

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Libyan Studies Center
Box 5040
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LIBYA: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION PART THREE: HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY - I

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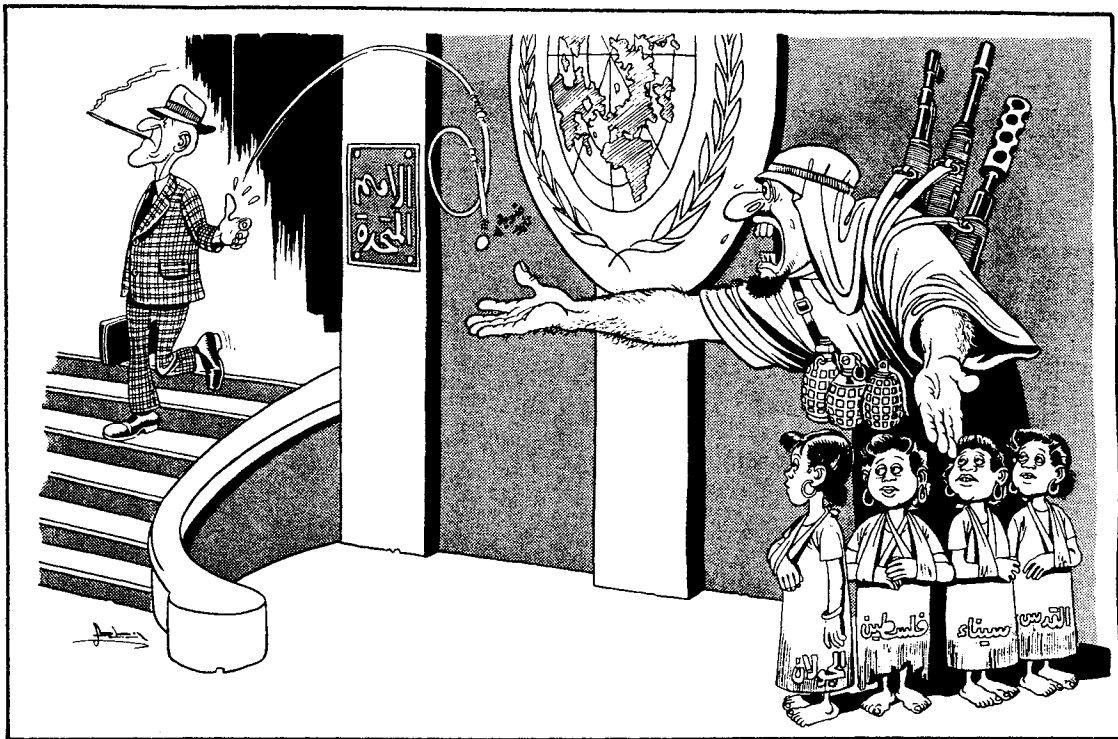
Dear Peter;

One evening, a few days after I started my research at the Libyan Studies Center, I was invited to a show at Tripoli's planetarium. Together with Ezzedine - my appointed research assistant - I joined an official Syrian delegation whose members sat twirling their worrybeads as we entered the massive, domed room. This was a special presentation, Ezzedine had assured me, entitled "How The Stars Stood When America Attacked the Jamahiriya." As the lights dimmed the narrator took our small audience back to 15 April 1986, the evening of the United States bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi. Against the dome's surface, constellations of stars shifted in rapid progression as the imaginary night was contracted into a few minutes of showtime: 9 p.m. - "the bombers are taking off from England..."; 10 p.m.... midnight - "the imperialist airplanes are over the Mediterranean." The low rumble of faraway bomber engines was added to the soundtrack; the narrator's voice became more agitated; the Syrians clicked their beads a little faster. Suddenly an array of stroboscopic lights at the dome's rim flashed into lightning while the earsplitting noise of low-flying jets and exploding bombs roared through the amplification system. The performance was so convincing - credit goes to a team of East German technicians - that everyone in the planetarium seemed almost shellshocked as the infernal noise drifted off into distant staccato bursts of anti-aircraft fire and then into silence. The audience was appreciative: "The Americans are devils" one of the Syrians a few seats down the line commented, making sure it was said loud enough for everyone to hear.

I recall this little episode in some cinematic detail merely to give my readers an idea of the level to which anti-US (and anti-Western) feelings have been raised in daily life inside Libya. I could easily add a few dozen more examples I encountered while in the Jamahiriya. The almost pathological distrust has become so much part and parcel of Qadhafi's revolution - and of his own legitimacy - that one could perhaps not survive without the other. But whether Libya's leader likes it or not, the country's development remains intricately linked to the West; and much of its economic history since 1951 has been marked by an almost intimate relationship - and then a rejection and a confrontation - with the United States.

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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.



