In the first half of the 20th century, most of the construction companies founded and managed by Italians in Northern Africa (outside of Italian Libya, where most of the companies operating were headquartered in Italy), were in Egypt and Tunisia. Some of those based in Egypt did business in Sudan, Palestine, and other Middle Eastern countries; the Italo-Tunisian companies worked in the French Maghreb. These companies were very often established and run by self-made men of humble origins with little formal education. They parlayed their experience as bricklayers or master builders into positions as entrepreneurs, and sometimes succeeded in becoming prominent citizens in the expatriate Italian community. Their rapid upward social mobility leads one to wonder what channels they used to raise the funds necessary for large construction projects, requiring dozens of skilled and unskilled workers. True, labor was cheap, because both indigenous men and Italian laborers were exploited for low wages, and the practice of subcontracting was widespread. Nevertheless, an entrepreneur needs access to investors with large amounts of capital. Some historians have surmised that these ambitious working-class bosses were able to obtain loans through their membership in the Freemasons or the Saint Simonian movement. Both movements had many followers among the members of workers’ mutual aid societies, and would have facilitated relationships with Freemasons or Saint Simonians prominent in the banking system.

Between 1875 and the political upheavals of 1954–1956, Egypt is an excellent observatory for the study of Italian construction contractors. More than one hundred companies were operating there, specializing in a wide variety of trades; likewise, the personalities of the men in charge of these companies were also diverse. Lastly, they carried out a large number of important projects. The role played in Egypt by the big Italy-based construction companies, such as the Società Nazionale Officine di Savigliano, the Metallurgica di Castellammare di Stabia (awarded the construction of the Kafr el-Zayat bridge over the Nile in 1892), and the Stabilimento Tecnico Triestino (which completed the iron swing bridge over Mahmudiah Canal in Alexandria in March 1927), is marginal, in comparison. There were also companies which followed up on successful growth in Italy and internationally, decided to move from Italy to Egypt. This was the case of the company founded in 1868 by the engineer Edoardo Almagià (1841–1921) from Ancona. Initially active in the railway sector, he later specialized in the construction of ports. In 1899, the company expanded its business abroad, first to Turkey and Romania, and then to Egypt, the Isle of Rhodes, Libya (where in 1912 it was awarded the contract for the port of Tripoli, designed by Luigi Luiggi), and Palestine (Haifa). In 1911, Edoardo’s son Roberto (1883–1947), an engineer with a degree from Polytechnic of Turin, joined the firm. In Egypt, their most important projects were related to the port in Alexandria, where the company had its main headquarters before opening an office in Cairo. Almagià’s projects included building the large Eastern Basin there (1899–1904); a breakwater for the western port and new timber quays (1906–1908), extension of piers E, K and coal loads; a port of refuge for barges; reinforced-concrete warehouses on pier E (1908–1921); a pier and wharf at Ras el-Tin (1922–1923); and a breakwater made of artificial boulders and extension of the drainage canal towards the sea at the eastern port of Sisilah (1929–1934). For the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez, the company extended the western breakwater in Port Said (1911–1915), and in Suez, the quays of Port Ibrahim (1928–1930) and the coal pier (1935–1939). Among the few works not involving port facilities, we should mention the main building of the Benito Mussolini Hospital in Alexandria (1921–1923, Giacomo Alessandro Loria arch.). After World War II, the company continued to do business, directed by Roberto’s son, Edoardo Almagià, who had earned his degree in engineering from the University of Rome. During his tenure, the company was responsible for the construction of the platform at the new passenger terminal in Alexandria, of the drainage canal of the eastern port (1948–1954), and of the breakwater for the nitrate pier in the western port (1951–1954). From 1954 to 1957, the company was involved in dredging the Suez Canal.
In 1978, after the long interval due to the change of political regime, the company resumed its activities in Egypt, having been awarded the contracts for various works at the Port of Alexandria.

