

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-31

Libyan Studies Centre
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LIBYA: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION PART TWO: CREATING A KINGDOM

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Dear Peter;

The early morning sunlight briefly brushes the curtains pink, deepens slowly to yellow and ochre and - suddenly - explodes into a blinding white. It is only 6:30 a.m. when I walk out on the balcony of my hotel room near Ajdabiya, almost five hundred miles east of Tripoli. The wind blowing in from the Sirte desert still tingles; the whole night it has rumbled on, occasionally rising into a plaintive low whistle. There were no other noises; the immaculate silence of the desert fell as soon as I turned off the car's engine. The little Traveler's Hotel is new, all concrete and unwashed windows, set in a patch of scree at the edge of the desert. It was barely visible from the litoranea - the road that connects Tunisia with Egypt, built by the Italian fascists in the 1930s - when I drove in last night. I was lucky to have noticed the few tiny flickers of light in the immensity and darkbrown monotony of the landscape. No neon sign or billboard: in Libya you either know where a hotel is at or you have no business knowing. Tourists are unknown here; lodging information is dispensed, along with the cheap gasoline, at the state service stations. "About forty kilometers west of the city of Sirte" the attendant had said earlier in the evening, "if you get to Sirte you've gone too far."

A few young men and an old shaykh in dirty woolen zirt were watching Qadhafi on television as I checked in. He was lecturing on the European invasions of North Africa, using old weather maps and what looked like a recycled radio antenna as a pointer. Even the wires of the microphone were green. The old man soon drifted off, trailing a cloud of cigarette smoke; the young men listened intently. I caught part of the speech. "The Europeans colonized the Maghreb for pure greed" Qadhafi was saying - I was filling out the arabic-only registration form - "to rob us of our identity... Fascism... butchers of our women and children... the new imperialism is American imperialism."

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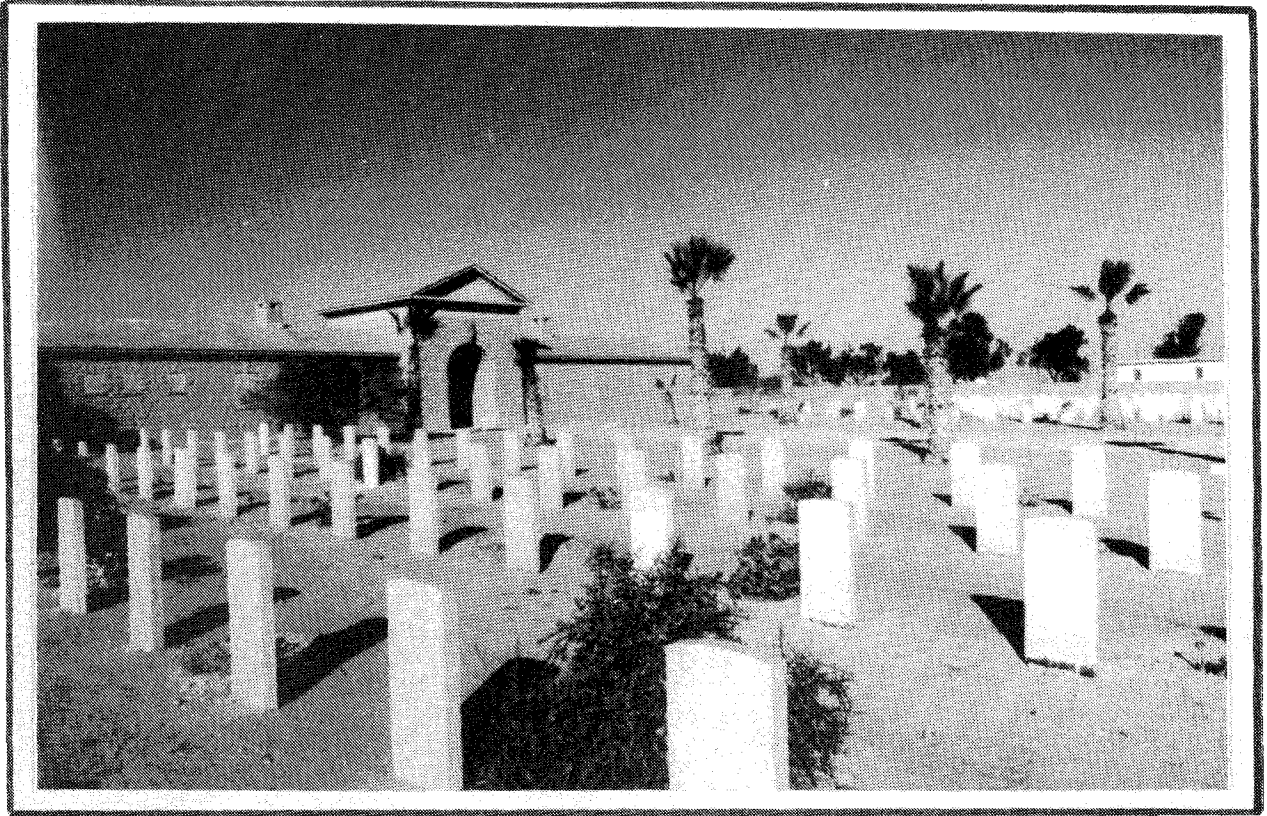
The former Italian cathedral, now part of the Islamic Call society.

