

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-33

Libyan Studies Center
Box 5040
Tripoli, Libya
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LIBYA: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION PART FOUR: HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Peter;

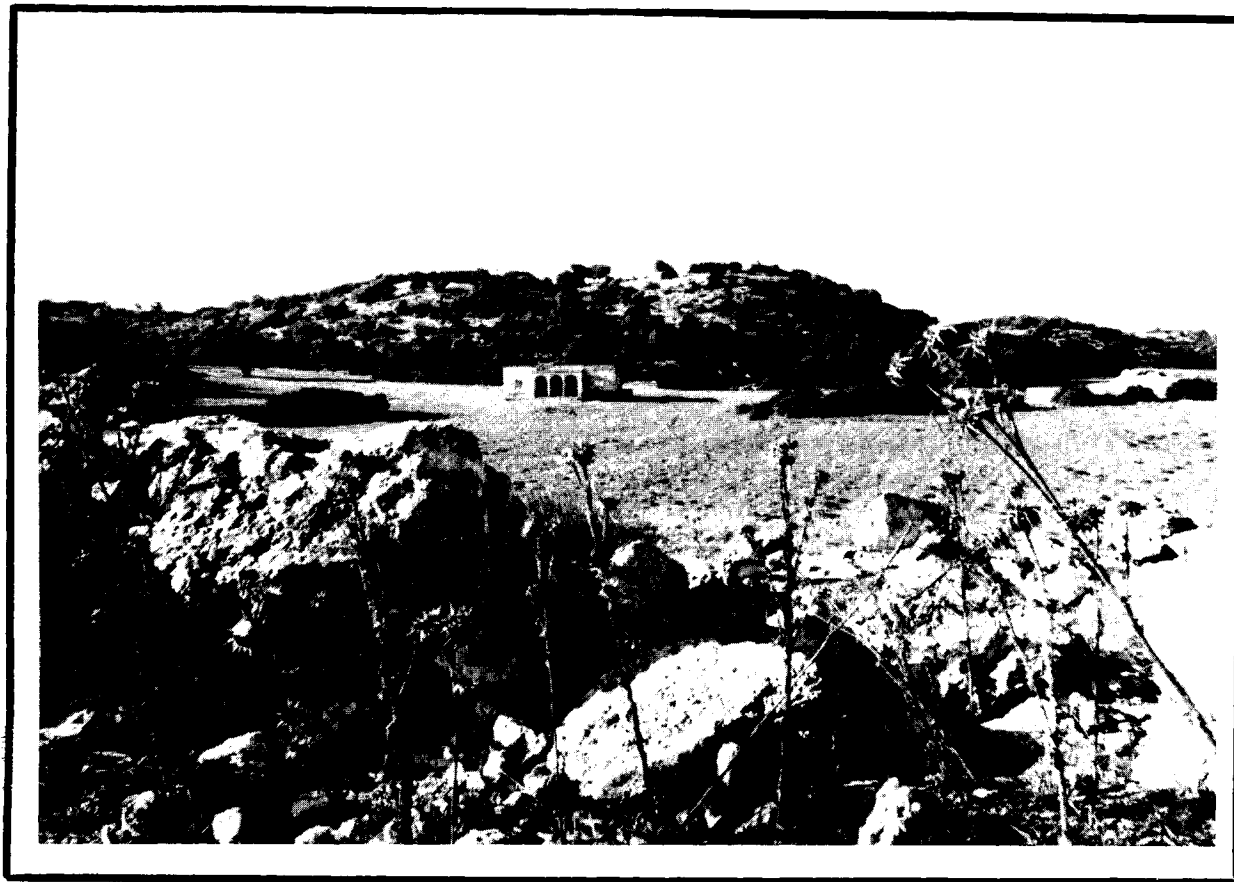
Very few people in Libya - or observers outside the country - bother to read the local newspapers. Most of the time they are utterly predictable. As mouthpieces of the Qadhafi government, however, they are terribly instructive. They convey first of all how Libyans perceive the Arab region and the world at large - or, perhaps more accurately, how those in charge of the country want Libyans to think about the world around them. And they also offer some fascinating glimpses of how Libyans view themselves and their own history. Throughout my stay I therefore closely read copies of Jamahiriyah and al-Zahf al-Akhdar (The Green Path) and any official publication I could put my hands on. Many of their articles are vitriolic in their denunciations of the West, reminiscent of those published in al-Ahram when Egypt's Nasser was still alive. But this is two decades later; when faced with severe economic hardship, Egypt under Sadat quietly abandoned the fury, the attempts at grandeur and the rhetoric of the revolution.

