INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Libyan Studies Center
Box 5040
Tripoli, Libya
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LIBYA: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION
PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 04755

Dear Peter;

In my final seven reports for ICWA I will attempt to provide my readers with a rather unvarnished glimpse of life in what Libyans call The Great Jamahiriyah - a political system run directly by the people. I stress the word "unvarnished" for I hope to avoid both the officially sanctioned propaganda Libyans sometimes use in describing themselves and their "revolution", and the barely hidden distaste and condescension that have too often colored western writing on Libya. To add a slightly different perspective, I have included in these reports a number of cartoons by the Libyan cartoonist Muhammad al-Zwawi. Zwawi was born in Benghazi in 1934, a short time after the Italians had conquered the entire territory of what became modern Libya. As many middle-aged and older Libyans he lived through a turbulent period in his country's recent history: World War II, independence in 1951 and the period of the monarchy (1951-1969). As a gifted cartoonist Zwawi has been poking fun at the foibles , idiosyncracies, misinterpretations and hypocrisy of his fellow Libyans as Qadhafi's "revolution" unfolded. As a court jester - and Zwawi is very much that - his work has been relatively immune from interference. I find it particularly interesting because in his work Zwawi often hints at what no one in Libya can say out loud without fearing repercussions: the fact that Qadhafi's revolution in certain crucial aspects never really succeeded. Zwawi of course makes it appear as if that failure should be blamed on the Libyan population who has not understood the wisdom of its leader. But cartoons are double-edged swords and Libyans in private often explain them in terms that puts the failure squarely on Qadhafi and some of his top advisors. They also fascinate me because Zwawi's life shows a good number of similarities with that of Qadhafi and of so many other Libyans who felt left out in the cold during the period of rapid

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Dirk Vandewalle was the North Africa Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs from 1986 until the end of 1988. He is currently teaching in the Department of Government at Dartmouth College.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Umar al-Mukhtar street in Tripoli.

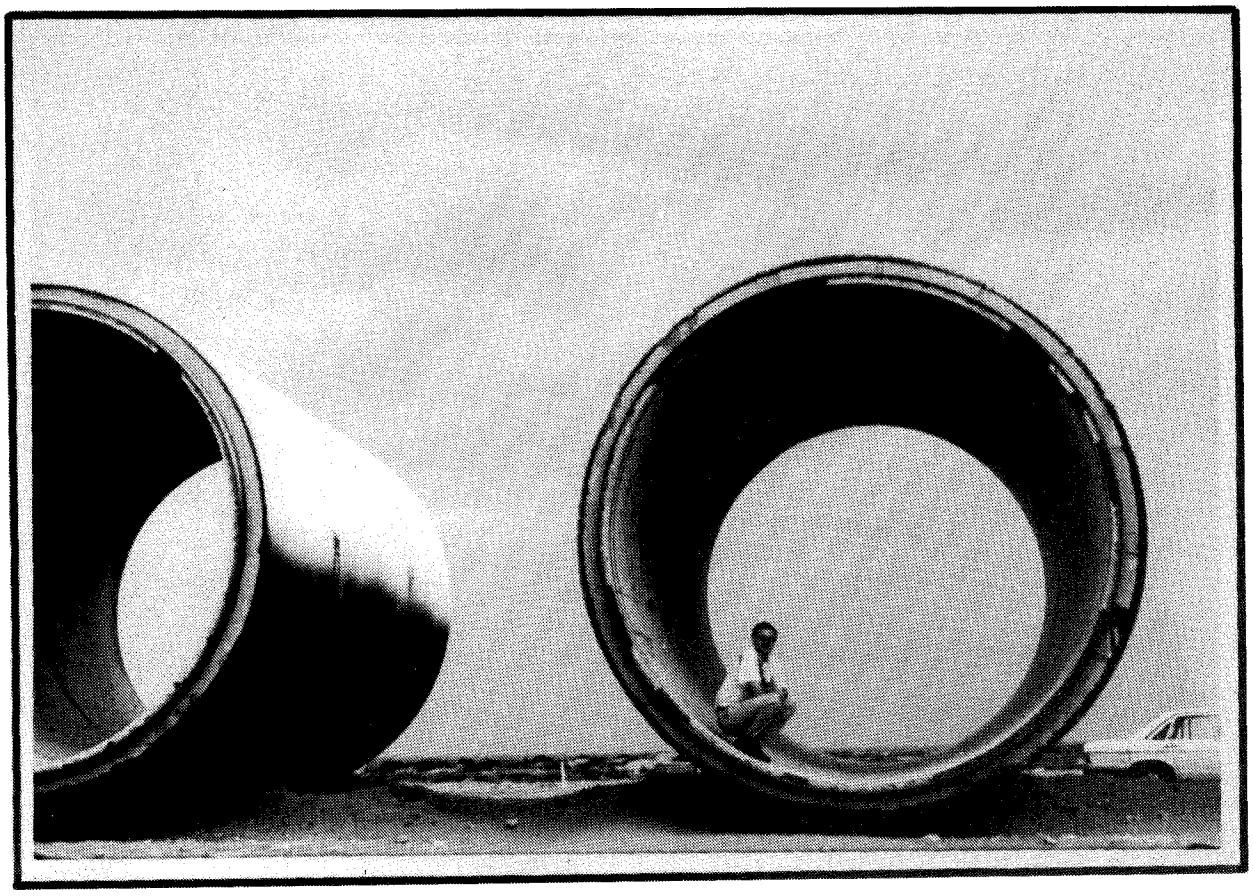
modernization that followed the discovery of oil in 1959.[1]

