

NYON CONFERENCE OF 1937
ON THE PREVENTION OF PIRATICAL ACTS
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND TURKEY

YÜCEL GÜÇLÜ

Unfortunately until now there has been no detailed scholarly investigation, or even a brief article in the available literature devoted to the examination of the specific subject of the Turkish participation in the Conference of Mediterranean powers on anti-piracy held between 10-14 September 1937 at Nyon, Switzerland. Very little has hitherto been written about this important aspect of Turkish foreign policy in the 1930s. Among both Turkish and Western historians, none has given more than a few passing pages to the matter under discussion here. Indeed, in several relevant works the event is omitted all together. For instance, in the collective study by a group of eminent Turkish historians, *Olaylarla Türk Dış Politikası: 1919-1965* (Turkish Foreign Policy Through Events: 1919-1965)¹ only one single paragraph is allotted to the theme and in the authoritative reference book, *Montrö ve Savaş Öncesi Yılları: 1935-1939* (Montreux and Pre-War Years: 1935-1939)², published by the Directorate General of Research and Policy Planning of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey the topic is not mentioned at all. The main purpose of this essay is, therefore, to fill the gap in the inquiry of a noteworthy though neglected phenomenon in the history of Turkey's international relations.

The Spanish civil war, begun on 18 July 1936, had found Germany and Italy actively supporting the Nationalists under General Francisco Franco, while France and Britain – neither of whom was prepared for fighting – were anxiously avoiding war at all costs. The Germans went in the Spanish civil war chiefly to complicate the strategic situation of France. Germany

¹ *Olaylarla Türk Dış Politikası: 1919-1965* (Turkish Foreign Policy Through Events: 1919-1965), Ankara, 1969, p.107.

² *Montrö ve Savaş Öncesi Yılları: 1935-1939* (Montreux and Pre-War Years: 1935-1939), Ankara, 1973.

had readily recognised the value to it of a Nationalist victory which would be certain to weaken France on the Rhine by creating a hostile frontier on the Pyrenees. And Italy, for its part, knew that such a victory could be an effective threat to both French and British communications in the Mediterranean. Benito Mussolini claimed that he aided the rebels to prevent the spread of communism, but it is doubtful if this was his major motive. One obvious motive was to place an ally athwart the sea lane between France and French Africa; Mussolini tried very hard to secure naval and air bases for Italy in the Balearic Islands. Probably even more important was the desire to raise Fascist prestige, already heightened by the Ethiopian war, to new levels in Italy by new military victories. Lacking the moral determination to resist such aggressions, France and Britain had imperilled their own positions by the ultimate encirclement of France and the dangerous weakening of British naval power in the Mediterranean. Presented with threats to their Mediterranean positions, France and Britain's desires to gain the friendship of Turkey were increasing.

On the other hand, upon the conclusion of the Montreux Straits Convention on 20 July 1936, the Soviet Union had acquired the right of passing its warships to the Mediterranean while Italy had objected to the almost unrestricted freedom of entrance conceded to the Russian fleet to this sea. The Soviet government strove to play a more active part in the Mediterranean area, which could be explained by its increased interest towards Spain. Another very important reason for Moscow's interest was the growing German threat to the Baltic ports, compelling the Russians to gain entry to the Mediterranean. The Fascist government, apprehensive of communism, did not look with favour upon the appearance of Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean. Soon after the outbreak of the Spanish civil war, Italy began to combat more aggressively the influence of the Soviet Union in the Mediterranean region.

When civil war broke out in Spain, Ankara gave moral support to the Republican side and backed the League of Nations. The Spanish chargé d'affaires remained at his post in Ankara as representative of the constitutional government. The Turkish government adopted the principle of non-intervention in Spain. No complaints were recorded against Turkey in regard to the supply of war material to either side³.

³ Tefvik Rüştü Aras, "La Politique Extérieure de Turquie, 1935-1939", *Dictionnaire Diplomatique*, Paris, 1939, vol.2, pp.1097-1098.

Turkey maintained an entirely correct attitude towards the Spanish conflict. On 9 March 1937 a decree was enacted forbidding the departure of Turkish volunteers to take part in the Spanish civil war or the enrolment as volunteers of foreigners residing in Turkey. Profitable offers by the Valencia government to purchase all Turkey's obsolescent munitions were resolutely resisted. A determined representation in July 1937 by Italy and Germany with a view to obtain Turkey's support for the Italo-German proposals in the matter of naval control and non-intervention met no response, and Turkey remained faithful to its principled attitude. Despite Mussolini's assertion that with the conquest of Ethiopia, Italy had become a "satisfied" power, anxiety of Italy's Mediterranean ambitions played an important part in the policy followed by Turkey with respect to Spain⁴.