Somehow the feeling of living in a political and ideological timewarp never left me when I was in Libya. Pictures of Qadhafi and Nasser walking together still adorn Tripoli streets. Libyan editors continue to write of Arab unity and Arab power as if the Middle East has stood still since the oil embargo. And, at the end of the day, in the television cartoon, nostalgia for the past is projected onto the future: the Arab world can unite again, under the banner of Islam, guided by the Green Book.

The writing and rewriting of history in Libya is a personal and national catharsis, an attempt to sort out and make sense of several decades of political confusion and lack of identity. The West - Italy and the United States in particular - have served as easy lightning rods in that struggle for self-discovery. There are undoubtedly a hundred reasons for bitterness - on both sides. It is clear that an impoverished and weak Libya had little leverage over its own affairs in the

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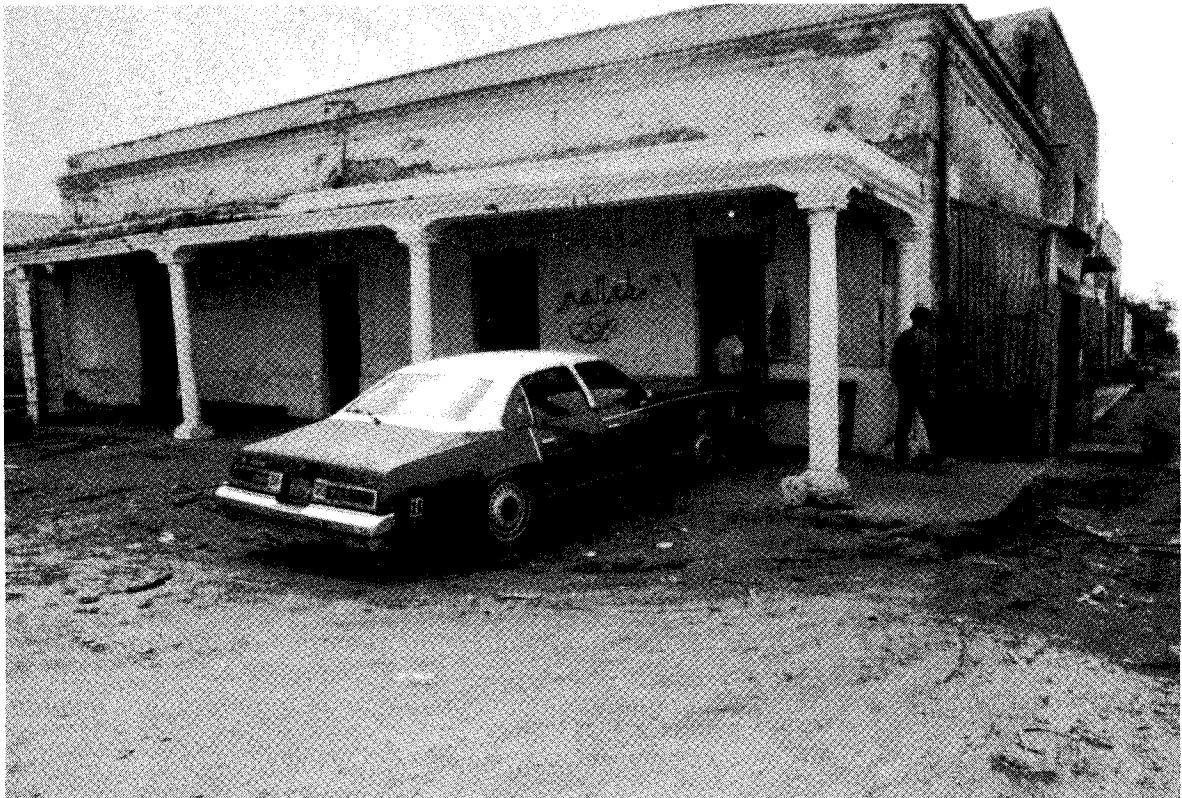
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Abandoned Italian farm near al-Bayda' (Cyrenaica).