[1] Born into a family of semi-nomads and raised in poverty, Zwawi went to the al-Abyar boarding school where - much like Qadhafi in Sirte - he was mocked because of his rural background. He later moved to Barqa and started working - nothing could be more typical of Libya at the time! - as a signpainter for the United Nations. His cartoons have since become a standard feature in Libyan newspapers. Many take an ascerbic look at the social habits of Libyans and their interpretations of Qadhafi's political directives. They closely mirror many of the complaints Qadhafi makes in his own speeches. Those of my readers who are somewhat familiar with the Middle East will immediately, and undoubtedly with much hilarity, recognize the situations Zwawi draws upon. I have tried, however, to choose cartoons that are intelligible even to those who know little about Libya or the Middle East.

A view of the old Italian inner core of Tripoli. The tent in the street is meant for a wedding...or a funeral. The presence of an uncommon number of the tents during the Chad war provided one quick clue to the number of dead soldiers and to much discontent.

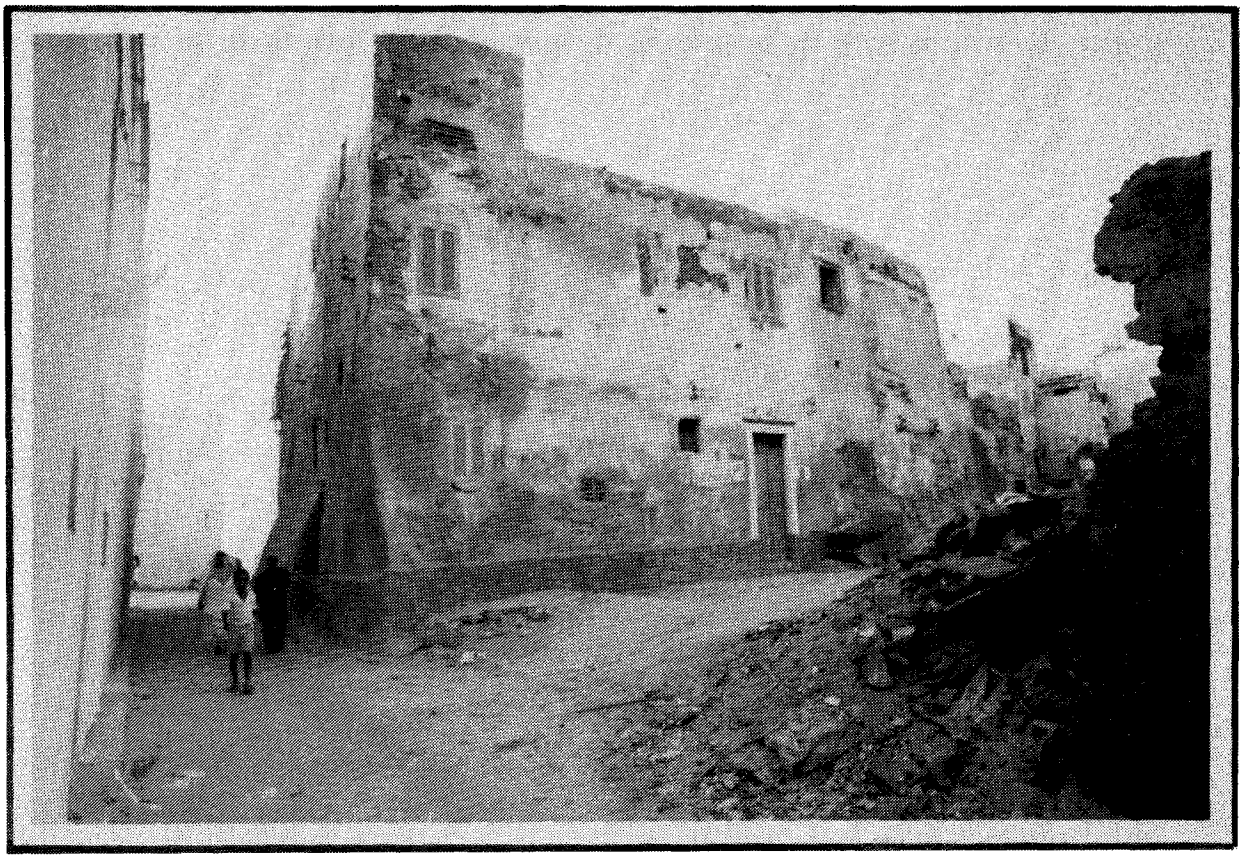
For almost five months, on three different occasions, I have had the opportunity to minutely observe a country that is normally off-limits to most would-be visitors. During my initial visit I traveled freely and extensively throughout the country, a privilege that to my knowledge has been extended to virtually no other westeners. My trip took me from the Tunisian border to Tripoli and then, along the litoranea (the coastal road built by the Italians in the 1930s) to Ajdabiya, Benghazi and the World War II battlefields of Tobruk. Near the Egyptian border I drove south and returned through the desert and the Green Mountains to the coast. In Libya even diplomats need authorization to travel; to roam unencumbered and free was both exhilarating and frightening. Would the travel permit delivered in Tripoli guarantee safe passage deep in the desert?