There is perhaps no single element that has sustained the Libyan revolution more effectively than the almost pathological hatred of the United States and the western world. Its expression has become a cornerstone of the Libyan leader's legitimacy, a self-fulfilling prophecy that is served by an occasional entanglement with the United States to refreshen its message. Since the April 1986 bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi, virtually every speech of the Libyan leader has been laced with vitriolic denunciations of what he calls "The Black House" and its imperialist stooges.

But the Libyan obsession with the United States is only the most current expression of a longstanding, festering distrust of the West. Libya's psyche and collective memory have been indelibly marked by its catastrophic encounters with the West in this century. The most traumatic part of that encounter took place in the decade after 1922 during the Riconquista - the Italian reconquest of the Roman Empire's former territories in Africa by Mussolini's fascists. In Barqa, the eastern province of what Rome would soon call Libya - the word hadn't been used for almost two thousand years - the conquest pitted the Italians against a determined band of local mujahedeen ("freedom fighters") led by a local shaykh called Umar al-Mukhtar. In an effort to crush the rebellion the local Italian commander, Rudolfo Graziani, cut off its supply routes into Egypt, forced most of the province's population into about a dozen concentration camps that stretched from Ajdabiya to the Egyptian border and systematically destroyed the local economy. The struggle

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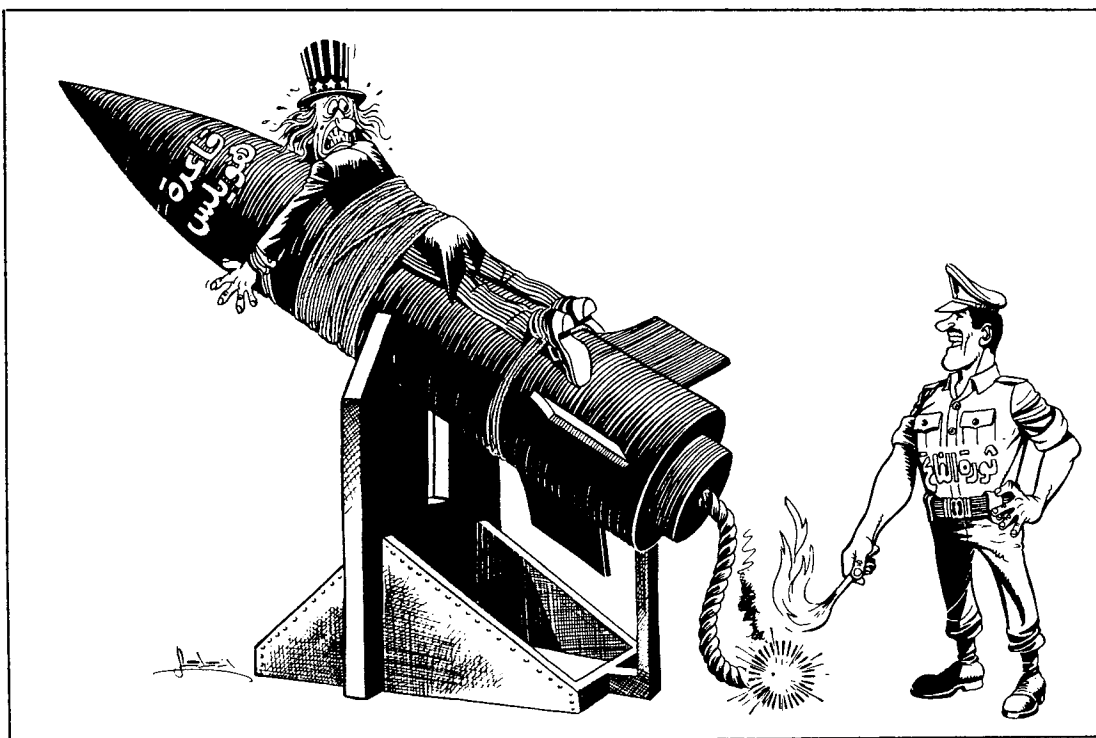
ended in 1932 when Umar al-Mukhtar was finally captured and hanged at the Sollum concentration camp in front of twenty thousand of his followers. Half of Barqa's population died during the Riconquista: from starvation and disease, from



The British World War II cemetery at Tubruk.

aerial bombardments pioneered by the fascists and from the use of mustard gas and napalm. Eighty to ninety percent of all the livestock had been killed in the province when the fighting ended. The desert oases, with their delicate palm groves and complex irrigation systems that needed constant supervision, had been destroyed.

Less than a decade later Libya bore the brunt of the World War II tank battles between the Axis and the Allies. Most of the coastal cities - Ajdabiya, Benghazi, Tubruk - were severely damaged by repeated bombardments. Shifting back and forth across the desert where I was now traveling, Rommel and Montgomery's armies haphazardly left millions of unexploded land mines in the sand and, closer to the coast, in some of the country's best agricultural land. Rough calculations suggest that as many as eleven million unrecovered mines are still buried on Libyan soil. When the conflict ended Libya was one of the poorest countries on earth. Per capita annual income hovered around twenty-five dollars. For half a decade after the war the sale of scrap metal left behind by the belligerents would be the country's single biggest source of income.