United Nations aid for the four "orphans" of the Arab world, i.e. Golan, Palestine, Sinai and Jerusalem. In Ath-Thawra, 1970

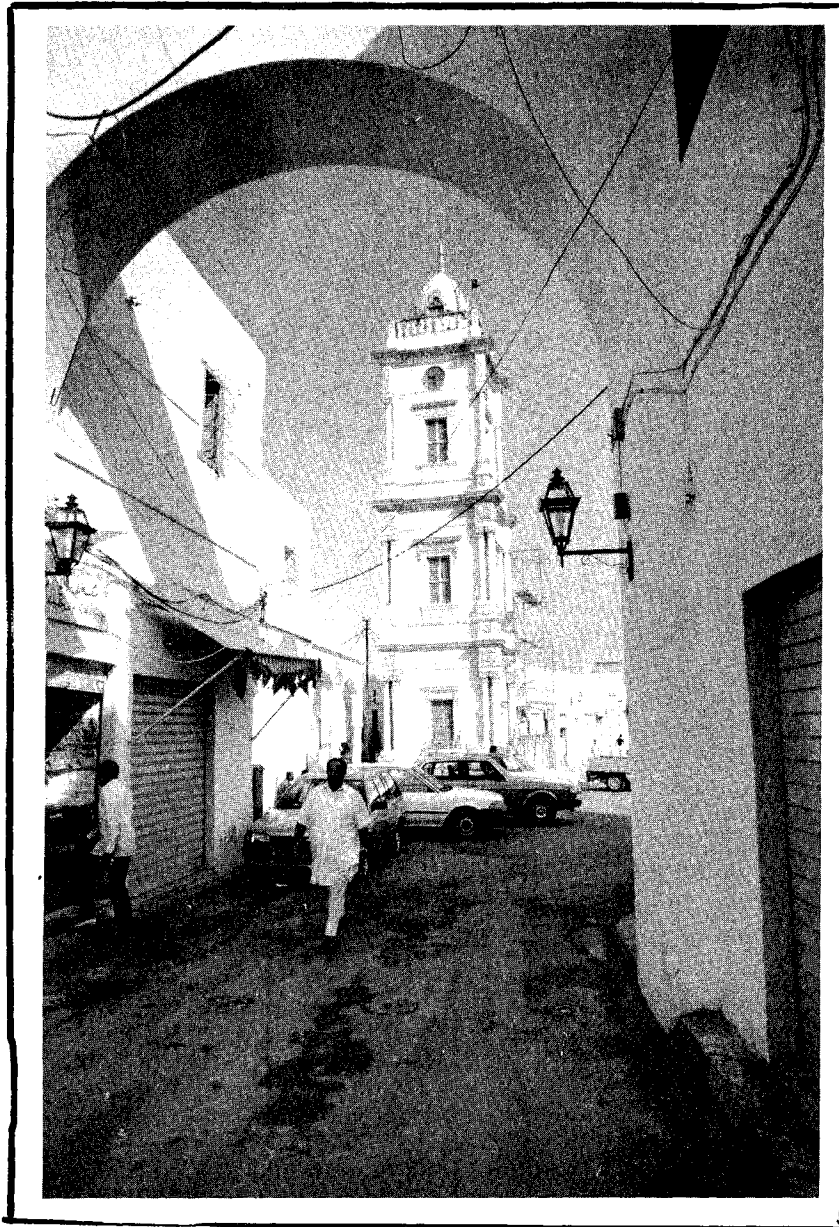
The claim to uniqueness and the reality of dependence on the West: two contradictory facts that Qadhafi has attempted to reconcile as his revolution unfolded. In Libya, as in many other countries that claim to have had a revolution, keeping that revolution alive is an unavoidable and never-ending exercise. To retain legitimacy and to stay in power requires a perpetual renewal of the revolutionary myth: new enemies must be discovered, old enemies are periodically recast into even greater threats to the survival of the revolution's ideological purity. Libya's struggle for an identity and greater independence from the West is hardly original. What has been truly unique in Qadhafi's Jamahiriyyah, however, is the intensity, thoroughness and perseverance - a veritable Enduring Revolution - of this effort in the last two decades. (Neighboring Algeria, for example, lost one million people in its eight-year bloody war for liberation but reached some sort of modus vivendi with France within a decade after the conflict ended.)



The race for the United States presidency in 1984. Whoever gets the best shot in receives the key to the White House delivered by the Zionist lobby.

Much of that intensity inside Libya emanates from Qadhafi himself; he has pursued his vision of the Jamahiriyah as a vanguard of Arab resistance to the encroachments of the West with a fervor bordering on zealousness - and with a large purse of petrodollars for his own experiments and for those who share his oppositional views. And as in many other newly independent countries, one of the first tasks the Qadhafi government set for itself starting in 1969 was to create a persona that all Libyans could identify with. As I detailed in my previous reports, however, this was no easy task: Libyan independence had been bequeathed by the United Nations in 1951 and the country was not a truly unitary state until six years before the coup that brought the young Libyan officers to power took place. Who - or what - was a Libyan?

The answer to that question is still taking shape inside Libya. Not so surprising, in trying to link the past and the present Qadhafi often refers to the two historical periods when the people that later became Libyans acted in some semblance of unity. The first is rather diffuse: the golden era of the expansion of Islam when "Libyans" accepted the faith. The second is more focused: the period of the Italian conquest when the tribes from Barqa, Tripolitania and Fazzan



The Ottoman clocktower, at the edge of the Tripoli medina.

temporarily united to combat the fascists. It is the Italian ghazu (pronounced "razu" - invasion - from which we obtained the word razzia) in particular that has served as a focus of an emerging national identity.



A nightclub in Tripoli after the "Libyanization" effort of the Qadhafi government in the early 1970s. The poster on the palm tree announces the program: among other things, "Folklore singing, Cancan dancing in farashiyah..." (a farshiyah is a white cover worn by traditional Libyan women that leaves only one eye exposed." in *Ath-Thawra*, 1971.