I then returned to Tripoli and spent the remainder of my time mostly at the Libyan Studies Center. Perhaps the center's full name - The Libyan Studies Center On The Italian Invasion - better suggests the specific historical research being conducted there. I shall have a bit more to say on the use and abuse of history in Libya in one of my these reports.



The author near Ajdabiya in one of the Great Manmade River Project pipes. The GMRP will eventually bring up to five million cubic meters of fossil water from Kufra (app. 650 miles south of Ajdabiya) to the coast. The total cost of the project is estimated at $27 billion - twice what the tunnel under the North Sea will cost.

I must admit that I traveled to Libya with more than the normal amount of trepidation. A few years ago, before I went to graduate school, I had visited Tripoli and its neighboring Roman ruins of Sabratha and Leptis Magna. I retain few memories of that earlier visit except for the great number of empty cardboard refrigerator boxes that littered the backstreets of inner Tripoli and the mile-long line of Peugeot trucks near the harbor, three abreast, still gleaming in their coating of protective wax. On Green Square in downtown Tripoli - called the Square of the Revolution at the time - young men idled their time away, driving expensive sportscars around the fountain near the Central Bank branch that juts into the italianate government offices on Umar al-Mukhtar street. After the middle class monotony of Tunisia this unabashed national attempt at conspicuous consumption had baffled me. One of the first things that struck me when I returned this time was that this spending wave had come to a halt. The conspicuous sportscars had given way to beat-up inexpensive Japanese pick-up trucks. Most were dented or missed spare parts that had never been imported since Qadhafi ordered a ban on certain imports in 1986. In one of his speeches I found a delightful statistic: in the

