

STUDIES

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al-Mukhtâr, 'Umar

'Umar al-Mukhtâr (1862-1931) was a Sanūsî *shaykh* and a leader of the resistance against the Italian colonisation of Cyrenaica. Since the second half of the twentieth century, he has often been considered a Libyan national hero in public memory.

'Umar al-Mukhtâr was born in al-Batnân, in the Jabal al-Akhḍar region of northern Cyrenaica (Barqa), in what was then the Ottoman province of Tripolitania (Turk. Trablusgarp, Ar. Ṭarâbulus al-Gharb). He was initiated into the Šūfî Sanūsîyya *ṭarîqa* (brotherhood) that was founded in 1837 by Muḥammad b. 'Alî al-Sanūsî (1787-1859) and that dominated religious life in 'Umar al-Mukhtâr's home region. He was trained as an Islamic scholar in the Sanūsî *zāwîyas* (lodges) of

Janzûr and al-Jaghbûb in Cyrenaica and became part of the brotherhood's religious and political-military leadership around Sayyid Muḥammad al-Mahdî (1844-1902), which had its centre first in al-Jaghbûb and then in the town of Gouro, in the Ennedi region of present-day Chad, at the end of the nineteenth century. There he also participated in the fight of Sanūsî-led forces under the command of Sayyid Aḥmad al-Sharîf (1873-1933) against French colonial expansion in the Chad Basin, which culminated in the years 1900-2.

After the Italian invasion of Ottoman Tripolitania in 1911, 'Umar al-Mukhtâr became one of the main organisers of the resistance in the *sancak* (*sanjaq*, district) of Benghazi (Banghâzi), until the Sanūsîyya agreed to a truce in exchange for the recognition of its autonomy by the Italian authorities in the 1917 treaty of 'Akrama (which was renewed three years later, in the Treaty of al-Rajma). Sayyid Aḥmad al-Sharîf had resigned as head of the brotherhood after Sanūsî forces unsuccessfully attacked British-occupied Egypt in 1915-6 to support the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. In late 1922, his successor, Sayyid Muḥammad Idrîs al-Sanūsî (1889-1983), the future king of Lîbya (r. 1951-69) whom the Italian government had recognised as ruler (*amîr*) of Cyrenaica in the years 1917-22, followed Sayyid Aḥmad into exile. This left the military direction of the anticolonial resistance led by the Sanūsîyya in the hands of 'Umar al-Mukhtâr, who, after the capture of Idrîs's brother Sayyid Muḥammad al-Riḍâ al-Sanūsî (d. 1955) in 1928, became the de facto head of the brotherhood inside Cyrenaica.

After Italy's new Fascist government under Benito Mussolini (r. 1922-45)

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