On 3 August 1937, Franco invoked Mussolini's help to intercept Soviet shipments of vast quantities of tanks, aircraft, and machine-guns from the Black Sea ports to Republican Spain. The Russians sent their arms to Spain mainly in Spanish Republican ships, while using British merchant ships for the legitimate trade from the Black Sea with cargoes of oil, coal, food and other supplies. Thereupon began a new phase in the Spanish civil war, which was marked by indiscriminate attacks upon merchant ships using the Mediterranean as a highway, without warning or inquiry and without regard to the nationality of the vessel attacked, the nature of its cargo, or its port of destination. Moreover, this campaign of piracy was conducted not only by aircraft and surface warships but also – and this to an increasing extent as the month went on – by submarines, whose identity it was much more difficult to establish. Each of the parties in Spain disclaimed responsibility for the acts of these pirate submarines⁵.

In the eastern Mediterranean, the Spanish civil war made little impact until sinking by unidentified submarines began. Most alarming for Turkey, these submarines were operating inside the Straits themselves.

⁴ Ibid. Yunus Nadi Abaloğlu, "Akdeniz Emniyetinde Alakamız Çok Sıkıdır" (Our Concern for the Mediterranean Security Is Very Close), *Cumhuriyet*, 12 August 1937. Abaloğlu was a deputy and a personal associate of the Turkish chief of state. See also Pertinax, "L'Italie Puissance Révolutionnaire en Méditerranée", *L'Europe Nouvelle*, 17 April 1937, pp.371-372.

⁵ *Survey of International Affairs* – henceforth referred to as "S.I.A." – (1937 - I) , London, 1938, pp.339-340. Also Peter Gretton, "The Nyon Conference – the naval aspect", *The English Historical Review*, vol. XC, no. 354, January 1975, p.104.

This seemed to highlight, in the most embarrassing possible way, Turkish vulnerability and military unpreparedness while raising the possibility of dangerous international complications for a Turkey only just restored to full sovereignty over the Straits. On 14 August 1937, the Spanish ship *Ciudad du Cadiz* was sunk by an unidentified submarine in the Straits. The submarine surfaced, chased the *Ciudad du Cadiz* to within two and half miles of shore, and after firing eight cannon shots into the stricken vessel, torpedoed twice⁶. Four days later, another Spanish vessel, the *Armero*, was torpedoed and sunk half a mile from Bozcaada. The attacker had been flying the Spanish Nationalist flag, but was neither a Spanish type nor marked as a Spanish vessel. The Greek patrol craft *Avansof* managed to rescue seventy-nine survivors before the *Armero* sank. Evidently, General Franco's allies were determined to prevent munitions, oil and foodstuffs from reaching Valencia and Barcelona and seemed prepared to run any risks to achieve this⁷.

The Turkish warship *Hamidiye* signalled that it had sighted a submarine in the area of sinking. All Turkish naval vessels put to sea and all aircraft took to the air. The submarine escaped⁸. The next day, 19 August, the Spanish government made representations on this aspect of the matter in Ankara, whereupon President Kemal Atatürk and members of the Turkish General Staff returned hastily to the capital from Thrace, where they had been attending army manoeuvres, to examine the situation. The upshot of the government's deliberations was an announcement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 24 August that the presence of a foreign submarine in Turkish waters would be a violation of the Montreux Straits Convention; that any submarine whose presence was detected would therefore be summoned to surrender; and that if it failed to surrender it would be sunk. In order to carry this decision into effect three Turkish warships were ordered to patrol the Sea of Marmara⁹.

⁶ Documents Diplomatiques Français – henceforth referred to as “D.D.F.” –, ser.2, vol.6, no.351, Ponsot (İstanbul) to Delbos, 24 August 1937. Yunus Nadi Abaloğlu, “Meçhul Denizaltı Gemisi Karşısında Hükümetimizin Hassasiyeti” (The Sensivity of Our Government about the Unknown Submarine), *Cumhuriyet*, 27 August 1937.

⁷ Ibid., no.338, Ponsot (İstanbul) to Delbos, 18 August 1937.

⁸ *Bullein of International Affairs* – henceforth referred to as “B.I.A.” –, vol.14, no.5, 4 September 1937, p.40.

⁹ *Anatolian News Agency*, 25 August 1937. Falih Rıfkı Atay, “Notalarımız” (Our Diplomatic Notes), *Ulus*, 28 August 1937.