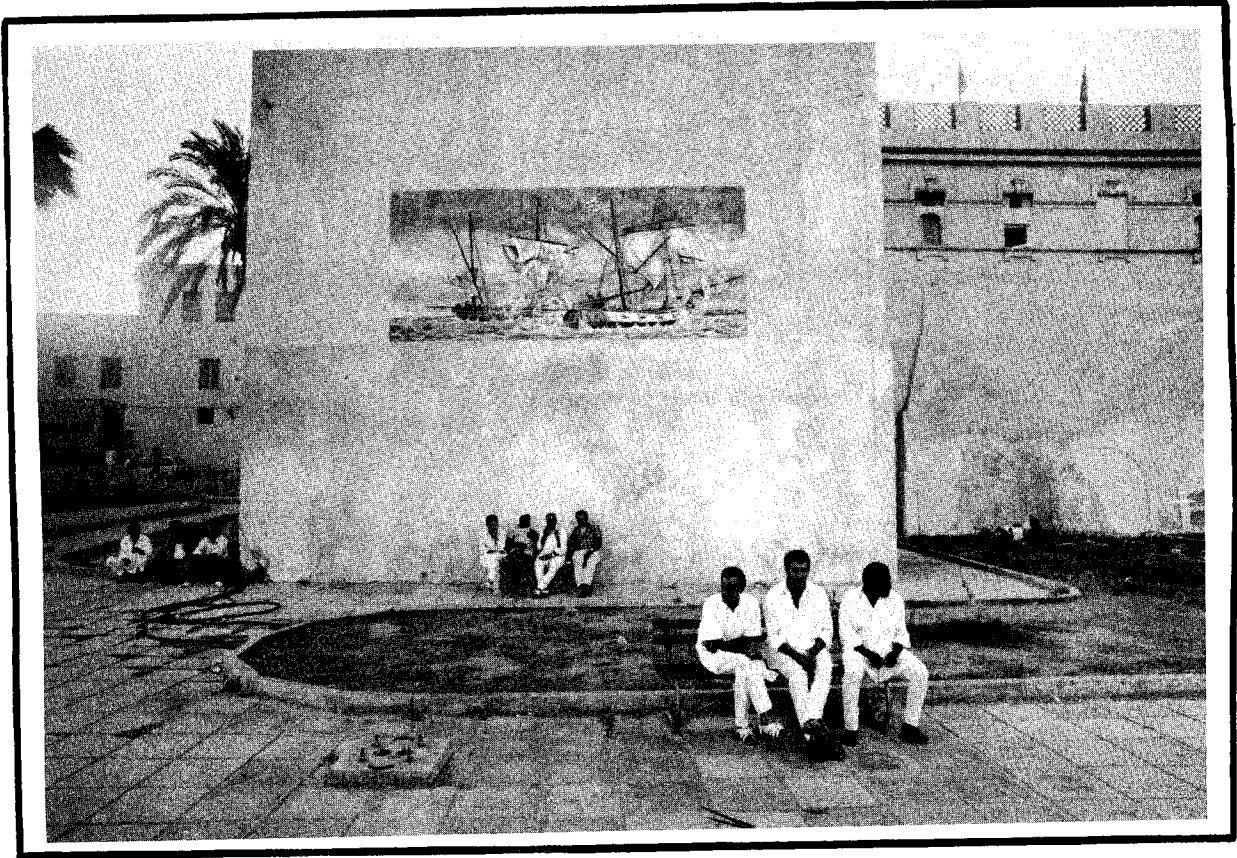
It comes perhaps as no surprise to the historians among my readers - particularly those studying North Africa and the Middle East - that in creating a new, national identity some liberties have been taken in Libya. Tunisia is only now "rediscovering" the history of its national movement, long dominated by the Neo-Destour and annotated by a number of official hagiography writers who dutifully embellished the role of the Supreme Commander Habib Bourguiba. In Algeria the first attempts to write less self-serving histories of the war of independence are still hotly disputed between two generations of scholars. In Morocco few historians are willing to write on contemporary history - or cling closely to non-controversial interpretations that leave the monarchy unscathed. Writing - or rewriting - history is an enterprise fraught with pitfalls. There is not in North Africa a constant challenging of ideas and interpretations. Revisionism is often the right of the ruler. History, and non-history, is what the ruler proclaims it to be - and on this score



After the Jordan crisis of 1970: Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan dance while the Arabs (Palestinians and Jordanians) are fighting each other.

