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# Libya in Western Foreign Policies, 1911 — 2011

SASKIA VAN GENUGTEN



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in the Contemporary World

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## Introduction

Libya has a short but volatile history. The desert lands between Egypt and Tunisia have undergone major changes ever since Italian colonialism imposed on the local inhabitants the idea of belonging to a territory with defined boundaries and a centralized authority. After the Second World War, external powers established Libya as an independent state, a decision made in the framework of the United Nations (UN). The UN itself was, back then, an experimental way of trying to impose on international politics some form of global governance through interstate consultation mechanisms. In the newly invented United Kingdom of Libya, a reluctant, British-backed monarchy replaced ruthless colonial rule. After 18 years in power, in 1969, a group of young military officers overthrew the rule of King Idris al Sanussi and replaced it with a radical, overenthusiastically authoritarian and anti-Western republic.

Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi then brought 42 years of oppressive stability to Libya, based on a cult around his personality, around shared grievances against the West and the forceful suppression of dissent. His regime disposed of an effective manipulative mechanism to retain authority as it could control the top-down redistribution of wealth from the export of natural resources.<sup>1</sup> By consequently absorbing the great majority of

<sup>1</sup>See for example Hazem Beblawi, "The rentier state in the Arab world", in Giacomo Luciani (ed), *The Arab state*, University of California Press, 1990, pp. 85–98; and Michael L. Ross, "Does oil hinder democracy?" *World Politics* 53 (3) 2001, pp. 325–61. Applied to

Libyans as employees of the state bureaucracy, the regime made a critical mass dependent on its goodwill. Political opposition could not only lead to prison or worse, but also to job loss or the withholding of social benefits affecting entire families. At the same time, Qaddafi knew to keep the Libyan bureaucracy and especially the security institutions in a state of continuous flux. The chaotic changing of institutions and a myriad of reporting lines was part of a strategy to mitigate the risks of coup attempts as it prevented the development of alternative power centers within state institutions.

Libya's fate turned again when in 2011, in the wake of popular uprisings in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, Britain and France initiated and led an intervention that empowered a plethora of Libyan opposition groups, both abroad and within the country. In the absence of any well-established or uncontested state structures, the opposition organized itself through local, informal networks of loyalty, establishing local militias and local governance structures. The short-term political objective of toppling Qaddafi initially united the rebels. However, beyond that shared goal lingered irreconcilable visions of what a future, post-Qaddafi Libya should look like. The international coalition that ultimately triggered the downfall of Qaddafi and his regime expected their military intervention and the following political transition to be short and successful, with a change of regime causing few negative regional and global consequences.

Ideas about developing a new Libya were simplistic: the West and its partners would back the National Transitional Council (NTC) and the loosely related militia. The West expected the Libyans – wealthy and highly educated on paper – to need little postwar assistance and imagined that they would work together towards a more liberal and more business-friendly future. Unfortunately, the assumptions underlying that best-case scenario turned out to be utterly flawed and post-Qaddafi Libya descended into civil war. Libya remained marred by centrifugal forces pulling the country apart. Once again, the United Nations had become the framework through which the international community tried to find common ground between the warring parties and the different regions, in order to prevent the break-up of its own creation – the independent, unified state of Libya.

The history of Libya shows that, throughout time, foreign powers have played a significant role in shaping its institutions and its policies. Intruders, interveners and enablers included Romans, Ottomans, Italians, British, French, Americans, Turks, Egyptians, sometimes Africans and more recently Gulf Arabs and those claiming to build an Islamic State. Sometimes, external threats and interventions helped unite the different tribes, families and classes of Libya. This was, for example, the case during the resistance and opposition to colonial control and decades later to Qaddafi's rule. At other times, foreign backing of rival factions within Libya nurtured chaos, polarization and civil strife instead. Egyptian interference during the monarchical rule is a case in point, as is the international support during the years of troubled political transition after 2011.

One of the objectives of the 1969 coup of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), masterminded by Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi, was to rid Libya of all detrimental foreign influences. A strong advocate of (Arab) nationalism, Qaddafi believed that his mission was to erase external influences in order to let a true Libyan spirit blossom. One complication to that vision was that Libya, as a unified place its inhabitants could identify with, had so far only existed in the imagination of external powers and a minority of Libyans. Upon its actual creation, first during Fascist Italian rule and then in the framework of the United Nations, the populations of the former Ottoman provinces Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and the Fezzan were hardly consulted on their future path and the establishment of new political, economic and social institutions. Centralized Libyan state authorities never exerted anything close to full control over the country's territory or over those living within its (disputed) borders. Even Qaddafi soon figured out that in order to consolidate his power, rather than creating a strong nation, the more successful strategy was one of managing a weak nation, using local, tribal and religious identities and loyalties as chips in a complicated game of balancing power relationships within the country.

At the same time, Libyan elites had always relied heavily on foreign donors, advisers and consultants, both with regard to domestic and foreign policies. Up until 1969, as a result of the dominant British and American influence during the first decades of independence, Libya was often depicted as a plaything or a puppet of the West. And indeed, without the external financial, material and political support received, the monarchy would most likely not have been able to remain in power for as long as it did. Nonetheless, the same seemed to hold true for Qaddafi's regime. Qaddafi was well aware of the fact that, despite his dreams and ambitions,

Libya could not do without its foreigners. His regime could put on a show of hostile rhetoric and symbolic acts, but to keep Libya's oil-based economy running, it also had to hold on to strong and structural ties with the outside world. Hoping to at least reduce the influence of the West, Qaddafi focused on building up relations in the Arab world and other post-colonial places. Where he failed to create serious synergies with fellow Arab leaders, he was able to build some excellent relations in postcolonial Africa. While useful to gather support for votes in the United Nations, unfortunately, these African supporters barely provided Qaddafi with the global standing and admiration his megalomaniac personality longed for. Ultimately, Qaddafi found himself dependent on those powers he claimed to resent most – the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Italy. He needed them for economic as well as political security. The more that support for his rule eroded at home, the more he had to rely on the goodwill of foreign governments and the provision of external guarantees. The 2011 revolution was indubitably impelled by domestic concerns and grievances, but the withdrawal of external support and the subsequent international intervention were decisive for the outcome of these local rebellions.

This book traces the history of the bilateral relations between Libya and those Western governments most vital to its political and economic development – the United Kingdom, Italy, France and the United States. Over the past century, these foreign powers most clearly shaped the path of Libya as a state. In 1911, Italy was the first European power to establish itself in the Ottoman province of Tripolitania and, less effectively, in Cyrenaica and parts of the desert hinterlands of the Fezzan. Britain was second in establishing a strong presence. From the time London set up the British Military Administration (BMA) in the eastern part of Libya during the Second World War, it knew to expand its reach gradually, leaving lasting traces on Libya's governance system. Also during the Second World War, France was granted control over the southern desert, using it predominantly as a springboard for its francophone possessions in the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. The United States, in particular under the Administration of President Ronald Reagan, contributed to the radicalization of Qaddafi's regime, including through the imposition of economic and military operations. The story told here is that of a longer-term history that holds the respective Western foreign policies towards Libya against the light of changing global power settings. At the surface, the picture of Libya and its relations to the outside world seems one of extreme

volatility and transformation, a rollercoaster going back and forth between consensus and conflict. Scratching that surface, a more complex, opaque web of direct and indirect interests and interdependencies emerges, actually exposing a substantial level of continuity and predictability.

The argument of this book is that, throughout history, the globe's most powerful international contenders have regarded Libya as a peripheral state, even after the discovery of vast quantities of oil. More than a century ago, the Great Powers of Europe considered the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica as the scraps of the imperialist scramble for Africa.<sup>2</sup> Britain predominantly focused on the east and southeast of the continent (Egypt, Sudan). The French concentrated on the west and southwest instead (Tunisia, Algeria, Niger and Chad). The desert territories in the middle constituted a natural, scarcely inhabited buffer between the historical spheres of influence of these two key European Imperial Powers.<sup>3</sup> Italy, as the least of the Great European Powers and treated as inferior to Britain, France, and Germany, was arguably the only country that really cared for control over the Libyan territories.<sup>4</sup> Libya belonged neither here nor there and never fell under the full protection of any significant global or regional powerhouse. A weak national identity, weak institutions and its peripheral position have made the country vulnerable to external influences. As a result, it repeatedly falls prey to foreign powers wanting to flex their muscles without causing any serious global reverberations. As this book narrates, this was the case in 1911, in 2011 and several times in between.