Tevfik Rüştü Aras, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, came to see Sir Percy Loraine, the British ambassador at Ankara. Turkey would, he promised, circularize the powers, "and will point out the undesirability and danger of this extension of the Spanish civil war to the eastern Mediterranean"¹⁰. Submarines found in the Straits, he warned, would henceforward be sunk without warning¹¹. He had hoped that such things had ended with the Ethiopian crisis¹². Turkey, he said, was resolved to take all necessary measures for surveillance and security and was determined to meet torpedoes with the depth charge¹³. On 29 August, a French passenger steamer was chased by a submarine from the Aegean Sea well into the Dardanelles. Turkey was concerned not so much over the threat to its own merchant shipping as over the danger of complications arising out of attacks by submarines on non-Turkish ships in Turkish waters. The Turkish government announced that a planned courtesy call of the Turkish fleet to Yugoslavia and Italy was cancelled¹⁴.

It was not just the embarrassment of being unable to ensure the safety of foreign vessels in waters recently become territorial that bothered the Turkish government. Turkey possessed very little antisubmarine capability and was becoming worried about the state of its maritime communications. A Mediterranean dangerous to shipping meant that Turkey's land communications increased in importance. Reliance on land lines, on its turn, indicated increased dependence on either the Soviet Union or Germany. Given Turkey's attempt to redirect its foreign policy, this was hardly a desirable development. For the moment, Ankara had little choice. On 12 July, Aras, together with Şükrü Kaya, Minister of the Interior, arrived in Moscow for a week of meetings with the Soviets. At the end of these, it was announced that the common "interest of both countries demands the preservation of their relation of friendship in full

¹⁰ Foreign Office Papers, Public Record Office, London – henceforth referred to as "F.O." – 371/424/282 W1599/23/41. Loraine (Ankara) to Halifax, 23 August 1937.

¹¹ D.D.F., ser.2, vol.6, no.351, Ponsot (İstanbul) to Delbos, 24 August 1937.

¹² Ibid., no.339, Ponsot (İstanbul) to Delbos, 18 August 1937.

¹³ F.O.371/424/282 W1599/23/41. Loraine (Ankara) to Halifax, 23 August 1937.

¹⁴ B.I.A., vol.14, no.5, 4 September 1937, p.40. Although the Turkish navy was not large and many of its vessels appeared to be far from new, it was by no means a negligible factor in any operations in the eastern Mediterranean.

as a stable element in their foreign policies”¹⁵. Two months later, the Turkish ambassador in Berlin, Hamdi Arpağ, approached the German Secretary of State, Hans von Mackensen, to facilitate deliveries of essential materials by rail¹⁶.

By mid August the indignation and anxiety to which this revival of piracy was giving rise in the countries whose ships had been, or might be, the victims of it had reached a pitch at which it was felt that some kind of collective action was called for in addition to the steps which were already being taken by the individual governments in the defence of their own interests. The situation had been discussed on 17 and again 25 August by members of the British Cabinet, some of whom had interrupted their holidays and returned to London for this purpose; and as a result orders had been issued that attacks by submarines were to be met by counter-attacks, additional destroyers had been sent to strengthen the British fleet in the Mediterranean, and General Franco had been warned that further attacks on British shipping would not be tolerated. The French government, too, had taken further measures to protect their merchant ships by introducing a system of escort by seaplanes and destroyers for ships leaving Algerian ports for Marseilles. Before the end of August the attacks on merchant ships were increasing in number and caused mounting anger in London and Paris. The British and French governments had therefore entered into consultation with a view to deciding what other action they could take in order to deal with the menace. Diplomacy alone could not maintain security in the Mediterranean; there would have to be teeth¹⁷.

The aircraft which attacked ships of various nationalities during August were known or presumed to belong to the Nationalists, but the identity of the submarine or submarines whose activities were being felt

¹⁵ Ibid., no.2, 24 July 1937, p.55. And *Documents on International Affairs* (1937), London, 1938, p.423. On Aras' visit to Moscow see in particular Rahmi Apak, *Yetmişlik Bir Subayın Hatıraları* (Recollections of an Army Officer in His Seventies), Ankara, 1988, p.278. Apak was a member of the Turkish Grand National Assembly who accompanied Aras and Kaya on their trip to the Soviet Union.

¹⁶ Documents on German Foreign Policy, ser.D, vol.5, no.538, Memorandum by Mackensen, 23 September 1937.