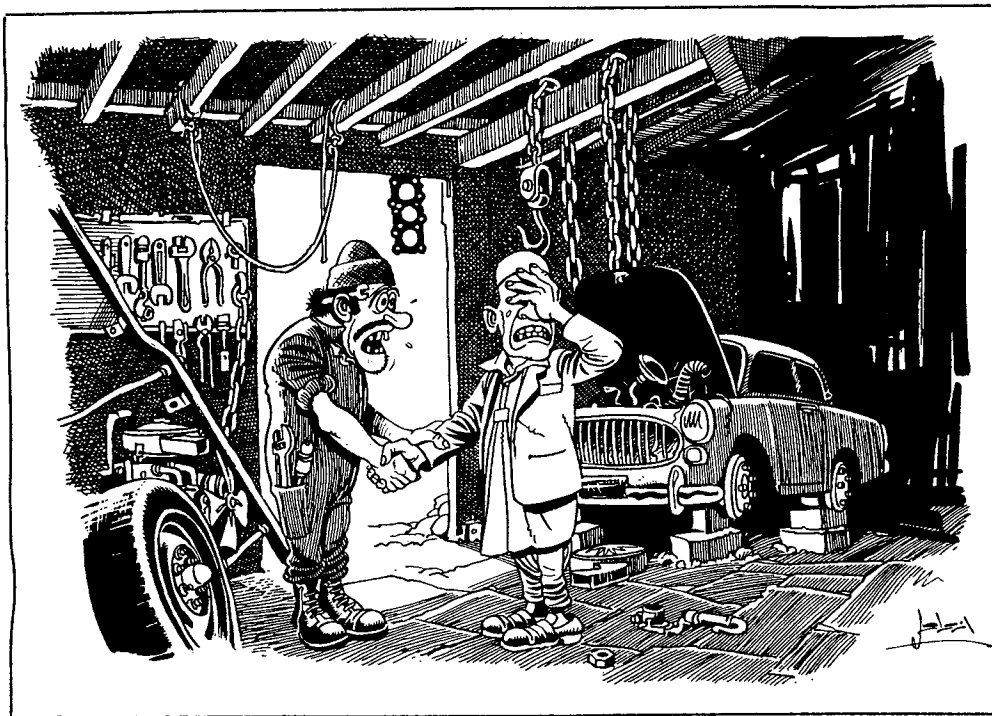
Qadhafi has issued quite a few fiats. History then becomes a means to an end. The leader controls the past, and through the past the present and the future.¹

¹ As Simon Leys has brilliantly described in some of his essays on China, the Chinese - and to a lesser extent the Russians - have been the absolute masters at this game. In one example, of almost Orwellian proportion, pictures of China's rulers that were printed the day after Mao's funeral were airbrushed for the monthly magazines in order to delete those who had been purged by that time. Their names were deleted as if they had never existed. Little printed slips of paper were added to books that had just been printed and still contained their names, instructing readers to paste them over passages that were no longer politically correct!!



The Medina in Tripoli. The painting on the wall depicts the defeat of the Philadelphia, a United States ship that was captured by "Barbary pirates" from Tripoli in the 19th century - Qadhafi regularly uses the Philadelphia incident to show the old antagonism of the US toward Libya, and to remind Libyans that their ancestors won that first encounter!

At the Libyan Studies Center On The Italian Invasion, a brandnew four-story building across from the Sidi Munaidir cemetery, forty researchers and assistants are trying to piece together whatever documents and oral testimony about the period can still be gathered. Each winter teams of researchers fan out across the country's immense territory to record old men and women talking about the Italians, to collect scraps of tribal documents and to piece together a record of the riconquista. Back in Tripoli the interviews are transcribed, catalogued and

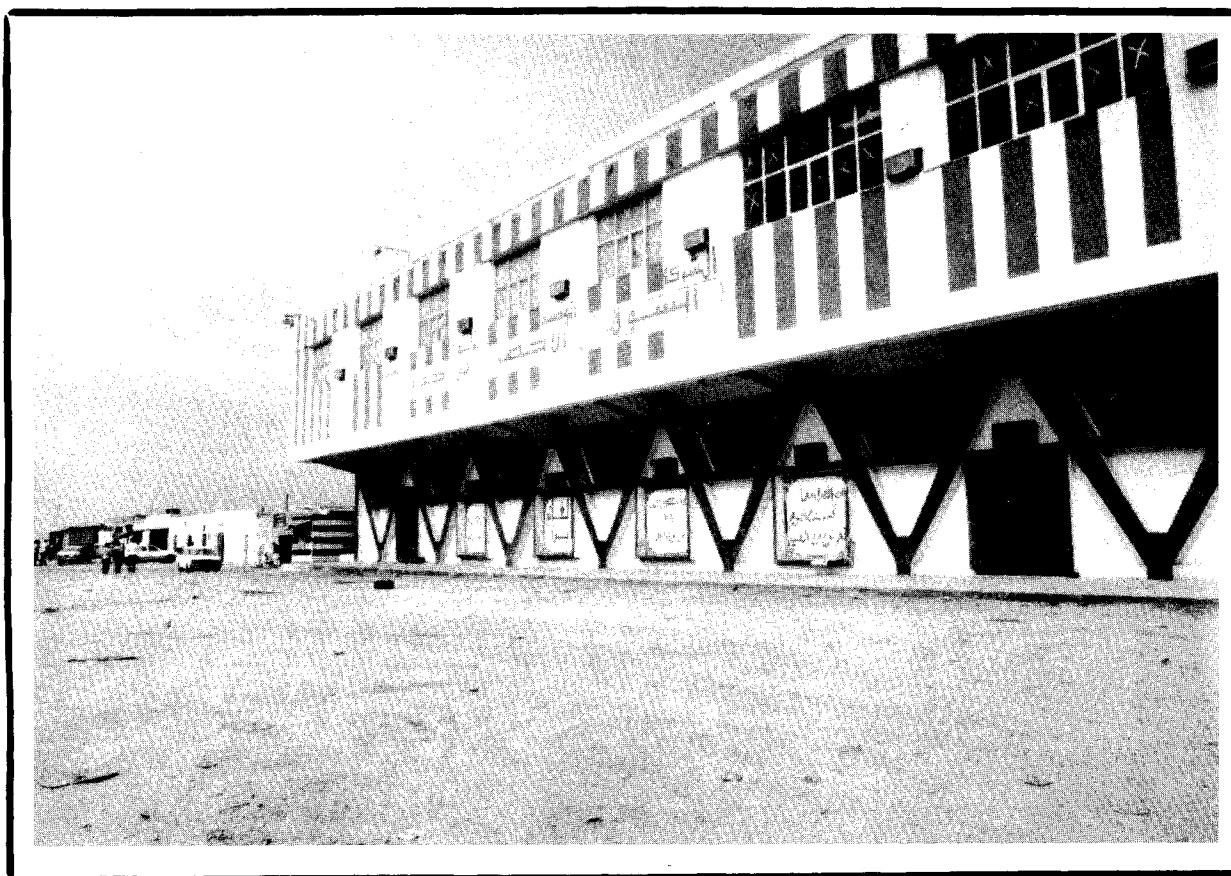


A cartoon about Libyans' obsession with cars. The mechanic says "Unfortunately the car died. The part that I need is not available anywhere in the country. Be strong and have patience!"