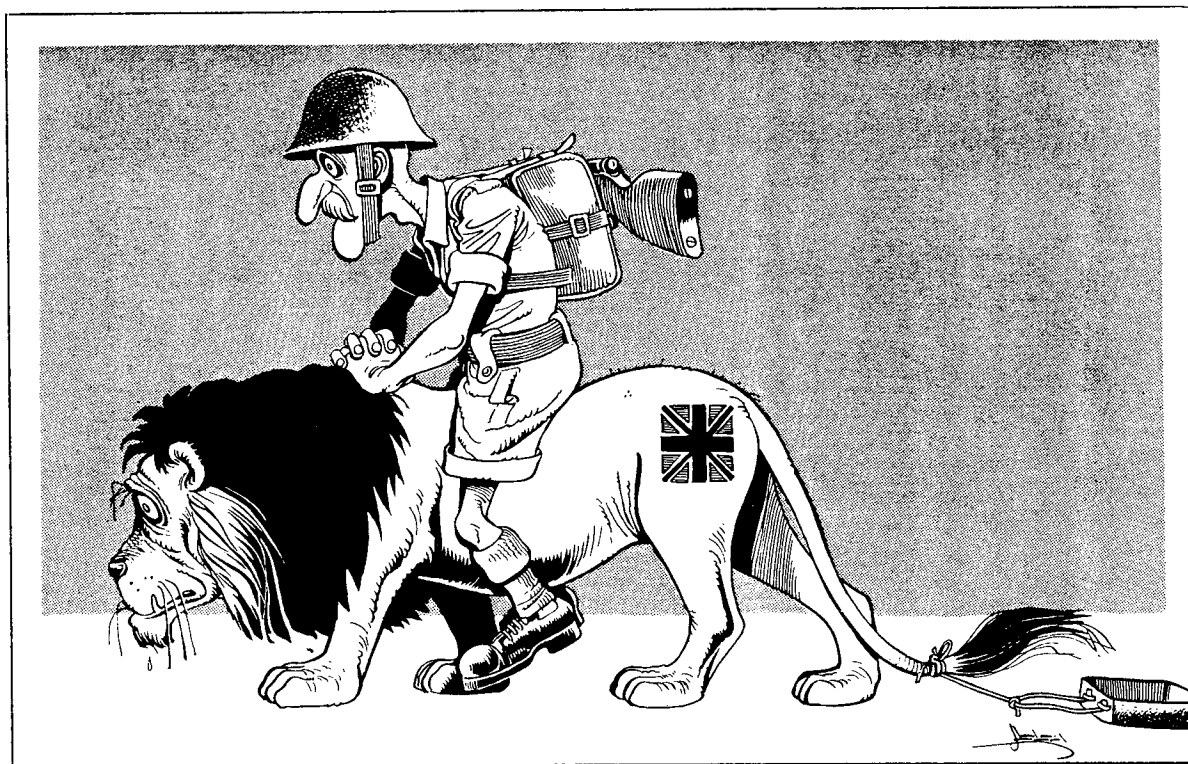
Zwawi's view of the evacuation of Wheelus Air Base.

It was ultimately Libya's geographical location that brought desperately needed money to the country - and led to its independence. At the newly created United Nations the disposal of Italy's colonies proved a major stumbling block. Each of the four Great Powers - France, Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union - had an interest in the country's strategic location. Britain perceived Libya as a valuable asset in the imperial link to its farflung colonies. The Cold War, and the American need for overseas bases to consolidate its defense systems, made the country particularly attractive to the United States. In New York the endless debates on the future of Libya finally came to a close. The Kingdom of Libya achieved independence in December 1951. The United Nations had effectively served as midwife in its difficult birth. Not surprising in light of the United States' power within the United Nations at the time, the Great Power debate was decided to the West's geo-strategic advantage. The Kingdom granted Great Britain a lease on a military base near Tubruk; the United States negotiated for what became Wheelus Air Base, a sprawling military installation just east of Tripoli. Until the exploration of oil almost a decade later, the rents paid for the use of the military bases provided the overwhelming share of the newly created kingdom's annual budget.

But the problem of keeping the kingdom's books in the black paled beside the political difficulties the new country faced. Who or what was a Libyan? Before the Italians arrived the word Libya had not been used for almost two millenia.

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Traditionally "Libyans" more often than not identified themselves in relation to a city - "I am Ajdabiyan", "I am Trablusi" (from Tripoli) - or a tribe - "I am a Magharba... an Ubaydi" - or at best with a province: "I come from Barqa... from Tarabulus al-Gharb..."



The British evacuate the Adem military base.