Born in Catania (Sicily), Giuseppe Garozzo (1847-1903) stands out among the pioneers of Italian entrepreneurship in the construction sector. After immigrating to Alexandria in 1862, he was hired by the Società Operaia Italiana as a master builder for the works on Khedive Ismail Pasha’s palace and stables at Sidi Gaber. In 1874, he founded his own civil engineering and construction company. One of its most important achievements was the Labbane police station on Cherif Pacha Street in Alexandria. Ismail Pasha continued to be one of its main clients. The construction work at the khedivial palace in Giza, which lasted for more than six years, motivated Garozzo to move to Cairo. His business grew considerably after the merger with the company owned by Nicola Marciano, an entrepreneur (1837-?) from Casoria (Naples), who had come to Egypt in 1863. In Cairo, Marciano founded a construction company which was among the first to use reinforced concrete, and in 1895 was awarded the concession for the Hennebique method. The Garozzo & Marciano company built the indigenous hospital in Alexandria, the Tewfikieh canal lock at the Delta Barrage, the Shepheard’s Hotel in Cairo (1892, enlarged in 1906) and completed the works at khedivial palace of Abdeen. In 1896, after the dissolution of his partnership with Marciano, Garozzo joined with Francesco Zaffrani (1847-?), a native of Casalzuigno (Como). He had come to Egypt in 1869 and settled in Alexandria, where he was hired as master builder at Storari & Radice. Later, he founded a company specialized in waterworks (locks, bridges, and reservoirs), first active in Lower and then in Upper Egypt. The first and most important contract awarded to Garozzo & Zaffrani was the construction of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities of Cairo (1897-1902, Marcel Dourgnon arch.), after an international competition (1894-1995). Marciano was also associated with construction of the museum. Other Garozzo & Zaffrani achievements were the Savoy Hotel in Cairo (opened in December 1898); the enlargement of the New Hotel, which was transformed into the Grand Continental Hotel, Chawarbi Pasha’s new residence in the Ismailiyya district, and the Ataba fire and police station (1901, Alfonso Maniscalco arch.). In 1901, Giuseppe Garozzo’s son Francesco (1873-1937) joined the firm. The eldest, Filippo (1867-1929), already worked in his father’s company, and had drafted the plans for a new building for J.-B. Piot-Bey in Cairo in 1898. In 1903, Filippo and Francesco replaced their father as directors of the company, later hiring their younger brothers. Their company held the license to the patented Siacci reinforced-concrete process, which was employed in the construction of the Luxor Winter Palace Hotel (1906, commissioned by Upper Egypt Hotels, Arrigo Baroni and Léon Stiénon arch.). In 1906, an album of photographs of the projects completed by the company in Egypt was shown in the “Italians Abroad” section of the Milan World’s Fair.