published by the Center.²

The work performed at the Libyan Studies Center is of high quality. One evening I attended the defense of a master's thesis written by one of the Center's researchers. It contained a detailed analysis of political events in Tripolitania in 1912. The questioning - by Dr. Aghil Barbar and Dr. Salah al-Din Hassan, two of the country's most respected historians - delved into a number of issues related to methodology and was highly professional. The thesis itself I judged of outstanding

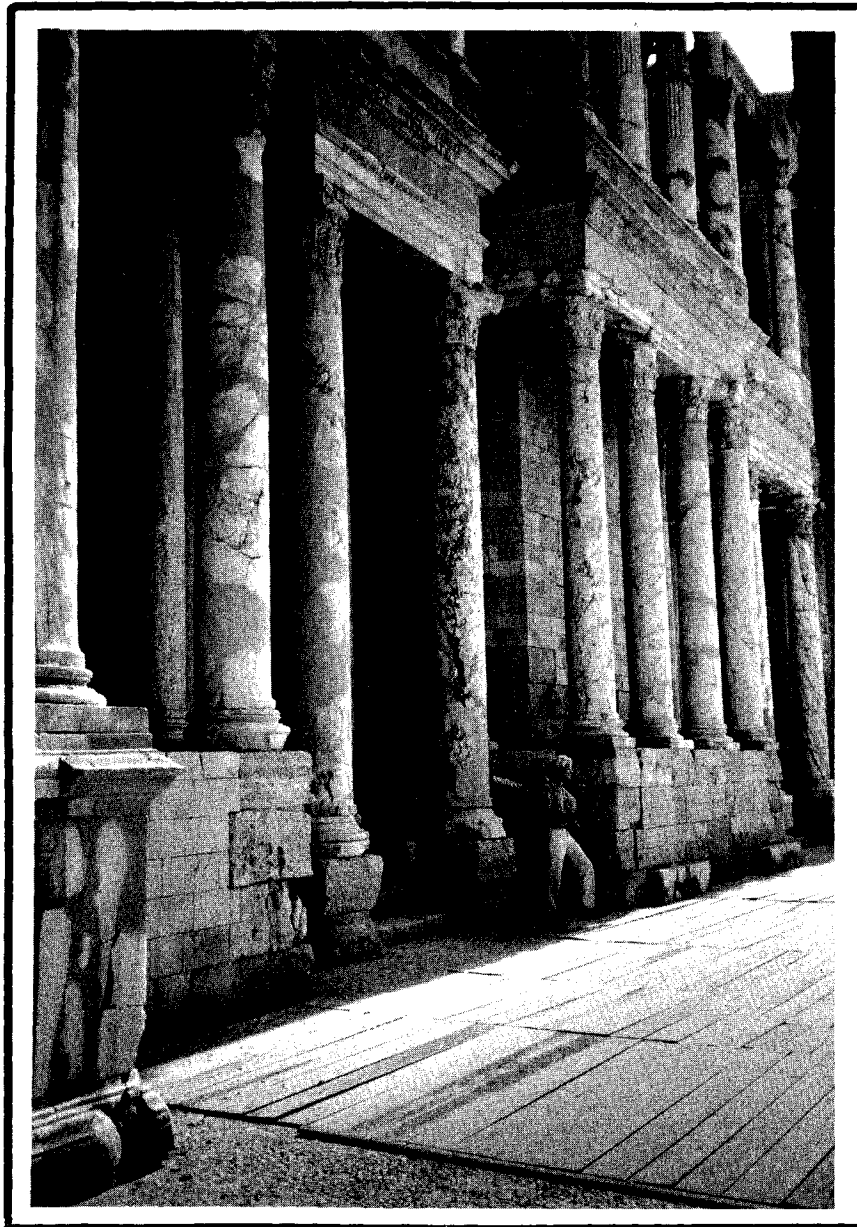
² One of my morning rituals while at the Center involved a daily chat with a very old shaykh, always dressed in an impeccable white zirt and embroidered Ottoman vest, who transcribed the interviews taped in Fazzan. Whenever I sat down to have tea with him he changed whatever tape he was working on for one containing arab-style disco music - periodically lifting his foot from the footpetal, stopping the machine to make a point more forcefully.