"I am from from Sebha (Fazzan)".¹ Only for a short period of time during the *Riconquista* had tribesmen from Barqa, Tripolitania and Fazzan fought together against a common enemy. No one embodied this ambiguity over identity and loyalty to the concept of a unified nation better than Idris al-Sanusi, the new king. Idris was the heir to a religious order, the Sanusiyah, that had once flourished in Barqa. The movement had been closely associated with the struggle against the Italians; Umar al-Mukhtar was a shaykh at one of the Sanusi lodges and closely coordinated his resistance strategy with Idris who lived in exile in Egypt. The king had reluctantly agreed to become ruler over all three provinces: in an audience with the first United States ambassador some years afterwards he still professed his preference to govern only Cyrenaica where his followers lived.

¹ Barqa is most often referred to by westerners as Cyrenaica. Sebha (strictly speaking the capital of the province of Fazzan) is very often used by Libyans to connote the entire province. I will use both names interchangeably.



Camp David.

This ambiguity and uncertainty over a political identity was reflected in the proliferation of the formal institutions of government inside the kingdom. Each province retained its own parliament and government. The king grudgingly commuted back and forth along the litoranea between three capitals and a summer capital he had constructed at al-Bayda in his beloved Jabal al-Akhdar (the Green Mountains), the hilly range in Cyrenaica that holds some of the country's best agricultural land. It was not until 1963 when rapid economic development started - the first oil from Libya was shipped to Europe in 1961 - that this cumbersome system of governing was replaced by a federal system centered in Tripoli.

The struggle over a national identity was exacerbated by the ideological upheaval that engulfed the Middle East almost immediately after the kingdom had been created. Just east of the kingdom Gamal Abdul Nasser overthrew King Faruk and launched his bid for leadership of the Arab world. A wave of nationalism swept across the area. In Libya, Nasser's appeals for pan-Arab unity and for a containment of Western influence found fertile ground among a young generation unsure of its own political or national identity. Qadhafi later pinpointed Nasser's Philosophy of the Revolution as a cornerstone in his own thinking.



Watching television.

The attempts by King Idris and his advisors to contain the growing unrest inside Libya in the 1950s and 1960s proved in the end impossible. A number of "nationalist" measures were adopted to mute the criticism that the king was a lackey of the West: the obligatory use of arabic in public life, negotiations with Britain and the United States over vacating the military bases and the redrafting of the country's commercial code to increase the kingdom's own earnings from oil extraction. (All of these Qadhafi would later claim as his own achievements - one of the new regime's first attempts at rewriting history.) But the measures couldn't dispel the feelings among many Libyans that the country was drifting. The ageing king showed little appetite for creating a modern political system that could perhaps have saved the kingdom. A few months after coming to power he canceled the only national elections that ever took place while he was king. He ruled Libya like a tribal shaykh, relying on a carefully selected royal diwan (council) to advise him and to implement his decisions.