In Cairo, G. Garozzo & Figli (Garozzo and Sons) built the Umberto I Italian hospital (1902-1903, Luigi Tosi arch.) and chapel (1925, Achille Patricolo arch.), the church of San Giuseppe (1904-1909, Aristide Leonori arch.), buildings S and T
of the Belgian-Egyptian Society in the Azbakeya district (1906),
Italian schools in Bulaq (1906, Tullio Parvis arch.), the head-
quartes of Assicurazioni Generali di Trieste (1911, Antonio Las-
ciac arch.), the Austro-Hungarian hospital in Shubra (1912-
1913, Léon Stiénon and Maurice Cattaui arch.), the Regina
Elena primary school (1925, Paolo Caccia Dominioni arch.) in
Bulaq, and the headquarters of the National Bank (formerly
Lloyds Bank, 1926-1927, Marco Olivetti arch.).
One of the most productive Italian entrepreneurs in the con-
struction field, Emanuele Dentamaro (1880-1935), a bricklayer
from Bari, had emigrated to Egypt to seek his fortune in 1896
after completing his apprenticeship. By 1898, he had worked
as construction site supervisor for various companies. After
these experiences, he and engineer Felix Gusman founded the
construction company Gusman & Dentamaro, headquartered in
Cairo. There is some evidence that Dentamaro’s membership in
the Masonic Lodge Le Cinque Giornate (he later served as
Worshipful Master in 1919-1920) was associated with his
company’s success. The railways at Kharga Oasis (under
construction from 1906-08; subcontracted by Corporation of
Western Egypt, Ltd.), built up to kilometer marker 193, and
a portion of the Egyptian Delta Light Railway, which stretched
through the desert from Bab-el-Hassanayn to the Cairo citadel,
were among the first works carried out by Gusman &
Dentamaro. In 1907, United Egyptian Lands assigned to the
company the construction of the dam over the Nile next to Roda
Island. The dam was built with the “system for drilling wells
that are built above sea level using temporary foundations.”
In 1908, the company was commissioned to carry out the enlarge-
ment and the lengthening of the Nubaria Canal, tendered by the
Third Circle of Irrigation of Alexandria. Besides working as a
subcontractor, the company took part in the competition ten-
dered by the Egyptian Government for the completion of the
brickyard of Khatatba, whose structure was designed by the
Sabbatelli engineering firm. As Sabbatelli’s licensee, Gusman &
Dentamaro equipped the brickyard with a technical and admin-
istrative office, and built food storehouses and dwellings for
executive staff and workers. Despite its specialization in road construction and plumbing, the company invested in real estate development projects showing architectural quality and a strong urban impact. Towards the end of 1907, when Cairo real-estate values were skyrocketing, Gusman & Dentamaro purchased a 25,000-square-meter tract northeast of Cairo on Shubra Alley, planning to subdivide the property and build single-family homes. Gusman's project subdivided the land into 9 parcels bordered by a regular layout of internal streets, dotted with 65 small Italian-style homes, each with a private yard. Cesare Brunelli described the Shubra project as a "model [...] town," provided with "playgrounds, a market, and a theater", built according to a "system [...] which was brand new for Egypt": "sturdy concrete blocks with a hollow center, which protect the dwellings from moisture and heat, perfectly shaped for stacking using little mortar."