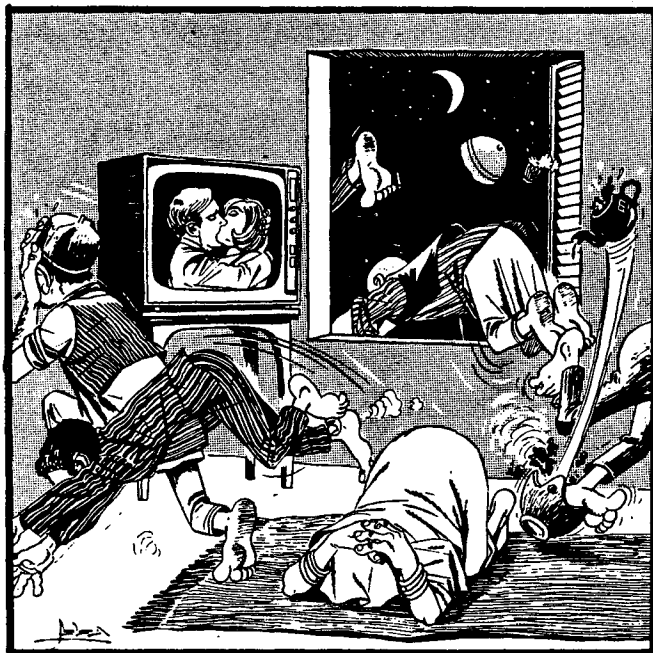
years immediately following World War II and independence. ("Why" the director of the Libyan Studies Center once asked me, "was there a Marshall Plan for Europe but not for a devastated Libya?") I think no serious observer of Libyan-American relations since the early 1950s would disagree that the US - or US companies - have handsomely (sometimes extraordinarily) profited from involvement in Libya once oil was discovered. And there is little doubt that Western strategic interests had been effectively served by the creation of the Kingdom of Libya. Undoubtedly the presence of a large expatriate community not always attuned to local customs was a thorn in the side of the young nationalists of Qadhafi's generation. (The 1964 yearbook of Wheelus High School opens with the lines "By the shining coastal waters/Stands a school so true/Wheelus High, our Alma Mater/Banners white and blue.")

In an interview Qadhafi once recalled his outrage at being denied permission to visit Wheelus Airbase, and his anger at the British navy for freely slipping in and out of Tubruk harbor. These feelings of frustration and powerlessness marked



At al-Marj, a small hamlet in eastern Cyrenaica that was virtually abandoned after an earthquake in 1962, I found among the ruins of the former Italian community a small run-down restaurant where two young men were selling sandwiches: two crusts of bread smeared red with harissa and sprinkled with flakes of tuna, wrapped in old copies of al-Zahf al-Akhdar. Outside, its front wheels drawn up on the concrete apron stood a gleaming bright-red late model Buick, an incongruous remnant of the US presence amidst the squalor of the village.

independence movements everywhere in Africa. In Libya the fact that the country was, at least in theory, independent heightened the feeling of dislocation. The growing corruption was linked to King Idris... who had close links to the United States. "Was it a coincidence," Ezzedine once asked, "that the American embassy was within a stone's throw of the royal palace?" The Qadhafi government has always considered the close ties between the Kingdom and the United States as evidence of collusion; it has charged over and over again that the US propped up the Idris regime. In reality there is little evidence to that charge. On the contrary:



Libyan television - without commentary.

the US made clear to Idris on several occasions - particularly when David Newsom was US ambassador in Libya - that it would not defend his dynasty against internal upheavals.

Qadhafi, and many Libyans weaned on a steady diet of their leader's views, explain American hostility toward their country in a curious mixture of fact and fiction. They believe that the United States has never forgotten or forgiven the nationalization of the Libyan oil industry - nor Libya's leading role in the OPEC negotiations that eventually led to higher oil prices. Several of the people I interviewed insisted that the United States still resents its forced evacuation from Wheelus Airbase soon after the Qadhafi government came to power.¹ "America saw the Jamahiriyah as a political maverick," a former Libyan ambassador to the United States told me at a formal luncheon, "so they decided to go after it."

In private, several of the country's intellectuals and older Libyans scoffed quietly at some of these notions during my visit - one close friend at al-Fatih

¹ As I pointed out in DJV-31, the evacuation of Wheelus had already been agreed upon while Idris was still in power. It is hardly something Qadhafi can claim as an achievement.