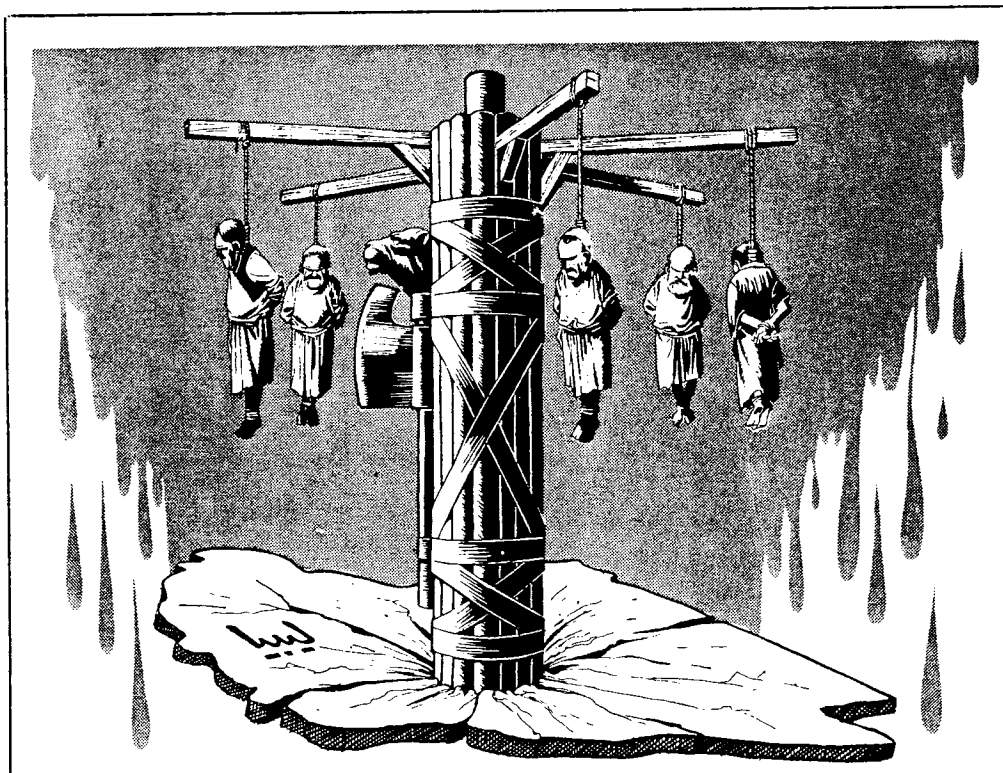
As oil revenues skyrocketed after 1961 - within a decade Libya became the third largest producer of oil in the Middle East, producing more than three million barrels per day - his difficulties increased proportionately. One of the most glaring characteristics of an oil economy is that whoever is in charge needs relatively few people to help run the country - a political and economic reality that was lost neither on Idris nor, later, on Qadhafi. An added characteristic is that since all



"The Libyan and Arab people are one" - without commentary.

revenues accrue at the top to those few, accountability is virtually an unknown concept. The top leader holds the strings to the purse in his own hands - or relinquishes them to his top advisors. Under the kingdom, with its weak internal controls and a ruler more interested in religious contemplation than actual ruling, the oil riches soon found their way to Idris's top advisors. Tales of corruption and favoritism became commonplace. One of the king's cousins was awarded a contract to build the desert road to Sebha after submitting a ridiculously low estimate that eventually turned into an astronomical final price tag. To their credit, western diplomats warned the king on several occasions that drastic reforms were necessary. Libya had become an anachronism in a rapidly modernizing Middle East.

In hindsight it is of course easy to claim that Idris could have avoided many of the problems - political exclusion, the failure to cultivate a national identity, the growing gap between rich and poor, corruption, apathy - that eventually contributed to the 1969 coup. But in doing so, I am perhaps overestimating the king's ability to react to profound socio-economic and political changes in Libya and North Africa during the two decades of the kingdom - changes that had no precedent and, often, seemingly no solutions that could be implemented without causing even greater upheaval. In most cases Idris did what many rulers do: he muddled through, made incremental decisions to keep the kingdom afloat in the face of its



Italian fascism in Libya.

many challenges.² If he had no real vision for the country's future, it was perhaps because he had no understanding of the present or of the legacy of the past. Since Qadhafi came to power on 1 September 1969, he has claimed to have a blueprint for Libya's future based on his intimate understanding of the country's past and present. But, as I hint at in DJV-32, his vision may be as elusive as that of his predecessor - making Qadhafi potentially the greatest shadow warrior of his generation.

² Except for a political treatment by Majid Khadduri and a couple of excellent doctoral dissertations, no comprehensive history of the Libyan monarchy exists. When it is eventually written - by people with access to the Libyan sources, something currently impossible - I am convinced that Idris will emerge as a much more skilled politician than the cardboard, cartoon-like depictions that have been used until now. I was struck by the measured tone of voice a number of Libyan historians used in private conversations when discussing the monarchy. In official Libyan discourse the monarchy is almost never referred to - or only in derogatory terms. As I will detail in my next report, ignoring an entire historical period necessitates some creative rewriting of Libya's history.