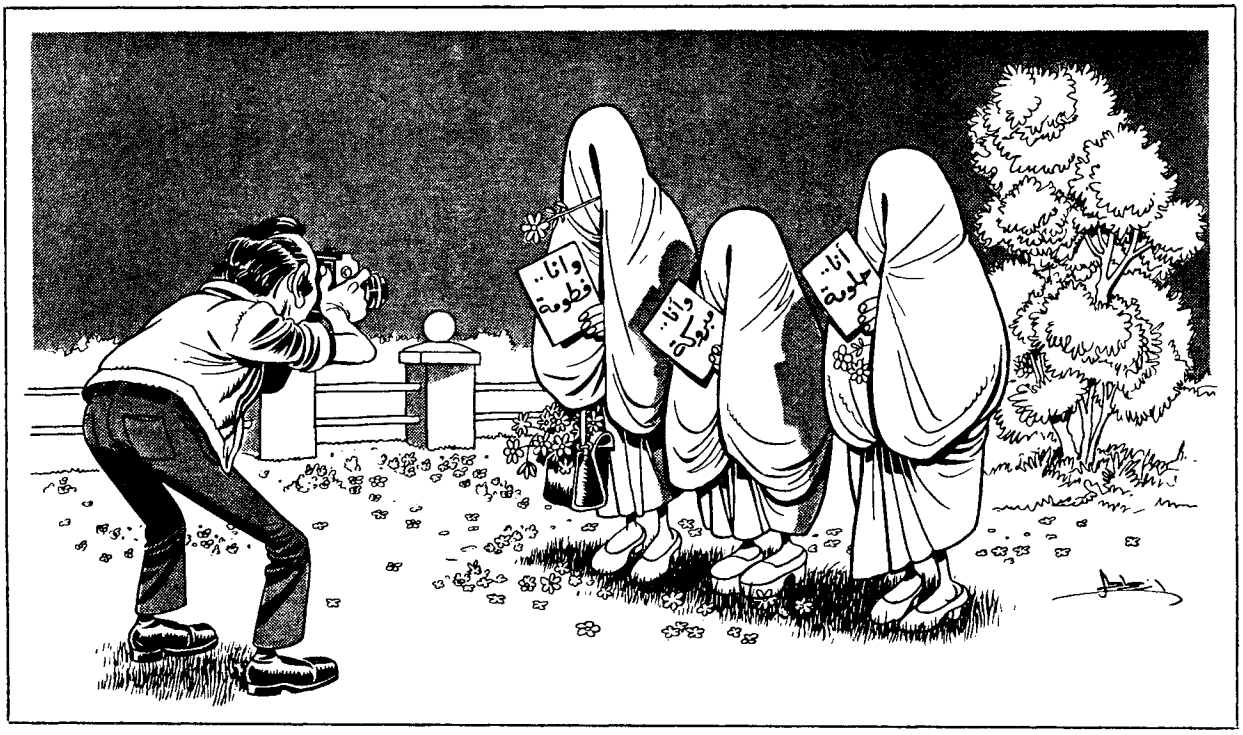


A view of Tripoli's old medina, now mostly filled with poor migrant laborers. Recently the Libyan government started a project of renewal in the area.

1970s Libya had imported ten transistor radios for every citizen; the average Libyan household now has three videotape machines.[2]