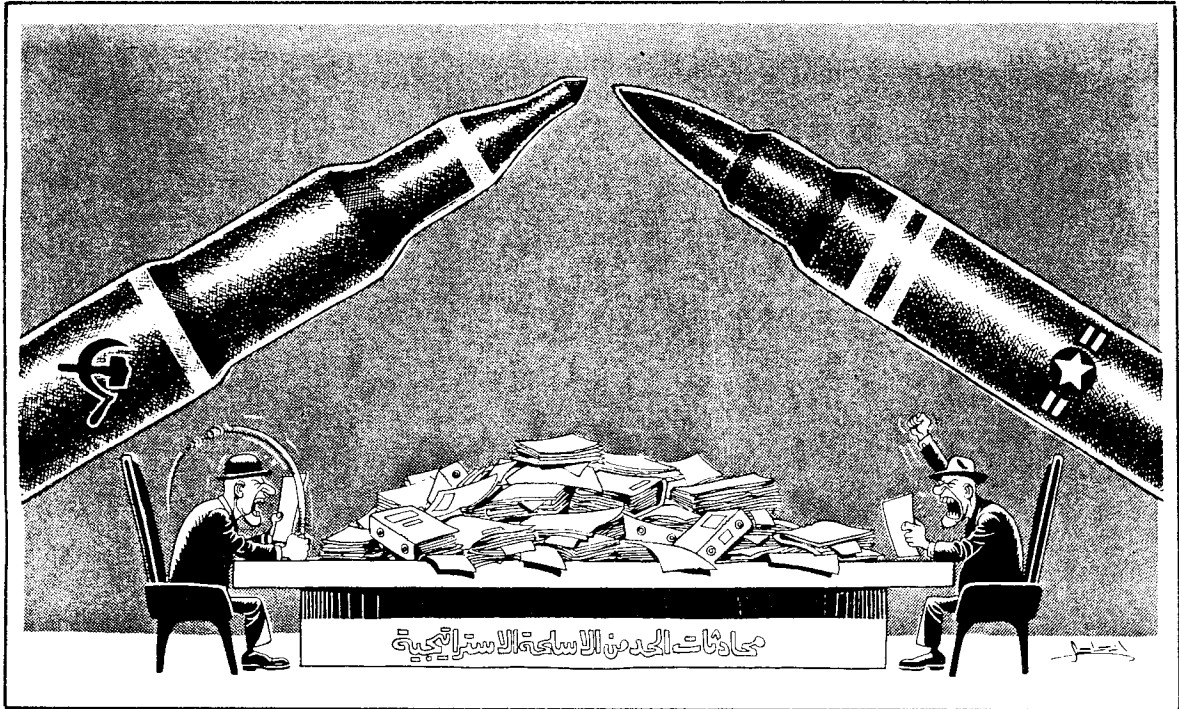


Development in Libya: the foreign companies dump their products while the local merchant simply hands over the money.

university laughingly refers to them as "Qadhafi-style revisionism." But even that friend had a difficult time reconstructing the events that led up to the open confrontation between the two countries. He viewed "the extreme reaction of the United States" to Qadhafi as an irresponsible act, seemingly out of proportion to the damage Libya could inflict on US interests. Had Libya - "a gadfly, and a weak one..." - been singled out "because Reagan needed to score some points at home... much like Qadhafi?" "Why" he asked, awkwardly translating an Arab proverb, "put on boxing gloves to milk an ant?"

There is something seductive about perpetually portraying oneself as a victim - of history, of the West, of suspended political development under a corrupt and ineffective monarchy. It subtly shifts the focus of attention and the burden of guilt and accountability when matters go wrong. It also exposes the deeper feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that lie at its roots. To comprehend this feeling of being trapped, forever vulnerable, of having little control over one's life and national destiny despite the rhetoric and the floods of money, is to understand the siren call of the desert with its promises of simplicity and freedom, a call so often expressed by Qadhafi.