<sup>2</sup> A vast body of literature exists on colonialism in Africa, to which this text, unfortunately, cannot do justice. See for example Thomas Pakenham, *The scramble for Africa: White man's conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912*, Avon Books 1991; William H. Worger et al. (eds.), *Africa and the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; and Richard Reid, *A history of modern Africa: 1800 to the present*, John Wiley and Sons, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See Joseph S. Roucek, "The geopolitics of the Mediterranean", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 12 (4), 1953, pp. 347–354.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian foreign policy Before the First World War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

## Libya's Origins: The Colonial Scraps of North Africa

Prior to the 1911 conquest by the Italians, the territories now known as Libya displayed hardly any characteristics of a state in the contemporary sense of the word. While Tripoli and Benghazi could be regarded as somewhat urbanized centers, informal frontiers and local ties based on tribal dynamics and blood linkages prevailed in the vast majority of the desert countryside, where national or class loyalties were alien concepts. Still, regardless of the difference in units around which social and political life was organized, patterns of political behavior resembled those in Europe and elsewhere: groups acted out of a self-defined interest. They formed alliances and took sides according to what was opportune in light of key political interests, ranging from tribal survival, territorial, religious or economic expansion to group or personal prestige.

For several centuries, the inhabitants of the Libyan provinces had invested in a mutually beneficial alliance with the Ottomans. The dwellers of the coastal plains of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had invited the Sultan's forces to take up a governing role in their lands. The rulers of Constantinople provided the territories with general protection against external enemies, while the local administration of the many different communities and villages remained in the hands of indigenous rulers and tribal chiefs. From the middle of the sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century, the main threat came from Europe, as Europeans set out to sail all the globe's oceans and seas to discover new products and occupy new lands. The inhabitants of North Africa perceived the intrusions as Christian attacks,

and tribal leaders relied on the better-equipped Ottomans to help fend off incursions.<sup>1</sup>

The situation changed when local rulers lost the focus of a common enemy and instead started to fight each other and the Ottomans. By the early eighteenth century, the territories experienced a short tribal war that ended when Ahmed Qaramanli, a defected janissary of the Ottoman Sultan, murdered the Ottoman governor in Tripoli and declared himself Pasha. Making the title hereditary, he virtually united the lands around Tripoli into an independent entity that his family would rule from 1711 to 1836. At moments, its authority stretched to Benghazi in the east and into the Fezzan in the south. Constantinople witnessed the assertiveness of the Qaramanli with weariness, but decided that these peripheral provinces were not worth the battle. The Qaramanli financed their rule through control over the desert trade routes and by taxing their subjects. They found another source of income in requesting protection fees from foreign ships in order to sail safely through the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> In one of the most often-narrated diplomatic incidents of that time, the Americans refused to pay. Consequently, in 1801, Yusuf Qaramanli initiated a war with the United States that brought four years of hostilities, which included the capture of the American sailing frigate USS *Philadelphia* by Qaramanli forces. As part of the strategy to win the war, the US Consul to Tunis, William Eaton, proposed an alliance with Yusuf's brother Hamed. During his brother's rule, Hamed had been forced to live in exile in Egypt; in the hope of regaining power, he allied with the foreigners to defeat his own brother. In April–May 1805, a decisive battle took place in Derna, a small urban center relatively close to the Egyptian border. American mercenaries, assisted by Arab and Greek troops, defeated Yusuf's troops in what ended up in the history books as the first US battle on foreign soil. Following this Battle of Derna, Colonel Tobias Lear and Yusuf Qaramanli

<sup>1</sup> See M. Cherif Bassiouni (ed) *Libya: From repression to revolution*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013, pp. 3–22.

<sup>2</sup> For the Qaramanli period, see for example Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The making of modern Libya: State formation, colonization and resistance, 1830–1932*, SUNY Press, 1994, pp. 25–30; and Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, “From tribe to class: The origins and the politics of resistance in colonial Libya”, *Africa* 63 (2), 2008, pp. 297–310. Also see Anna Baldinetti, *The origins of the Libyan nation*, Routledge, 2010. For a narration from the US perspective, see for example James R. Sofka, “The Jeffersonian idea of national security: Commerce, the Atlantic balance of power, and the Barbary War, 1786–1805”, *Diplomatic History* 21 (4), 1997, pp. 519–544.

signed a Treaty of Peace and Amity between the United States of America and the “Subjects of Tripoli in Barbary”.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, a new threat from Europe was emerging, in the form of the 1830 French conquest of Algeria and the English occupation of Malta. Faced with these encroachments upon its weakening Empire, the Sublime Porte, the central government of the Ottoman Empire, in Constantinople, decided to curtail the powers of the Qaramanli dynasty and in 1835 appointed an Constantinople-minded governor in its place. This second period of more direct Ottoman rule in the Libyan provinces would last until 1912, when the Italians gained formal control over the territories.

On the northern side of the Mediterranean, political and economic nationalism had poisoned the relations between the governing classes of Europe. By the 1900s, colonial and imperial practices led to this European feuding flaring up all over the globe. The African continent was one such place. The so-called scramble for Africa left hardly any part of that continent untouched, though it was Africa’s northern, Mediterranean shore that remained closest to the homes and hearts of the Great Powers of Europe. French and British elites, as well as those emerging in Germany and Italy, looked at North Africa with unique mixtures of geostrategic ambitions, which included military expansionism, economic exploitation, political prestige and religious mission. The two most established powers – France and Britain – shared an interest in keeping the Mediterranean and the related global trade routes secured. Roughly speaking, France cared particularly about the vertical routes from French West Africa (Mali, Niger, Chad) through the Sahara northwards via Algeria, Tunisia or Morocco, crossing the Mediterranean, “home” to the hexagon.<sup>4</sup> Britain’s focus was on the horizontal waterways connecting the mother-island with the colonial crown jewel of India, on the way demanding control over the Gulf of Aden, the Suez Canal, Cyprus, Malta and Gibraltar. Both London and Paris saw the Libyan provinces as peripheral to their respective geopolitical interests.

Western interest in North Africa and the Middle East increased, as the Ottoman Empire was weakening. At the turn of the century, the future of

<sup>3</sup>Treaty of Peace and Amity, signed in Tripoli on 4 June 1805. Full English text available at Yale University’s Avalon Project website: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/bar1805t.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/bar1805t.asp).

<sup>4</sup>See for example C.W. Newbury and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, “French policy and the origins of the scramble for West Africa”, *The Journal of African History* 10 (2), 1969, pp. 253–276.



the fragile Ottoman Empire was the largest question mark in the political equation of the Mediterranean. The Turks were on the winning side in the 1853 Crimean War against Russia, but that victory owed little to the performance of the Sultan's forces. More important had been the support of Britain, France and the Kingdom of Sardinia. The flimsy Ottoman Empire had critically overstretched itself, though it was desperately trying to keep at least a peripheral role in the Great Power game by clinging to two of its strategic assets: the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. London, in particular, believed that propping up the Ottoman defenses was the best way to prevent disruptions to the waterways and to manage the crumbling of the empire in a controlled way – meaning, in favor of British, as well as French, colonial aspirations.

Britain and France had pioneered in colonial and imperial practices. Italy and Germany, in contrast, were latecomers and as a result looked overseas with a somewhat different set of motivations. The emerging powers saw territorial expansion as one of the key instruments to gain international respect and recognition. The Italian state had only been glued together in 1861 and the Italian forces added Rome in 1870, when French forces tasked with defending the Papal Territories were dragged away from the eternal city to fight in the war between France and Prussia. The Prussian victory in that war was a keystone of Otto von Bismarck's project of building a strong, centralized and unified Germany. In Italy's nation-building efforts, the southern shores of the Mediterranean held a special place. For the great majority of those newly branded as "Italians", local identities remained of great importance. Even today, a distrust of the national authorities plagues the country (as does a fear of centralization of power and a Rome-led redistribution of resources). In an attempt to change these localized loyalties, Italian national elites set out to create a shared, territory-wide feeling of belonging. Cherry-picking from the past, a national history emerged in which Italy was on its way to become, once again, a prime Mediterranean power, worthy of an empire that would remind others of Ancient Roman times. Giuseppe Mazzini, together with Count Cavour and Giuseppe Garibaldi one of the main ideologues of the Italian unification movement, articulated the idea of *Terza Roma*: a Rome of the People that would succeed the Rome of the Emperors and the Rome of the Popes.<sup>5</sup> As with the Roman Empire, nationalists viewed

<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Mazzini, *Per la proclamazione della repubblica romana*, "La Costituente italiana", 15 February 1849.

expansion into the southern Mediterranean as a natural development following the unification of Italy. In 1872, an Italian nationalist passionately noted:

Egypt, Tunisia, Tripoli, Algeria lie only at short distance from our lands, like our natural colonies (...) Let us throw ourselves on this sea that we have wrongly left abandoned for several centuries, and which lies there, ready, longing to receive us, and which for some time has been inviting us, which embraces, which clasps, which kisses so affectionately our lands. She is our only trustee and true friend.<sup>6</sup>

Acquiring colonies in North Africa was part of Italy's strategy to convince other Europeans of its worth. While at home Rome glorified its historical achievements, in other European capitals, Italy's nineteenth century political, economic and social conditions tended to be subject to pity or scorn. To give just a few examples: the French writer Madame de Staël depicted Italy as a country that existed merely because of its history, Rome being a city of tombs, only capable of celebrating dead people.<sup>7</sup> The poet Alphonse de Lamartine declared the contemporary Italians to be poor imitations of their ancestors, and the British poet Percy Shelley considered them a miserable race, without common sense and imagination: a tribe of idiots and slaves.<sup>8</sup> Several Italian poets and writers despised their own new homeland in similar ways, including Giacomo Leopardi, Ugo Foscolo, Edmondo De Amicis and Carlo Collodi, author of the adventures of the little pine-boy *Pinocchio*. The political elites of the new Italy did not fare much better in the judgment of their peers. For Bismarck, Italy was "the fifth wheel to the concert of European nations", Von Moltke had called the Italian nation "a gang of thieves", Lord Salisbury depicted the Italians as "sturdy beggars" and Sir Edward Grey spoke about "the bluebottle flies of international politics: always buzzing when one wants to be quiet. Happily they do not stay".<sup>9</sup>

Initially, Italy had hoped to govern in Tunisia, only 150 kilometers away from the Italian island of Sicily. Italy considered the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica of interest as well, but statistics suggested

<sup>6</sup> Luigi Campo Fregoso, *Del primato italiano sul Mediterraneo*, 1872.

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Luisa Germaine (Madame de) Stael, *Corinne, ou, L'Italie*, Vol. I, 1809.

<sup>8</sup> Alphonse de Lamartine, *Dernier chant du pèlerinage d'Harold*, 1825; Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The prose works*, Vol. II, 1888.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Bosworth, *Least of the Great Powers*, p. 7.

Tunisia as the natural starting point for any colonial adventure. At the beginning of the 1870s, a mere 600 Italians dwelled in Tripolitania, while some 10,000 had already migrated to Tunisia with numbers rising steadily.<sup>10</sup> France also had its eyes on Tunis and wanted to include the territory in its continuously expanding sphere of influence in Africa. Several powers hostile to French ambitions (especially Germany and Austria-Hungary) tried to push Italy towards hasty action, but Italy hesitated. France received a *carte blanche* to occupy Tunis at the Congress of Berlin (1878), where the Great Powers had discussed the consequences of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The Italians were furious; the news of the 1881 French invasion of Tunisia filled Rome with indignation and rage.<sup>11</sup> Anger with France over its occupation of Tunis fed into Italy's decision to join Germany and Austria-Hungary in the 1882 Triple Alliance – as opposed to the alliance of the Entente Powers that included Britain, France and, by 1907, Russia.

The Italian move disquieted Britain, which had hoped to receive Rome's support for its own coalition. Nonetheless, London sensed that Italian politicians could be convinced to change their minds and to change sides, as long as they were given the right incentives to do so. London believed these incentives to lie in the colonial realm. It urged Italy to forget about Tunis and focus on Tripoli instead. The French, who also wanted Italy to join the Entente Powers, adopted a similarly conciliatory approach. The *Quai d'Orsay*, the French Foreign Ministry, invited the Italian ambassador for consultations and allegedly asked:

Why do you keep thinking obstinately about Tunisia, where your competition could one day or another bring turbulence to our good relations? Why don't you turn your eye to Tripoli, where you do not have to fight with us, nor with others?<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, London invited Italy to take up a leading role in the Horn of Africa, where one could still find several territories that did not yet fall under the control of any European power. The British in Somaliland imagined the Italians to constitute a useful, harmless buffer against the

<sup>10</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Bolletino del Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (Demografia della colonia italiana di Tunisia), 1888.

<sup>11</sup> Vittorio Ianari, *Lo stivale nel mare*, Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2006, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Francesco Crispi, *Politica estera: memorie e documenti raccolti e ordinati* by T. Palamenghi-Crispi, 1914, p. 85.

French as well as against the *Mahdists*, the indigenous rebels who were a serious headache for their colonial forces.

Italian prime minister Francesco Crispi was excited about the opportunity of joining the ranks of Britain and France, and so were many others in his government. Crispi quickly accepted the offer to set up a base in the Horn of Africa. After all, as Britain had illustrated with Suez and Aden, establishing control in the Horn was key to control over the Mediterranean basin. Crispi also started restructuring the Italian institutions for a colonial adventure: a Colonial Office was set up within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and anti-imperialist voices were purged peacefully from the Italian diplomatic corps.<sup>13</sup> In 1885, British troops supported the Italian military in their occupation of Massaua in Eritrea, but Italy's first colonial experience turned out far from successful. Despite the rhetoric and ambitious ardor, Italy's forces were ill prepared and no elaborate, coherent or convincing strategic or implementation plan existed to establish control over and develop the new territories. In the year of the occupation, the Italian parliament had asked Crispi what the whole point of this colonial exercise actually was. His response revealed the prevailing mood: "What our goal is? We only have one: affirm the name of Italy in the African regions and demonstrate to the barbarians that we are strong and powerful! Those barbarians do not feel other than the power of the cannon. Well, this cannon will thunder at this opportune moment".<sup>14</sup> It soon became clear though that Italy would not convince the "barbarians" or anyone else of its international grandeur. Instead, Italy became the laughing stock of Europe as the first colonial force defeated by Africans. The humiliating 1896 Battle of Adowa ended Crispi's political career and underlined the fragility of Italy's international standing. The consequence of the embarrassment of Adowa and defeat in the Horn of Africa was that Rome became increasingly and even more belligerently fixated on the territories between Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>15</sup> As one historian put it, "the repulse of Adowa carried within itself the Tripoli War".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>E. Serra, "I diplomatici italiani, la Guerra di Libia e l'imperialismo", in: E. Serra and C. Seton-Watson (eds), *Italia e Inghilterra nell'età dell'imperialismo*, Milano: ISPI/Franco Angeli, 1990, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup>G. Piccinini, *Guerra d'Africa*, Roma: Perino, 1887, p. 981.

<sup>15</sup>Timothy W. Childs, *Italo-Turkish diplomacy and the war over Libya, 1911–1912*, Leyden/New York: E.J. Brill, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>J.L. Miege, *L'imperialismo coloniale italiano dal 1870 ai giorni nostri*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1976, p. 63.

To move into the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica without repercussions, Italy needed the explicit consent of the other, more dominant, European powers. Germany had already endorsed Italian ambitions in North Africa during the 1887 renegotiation of the Triple Alliance, but getting guarantees from Britain and France, given their established interests in the Mediterranean, was more challenging. In 1899, an Italian attempt to obtain London's guarantee not to claim any territory in Tripolitania had failed. A year later, Rome did however succeed in getting a partial commitment from France. In a joint statement with the French Ambassador to Rome, Camillo Barrère, one reads: "if there should occur a modification in the political or territorial integrity of Morocco, Italy (...) would reserve itself the right of developing eventually her influence in respect of Tripolitania-Cyrenaica".<sup>17</sup> This meant that if France were to establish its rule in Morocco, Paris would allow Italy to do the same in Tripoli. Giulio Prinetti, who had become Italy's foreign minister in 1901, made territorial expansion in North Africa a number one priority and aggressively continued the quest for international guarantees regarding the Libyan provinces.<sup>18</sup> He received additional consent from Austria and the French reconfirmed their accommodating position. To increase international attention to the Italian case, Sidney Sonnino, still a junior diplomat at that point in time, suggested a strategy of provocation to "have the question of Tripoli also inflate artificially".<sup>19</sup> In 1901, Italians had tried to open a post office in Benghazi, but the Ottoman representative in the city blocked the move, which it perceived as a first step towards colonization. Prinetti, purposefully overreacting, dispatched two warships to the Mediterranean coast, one cruising towards Benghazi, the other towards Tripoli. In this context, in January 1902, Prinetti mentioned once more to the British Ambassador in Rome Italy's resolve to take possession of Tripoli. This time, to Prinetti's surprise, the Ambassador vaguely stated: "any alteration in the status quo in Libya would be in conformity with Italian interests".<sup>20</sup> Prinetti presented this British statement as a mandate for Italy to act, but in London the statement was explained as leaving Britain completely without obligations with regard to Italy's ambitions in Tripoli.