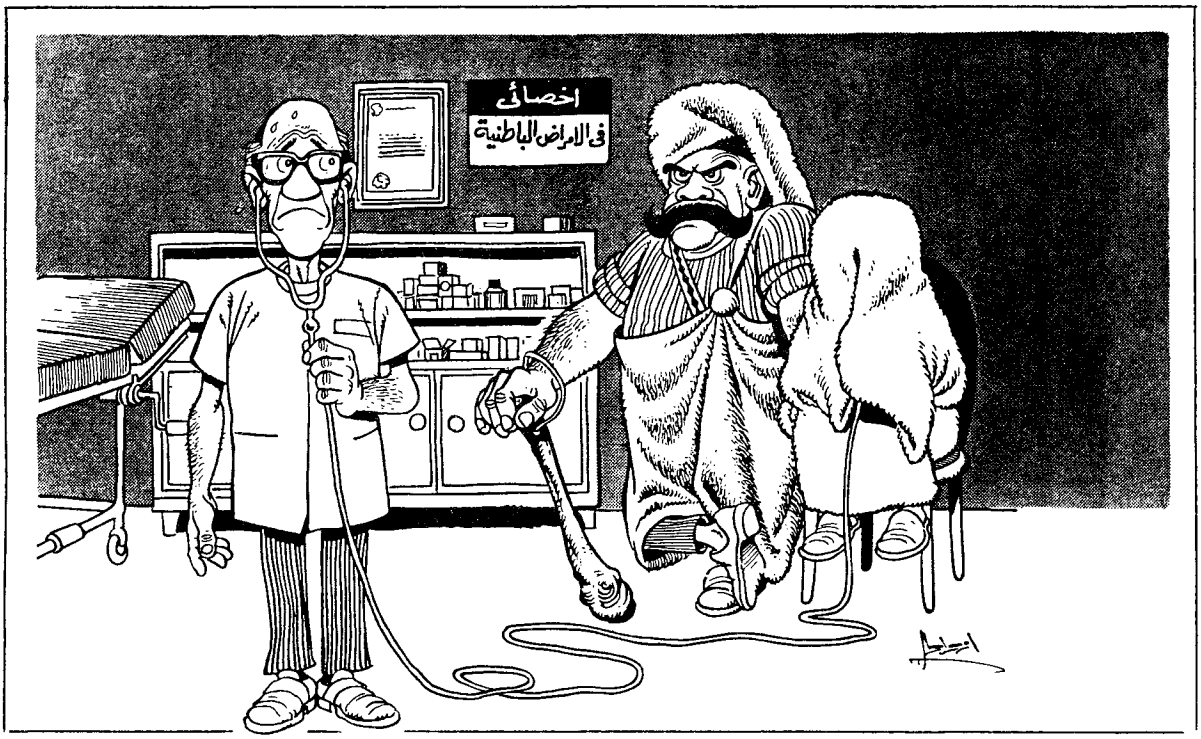
If there was still a feeling of oil wealth in the air, it was conveyed by the number of new highrise apartment and office buildings that fring the Tripoli shoreline. The country's capital now has the look - but not, because of the austerity, the feeling - of a mid-sized American city. Miles of divided highways bisect the old city, connecting new settlements to the center of the city. The roads are of the highest quality, flawlessly designed and engineered by East Germans and built by an army of Phillipino, Korean and Thai laborers. Downtown, at the

[2] As Qadhafi sarcastically remarked: "one for the men, one for the women and one for the children." One of the reasons for this excess is suggested by the Zwawi cartoon I enclose in this report - the fact that in many Libyan households men don't allow women to watch television in their presence. While I was in Tripoli the talk of the town - among men - was a weekly striptease show broadcast in Italy, dutifully taped by the men on their (own) videomachines after the women were shepherded into a separate room.



Taking pictures. The women carry little signs: 'I am Haluma... I am Mabruka... I am Fatuma'.

streetcorners near the old Italian cigar factory, taxidrivers now yell names of destinations I had never heard before: "Gurshi, fifty piasters", "Gurshi Dora, seventy-five piasters." A few weeks later I would stay with some friends in one of these outlying suburbs that were constructed, in great haste and with little concern for urban planning, at the edge of each major city. Libya has become, perhaps too quickly and certainly not very gracefully, a commuter society. At the same time it lacks a public transport system. And so, despite the Green Book's revolutionary injunction that all workers should become partners and not wage-earners, lines of taxidrivers gather in the raking sunlight, scouring for paying customers. In the new suburbs many of the backstreets remain unpaved; the water is salty and untreated. Even the traditional Arab coffee - if coffee is available at the moment - must be made from sweet water gathered at one of the inland wells where the seawater has not yet intruded. And so, for all the billions of dollars the country has earned in the last two decades, Libyans are always on the move with plastic containers looking for water. At the city's few five-star hotels, regulars have water brought to their rooms to wash their hair.



At the doctor - without commentary.

The most vivid memory of my earliest trip to Libya concerns a small incident that took place during the return trip, at the Libyan customs office. I had taken a louage for the first time in my life. (If political conditions are right - they never were during my entire stay in North Africa - a traveler can climb aboard one of these long distance taxis in Cairo, drive across to Tripoli and continue westward toward Tunis, Algiers, Oujda or Casablanca in Morocco. The truly adventurous end up, after hundreds of miles of desert, in Mali or Mauretania.) The border station was filled with Libyans and Tunisians. All the passports had been thrown in one big pile on the counter. I stood talking with the men of my taxi when suddenly a young man without uniform, my passport in hand, tapped on my shoulder. He took me aside for a few minutes. His questions seemed innocuous, his voice pleasant enough. But his efficiency was out of the ordinary - as I described in several previous reports, North African borderposts are notorious for long delays - and his eyes had been inquisitive, cold and hostile. For the first time I had felt myself scrutinized; and the men around me who had been so hospitable in the taxi suddenly made a great effort not to hear, not to see, not to know. Several quietly scampered away.