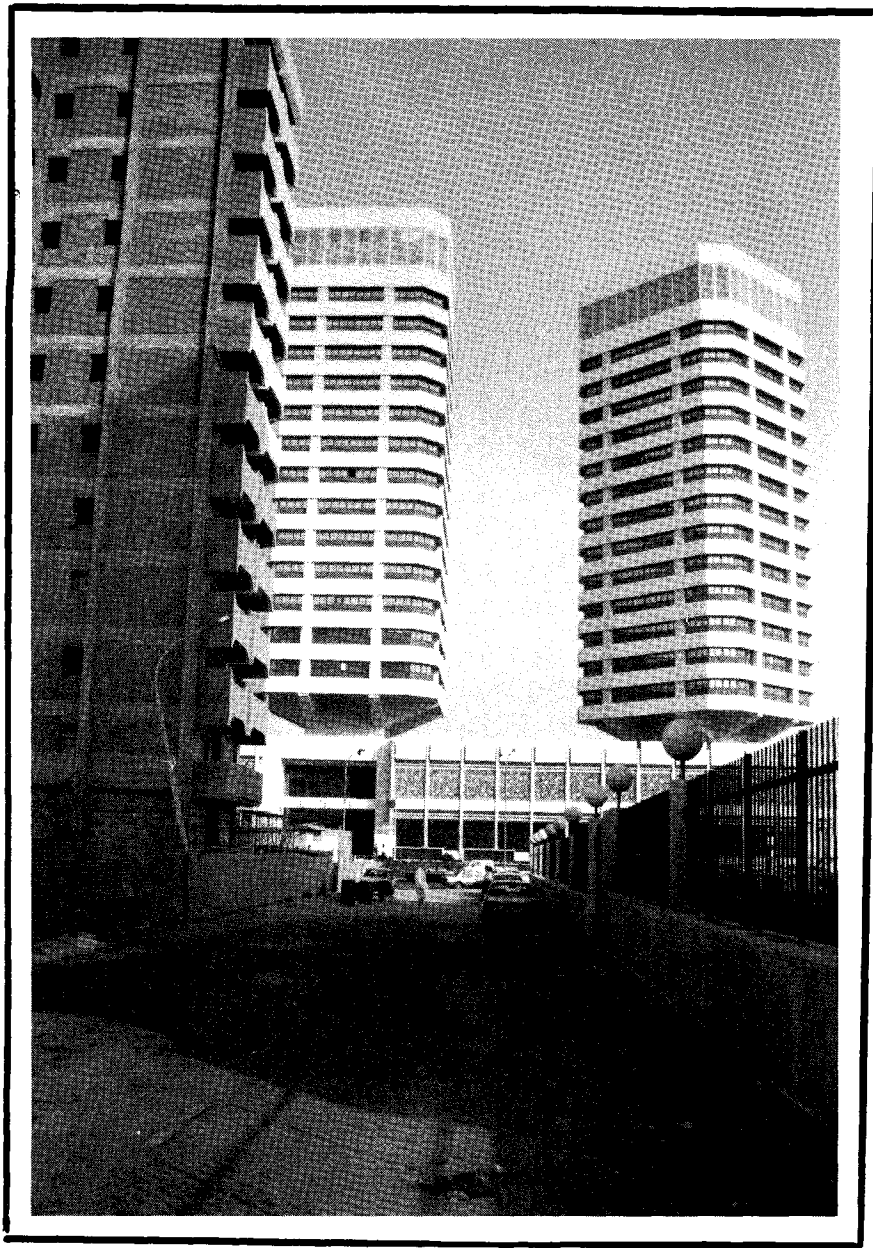
"We can do without the West," he said during one of his evening talks on the



The Superpowers discuss disarmament.

European invasions of the Maghreb, "we have our own civilization." And so, current efforts to rewrite Libyan history restores Libya to the Libyans. It ignores the intruders that crossed the Mediterranean or the Atlantic - except when their intrusion can be put to some useful purpose. It reduces a complex process that can provide some beacons for identity to a laundry list of selected details, to a mere summary of great events in a glorified past.

In Libya the attempt to preserve certain aspects of the country's history goes hand in hand with efforts to destroy other parts of that same history. At the Libyan Studies Center the resistance against the fascists is recorded and studied in great detail. All around it, however, the former Italian presence is slowly, but with great perseverance, obliterated. The fountain in the once elegant central market in Benghazi - its photograph featured prominently in one of Rudolfo Graziani's books about the "new Libya" - has been turned off long ago. The market has become a People's Souk where young women sullenly answer customers' questions. The manhole covers in the streets, still marked ANNO I in reference to the first year the fascists came to power, are replaced with locally made ones. In Tripoli whole inner city blocks of middleclass Italian houses are left falling into ruin; pollarded trees in formerly manicured parks are running to riot. In the undulating, burgundy fields of



New highrises near Tripoli harbor. Officially named after a hero of the war against the Italians, they are simply referred to by most Libyans as the "Johnie Walker" towers because of their shape.