<sup>17</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> Del Boca, *Italiani in Libia*, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 137.

Prinetti was ready to cross the Mediterranean. However, others, including prime minister Giuseppe Zanardelli, kept a more cautious line as they felt their country was not yet ready for a serious colonial exercise that would involve withstanding competition from France and Britain in North Africa. When Prinetti started implementing his ideas in the early 1900s, Zanardelli forcefully deactivated the dynamics of escalation. Giovanni Giolitti, minister in the same cabinet, threatened to resign over Prinetti's behavior. A decade later, in the role of prime minister, Giolitti himself would order the Italian occupation of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. What had changed in that decade was that a strong pro-colonial lobby had ensured a critical mass of public support. After Zanardelli dismissed Prinetti's ideas, the colonial issue started heating up public and parliamentary debates. Still, in economic terms, occupation seemed to make little sense: in 1905, only 70 cents of every 1000 lira of Italian foreign trade was with Tripolitania – less than 0.1 percent.<sup>21</sup>

The pro-colonial lobby forwarded a simplistic line of thinking in the debate on colonial expansion: whereas Britain had constructed an empire through foreign investments of excess capital, Italy could export its surplus population as excess labor.<sup>22</sup> Italy, after all, suffered from population pressure. The population density of Italy had increased from 63.2 inhabitants per square kilometer in 1800 to 87 in 1861. Between 1861 and 1911, the density increased from 87 to 123 inhabitants per square kilometer.<sup>23</sup> Unable to find jobs at home, Italians started leaving by the thousand. In the peak years of the early 1900s, as many as 800,000 citizens a year searched for a living abroad, most often in the Americas.<sup>24</sup> The Italian authorities hoped that by creating new opportunities in the colonies, they could reverse these flows. The lobby also pitched the need for colonial expansion as an unavoidable alternative to unemployment and starvation at home. They depicted the offer of plots of land in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica to Italian settlers as a solution to the brain drain and a way to alleviate rampant poverty at home. Within this narrative, they tried

<sup>21</sup> Intervention of Maggiorino, Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, legislatura XXII, first section, discussions, May 1905. Quoted in L. de Rosa, *Banco di Roma (1880–1992) introduzione storico-economica*, Vol. I, 2001, p. 240.

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell H.H. Macartney and Paul Cremona, *Italy's foreign and colonial policy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 275.

<sup>23</sup> David V. Glass and David E.C. Eversley (eds), *Population in history*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1965, pp. 576–587.

<sup>24</sup> Glass and Eversley (eds), *Population in history*, pp. 576–587.

to depict an image of Italy as a more benign colonizer. Italian colonialism would be different from the British model, which had been driven by exploitative capitalism and the import of raw materials for the home economy, and different from the French approach of supposedly assimilating their colonial subjects.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the other European settlers, Italians would not be ashamed to work in the fields, side by side with the indigenous population.<sup>26</sup> The farmers of the southern regions of Calabria and Basilicata in particular, as well as the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, had the right expertise to cultivate relatively dry soil. Italians could be of help in making the agricultural sector blossom in the more arid parts of North Africa. With this argument, Italy portrayed its colonization strategy as including hard, manual labor alongside their colonies' natives. A second line of argumentation introduced elements of international competition. Pro-colonial Italian elites expressed fear that if Tripoli "were to fall under the domination of a different power, it would feel as if our [Italian] breathing had been cut off".<sup>27</sup> The pro-colonial lobby fed these fears by spreading stories about the ongoing attempts of the Maltese – the puppets of London – to penetrate Libya before the Italians did.<sup>28</sup> This line of thought was to become dominant during the Fascist period, as such ideas blended even more forcefully with exclusive nationalism. By then, theorists including Antonio Labriola and Benito Mussolini started seeing international politics as a class struggle in which they categorized Italy as a proletarian nation, a champion of the "have-nots" which had to revolt against "the haves" – led by Britain and France.

Rome suffered from a volatile political climate, where prime ministers and ministers came and went. Despite this dynamism, three Italian politicians dominated the office of the Italian foreign minister between 1903 and 1914: Tommaso Tittoni, Conte Francesco Guicciardini and the Marquis di San Giuliano. The three men shared an explicitly expansionist

<sup>25</sup> See for example M.D. Lewis, "One hundred million Frenchmen: the 'assimilation' theory in French colonial policy", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1962, pp. 129–153; and P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, "Gentlemanly capitalism and British expansion overseas", *The Economic History Review* 39 (4), pp. 501–525.

<sup>26</sup> Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth shore, the Italian occupation of Libya*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974, p. xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Intervention of E. Artom, *Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, legislatura XXII, first section, discussions*, May 1905, p. 2690. Quoted in De Rosa, *Banco di Roma*, p. 240.

<sup>28</sup> Camera dei Deputati, *legislatura XXII, first section, discussions*, May 1905, p. 2737. Quoted in De Rosa, *Banco di Roma*, p. 241.

view and sought to overcome Crispi's policy of hesitancy and unprepared waiting. Italy had to bury the legacy of colonial defeat at Adowa (1896) and focus on a new colonial adventure. In 1911, San Giuliano appointed Giacomo De Martino as his secretary general. Prior to this posting, De Martino had presided over the Colonial Institute and had been governor of Somaliland. His appointment was widely seen as a reward for his positive attitude towards Italian expansion in Libya.<sup>29</sup> De Martino's family tree branched out over Tunisia and Egypt and in 1908, he stated: "Tripoli opens her arms and is waiting. The land is the same as that of Tunis, if not more fertile; the climatic conditions are the same (...) minerals, there must be (...) what is needed is a government which acts, or is willing to assist action".<sup>30</sup> A year earlier, he had asserted that "above all, Italy must develop the consciousness of being a Great Mediterranean Power", calling Tripoli "a land so near to us almost to be able to see it, a land fertile, rich, once a happy and prosperous colony of the Greeks and the Romans".<sup>31</sup> Cyrenaica as well, in his view, was a real Eden. The Sicilian-born San Giuliano was of the same opinion, and was recorded as saying: "Italian ambitions in Libya dated back to Italy's beginnings as a nation. Indeed, even before the *Risorgimento*, both the Kingdoms of the Two Sicilies and the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia had been interested in colonial acquisition in North Africa and Ethiopia".<sup>32</sup>

Acknowledging that the country might still be militarily too weak to act, the pro-colonial camp recommended the use of trade, finance and culture more strategically as foreign policy instruments. As a first step towards controlling the economic and financial networks in the Ottoman provinces, Italy had opened post offices in several of them. By 1906, it had established banking facilities as well. Tommaso Tittoni was a key actor in the economic penetration of Libya and he made the Banco di Roma into its driving force.<sup>33</sup> This bank, founded in 1880 with funds of the clerical aristocracy of the Vatican, was the only Italian bank with foreign branches – in Paris, in Alexandria and later in Valletta, Malta. Encouraged by the ministry, the Banco di Roma started exploring commercial oppor-

<sup>29</sup> Serra and Seton-Watson, *Italia e Inghilterra*, p. 160.

<sup>30</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, pp. 134–135.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Renato Mori, "La penetrazione pacifica italiana in Libia dal 1907 al 1911 e il Banco di Roma", *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali* 24 (1), 1957, pp. 102–118; and Vittorio Ianari, *Lo stivale*.



tunities in Tripoli and Benghazi. Officially, the bank acted as a private firm with no relations to the Italian state, explaining expansion in Tripoli as a step in creating an economically profitable Mediterranean network of offices. Nonetheless, economic and political motives had merged, as can be read in the notes of a 1907 reunion of politicians and the bank's directors. The report states that the bank, as suggested by the Colonial Institute and approved by the ministry, decided to invest heavily in minerals, agriculture and public works, archeological excavations and infrastructure in order to advance Italian influence in the provinces.<sup>34</sup>

The bank's vice-director was Tommaso Tittoni's brother and both were very close to the Catholic establishment. In the late 1930s, the brother of the Director of the Banco di Roma, Eugenio Pacelli, would be appointed Pope (Pius XII). The Vatican had its own interests in increasing Italian influence in North Africa and was especially eager to check the French, with whom it had severed diplomatic ties over the protection of religious interests in the Near East and the 1905 French Law of Separation between Church and State. The Holy See's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, explicitly advocated colonialism and the Vatican was widely involved in missionary activities that helped pave the way for the expansion of Italian interests in Libya. The Ottoman authorities, officially still in charge in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, were well aware of Rome's political intentions. As a way of protest, Constantinople, supported by British and French capital, decided to open a competing branch of the Imperial Ottoman Bank in Tripoli, soon after the Banco di Roma started its operations in 1906. The Italian consul in Tripoli concluded that this was a "smart maneuver to paralyze the most powerful weapon Italy has in determining and subsidizing its peaceful penetration of the country".<sup>35</sup>

As time passed, rivalry between the European powers grew steadily and competing interests for the Libyan provinces started to emerge. London in particular seemed to be rapidly increasing its interest in Cyrenaica. This eastern province was economically dependent on British-administered Egypt and the majority of its external trade was with either Egypt or Britain. Egypt had, throughout history, attempted to annex Cyrenaica several

<sup>34</sup> Archivio Storico del Ministero Africa Italiano [ASMAI], Vol. II (Libia) Posizione 178/1, Tittoni to Imperiali, Rome, 31 May 1907.