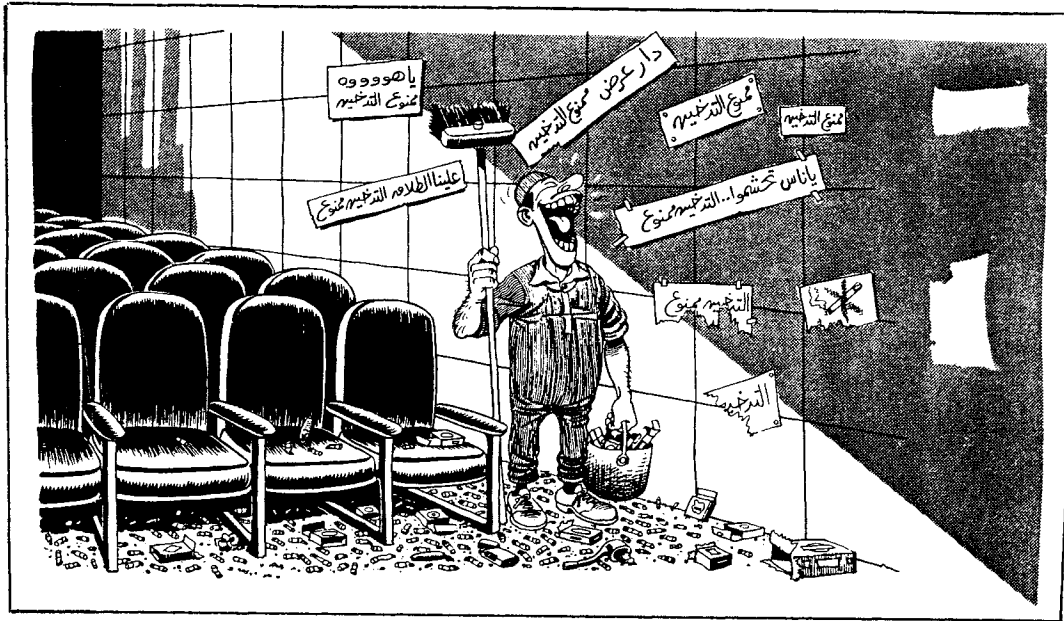
A People's Supermarket near Ajdabiya, painted white and green. For a few years Libyans were forced to buy most essentials in these government-run stores. Due to local corruption and a growing black market, the government in 1987 relaxed its draconian measures against private trade and the state souks lost much of their importance.

quality, its source materials gathered over a number of years and deftly woven into the narrative. (Libyan universities and institutes grant no Ph.Ds yet. Since relatively few Libyans have gone abroad these last years for prolonged studies in the social sciences, local master's theses therefore tend to be, in format and scope, the equivalent of a doctorate in the West. Researchers obtaining a master's degree are usually in their late thirties or early forties.)

Although I was impressed by the degree of professionalism at the Center, I was even more struck by the singleminded pursuit of a narrowly defined body of historical knowledge dedicated to shore up some basic tenets of what I call Libyan official mythology: the idea that Libya has suffered inordinately at the hands of the West and that many of its problems and its current international political difficulties



The Roman ruins at Sabratha.



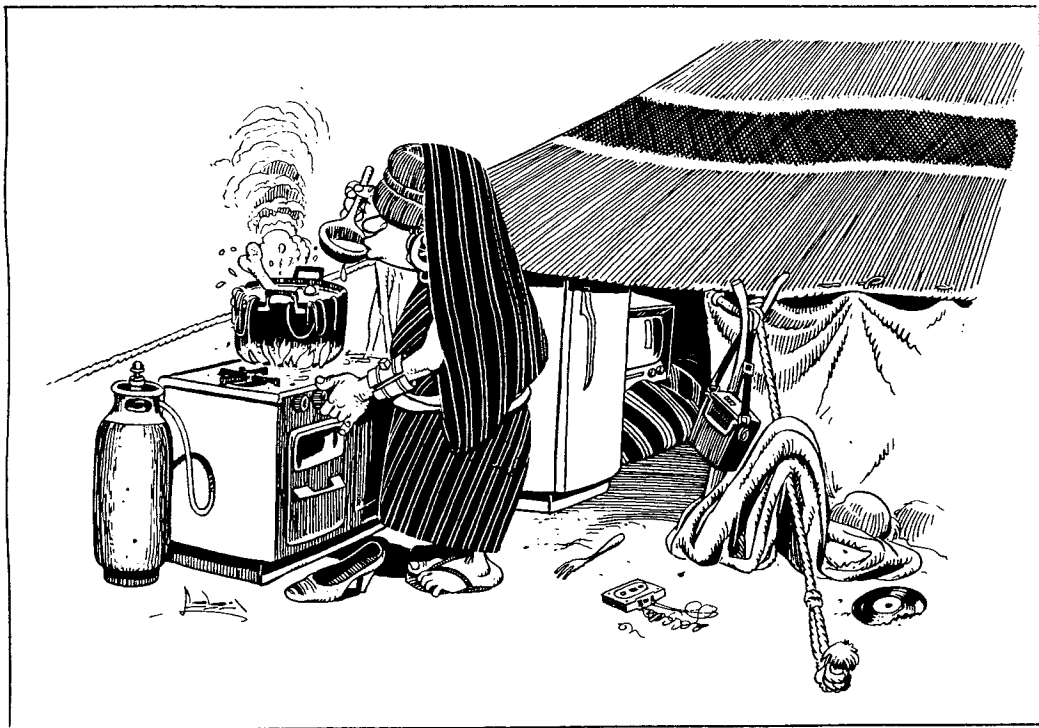
About lack of discipline. The walls of the movie theater are filled with notices "Forbidden to smoke, forbidden to smoke."

are somehow linked to that fateful encounter.³ What is ignored at the Center - or