About the custom of selling brides. The bride is advertised for 5,000 dinars and the young man wants to "check the goods" - at which the father explodes in anger and says: "What do you think you're doing? Do you think I'm selling water mellons or something?" (A semantic detail: the word for "doll" and "bride" in Libya are synonymous!)

Jebel Akhdar hundreds of Italian farmhouses stand deserted, some of their walls still stenciled with the name of the Italian settlement agency that built them. Picked clean of doors and windows and other valuables, they slowly disintegrate beside brandnew Libyan homesteads, painted light pink or blue, often within a stone's throw of the former settlers' dwellings. At Oliveti, an Italian agricultural settlement west of Tripoli, the old synagogue has crumbled into a tottering pile of brick. The outline of its formal courtyard, landscaped around a strapping eucalyptus tree, is barely visible now. Near the magnificent Roman ruins of Sabratha, at the end of a cypress-lined country lane, an old Italian country church has been refashioned into a popular restaurant. A huge picture of Qadhafi and some revolutionary slogans now top a formica counter where the altar once stood. The church's sacristy has been converted into a kitchen; the hooks where laundered supplices once hung now hold strainers and spatulas. On the walls the



Without commentary.

pictures of saints have given way to posters of Tahiti and Amsterdam.

At Sabratha - and Leptis Magna and a dozen other sites where Herodotus and Pliny once wandered - the same neglect rules. The rails laid down by Italian archaeology teams are now tangled and rusted. A marble UNESCO stela at Sabratha declaring the site part of the "heritage of mankind" lingers in the dust amid tufts of wilted grass near the gatekeeper's shack. Around Marcus Aurelius's triumph arch in Tripoli the floodlights installed by the Italians have been smashed; the switchboxes are cracked; the formal promenade has been scuffed to dust by soccer-playing youngsters. At Wheelus Airbase a rusty Coca Cola sign flutters against the whitewashed wall of one of the few remaining barracks; they will soon be torn down to make room for an expanded international airport. To most Libyans these remnants are exactly what Qadhafi says they are: the effluvia of foreign invasions, monuments without much meaning.

In barely two decades Libya turned from a barely self-sustaining agricultural society into an urban economy - dependent on the rents of the military bases and, later, on the proceeds of oil sales. And during those two decades three disparate provinces reluctantly unified under the kingdom. It is the sort of enforced modernization few traditional societies withstand very well. Qadhafi once summarized the process very well: "...I have lived as one who has traveled across the different phases of human evolution - primitive age, hunting age, primitive agriculture - before knowing the other periods - such as precapitalist society and industrial society - until the age of capitalism and finally the revolution. In less than a quarter century I have moved from primitive society to modern times! I have thus had an experience that most thinkers and rulers of the world, in the past or in the future, will never have a chance of experiencing except by [reading] books..."