¹⁷ Cabinet Office Papers, Public Record Office, London – henceforth referred to as “CAB” – 23/89. Cab 34 (37), 8 September 1937.

over such a wide area was a question which never received an official answer. The Spanish government, on its part, felt no doubt on this point. In a statement issued on 18 August, in a note of 21 August appealing to the League Council under Article 11 of the Covenant, and in another note circulated to European governments on 22 August, they openly accused the Italian government of responsibility, declaring that the attacks on Spanish merchant ships were carried out by Italian submarines and destroyers. It has been mentioned that all the submarines belonging to the Spanish navy at the outset of the civil war were believed to have remained in the possession of the Spanish government; and this belief led to the assumption that, at any rate in the case of Spanish merchant ships which had been sunk by submarines, the vessels responsible were of foreign origin, though they might now be acting nominally under General Franco's orders¹⁸.

It was indignantly denied in Rome that any Italian submarines were ever engaged in acts of piracy in the Mediterranean, and the Spanish Nationalists pointed to Russia as the villain of the piece. It was hardly to be supposed, however, that Russian submarines would have attacked the Spanish and Russian merchant ships which figured prominently among the victims, and though it was perhaps theoretically possible that two pirates of different 'ideological' complexion were at work at the same time, that assumption might incriminate Russia without absolving Italy. The Russian government was, indeed, alone in giving open support to the Spanish government's accusations against Italy, but the restraint which was exercised by other governments in the matter was probably determined by policy rather than by a conviction of Italy's innocence. In France, at all events, little doubt seems to have been felt that the adoption of piratical methods was the latest move in Italy's campaign for ensuring General Franco's victory, and the incidents in the Mediterranean were taken all the more seriously in Paris because they coincided with a growing tendency on Mussolini's part to abandon any pretence that Italy was not playing an active part in the war in Spain¹⁹.

¹⁸ S.I.A. (1937 - I), pp.342 - 343. Also Yunus Nadi Abaloğlu, "Don Kişot Vari Bir Taarruz" (A Don Quixotic Assault), *Cumhuriyet*, 31 August 1937.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.343. Moreover see Brian Sullivan, "Fascist Italy's Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War", *Journal of Military History*, 59, October 1995, pp.697-727.

For some weeks past the Italian press had been boasting openly of Italy's refusal to be neutral in the Spanish conflict and referring in laudatory terms to the achievements of the Italian legionaries in Spain – whose activities had also been described by Count Dino Grandi, the Italian ambassador in London, at a meeting of the Spanish civil war Non-Intervention Committee on 9 July, as an expression of an ancient and glorious tradition of his country. In a speech at Palermo on 20 August, Mussolini declared once more, in categorical terms, that Italy would not tolerate the establishment in the Mediterranean of “Bolshevism or anything of a similar nature”, and on 27 August the Italian press published the text of telegrams which Mussolini had exchanged with General Franco on the occasion of the fall of the city of Santander, together with a list of Italian casualties in the battle for Santander, and the names of twelve Italian generals serving with General Franco's forces. When Italy threw off the mask in this way, it became more difficult for other governments to defend the policy of non-intervention against its critics, and in France the relative advantages and disadvantages of abandoning the fiction of non-intervention in order that the French frontier might be opened for the supply of munitions to the Spanish government were under consideration in official circles at the end of August. The French government also had in mind the possibility of raising the question of Italy's open intervention in Spain at a meeting of the Non-Intervention Committee in London²⁰.

The question of the future of the policy of non-intervention, as well as the question of attacks on shipping in the Mediterranean, came under examination during Franco-British conversations at the turn of August and September, when it was agreed that no direct action should be taken in the matter of the exchange of telegrams between Mussolini and General Franco, in order not to prejudice the chances of dealing with the urgent problem of attacks on shipping in the Mediterranean. It was also agreed that the best hope of finding a solution of that problem lay in holding a special conference of the states principally interested and not in bringing it before the Non-Intervention Committee – the members of which had learnt by experience the difficulties in the way of reaching agreement for immediate action on any particular point among the whole complex of

²⁰ Ibid., pp.343 - 344.

questions which came within the Committee's scope. On 31 August, the French suggested that a conference be called to discuss the situation in the Mediterranean, rapidly moving beyond control. London thought this an excellent idea²¹.