<sup>35</sup> Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri [ASMAE] (Libia) Pacco 27, 1906–1911, 1/24, Italian Consul General in Tripoli Pestalozza to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tripoli, 6 April 1906.

times and Britain was in search of a port between Malta and Alexandria. The port city of Tobruq seemed an excellent option and, while perhaps not directly representative of London's views, the British consul in Libya made no secret of British ambitions regarding "Cyrenaica to England". Apparently, he went as far as publishing a map that showed Cyrenaica as part of Egypt.<sup>36</sup>

In light of this growing competition, the Italian authorities in Benghazi signaled, in 1907, to the foreign ministry the need to speed up the conquest of the Ottoman provinces.<sup>37</sup> Four years later, in July 1911, the German gunboat *Panther* positioned itself at the port of Agadir, Morocco, after the French had intervened in Morocco. The diplomatic crisis triggered by France and Germany was predominantly about Germany's behavior, rather than Italy's. Germany had risked provoking an escalation of a long-running dispute it had with France over Morocco. At the same time, Germany's relations with Britain deteriorated further due to the challenges posed to UK naval supremacy by the Germans' massive expansion of their Fleet for the High Seas, as initiated by Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz.<sup>38</sup> In the shadow of this potentially more urgent international event in 1911, Prime minister Giovanni Giolitti decided not to hesitate. He quickly invoked the Franco-Italian agreement linking Italy's special interest in Tripoli to France's special interest in Morocco, and the Italian Embassy in Constantinople followed up by presenting the Ottomans with an ultimatum. Rome requested consent for an Italian military occupation of Tripoli within 24 hours. The Italians stated as reasons for the hostility the obstruction of Italian commercial interests and the need to safeguard the rights of Italian citizens. The Ottoman authorities rejected the ultimatum and Rome declared war.<sup>39</sup> Bombs fell on Tripoli on 3 October 1911, which made Italy the first power ever to use air strikes in a theater of war. In addition, troops sailed to the coast of Tripoli and occupied critical infrastructure. Giovanni Giolitti, the Italian prime minister who had ordered the invasion, believed the occupation to be a historical necessity. Looking for further justifications than the change in the status of Morocco and the Ottoman's economic obstructions in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica,

<sup>36</sup> De Rosa, *Banco di Roma*, p. 270.

<sup>37</sup> De Rosa, *Banco di Roma*, p. 270.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Paul M. Kennedy, *The rise of the Anglo-German antagonism: 1860–1914*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Stephenson, *A box of sand: The Italo-Ottoman War 1911–1912*, Tattered Flag, 2014, p. 236.

Giolitti also alluded to evidence of others preparing an invasion and rivals blackmailing Italy over its desire to set up colonies. In his view, to stop this game of political manipulation by the other European states, Rome had to close the chapter.<sup>40</sup> He perceived facts that stood out as:

historical inevitabilities which no nation can escape without irreparably compromising its own future. In such moments, it is the duty of a government to assume all responsibility because any hesitation or delay might mark the start of a political decline that would produce consequences that the nation would deplore for many years, possibly for centuries.<sup>41</sup>

In a buoyant mood, humming the tune of the popular pro-colonial song “Tripoli, bel suol d’amore”,<sup>42</sup> an army division of 15,000 soldiers landed on the southern Mediterranean shores. Within two weeks, the Italians occupied the main coastal towns in the west. A week later, soldiers landed in the eastern province of Cyrenaica. Italian optimism and expectations of a quick victory and easy occupation quickly faded. During the first three weeks, the Italians encountered little resistance. Then, events in the small oasis town of Sciara Sciat shattered the idea that the indigenous tribes welcomed this new Italian presence. Settlers of this oasis, Berber equestrians, Arab and Turkish troops united into a force of around 8,000 to 10,000 men and, protecting their households and livelihoods, killed 21 officers

<sup>40</sup> Childs, *Italo-Turkish Diplomacy*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in N. Valeri, *Giolitti*, UTET Torino 1971, pp. 218–219.

<sup>42</sup> The song is by Giovanni Corvetto and was composed in 1911:

*Tripoli, bel suol d'amore,  
ti giunga dolce questa mia canzon!  
Sventoli il tricolore  
sulle tue torri al rombo del cannon!  
Naviga, o corazzata:  
benigno è il vento e dolce la stagion.  
Tripoli, terra incantata,  
sarai italiana al rombo del cannon!  
Tripoli, beautiful land of love,  
I send to you this sweet song!  
Wave the tricolor  
in your towers to the roar of the cannon!  
Sail, battleship;  
benign is the wind and sweet is the season.  
Tripoli, enchanted land,  
you will be Italian at the roar of the cannon!*

and 482 Italian troops.<sup>43</sup> In response, Italy indiscriminately killed a large number of fighters, but also many unarmed civilians, with some estimates ranging to up to 4,000.<sup>44</sup> Those domestically opposed to the occupation concluded that Italy was:

bored in 1911. It was disgusted by everything. The public despised the democratic parties. Anything was considered better than this current universal stagnation. And this anything was presented by the daily newspapers in the conquest of the “promised land”: an easy conquest, nothing expensive, enormous productivity capacity, extremely necessary for Italy.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of any setbacks and criticisms, Italian prime minister Giovanni Giolitti rejoiced over the international recognition his government hoped to receive and proudly asserted: “the regions of Italy, north and south, whose interests so often appeared to diverge, were entirely at one on the question of Tripoli”.<sup>46</sup> For Italy, grabbing the Ottoman provinces was part of overcoming a lingering inferiority complex that the kingdom had suffered from since its birth and which had been reaffirmed by the defeat at Adowa.

Italy had hoped to impress its peers, but international praise remained subdued. Italy had not notified any other government officially until the start of the Italo-Turkish War, which irked the Great Powers. Moreover, while Rome was after a quick intervention and did not expect the occupation of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica to have a destabilizing regional effect, the war dragged on and created regional overspills. Voices from London labeled the Italian actions as a damnable rascality and brigandry, with the British press and public turning decisively against Italian actions in the Mediterranean.<sup>47</sup> Foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey explained with British

<sup>43</sup> Angelo del Boca and Anthony Shugaar, *Mohamed Fekini and the fight to free Libya*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 19–30.

<sup>44</sup> See for example Lino del Fra, *Sciara Sciata: genocidio nell'oasi: l'esercito italiano a Tripoli*, Manifestolibri, 2011; Angelo del Boca, *Italiani, Brava Gente*, 2005 or Bruce Vandervort, “Verso la quarta sponda la guerra italiana per la Libia (1911–1912)”, *Stato maggiore dell'esercito*, Roma, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Geatano Salvemini, *Come siamo andati in Libia*, Libreria della Voce, Firenze, 1914, p. xvi.

<sup>46</sup> Giovanni Giolitti on 4 December 1911, quoted in C. Seton Watson, 1990, p. 125.