DJV-33 HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

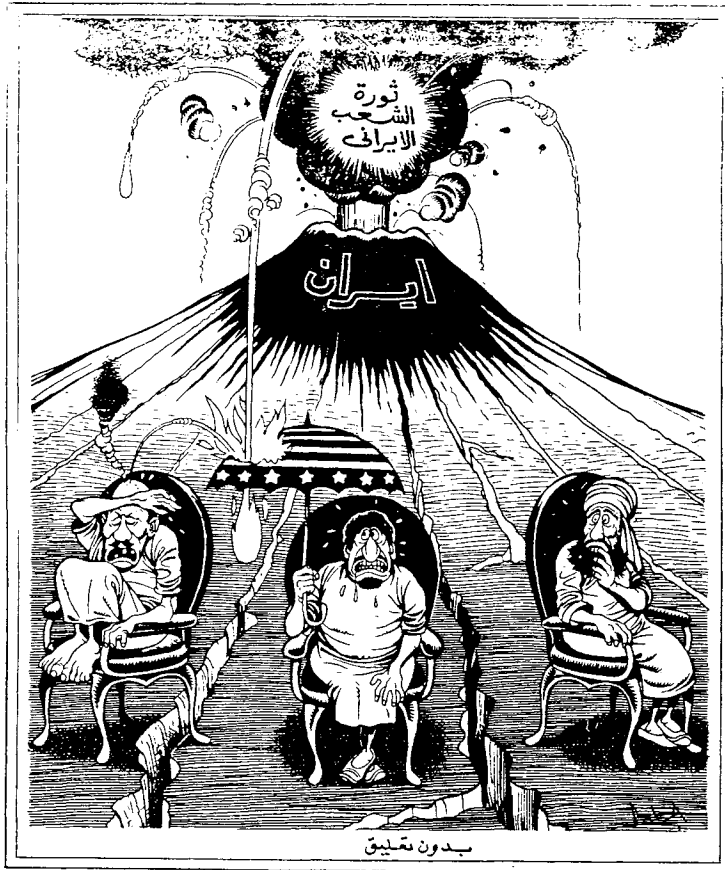
Contrary to what Qadhafi implies, however, this telescoping of entire historical epochs into twenty-five years has yielded no special insights to Libya's ruler or to his fellow countrymen. The old and the new mix uneasily in the Jamahiriyah. There is a confusion about authenticity: the zirt versus the business suit, sometimes worn in an incongruous combination; the Arabian horses and the camels versus the Toyota pick-up trucks driven by men who thirty years ago were wandering the desert; the oral traditions of the tribe versus video tapes. And the confusion is heightened by the cult of the revolution. Always the revolution: the revolution as an end in itself, overpowering the comprehension of a people who have historically barely emerged.

At the personal level this confusion can be devastating. A few days before I left the country I visited a business man in his ornate office near the old Italian cathedral. He proudly showed me all the trappings of Libyan-style financial success: the diamond-studded Rolex watch, the enameled pen-and-pencil set, the gold-rimmed Cartier glasses and the Balmain silk tie. But there was something absurd, almost nihilistic about him. "You come visit my home," he insisted, "we will drink lots of whisky." For all the wealth and bravado, I felt in the presence of deep resentment and anger - expressed only briefly when he ranted about the difficulty of obtaining visas to Europe. Imitation and revulsion of the West mixed incoherently. On his trips to Holland he had felt nauseated by the lack of human warmth, the "always business" atmosphere, the drug addicts and the brothels in Amsterdam. Out of it grew a primitive rage that could turn - when suddenly confronted with the fact that the West held no greater promise or solution than his own society - into an all-encompassing hatred, or into the more comforting world of religion.

Libya's ambivalence about its past and about its future has found a perfect expression in Qadhafi. His concept of a Jamahiriyah and popular rule harks back to a period unencumbered by the trappings of modern political institutions, to a period when retreat into the desert was possible in the face of powerful enemies. He still considers Libya as the last Arab fortress. Each entry gate is festooned with the green-trimmed slogans of the revolution: "In Need Freedom is Latent"; "Parties Abort Democracy"; "No Democracy Without Popular Congresses". But escape is no longer possible. At the wall of the fortress lap the waves of western civilization and they intrude quietly but forcefully and inextricably upon the smugness of localism: the library at al-Fatih university uses the Dewey Decimal System; the reference work in its biochemistry department - bought via Lebanon at three times its original price - is Lehninger's standard reference work; the engineer at the Zawiya refinery switches to english to convey some technical information; the control board at his fingertips is Italian.

Qadhafi once boasted that Libya had lived for five thousand years without oil and could do so again. The longing for the past may remain palpable, but inside Libya its technocrats and intellectuals smile indulgently at these kinds of anachronisms advocated by The Leader. Their world - the chemical complex at Ras Lanuf, the sophisticated steel plant near Misratah, the costly petroleum defraction towers at Zawiya and Brega - is the West's creation. With their fingers on the buttons that run the machines, they realize that the country's fate and development are intrinsically linked with the West - even if they agree with The Guide of the Revolution's underlying message that Libya should not sell its soul to the West.