On 3 September, Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary of the British Foreign Office met with the chargé d'affaires of the French Embassy in London to discuss the coming conference. During the next few days the questions of where the conference was to be held and what states were to be invited to take part in it were under discussion between the two representatives. Quickly, they reached basic agreement on a common Anglo-French line. It was agreed that the meeting-place should not be Geneva, in order not to give offence to Italy, but some town within easy reach of Geneva (where the eighteenth session of the League of Nations Assembly was due to open on 13 September); and Nyon was finally selected. The question of who were to be the participants in the conference gave rise to more difficulty. France had originally suggested that all Mediterranean and Black Sea states with the exception of Spain, and only those states, should be invited, but the British government felt that if the Soviet Union was to be included it was not possible to exclude Germany, and it was finally agreed that both the Soviet Union and Germany should be invited to attend²².

On 5 September, British and French ambassadors received instructions to invite Albania, Bulgaria, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Roumania, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Turkey to attend a conference at Nyon on 10 September, in order to end the present state of insecurity in the Mediterranean and to ensure that the rules of international law regarding shipping at sea shall be strictly enforced. Together they would examine the best means of assuring the protection of navigation in the Mediterranean²³. During the next few days the Italian and German governments consulted together in regard to the answers which they were to return to the Anglo-French invitation. On 9 September both governments notified the British and French governments that they had

²¹ CAB 23/89. Cab 34 (37), 8 September 1937.

²² Ibid.

²³ British Documents on Foreign Policy – henceforth referred to as “B.D.F.P.” – , ser.2, vol.19, no.123, Eden to Ingram (Rome), 5 September 1937.

decided not to send representatives to Nyon. Before these formal replies were received it had already been clear what line Italy and Germany would take, and it had become clear that Britain and France intended that the conference should be held at Nyon with or without Italian and German participation. Initially, Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, wanted *de jure* recognition of the Italian Empire in Africa as a precondition for attendance. Later he refused point-black to attend under any circumstances. The Russians would be there and they had just accused the Italians formally of being responsible for the sinkings²⁴.

Meanwhile, the invitations to the conference had been accepted by all the other states to whom they had been sent except Albania, who fulfilled expectations by following its patron Italy's lead and refusing to attend. Nine states were therefore represented – most of them by their Ministers of Foreign Affairs – when the opening meeting of the conference was held at Nyon on 10 September. No one cared about the non-participations, and the conference went on without them. Italy, after all, was known to be the pirate state. Germany was not a Mediterranean power. Albanian participation mattered so little, that when it subsequently applied to be associated with the Nyon Agreement the British Foreign Office did not even bother to reply²⁵.

The opening phase of the conference, consisting of general statements of policy, was much shorter than was usual at such international gatherings. Yvon Delbos, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was elected the president, made a speech in which he avoided any suggestion that the conference was called upon to apportion blame for the incidents which had occurred during the past six weeks, and left the door open for the adherence of Italy and Germany to any arrangements that might be decided upon. Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, introduced a more polemical note by repeating the Russian charges against Italy (though he did refrain from mentioning it by name) and by laying stress on the patent absurdity of the insinuation that Russian submarines had been responsible for the destruction of Russian ships. All Mediterranean powers must wish to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no.s 124 and 126, Ingram (Rome) to F.O., 9 September 1937.

²⁵ Public Record Office, London – henceforth referred to as “PRO” – . Pound's Private Papers. CC DUPO 4/6. Pound (Geneva) to F.O., 15 September 1937.

participate in the conference, he said, except those who considered themselves guaranteed against piracy, either because they organised it themselves, or because of their extreme intimacy with the pirates. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, on the other hand, who was the only other speaker in the public debate, was as careful as Delbos to avoid controversy, and he also expressed the hope that Italy and Germany would associate themselves with the decisions of the conference. The conference then constituted itself into a standing committee which met in private and got to work without delay on the basis of draft proposals which had been prepared for submission to the conference by the British and French governments in preliminary conversations in Paris²⁶.

The Nyon Conference, to suppress the pirates, went well. It was immediately successful. Indeed it succeeded before it began. In the absence of Italy and Germany, the proceedings were very rapid. At 11.00 a.m. 11 September, a draft agreement for countermeasures against Mediterranean piracy was reached. Aras was one of the delegates who felt it necessary to refer the agreement to their governments before signing and this held up its signature until the 14th²⁷.

The signatories, which were Britain, France, Soviet Union, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Roumania, Bulgaria and Egypt, agreed that any submarine which attacked a ship in a manner contrary to the rules of international law referred to in the International Treaty for the Limitation and Reduction of Naval Armaments signed in London on 25 March 1936 should be counter-attacked and, if possible, destroyed. In order to facilitate the putting into force of the above arrangements, the British and French fleets were to operate in the Mediterranean up to the entrance of the Dardanelles. Six days later, patrols began. Agreement was achieved so easily because the British and the French delegations, anxious to prevent a repetition of the League of Nations sanctions fiasco, met on 6-9 September and established identity of views on technical matters. It was also decided that in the interest of speed, the conference should deal first with submarine warfare only. Attacks by surface vessels and aircraft would be examined later, during the course of the League of Nations Assembly²⁸.