A large number of the small homes, available in three models of varying prices, were already constructed by January 1910. By 1919, the Gusman & Dentamaro partnership was no longer active. Dentamaro set up a new company with Ferro and Padova, to work with the firm Léon Rolin & Co. on the construction of the Heliopolis Palace Hotel (1908-1910, Alexandre Marcel arch.). In October 1922, Dentamaro, who had since moved to Alexandria, formed a partnership with young Filippo Cartaregga (Cairo, 1904 - Milan, 1978), whose family was Sicilian. Cartaregga became his son-in-law two years later. A graduate of the RR. Scuole Medie Italiane
(Royal Italian Junior Secondary schools) of Alexandria, Filippo had worked for important public-works contractors. In fact, at age seventeen, he had been the general manager of the British company A. Urquhart & Co. Until it was dissolved in 1935, the Dentamaro & Cartareggia company also operated in Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Palestine. The Italian community in Alexandria appreciated the company’s “philanthropic” contributions: between 1922 and 1933, it completed projects at no charge for various agencies and institutions of the Italian colony. Filippo, in particular, was especially active in ensuring the participation of the Egyptian Government in the exhibitions in Bari and Tripoli. One month after participating in the 3rd Cairo International Exhibition (February 1933), Filippo went to Tripoli in order to curate the Dentamaro & Cartareggia pavilion at the 7th Fair of Tripoli, where he presented “a magnificent documentation of the grandiose projects carried out over a decade of activity.” Among the hydraulic engineering public works carried out by the company, it is worth mentioning the Lake Hadra drainage (1925), the raising of the Aswan Dam in Upper Egypt, in collaboration with other companies (1929-1933), and the construction of the three-kilometer Muhammad Ali drainage canal (1932-1933), which flows into Lake Mariut. The company’s most significant road works include: the “restoration in the Kom el-Chogafa district through primary and secondary pipework and road paving with asphalt” (1925); the drainage and enlargement of the Siouf road, between Carlton and Bulkeley, the first section of which was completed in June 1931; and the waterfronts in Mex and Corniche, which extend from Ras el-Tin to Muntaza (the company built all but one section, which was awarded to the Almagià company). Dentamaro won the contract thanks to the crucial support of Ismail Sidqi, with whom he had maintained a friendly relationship since 1905. The first sections were completed in the 1920s, the fifth and sixth sections (Cleopatra-Carlton and Carlton-Stanley Bay, the contract for which included the construction of an amphitheater on the beach at Stanley Bay) in 1932; and the seventh and final section (Stanley Bay - Saba Pasha - Gharbana Bay) in 1933. In addition to these major hydraulic engineering and paving works,
Dentamaro & Cartareggia built public buildings in Alexandria, such as the Egyptian Maternity Hospital (1928) in the Anfushi area, on the edge of the Ras el-Tin district, the second group of pavilions (tuberculosis and isolation wards, housing for the Sisters of Africa, and a chapel) at the Benito Mussolini Italian hospital in Hadra (1929-1930, G. A. Loria arch.), the third-class bleachers and reinforced concrete combat-sports pavilion for the municipal stadium of Alexandria (1927-1929, Wladimir Nicohosoff Bey arch.), the Egyptian hospital for infectious diseases in the Hadra district (1930-1932), and finally, the race-track and the Royal Pavilion at the Sporting Club (approx. 1932). Another major Italian construction firm in Egypt was the company founded by Ernesto De Farro (1875-1941). De Farro left Turin, Italy in 1898 to reunite with his family, residing in Cairo. Between 1898 and 1900, he was employed at the Project Office of the Ministry for Public Works, and between 1901 and 1904 he worked as assistant to the chief engineer for the construction of the Aswan Dam (assigned to the British company John Aird & Co.). After having completing this mission, he moved to Zifta in Lower Egypt in order to supervise the lime kilns belonging to his uncle Augusto, owner of the firm Società Augusto De Farro & C. Ernesto started his career as a building contractor in partnership with his uncle with the construction of the Agricultural Bank of Belgium in Cairo (1902). In 1905, he founded his own firm, De Farro & Co., specializing in reinforced concrete and structural steel construction. Two important buildings in Cairo made a name for the firm: the Davies Bryan building (1911, Robert Williams arch.), and the Sednaoui department store on Khazindar Square (1913, George Parcq arch.; stucco decorations by the Giuseppe Santo Riccadone studio). The latter was one of the first examples in Egypt of a steel frame structure. The structure itself was made in England under the supervision of his nephew, also named Ernesto, who by 1905 had founded his own company, De Farro & Co. Specializing in constructions in reinforced concrete and steel framing, the company expanded so quickly, it was necessary to open offices in Cairo, Alexandria, London, and Jerusalem, from which it engaged in business in Transjordan and Syria. International directories cited De Farro & Co. for its loose-soil consolidation technique. Unstable soils, typical in Egypt, were compacted using compression pillars (Sinus and Compressol systems), which also functioned as foundations. In 1914, the Imperial Wire Company awarded De Farro & Co. the construction of the Marconi radiotelegraph station in Cairo, and in 1915, he built five bridgeheads with 25 km railway track each for the British army on the Asian shore of the Suez Canal. Among the major constructions carried out alongside other companies, the Nag-Hammadi Dam (1928-1930) and the raising of the Aswan...
Dam (1930) deserve mention. The company's long list of achievements include some of the most representative architecture ever built in Egypt by the Italian government, such as the Royal Italian Embassy in Cairo (1926-30, Florestano Di Fausto arch.), the Scuole Littorie of Chatby, Alexandria (1931-1933) and the Scuole XXVIII ottobre of Shubra, Cairo (1933-1935), both designed by Clemente Busiri Vici. The company's excellent reputation is also attested by the commissions it won for the works on enlarging the Ras el-Tin Royal Palace (1920-1925) and on constructing of the Muntaza Royal Palace (1923-1928) in Alexandria. The latter job involved a collaboration with the architect Ernesto Verrucci, which continued with the construction in the same city of the Vittorio Emanuele III nursing home (1929-1932) and of the monument in honor of khedive Ismail Pasha (1934-1938). Verrucci, who was a friend and adviser of King Fuad, served as Worshipful Master (1919-1920 and 1924-1925) of the Masonic Lodge "Il Nilo" of Cairo, whose members also included Ugo De Farro and Arturo Garozzo. Ernesto De Farro and Emanuele Dentamaro were members of the Lodge "Le Cinque Gior-nate". Nevertheless, we should not interpret the membership in Freemasonry of various entrepreneurs, engineers, and architects solely as a means of obtaining building commissions or finances. They also had deep ideological motivations and commitments. For the Italian community in Egypt, where numerous political exiles resided from the very beginning, the Italian Masonic lodges, whose presence dated back to the Risorgimento age, acted as a national and patriotic bond, which can be seen from the works of charity offered by the richest "brothers" to their countrymen.