The little hotel that I stayed at near Sirte had been constructed - by South Koreans? Scandinavians? no one seemed to know - a few months earlier. Everything except the blankets with their revolutionary slogans had been imported: American toilets, Swedish beds, air conditioners from Germany. In Seoul or Oslo its design would perhaps have won a prize; at the edge of the Sirte desert it was found wanting. Much of the building had already been readapted to local use. The entry doors facing the desert were boarded up to keep out the harsh sunlight; an office near the lobby had been turned into an entertainment room where two



The effect of the Iranian revolution, according to Zwawwi. Sadat, the United States and the conservative Gulf monarch are trying to seek shelter.

telephones and an adding machine stood incongruously on a splintering pingpong table. The boutiques lining the entryway were stacked with kitchen supplies and toilet paper from Italy. Even the personnel was expatriate. Across the desk the young Moroccan receptionist had smiled enigmatically when I handed back the completed registration form, asking in a low and mocking voice, "Ca vous plait Monsieur, la Libye?"

My initial impression of Libya, gleaned ten years ago, of a giant consumer society flashed back time and time again. What will happen to this society when the oil runs out? Many of the answers I received were not terribly convincing. As I write this, several of the economic and political measures that once formed the cornerstones of the Enduring Revolution are already being dismantled. Libyans are

DJV-33 HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY


now relatively free to travel. The Revolutionary Guards have lost some of their power. The restrictive measures on the private retail trade have been relaxed. Inside the old souk in Tripoli the bazaaris have returned. Under the arches of a little courtyard near the old Gurgi mosque - its walls freshly whitewashed for the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the revolution - a group of black women swathed in cheap cotton safsaris sit crosslegged on the dirt floor. They are selling gold rings and bracelets. A few months ago the police would have chased them away for "unrevolutionary activities." Now they sit quietly, undisturbed, chatting in a lilting low voice that hints of subsaharan Africa. Each hand with its hennaed fingers holds several pieces of jewelry; chokers and necklaces glitter in the folds of the cloth between their knees. The perfume of spices floats on the wind. There is, at least for now, a semblance of normality.

The ambition to be counted; the illusion of power and permanence; the denial of a clear and reasonable vision of the world: undoubtedly the West bears some responsibility for what eventually provoked Libya's tortuous path after 1969. A steady progression from indifference and lack of knowledge to meprise have marked our notions about Libya and about Libyans - a sort of collective auto-da-fe centered on Qadhafi. And clearly, Libya since the 1969 coup has never lived by the standards of behavior we expect of modern nations and its leaders. Even in presenting himself to the world, Libya's leader stands apart. In the Brussels and Tunis embassies, a smiling Qadhafi wrapped in a traditional woolen zirt looks down from a refrigerator-sized picture at each applicant. I also had smiled, remembering all those formal tight-lipped, tie-and-jacket photographs of the other North African leaders I had stared at so often during my three years in the Maghreb.

But if the quest for the country's history and for some form of authenticity seems likely to continue in Libya, Qadhafi's real enemy after twenty years in power is no longer America or the West. It is instead the notion of accountability: the idea that the ways of the desert have come to an end; the notion that there is no longer one leader who should singlehandedly decide on the fate - and the economic well-being - of a nation. I think that Qadhafi - for reasons I spell out more clearly in DJV-34 through DJV-36 - is already losing that battle even if he will, as seems likely, remain physically in power for a while longer. Whatever its outcome, Libya has already paid a price very few nations in the world have been willing or able to pay in this struggle for identity and for an illusory sense of independence that will turn into a much less comforting reality when the oil stops flowing.

For all the money in the world, old and new - tradition and progress - cannot be separated. A return to the desert is no longer possible. (The best one can do is to bring a piece of the desert to the city; hence Qadhafi's bedouin tent at the Aziziyah barracks in Tripoli.) It is a reality most Libyans instinctively understand and accept. On my return from Jaghub I find myself once more at the little hotel near Sirte. I am chatting in the coolness of the dusk with the gardener who is delighted to see me again. The wind picks up, rustling the palm fronds above us; a low plaintive sound that makes the stray dogs in the distance bark. "The sand sings," the old man says as we walk inside to watch our daily portion of Qadhafi on television. He tugs at my shirt sleeve: "Si Mohamed can predict the weather by listening to its pitch." A few minutes later the Benghazi weatherman appears on the screen to read his forecast, armed with the latest satellite pictures. "French technology," the gardener shrugs, "much more reliable than Si Mohamed if you plan on driving to Kufra."

All the best,



Dirk Vandewalle

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