³ A good example is a booklet written by a colleague, Dr. Hasbib al-Hisnawi, entitled "min al-jumhriyah illa al-jamahiriyah" (From the Republic to the Jamahiriyah) and published by the Libyan Studies Center in 1982. The mythology contains a number of other powerful and interlocking - and often contradictory - ideas as well: Libya is the last Arab country truly interested in Arab unity; its unique role is to make sure that this dream is not lost; the concept of a Jamahiriyah can be implemented everywhere in the world; the revolution has freed the Jamahiriyah from the influence of the West; by adopting the Jamahiriyah system the other Arab countries will equally be able to do so; Libya's economic dependence on the West does not imply a political or cultural dependence; the

DJV-32 HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY - I

in Libya until a few months ago - is as telling as what researchers have been allowed to focus on: there is still no good study of Idris al-Sanusi's role during the ricongiusta or of the monarchy available. When I looked for a number of standard works in arabic on the Sanusiyah, I discovered that the Center's library did not have them. A subsequent talk with the Center's young librarian revealed the existence of a separate index that contained books deemed off-limits to students - almost all dealt with the period of the monarchy. (I eventually perused most of them during my second visit. Between my first two visits, Qadhafi had officially inaugurated the center and announced that all books should be available for study purposes. Ezzedine proudly pointed this out as a sign of openness, but the more important point is that it took the personal intervention from Qadhafi to suddenly make certain books acceptable.)

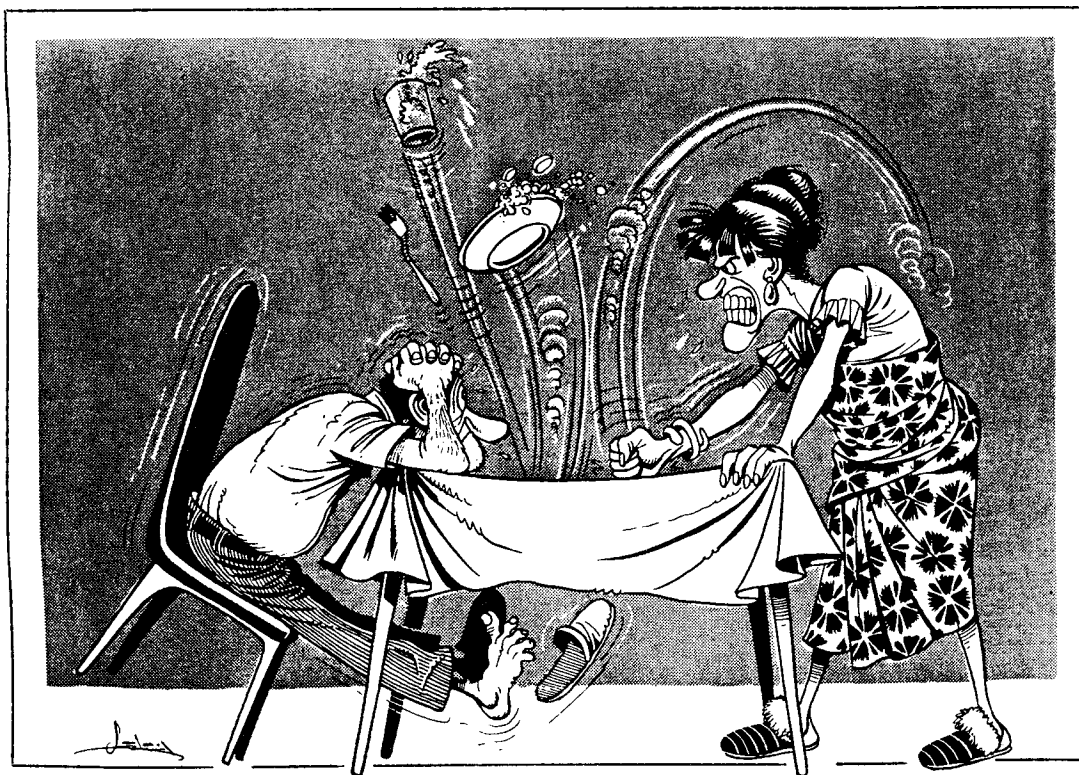


A cartoon about rapid modernization and traditionalism. The woman, standing beside a bedouin tent with modern appliances says "Ah, thank God, a new era has begun." The cartoon originally appeared in al-Mar'a, one of the oldest magazines in the Middle East that deals specifically with women's issues.

Libyan revolution and its political system can serve as examples for other countries; Muammar Qadhafi is responsible for Libya's economic progress.

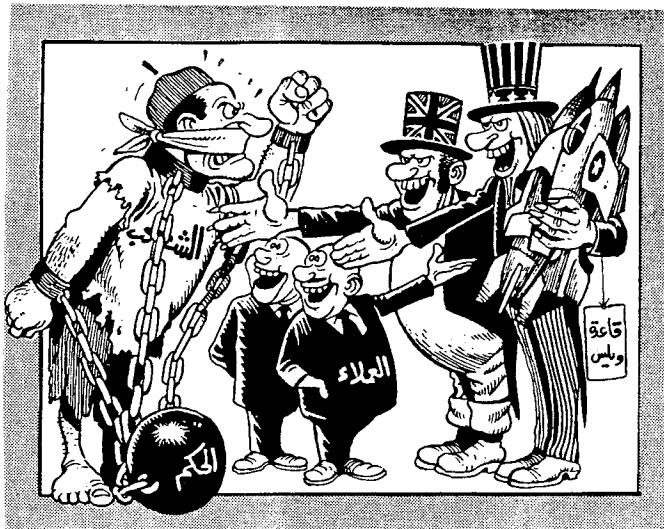
DJV-32 HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY - I

Zwawi's view of relations between the sexes, before Qadhafi's emancipation campaign for women... and after.