<sup>47</sup> Admiral Jackie Fisher quoted in Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 173. *The Economist* rejected and repudiated “the suggestion made by certain Italian journalists that because of traditional sympathy of England for Italy (...) we are bound now to smile approval; on this

politeness that formally, Britain did not oppose Italian actions in North Africa. Nevertheless, he regarded the annexation of Tripoli, by force, as an extreme step, of which the indirect consequences could cause great embarrassment to other powers, including to Britain. Grey urged Italy not to mortify other Europeans with such behavior.<sup>48</sup> Britain's reaction was based on the feared impact that Italy's actions would have on the stability of the Ottoman Empire and the maritime routes of the Mediterranean. London also worried about the reaction of the Muslims in its own colonial empire, numbering some 80 million individuals.<sup>49</sup> Despite the outrage, the official line was one of mild condemnation. In a note to the Foreign Office, the British Ambassador in Rome, Sir Rennell Rodd, summed up the concerns:

An Italy with one foot in Sicily and one in Tripoli, with naval bases on the one side at Augusta and Taranto, and a good potential base at Tobruq on the other, will become a more important factor (...) It would be senseless to sacrifice our own advantage to a hastily formed sense of righteous indignation, which however genuinely felt, is not likely to carry conviction to public opinion on the continent.<sup>50</sup>

Headquarters in London agreed: "It is most important that neither we nor France should side against Italy now".<sup>51</sup>

The leniency of the Great Powers was based on the expectation that the war over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica would be brief. After all, the desert lands were only sparsely populated, the tribes were considered economically and militarily backward and the Turks were likely to give up these peripheral lands relatively easily. Nevertheless, the war dragged on. At the beginning of 1912, the Italian Supreme Command concluded that to bring the fight to an end, its forces had to divert Turkish attention away from the Libyan provinces. The idea was to hit the Ottomans elsewhere in order to make them realize that Tripolitania and Cyrenaica should

detestable outbreak of chauvinism and brigandage". One of the least critical reactions came from the US Ambassador in Rome, H. Nelson Gay, who declared that "the great economic and strategic advantages to Italy must stamp the annexation of Tripoli as a master-stroke of statesmanship." Serra and Seton-Watson, *Italia and Inghilterra*, p. 115.

<sup>48</sup> Bosworth, *Least of Great Powers*, p. 173.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Seton-Watson, "British perceptions of the Italo-Turkish War 1911-1912", in Serra and Seton-Watson, *Italia e Inghilterra*, pp. 111-145.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Serra and Seton-Watson, *Italia and Inghilterra*, p. 318.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Serra and Seton-Watson, *Italia and Inghilterra*, p. 112.

not be Constantinople's priority. The choice fell on bombing the harbor of Beirut: there, on February 24, 1912, Italian forces sank two Turkish gunboats in the port. To Rome's despair, the Turkish reaction remained controlled and entailed only political measures as the Porte called for the expulsion of Italian subjects – all except priests – from Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, and later on, the whole of Lebanon. The Italian attempts to provoke the Ottomans outside Libyan territories triggered Britain to mobilize the Great Powers to punish Italy for its acts, but Austria-Hungary and Russia refused to apply sanctions. The international reluctance to discipline Italy led to another attack: on April 18, an Italian naval squadron bombed the Turkish fortifications in the Dardanelles. This time, the Ottomans closed the Straits to all shipping immediately. Several weeks later, the Italians occupied 13 Aegean islands, now known as the Dodecanese. The Greek inhabitants of the occupied islands seized the opportunity to ask for autonomous status or union with Greece, something that had the potential to ignite the entire Balkans.<sup>52</sup> During the summer of 1912, yet another possible front loomed for the Turks with the emergence of the Balkan League of Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Greece. Its members were hopeful that the ongoing Italo-Turkish war would provide the opportunity for, among other things, a move to independence in Bulgarian territory. Diverting the attention of Constantinople finally seemed to pay off. Ultimately, the Turks could only handle so many complications at once and they decided on peace negotiations with Italy. The signing of the Treaty of Ouchy on October 18, 1912 ended the Italo-Turkish War.<sup>53</sup>

From the beginning of its political history, Italy had hoped to be a significant power of in the Mediterranean and in North Africa. Partly driven by unrealistic ambitions and partly by fear that France or Britain would also attempt to establish themselves in the area between Tunisia and Egypt, Rome decided to challenge the Ottoman Empire and conquer Tripoli, Benghazi and their surroundings. Italy's colonial adventure in what would become Libya took off with little planning and little knowledge of the local inhabitants. In 1912, two external powers, the Italians and the Ottomans, decided on the administrative future of the provinces of Tripolitania and

<sup>52</sup> Francesco Caccamo, "Italy, Libya and the Balkans", in: William Mulligan et al. (eds), *The wars before the Great Wars*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 21–41.

<sup>53</sup> Andrea Ungari (ed), *The Libyan War 1911–1912*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 89.

Cyrenaica. This legal transfer of sovereignty from the Ottoman Sultan to the Italian authorities was, however, meaningless to the majority of tribal elders and to Muslims loyal to Islam rather than to the Ottoman Sultan. After the official ending of the war between Italy and the Ottoman Empire in the Libyan provinces, the “big sandbox”, would remain a hotbed of rebellion and guerilla attacks against the new Italian rulers.

## Libya During the World Wars: Other People's Battlefield

Italy paid a high price for its bid for Great Power status. Establishing effective governance over the new North African territories turned out to be complicated. Transforming arid land into an agricultural paradise also proved less easy than the colonial lobby had depicted. Italy's misperceptions of the agricultural value of its newly conquered territories became painfully clear not long after the start of the colonization efforts. The coastal areas were blessed with a little fertile soil ready for cultivation, but the vast areas inland consisted mainly of desert, rocks and scrub. Italian authorities had been convinced its citizens could make a difference and prided themselves for adhering to a type of colonial model distinctive from that of its European peers. The Italian lobby portrayed the Italians as wanting to work alongside the locals and to develop the lands into an agricultural paradise through joint effort. Who could be better at making the desert flower than farmers from the arid, southern regions of Italy? However, many of them, confronted with useless plots of sandy land, flocked to the urban centers soon after their relocation, in search of alternative ways of living. In the hope of keeping alive the dream of an agricultural empire, Rome initiated an expensive subsidy scheme to incentivize colonists to stay on the land. As a result of this state intervention, within two decades, Rome would provide and control almost all elements of colonial life, including the farms, houses, village centers, livestock, seeds and fertilizers.



The debacle of Sciara Sciat had also shown that Italian settlers struggled to conquer the hearts and minds of the local population. The Libyans set up an organized resistance that, especially in the east, further drained Italian resources. Italy's army lacked material and men, and was low in morale. In the southwest, Italian troops penetrated only as far as Ghadames, the Saharan caravan trade hub near the border with Algeria and Tunisia. In the east, in Cyrenaica, the Italians were able to occupy a few urban centers, including Benghazi, Derna and Tobruq, but in most other settlements, tribal elders retained their status as the ultimate decision-makers.<sup>1</sup> A large majority of the tribes in the east remained loyal to the Sanussiyya, the strongest of tribal coalitions, which would ultimately become the prime resistance force against the Italian intruders.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the change in status of the Ottoman provinces, the First World War transformed the dynamics in North Africa and Europe. Libya, as part of the Italian sphere of influence but bordering British and French controlled territory, found itself on a fault line of fighting. The war aggravated Italy's political, economic and military situation. The country's public finances had been unhealthy ever since the inception of Italy as a state, but the colonial adventure and the participation in the war contributed significantly to its bankruptcy.<sup>3</sup> When fighting broke out in 1914, Italy initially claimed neutrality, showing eagerness to stay on the fence despite its membership of the Triple Alliance. A year into the devastating war, Italy decided to join the struggle on the side of the Entente Powers, the alliance led by France and Britain. In April 1915, Italy signed the Treaty of London and declared war on its former allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary. At the heart of the decision was a promise of further colonial expansion and increased international influence. The Great Powers had assured Italy of influence over the so-called *terre irredente*, "unredeemed territories" with Italian-speaking majorities outside the Italian state borders, as well as adequate colonial compensation.

<sup>1</sup> See for example Lisa Anderson, "Tribe and state: Libyan anomalies", in: Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (eds), *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*, Los Angeles, Berkeley, 1990, pp. 288–302.

<sup>2</sup> See for a contemporary overview of the tribal political culture in Cyrenaica Thomas Huesken, "Tribal political culture and the revolution in the Cyrenaica of Libya", Conference Paper presented to the Libyan Centre for Studies and Research, Doha, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Claudio G. Segré, *Fourth shore*, p. xiv.