A number of developments that had happened since then added to my worries. Libya and the United States had broken off diplomatic relations. The Reagan administration had called Muammar al-Qadhafi the "mad dog of the Middle

At the doctor: making fun of all the foreign experts in Libya - without commentary.

East" and "a cancer that needs to be removed." Such was Qadhafi's reputation for evil that whenever another international terrorist incident was reported, policymakers often no longer asked themselves "who did it?" but rather, "was Qadhafi involved?" Virtually no researchers had been in the country since 1969. Journalists normally receive visas for a few days and are closely watched inside the country. My own initial request for a visa had been politely - but without much enthusiasm - relayed to Tripoli. "What", an official at the People's Bureau (i.e. embassy) in Brussels asked, "does the Institute of Current World Affairs really do?"

More than a year passed. I was still waiting, increasingly despondent, this time in the sweltering heat of the People's Bureau in Tunis . There was some progress. Admission was not a problem, I was assured in the Tunisian capital. The Libyan government would gladly grant me a visitor visa for a month, on the basis of a recommendation from a friend at al-Fatih university in Tripoli. "But a research visa" the young consul said with an apologetic smile - he had been stationed in New York and realized how ridicuous this would sound - "is more difficult... is very difficult... is impossible." I was about to call Hanover a few days later and admit failure when the telex machine finally clattered out a cryptic message that my admission to the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriyah had been approved - Libya's official title took up almost as much space on the pale

The Israeli influence over American policy-making.

sheet of paper as the message itself. The personal intervention of an acquaintance at the Libyan Studies and at the Belgian embassy had finally persuaded a government official to grant my request.[3]

Just before the daily evening news, Libyan television broadcasts a five minute cartoon - not to prepare children for bed, but to awaken the revolutionary ardor of adult Libyans. On a slowly spinning globe all countries appear as yellow deserts, their boundaries marked by thin black lines. Only Libya is green: the green of Islam, of Qadhafi's revolution and of the Green Book. In a stern baritone voice, tremulous with echochamber feedback, the announcer reads a passage from the Green Book. The words are simple and direct: the leader's thoughts on democracy, socialism and Islam are meant to be recited and memorized - and many young students I met have done exactly that.

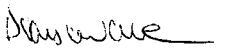
Suddenly an enormous Green Book hovers above the planet. As the

[3] In fairness to the Libyans, I must stress that subsequent visas were granted almost immediately. After reaching the Libyan Studies Center and talking to its director I was quickly issued all the necessary permits to travel and to take photographs.

voice trails off golden rays from the incongruous sattelite impregnate the scorched earth below. In a few seconds the entire globe - including the United States and Great Britain that are colored black during normal programming - turns vermillion. Magically, the boundaries between the countries disappear. The world becomes one nation. Such is the alleged power of the Third Universal Theory - "the alternative to capitalism and communism" - contained in Muammar Qadhafi's Green Book. According to the Libyan leader, it is only a matter of time before the whole world embraces the Jamahiriyah concept, the idea that people must govern themselves without the intervention of appointed officials or political parties.

There is something both unsettling and fascinating about this revolutionary fervor in a desert country of barely four million people. Inside Libya no one escapes the revolution - at least not its slogans that are omnipresent. "The Revolution Everlasting" is embroidered on the label of my blanket at an Ajdabiya hotel. A bottle of mineral water from the desert oasis of Kufra carries the message that "One Hand Builds, The Other Carries a Weapon." The toothbrush I bought in Hums announces that "Parties Abort Democracy." At al-Fatih university the really dedicated revolutionaries - the Green Men or Green Women - wear Qadhafi-watches. Criticism of the revolution is much harder to detect. Not only is opposition not allowed; under Libya's system of popular rule it is, according to Qadhafi, a contradiction in terms. How can one oppose government directly by the people? Just in case a Libyan is tempted, however, a 1972 law makes anyone who forms an opposition party a traitor. It is not surprising that under those circumstances I only encountered two signs of muted dissent. During an evening walk in Benghazi I came across some verses from a Darwish poem - "even the air I breathe tastes like fire" - that a dissenter had spraypainted on a deserted building. In the morning I found the wall whitewashed. At the Benghazi post office an older man scolded me for buying commemorative stamps of the April 1986 United States bombing: "Why waste your money? It's all propaganda."

All the best,



Dirk Vandewalle

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