DJV-32 HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY - I

About the kingdom: the notables have just sold military bases to Great Britain and the United States while the angry Libyan people are shackled.



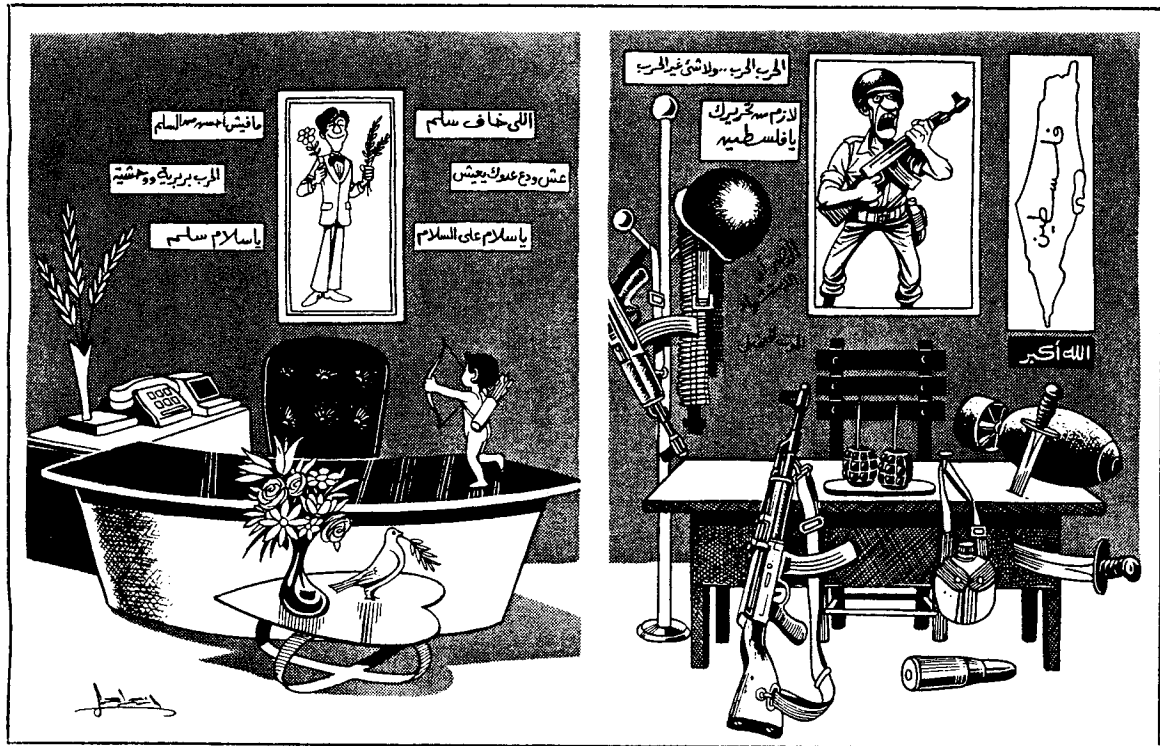
A cartoon about the huge amount of drugs Libyans have come to rely on, freely dispensed at state hospitals. Then man is saying, "And when I get out of here, by God, I will start a pharmacy!"



The United States as policeman of the world. Over his shoulders he carries a bag containing the "freedom of the peoples."

The selectivity does not stop at the Libyan Studies Center. Consider a visit to the Jamahiriya museum. Located inside the Saraya al-Hamra - the Ottoman red castle that was once a little island off Tripoli harbor but now belongs irrevocably to the terra firma of Green Square - the museum is an architectural marvel. Built by the Swiss at a never disclosed price, constructed entirely of beige marble that sparkles and shines under strategically placed halogen lamps, its corridors provide a welcome respite from the heat outside. (I was always envious of the old ticket seller with his light sandals who occasionally slipped his feet onto the cool marble.)

At the entrance every visitor's attention is unconsciously drawn to a second floor balcony where, amidst the vast acreage of pale marble, hangs an exquisite medallion in darkgreen velvet. Its surface is embroidered in thick goldbraid with the bismallah, "In the name of God, the merciful and the compassionate." The different floors of the museum contain artifacts from the different periods in Libya's history: tracings of the magnificent neolithic rock drawings from the southern desert, artifacts from the roman period, costumes from the Ottoman Empire, Umar al-Mukhtar's glasses recovered after his execution, pictures of World War II and...



About Arab hypocrisy. The cartoons shows the two offices every Arab politician has: on the left the one for external relations (Some of the inscriptions read "War is a Brutality" and "Peace is the Highest Good"). On the right the office for local consumption: "God is Great... War, war, nothing but war... We won't forget your freedom, O Palestine!"

an entire floor dedicated to the achievements of the Jamahiriya. At first I thought I had missed a floor, but upon closer inspection confirmed that neither the Sanusiyah nor the kingdom are ever mentioned in the museum. I asked one of the attendants what had happened? He pretended not to understand and I didn't press him: the kingdom had simply vanished as if it never existed.

In my next report I will continue describing the Qadhafi government's attempt to subtly manipulate history in support of the revolution's ideology, and draw some conclusions of what this entails for the direction of the revolution itself.

All the best,

 Dirk Vandewalle

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