²⁶ S.I.A. (1937-I), pp.346-347.

²⁷ The text of the Nyon Agreement is found in League of Nations, *Official Journal*, XVIII, 7 (July-December 1937), pp. 671-674.

²⁸ Ahmet Şükrü Esmer, "Korsanlara Karşı Tedbir" (Measure Against Piracy), *Ulus*, 14 September 1937.

The agreement was welcomed in Turkey. Turkish public opinion was enthusiastic and the Turkish government took its rightful share of the credit for having participated in the conference. Aras spoke of his pleasure at an international agreement with very considerable backing. The Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs described the results of Nyon as a success for status quo powers and a defeat for Italy. He believed that the conference achieved its purpose²⁹.

At Nyon, the smaller powers were all anxious to help, but had little naval power and no antisubmarine capability. What quickly became obvious also, was that none of them wanted help from the Soviet Union. The eastern Mediterranean countries were most unwilling to have any cooperation at all from the Russians. "The extent of this feeling which was shared by all – even by the Turks in spite of their friendly relations with the Soviet Union", Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, Commander-in-Chief of the British Mediterranean fleet informed London, "was surprising."³⁰ No one should have been surprised. The Turks were not anxious to establish a precedent for opening the Straits to the Soviets. Also, they knew that if the Soviets were allowed out, the Italians would be certain to hold the Turks accountable after the crisis ended.

It was agreed at Nyon that the British, who were to be responsible for patrolling the eastern Mediterranean, would request assistance from the smaller powers. The smaller powers would grant it, and be allotted patrol zones. Since they would not be able to adequately patrol their zones with the naval powers at their disposal, the smaller powers would, in turn, request aid from the British, who would provide it. The arrangement gave the British Admiralty control, and it reserved the right to call upon the Russians for help in the area. In practice, the plan would keep the Russians out of the Aegean. The Soviet Union had not been assigned a patrol zone in the Mediterranean, but was confined to the Black Sea. The Russians, very largely, were left out in the cold. It was Eden's belief, shared by his naval adviser Pound, that the Soviets were prevented from protesting by their anxiety that the world not learn the extent of their unpopularity

²⁹ Tevfik Rüştü Aras, *Görüşlerim* (My Views), İstanbul, 1968, pp. 206-207.

³⁰ PRO. Pound's Private Papers. CC DUPO 4/6. Pound (Geneva) to F.O., 15 September 1937.

and isolation³¹. "The Soviet government", Litvinov said, "had no axe to grind, and sought only to ensure the elimination of piracy." However, he warned, all must understand that the Soviets had as much right in the Mediterranean as anyone else and would protect their rights³².

Theoretically, the Turks and the Greeks were responsible for the Aegean³³. In reality, the Turks and the Greeks would restrict themselves to providing bases for patrolling vessels: Ildır from the Turks, Lemos and Skyros from the Greeks – provided that there were no overflights of fortifications³⁴. The Turks, of course, were responsible for patrols in the Dardanelles; and both Turks and Greeks for patrolling their territorial waters³⁵. Turkey desired to participate more fully, Aras admitted later, but did not have enough sound ships to take on anything more strenuous than Dardanelles defence³⁶. Britain, it was agreed, would operate in the eastern Mediterranean up to the Dardanelles and excluding the Adriatic³⁷. From 17 September, the Turks and the Greeks refused port facilities to Italian vessels³⁸.

On 18 September, Numan Menemencioğlu, the Political Under-Secretary of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, introduced the Nyon Agreement to the Grand National Assembly. The aim of the agreement, he told the deputies, was to prevent a war which could be a catastrophe. Menemencioğlu stated that at a time when aggression, international lawlessness and adventurist impudence have been accustomed to success, any action combating these phenomena which takes the form not merely

³¹ Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators, 1928-1938*, London, 1962, p.467. Also Burhan Belge, "Konferansın Ehemmiyeti" (Importance of the Conference), *Ulus*, 16 September 1937.

³² B.I.A., vol.14, no.6, 18 September 1937, pp.42-43.

³³ Eden had first suggested this on 7 September as a way of providing effective patrols without unduly frightening the Italians; but neither Turkey alone, or Turkey and Greece together, had enough destroyers to patrol a zone without assistance. CAB 24/271. CP 213 (37). *The Situation in the Mediterranean*, Eden, 8 September 1937.