Ernesto De Farro, like Dentamaro, stood out as a praiseworthy member of the Italian community by financing the Dante Alighieri Library and the evening classes at the Leonardo da Vinci drawing school, long directed by Verrucci. Both also donated generously for the construction of Casa del Fascio (House of the Fascist Party) and Vittorio Emanuele III Nursing Home in Alexandria. Even De Farro's decision to join the Fascist Party very early (like that of many other Masons, including Jewish ones) should be considered in the light of the patriotism nurtured by the Risorgimento spirit. Moreover, despite this allegiance to Freemasonry, he maintained good relations with various religious associations and orders, such as the Franciscan Missionaries of Upper Egypt, the American Mission, the Salesians (for whom he built the Loris Pagano-designed Don Bosco church and nuns' house in Alexandria, between 1929 and 1936), the Young Men's Christian Association, etc. On behalf of the Franciscan Sisters of Egypt, he purchased land and built nearly fifty buildings (schools, small hospitals, clinics, and orphanages) in Cairo, Port Said and in other smaller towns. Following Italy's declaration of war on Great Britain, Ernesto De Farro was interned in a detention camp, but he succeeded in returning to Italy in 1940 thanks to the intervention of Minister Plenipotentiary Mazzolini.

The Dentamaro, Garozzo, and De Farro families were the most visible figures in the large entrepreneurial network covering all the trades related to the construction industry. Although the companies we described operated in multiple construction trades, others established excellent reputations in building due to their high level of specialization. For example, Andrea Vescia's firm was active from 1897 to 1940, working on the such major hydraulic engineering projects as the Aswan and Muhammad Ali dams on the Nile. Vescia's company was also commissioned to build several bridges over the Nile and the base of the Saad Zaghloul monument in Cairo. Among the other Italian-owned contracting companies associated with important achievements in the field of hydraulic works (dams, drainage channels, and drinking-water and sewage facilities), we must cite Alfonso Sasso and Amedeo Bracalone (active 1926-1927 and 1930-1931, also in Sudan), G. D'Alba, and Giuseppe del Puente and Sons, and those owned by engineers, such as Ermete Alessandrini, Gesù Archimede Messina, Guido Pizzagalli, and Costantino Taverna (who also built police stations, prisons and courts).

The Suez Canal Company and the British Army were the two key clients for Italian companies. The first often turned to Pietro Grinza, Archimede Petraia, and Ugo Rossetto. The second
called upon companies experienced in industrial construction, such as T. Mafera, Uva e Piscitelli and, for the construction of warehouses and hangars, Ugo Roccheggiani's firm. Another recurrent figure was that of the architect or engineer who worked both as designer and as contractor, building structures that either he or his colleagues had designed. This category included Domenico Limongelli, Ugo Dessberg and Giuseppe Tavarelli (who, as a contractor, worked mainly in restorations).

The number of entrepreneurs working primarily in the field of private housing was also substantial, among which it is worth mentioning Giulio De Castro, Salvatore Di Mayo (also active in the road construction field), and Vespasiano Griffoni in Port Said and in the Canal cities. Equally long would be the list of Italian companies, founded in Egypt, which specialized in architectural decorations and those that produced building materials.

The contributions of these entrepreneurs went beyond the modernization and expansion of the territorial and urban infrastructures of Egypt, and the definition of the architectural appearance of Cairo, Alexandria, and other towns. They also took it upon themselves to play a leading role in financing and managing the facilities that were essential to the Italian community, such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, recreational clubs, etc., compensating for the absence of government initiatives or in some cases stimulating them. The integrity of the Italian builders was expressed by their ability to transmit their knowledge of the trades to local workers and businessmen, and was acknowledged by the large British companies, who subcontracted key projects to them.