Italy participated in the Great War because it expected Britain and France to grant it a fair share of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. London and Paris considered the fact that such promises conflicted with pledges made to other temporary allies as a problem for later.<sup>4</sup> In 1916, word of the secret Anglo-French Sykes-Picot Agreement reached Sidney Sonnino, Italian minister of foreign affairs, and the fact that no one had consulted Italy, infuriated him. Instead, with the consent of Russia, these agreements envisioned a partition of the Ottoman Empire that left Italy uncompensated. Angered, Sonnino forced discussions on another, accompanying treaty, which he, Alexandre Ribot and David Lloyd George endorsed during a summit at Saint Jean de Maurienne in April 1917. The new arrangement allocated to Italy the southwestern part of Turkish Anatolia, Smyrna, Konya and Adalia. This time, the Russians remained out of the agreement due to the changes in their policy outlook after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

During the First World War, the seeds were planted for a British–Cyrenaican alliance that would ultimately lead to Libyan independence under Sanussi rule. For Italy, committing troops to the European war front had meant pulling material and men away from the colonial endeavor in Libya. The Ottomans, fighting on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary, sensed an opportunity to break Italian rule in its former peripheral provinces and Constantinople decided to prop up the indigenous resistance, particularly in Cyrenaica where it invested in a stronger alliance with the Sanussi-led opposition. At the time, Sidi Ahmad al-Sharif, a seasoned fighter who had previously been in charge of an (unsuccessful) struggle against the French in Chad, was leading the Sanussi forces. Al-Sharif had an interest in receiving Ottoman support in the fight against the Italians. However, Constantinople not only urged the Sanussi to take on the Italians in the Libyan territories, but also the British in the Egyptian border areas. Aware of the risks of an attack on British interests, al-Sharif communicated to the British authorities in Egypt his willingness to maintain peaceful relations.<sup>5</sup> While he sincerely wanted to abstain from any confrontation with British forces, ultimately al-Sharif gave into Ottoman pressure and launched an attack across the border with Egypt. The Sanussi were able to briefly occupy the Egyptian border town of Salloum, but

<sup>4</sup>David Thomson, *England in the twentieth century (1914–1963)*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 15.

were unable to hold that position for long. Overall, the Sanussi campaign utterly failed; the defeated al-Sharif opted for exile in Austria-Hungary and later Turkey. He passed the Sanussi leadership of the resistance in Cyrenaica to his cousin, the 26-year old Muhammed Idris. London in particular welcomed Idris' appointment, as he was well known to the British establishment for his fervent opposition to any war with England.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the protracted First World War made Italy come to terms with requests from the local population. Italy had seen its financial and material resources dwindle, together with its soldiers' morale. In the most humiliating defeat, at Caporetto in 1917, around 11,000 Italian soldiers lost their lives, with another 20,000 wounded, while the Austro-Hungarian and German forces took around 265,000 Italian troops as prisoner of war.<sup>7</sup> Pointing at the dilapidated state of the army and state coffers, the British authorities encouraged Italy to find a political solution for the conflict with the Sanussi forces in Cyrenaica. With British mediation, the Italians and the Cyrenaican leadership agreed a ceasefire. The Akrama agreement of 1917 stipulated that hostilities would end, freedom of movement would be ensured, Sanussi property restored and Muslim law and the Islamic creed observed, including in the zone under Italian control.<sup>8</sup>

After the war, Italy initially seemed to continue its accommodating stance towards its colonial subjects. Italy drew up two separate administrative statutes for Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Conveniently hiding its wartime exhaustion behind the pretext of a new Wilsonian spirit of self-determination and a belief in individual freedoms, Italy endowed both provinces with a parliament, a government council and local councils, thereby setting up a governance structure more in accordance with local traditions. Giacomo de Martino, Governor of Cyrenaica, was charged with implementing and overseeing this more liberal and localized approach. In 1922, following Mussolini's March on Rome and the electoral victory of the National Fascist Party, Italy's minister of foreign affairs, Carlo Schanzer, explained that, "the Italy of today wishes to develop her African possessions for the benefit not only of the homeland, but also of the sub-

<sup>6</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanussi of Cyrenaica*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Simkins, Geoffrey Jukes and Michael Hickey, *The First World War: The war to end all wars*, Osprey Publishing, 2003, pp. 312–313.

<sup>8</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 17.

ject population and of humanity as a whole".<sup>9</sup> Putting the new approach in a comparative European framework, he proudly proclaimed: "Whereas other nations have been trying to govern Arab tribes by keeping alive the bloody jealousies between *cabilas* [tribes] and chiefs, Italy has made a new and bold experiment aimed at developing the conception of a fatherland compromising all of the little tribal territories".<sup>10</sup>

With the provinces being granted more autonomy, the political institutions in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica developed along different lines. In the east part, the Sanussi remained by far the most powerful force. At first, De Martino stood on reasonably cordial terms with their new leader, Sidi Mohammed Idris. The Italians reached another agreement with their colonial subjects on October 25, 1920 at al-Rajma in which the Italians granted Sidi Idris the hereditary title of Emir, a recognition of him as the head of the self-governing regime of the Interior of Cyrenaica.<sup>11</sup> The authorities even put him, his family and his staff on the Italian state payroll.<sup>12</sup> In the western province, Tripolitania, a force led by Ramadan Suwayhili defeated an Italian force in 1915 and declared Ramadan's hometown, Misrata, liberated. In light of the difficulties sustaining control, in 1918 a more inclusive Tripolitanian Republic was established and governed by a committee of reform, still from the city of Misrata. With no tribe clearly dominating, infighting between local tribes and families led to the rapid collapse of this institutional governing structure in Tripolitania, with many tribes pledging allegiance to the Sanussi instead.<sup>13</sup>

In the meantime, Italy's domestic politics witnessed some significant changes that also influenced its policies towards the colonial lands. Italy, at the closure of the First World War, had felt betrayed. The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement had caused bad blood between the former allies. The fact that Britain and France did not live up to promises made in the negotiations around the 1915 Pact of London, exacerbated the sense of deception. The Great Powers failed to provide Italy with a satisfactory level of territorial compensation. Back in 1912, Britain had ceded the area around Kufra to

<sup>9</sup> Carlo Schanzer, "Italian colonial policy in Northern Africa", *Foreign Affairs* 2 (3), 1924, pp. 446–456.

<sup>10</sup> Schanzer, *Italian colonial policy*, p. 456.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya: Continuity and change*, London: Routledge, 2015, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Simons, *Libya and the West: From independence to Lockerbie*, I.B. Taurus, 2003, p. 9.

Italy. After the war, Britain only added to its concessions the Jarabub oasis on the Egyptian–Libyan border, while France made some, in Italian eyes negligible, adjustments to the border with French-administered Tunisia. In the analysis of the new Fascist regime in Rome, the lack of territorial compensation showed that Italy’s war efforts had only led to a “mutilated victory”.<sup>14</sup> Francesco Coppola, a nationalist writer, concluded that the 1915 Pact of London had shown it all: Britain and France had given Italy nothing. Italian blood was spilled in vain at Caporetto. Another two years down the road, in 1919 at Versailles, Britain and France had once again broken their promises. In the Mediterranean, Italy’s position had changed for the worse.<sup>15</sup> Launched to power on a wave of nationalism and with an emphasis on international injustice, the new Italian leader Benito Mussolini started pleading for more assertiveness and a more militant policy towards the Libyan provinces. Because of this change in attitude in Rome, reconciliation with colonial subjects did not last long. De Martino died in Benghazi in 1921 and General Luigi Bongiovanni was appointed Governor of Cyrenaica. He declared all agreements previously made with the Sanussi leadership invalid and tightened Italy’s military grips, a policy labeled as “pacification” of the colonies. “Pacification” was enforced in a brutal way, unleashing years of protracted fighting between Italian troops and local inhabitants, resulting in mass death and internal displacement of thousands.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout, Italy’s relations with the eastern province remained a headache for Rome. Western Tripolitania had nominally accepted the new Italian aggression – even though food and other supplies, there as well, went to the large number of sons and husbands joining the resistance.<sup>17</sup> It was especially in the region of the *Jebel Akhdar* (Green Mountains), in Derna and in Marj, that indigenous forces met the Italians with a robust guerilla force. The resistance to the colonizers in this region endowed the Libyan provinces with their first (and perhaps only) national symbol: the

<sup>14</sup>Gabriele D’Annunzio, “Vittoria nostra, non sarai mutilate”, *Corriere della Sera*, 24 October 1918.