³⁴ F.O. 371/424/282 W17342/23/41. Chamberlain to Athens and Ankara, 17 September 1937.

³⁵ PRO. Pound's Private Papers. CC DUPO 4/6. Pound (Geneva) to F.O., 17 September 1937.

³⁶ F.O. 371/424/282 E6412/67/44. Loraine (Ankara) to Halifax, 27 October 1938. One should remember, however, that at the time Aras told Loraine this, Turkey was trying to negotiate an armaments loan intended primarily for naval purchases.

³⁷ B.I.A., vol.14, no.6, 18 September 1937, pp.42-43.

³⁸ Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, vol.II, London, 1976, p.9.

of discussion, protests and declarations but of practical steps must be particularly welcomed. He called on those “great powers which still remained outside the arrangement to adhere.”³⁹

On 28 September, İnönü announced his resignation “for reasons of health” from the Premiership. Allegedly one of the many seeming reasons behind his withdrawal was that he had opposed Atatürk’s policy at Nyon as too confrontational. Atatürk, who had become a warm supporter of Turco-British friendship, who never fully trusted Italy and rejected Russian attempts to command Turkish foreign policy – although he desired to remain on good terms with the Soviet Union– supported Britain’s resolute policy at the Anti-Piracy Conference. It was said that İnönü had counselled a more cautious approach on the question of Mediterranean pirating than was actually followed. There were reports that İnönü did not see eye to eye with Atatürk in the matter, the latter being widely credited with wishing for some more drastic action. Telephoning to İnönü from İstanbul, Atatürk overrode in strong terms a Cabinet decision to accede only upon certain conditions to the agreement and personally gave orders to Aras in Nyon to sign the instrument at once without strings. The inspirator of the policy pursued by the Turkish government on the issue was obviously Atatürk himself. However, it naturally belonged to the government to negotiate with the foreign representatives and it seemed that the interventions of İnönü aimed to counterbalance the strong driving motives of the chief of state by a moderate dose of circumspection and reticence⁴⁰.

³⁹ *Anatolian News Agency*, 18 September 1937. Falih Rıfık Atay, “Kamutay Toplantısı” (Meeting of the Grand National Assembly), *Ulus*, 18 September 1937. Turkey also accepted the supplementary agreements reached at Nyon in an attempt to prevent attacks by surface vessels and aircraft on shipping in the Mediterranean. See League of Nations, *Official Journal*, XVIII, 7 (July-December 1937), pp. 685-686.

⁴⁰ İsmet İnönü, *İnönü’nün Hatıraları* (İnönü’s Recollections), İstanbul, 1987, vol.2, p.285. Interestingly in Edward Weisband, *Turkish Foreign Policy: 1943-1945. Small State Diplomacy and Great Power Politics*, Princeton, 1973, p.49 fn.41 it is asserted that Menemencioğlu, along with İnönü, urged greater caution as regards Nyon Agreement. See also in particular Hasan Rıza Soyak, *Atatürk’ten Hatıralar* (Recollections from Atatürk), Ankara, 1958, vol.2, pp.659-682. Soyak’s work is especially important for the personal insights offered on events in which the author frequently took part. Soyak was Atatürk’s secretary-general in the 1930s and thus had access to the presidential archives.

The Turkish Prime Minister was inclined to exercise restraint on the handling of the crisis and tried to avoid excess. In view of Italy's presence in the Dodecanese Islands, its intrigues with Turkey's neighbours as well as its avowed territorial revisionism, he particularly felt concern about a possible Turkish armed clash with the Italians in the eastern Mediterranean. Already in 1934 Italy had spent a vast amount on building up its navy and had begun to fortify the Dodecanese. Italy reinforced its garrisons in the Dodecanese and turned these islands into a sort of rear base. It was clear that the purpose of an air and sea base in the Dodecanese was either to attack western Anatolia or to disrupt sea traffic in the eastern Mediterranean. The Dodecanese provided excellent sites for submarine bases and by May 1937 the Italians had airfields operational in the island of Leros⁴¹.

Since the emergence of the dispute over Hatay with the French in September 1936 foreign policy was one of the most important areas on which İnönü's relations with Atatürk became especially strained. The outcome of the Nyon Conference was welcomed by Atatürk, whereas İnönü's reaction was mixed, i.e. one of criticism and praise. The head of government was lukewarm, because the agreement seemed to be full of danger. The Turkish President, on the other hand, considered that it was not right at all costs to avoid opposition with Italy. According to him, the best way to avoid conflict was not continually to retreat before Mussolini. To do so was to invite his converging upon Turkey. Atatürk found it apt to follow a forward policy vis-à-vis Rome⁴².

