s activities in politics, in war, and as a patriarch—from Ottoman to Italian rule and through his children—to the years of Idris al-Sanussi’s monarchy (1951–1969).

The mix of Italian and Libyan voices that marks the present book is fruit of a new period of scholarship on Italian colonial policies and on Libyan life under Italian occupation. Until the 1980s, neither topic received much attention from either Libyan or Italian scholars. On the Italian side, the absence of a process of decolonization and the lack of public debate about the moral and other legacies of colonialism, difficulties in gaining access to colonial archives, and the desire to maintain an image of their colonial rule as benevolent hampered the development of scholarship. Del Boca, along with Giorgio Rochat and Claudio Segrè, was a pioneer of this field of study, and his two-volume study of *Gli italiani in Libia* (*The Italians in Libya*, completed in 1986–1987) offered a masterful synthesis which was the fruit of his work in almost a dozen archives.<sup>3</sup> From this foundation has come work on colonial Libya by several generations of scholars, many of whom write in English and come from disciplines as disparate as history, political science, anthropology, and architectural history.<sup>4</sup>

Nor were conditions initially propitious for the writing of Libyan histories of the experience of Italian colonial rule. As Mia Fuller has observed, high illiteracy rates and the fact that the three regions that make up modern Libya (Tripolitania, the Fezzan, and Cyrenaica) were unified only during Fascist rule meant that the country came out of colonial rule without an established written historiography. Tellingly, during the monarchy, the most influential book on Libyan history, E.E. Evans Pritchard’s *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (1949), was the work of an Englishman linked to the British military administration of

Libya (1943–1951).<sup>5</sup> Libyan research on the period of Fascist occupation received new impetus with the onset of the regime of Mu‘ammar Qadhafi (1969–present), who presented himself as continuing a tradition of anticolonial uprising enshrined by Shaykh ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, leader of the resistance in Cyrenaica. Yet it was only with the 1978 founding of the Libyan Studies Centre and its massive projects of oral history and research that a Libyan knowledge base has come into being about Italian colonialism and its postcolonial legacies.<sup>6</sup>

The new millennium has brought these two national historiographies about the Italian imperial engagement with Libya into dialogue. Agreements struck in the late 1990s by the Italian and Libyan governments, which recognized Italian efforts to acknowledge the consequences of 30 years of occupation and Libya’s desire for international rehabilitation, opened the doors for exchanges between Libyan and Italian scholars. Joint conferences and publications and the opening of Italian document collections in Libya to Italian and other Western scholars have brought a renewed vitality to scholarship on colonial and postcolonial Libya.<sup>7</sup> The publication of the memoirs of prominent Libyan notables and politicians within and outside of Libya has also given a broader resonance to modern Libyan history, often providing an alternative to the antiroyalist narratives favored by the Qadhafi state.<sup>8</sup> The present book can also be said to be fruit of this general climate, in that it was made possible by the decision of Mohamed Fekini’s grandson, Anwar Fekini, Esq., to make his grandfather’s memoir and hundreds of letters available to an Italian scholar. Del Boca integrates these documents into a compelling reconstruction of colonial Libya that draws on a lifetime of research. The histories that Mohamed Fekini recounts therein confirm the more complex view of Libyan colonial society that has been emerging in recent years. They also raise a set of issues that still await further investigation, since they were not privileged by either the monarchy or the early Qadhafi state.

The first of these issues is the anticolonial resistance, which has been well studied as it unfolded in Cyrenaica in the late 1920s and early 1930s, because of the leadership of ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, the prominence of the Sanusi order, and the infamous concentration camps there which imprisoned Bedouin foot soldiers of the resistance and their families.<sup>9</sup> Less known is the situation in Tripolitania, where Mohamed Fekini operated, and the long earlier period of resistance that preceded the advent of Fascism. Fekini’s letters and memoir, as presented in Del Boca’s book, convey the tenacity and intelligence of