The chief of state favoured firmness and was convinced that Mussolini would respect a show of force. He observed that the combined influence of the Mediterranean powers, if expressed with resolution and readiness to use force, would be powerful upon the mood and policy of the Italian leader. Accordingly Turkey, on Atatürk's instructions, co-operated fully in the international patrol set up by the Nyon Conference to counter the piratical submarine acts in the Mediterranean. But İnönü showed caution over the agreement, apprehending about a war with the Italians and

⁴¹ Ibid. See also Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini Il Duce*, II, Turin, 1974, pp. 265-267.

⁴² Falih Rıfka Atay, *Çankaya*, İstanbul, 1984, p.495 and Asım Us, *Asım Us'un Hatıra Notları: 1930-1950* (Recollection Notes of Asım Us: 1930-1950), İstanbul, 1966, pp.209-210. It is to be noted that Atay and Us were among the leading political columnists of the period and they had gained the trust of Atatürk.

favouring a submarine patrol in which each country remained in its own territorial waters. Atatürk, resenting this, took more and more to bypassing İnönü and dealing direct with Aras. Turkish newspapers described Atatürk's attitude as fully justified. In taking this line the press fairly represented Turkish feeling in general⁴³.

The measures agreed upon at Nyon proved effective. The antisubmarine patrols were a startling success. A hasty Italian retreat resulted, even if the West subsequently spoiled the effect by meekly inviting Italy to aid in policing. Submarine piracy quickly disappeared; not least because on 14 September Mussolini had ordered a stop to sinkings. On 30 September, not linking its position on the outside of something frighteningly like a Mediterranean pact, Italy adhered to the agreement and took over responsibility for patrols in the Adriatic. This has led some commentators to interpret the Nyon Conference as evidence of what the British and the French could have accomplished against the Axis powers had they been so inclined. Such a judgement stretches the evidence, since Mussolini was much easier to intimidate than Hitler⁴⁴.

The Nyon Conference and its results, the Nyon patrol, are well worthy of analysis as an example of the effective use of international co-operation to prevent the breaking of international law – in this case, the piratical sinking of ships at sea by submarine, surface ships and aircraft. It had been expensive in effort. Over sixty ships and many aircraft were involved, but it achieved its aim, somewhat earlier than was generally realised at the time. Its effect provides a refreshing contrast to the disappointing results achieved by the Non-Intervention Committee and the uselessness of the League of Nations in attempts to limit the civil war in Spain.

By its signature of the Nyon Agreement, Turkey stressed its interest in preserving the status quo and the principle of collective security, both features unpleasant to Italy and Germany. Attached to peaceful reform and reconstruction at home, Turkey could not but view with apprehension Mussolini's adventurous policies in the Mediterranean. It was, therefore, irresistibly drawn towards closer co-operation with Britain and France, the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ B.D.F.P., ser.2, vol.19, F.O. to Phipps (Paris), 30 September 1937. Also Yunus Nadi Abalıoğlu, "Nyon İtılafnamesi Değişirilmmez ve Değişirilmemelidir" (Nyon Agreement Is Not To Be Changed and Must Not Be Changed), *Cumhuriyet*, 18 September 1937.

two pillars of European status quo. The trend towards rapprochement was reciprocal, since these two countries also needed Turkey's co-operation. Nyon, if nothing else, drove the Turks and British closer together by associating them in what was, in effect, an informal alliance against Italy. In addition, the procedure adopted at Nyon of formally associating the smaller powers with the actions of the great had an excellent effect on Turco-British relations. Winston Churchill later wrote that under the "almost effusively friendly lead of Turkey" the attitude of the small Mediterranean powers had been satisfactory⁴⁵.

In regard to Spain, Turkey co-operated loyally in aiding Britain in the task of establishing an anti-piracy control in the Mediterranean, by readily placing its harbours at the disposal of British ships. A cruise by the British Mediterranean fleet to Turkish waters had evidently made a remarkable impression. Turco-British friendship was now a living reality, which by astute diplomacy could be made to extend to countries with whom either Turkish and British relations might hitherto not had been all that they might be. This friendship was, indeed, one of the corner-stones in international politics, based firmly on identity of interests and mutual admiration. It could be made even more fruitful than it now was, standing model as it was of how former enemies might become fast friends.

⁴⁵ Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, Boston, 1948, p.246.