<sup>15</sup>Francesco Coppola, “Italy in the Mediterranean”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 15 June 1923, pp. 105–114.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Duggan, *The force of destiny: A history of Italy since 1796*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup>Evans-Pritchard, “The Sanusi of Cyrenaica”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 15 (2), 1945, p. 72.

resistance hero Omar al-Mukhtar. When the Italian military campaign had gathered full force, Emir Sidi Mohammed Idris had decided for voluntary exile in Cairo and had appointed Sidi al-Rida as caretaker leader while he himself provided strategic guidance from Egypt.<sup>18</sup> At the end of 1928, the Italian military leader, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, had given the Arabs of Cyrenaica a choice: unconditional surrender or complete extermination.<sup>19</sup> Al-Rida, confronted with an overwhelming Italian military force, opted for surrender, though many of his men defected and continued the fight. In June 1929, Omar al-Mukhtar, born in Janzour and a graduate of the Sanussi University in al-Bayda, climbed up the ranks as the new wartime guerilla leader of the Sanussi forces. This prompted the Italians to adopt some gruesome measures, which included the use of mustard gas and the construction of concentration camps.<sup>20</sup> On September 11, 1931, the commander of the Italian forces in Libya and Governor of Cyrenaica, General Rudolfo Graziani, managed to capture al-Mukhtar.<sup>21</sup> Three days later, without a proper trial, the resistance fighter was sentenced to public hanging at Suluq, the location of one of the concentration and labor camps constructed by the Fascist forces in eastern Libya. In Italy, Graziani rose to hero status and the context of al-Mukhtar's hanging largely disappeared from the history textbooks. In contrast, Libyans would remember Graziani as "the butcher". Al-Mukhtar remains a legend inspiring scores of young Libyans and militant Muslims across the globe. The dissimilarities of collective memory of this period in history resurfaced with the 1981 release of the movie *The Lion of the Desert*. Starring Anthony Quinn as al-Mukhtar, this Qaddafi-sponsored feature film was banned in Italy until 2009. With al-Mukhtar dead, the Italians considered the indigenous resistance defeated.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Italian authorities judged the provinces sufficiently stable for renewed large-scale colonial development programs. The Italian authorities confiscated an estimated 225,000 hectares

<sup>18</sup> Roland Oliver, *Africa since 1800*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 236.

<sup>19</sup> See Massimiliano Cricco, "L'Islam in Libia" in: Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli, *Libia: fine o rinascita di una nazione?*, Donzelli Editore, 2012, p. 46; and "Africa", *Journal of the International African Institute*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945, p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 12; and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi*, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> See Enzo Santarelli, *Omar al-Mukhtar: The Italian reconquest of Libya*, Darf, 1986.

of the most fertile land and settled another 100,000 Italians in its colony.<sup>22</sup> Rome believed that an intense, state-controlled colonization, including large public works, could curtail the rampant unemployment that afflicted Italy. The film material of the archive of *L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa* (LUCE) on these public works provides a fascinating illustration of what the projects entailed in practice and highlights the level of societal enthusiasm they seemed to evoke. The Fascist regime also imposed its obsession with centralization on the colonial lands.

In 1934, Italy unified Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and the Fezzan and for the first time in history, one “Libya” existed. The event was marked with the adoption of a new flag and a new administrative division: the provinces of Tripoli, Misrata, Benghazi and Derna, and the Military Territory of the South.<sup>23</sup> Kufra had been brought under control and by 1935 the French promised the Aouzou strip bordering Chad to Italy as well. Italy ordered the building of around 4,000 kilometers of road and a substantial network of railroads. Italy believed that a modern, intensively colonized Libya provided it with a strong card in its bid for hegemony in the Mediterranean. Rome envisioned that control over the territories would provide the cornerstone for any African or Mediterranean empire. As a capstone to all these efforts, in the spring of 1937, Mussolini inaugurated the 1,822-kilometer-(1,132-mile-) long *Strada Litoranea Balbo* (later *Via Balbia*), running from the border with Tunisia, along the coast, all the way to Egypt. During the inauguration ceremony, Mussolini portrayed himself as the protector of Islam and as the leader of an altruistic empire predominantly concerned with the development of its indigenous people. At the same time, he proclaimed Libya officially Italy’s “fourth shore” and integrated the overseas provinces into the administration of the mainland. This would potentially make the transfer of material and soldiers easier and would enhance the strategic position of Italy in the Mediterranean. Consequently, the local Libyan Italians were entitled to receive a special Italian citizenship, on condition that they could read and write and remained resident in Libya. The gesture was presented as a token of appreciation for the support provided by around 9,000 Libyans in the Italian Libyan Colonial Division during the 1936 military cam-

<sup>22</sup> IBRD, *Economic development of Libya*.

<sup>23</sup> See for example David Atkinson, “The politics of geography and the Italian occupation of Libya”, *Libyan Studies* 27, 1996, pp. 71–84; and Davide Rodogno, *Fascism’s European empire: Italian occupation during the Second World War*, 2006, p. 61.

paign in Ethiopia.<sup>24</sup> Muslims could now also join the Fascist movement, through the Muslim Association of the Lictor, an organization founded by the Governor of Libya, Italo Balbo. Fascism had an inclination towards the theatrical and in 1938 – aiming for significant international attention – Balbo organized a dramatic mass sailing of 20,000 Italian peasants to Libya. The idea had not really been Balbo's, as the previous government had discussed a similar approach, but had deemed it far too expensive. For the Fascist regime, however, the desire for international attention trumped all financial obstacles.<sup>25</sup>

Britain was increasingly worried about the developments in Italy and in Italian Libya. At the same time, Britain's capabilities to intervene were rapidly decreasing; by the 1930s, Britain was suffering from imperial overstretch. For example, the stationing of additional aircraft and anti-aircraft guns on Malta, meant they had to be taken away from elsewhere in the British Empire. London had decided on a massive naval program to boost its forces, but that undertaking would not pay off any time before 1940. With the so-called 1934 "Ual" incident in Abyssinia, Mussolini took hostilities towards Britain to a next level as he ordered troops from Italian Somalia to cross into Ethiopia. Britain, with its troops patrolling the border of British Somaliland and Ethiopia, condemned the act, but refrained from escalation – to the great disappointment of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. Italy had strategically planned its attack to coincide with Germany's re-launch of military conscription – something explicitly forbidden under the Versailles agreements. At the time of the aggression towards Ethiopia, Italy and other European states were also negotiating the Stresa Front, meant to reaffirm the postwar friendship enshrined in the 1925 Locarno Treaties. Hoping for a successful Stresa conference, Britain refrained from raising concerns about the situation in East Africa. However, when a full-fledged war between Italy and Ethiopia broke out several months later, Britain declared Italy the aggressor and took the matter to the forum of the League of Nations, which had been established in 1920 to resolve international conflicts (though utterly failed to do so). The League condemned Italy's actions, but Mussolini was quick to point the finger at Britain, the most influential member of the League, instead.

<sup>24</sup> Sabina Donati, *A political history of national citizenship and identity in Italy, 1861–1950*, Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 193.

<sup>25</sup> Claudio G. Segrè, "Italo Balbo and the colonization of Libya", *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 (3–4), 1972, p. 142.



Disgruntled, he cried out: “Fifty nations led by one!”<sup>26</sup> Italy, as many others did, judged the League to be a vehicle to defend London’s narrow interests, rather than an institution that looked at international disputes impartially.

Anthony Eden, who had been appointed British foreign secretary in 1935, was convinced that Mussolini wanted war and would be unmoved by diplomatic dialogue and political negotiations. In his view, Italy was a direct threat to “the international security of British possessions and protectorates, the paramountcy of Britain in Egypt, and the influence which his Majesty’s Government had been able to exercise over foreign states in the Near and Middle East”.<sup>27</sup> Eden officially voiced his deep distrust for the Italians and suggested in 1937 to his colleagues that symbolic acts such as sanctions, the closing of the British legation and the withdrawal of the guard at Addis had only an ephemeral effect. Eden feared that “Italy is determined to revive the Roman Empire, and we [the British] are in the way”.<sup>28</sup> Not all in the British government shared this view and in 1938, hoping to appease the Fascists as much as possible, Britain signed a Mediterranean Pact with Italy, thereby recognizing Italy’s “rights” in North Africa and reconfirming the gentleman’s agreement signed the year before, which had the objective of maintaining the status quo in North Africa. Eden, however, had been right. On May 22, 1939, Mussolini signed the Pact of Friendship and Alliance with Germany, the so-called “Pact of Steel”. On 1 September of that year, the Second World War broke out with the German invasion of Poland. On June 10, 1940, Mussolini declared war on Britain and France. His strategic plan entailed besieging British interests in North Africa and the Horn. For that purpose, Mussolini stationed around 300,000 Italian troops in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, and nine divisions in Libya.<sup>29</sup> The *Duce* presented the decision to go to war as a campaign to shatter the British Empire and to (re) build, on its ruins, Italy’s Mediterranean Empire. War, he hoped, would

<sup>26</sup> David N. Dilks, “British reactions to Italian empire-building, 1936–1939”, in: Serra and Seton-Watson, *Italia e Inghilterra*, p. 166.

<sup>27</sup> Memorandum by Eden “Problems facing His Majesty’s government in the Mediterranean as a result of the Italo-League dispute”, CP 165 (36) Cab 24/262 Pro.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum by Cadogan, 10 May 1937, with minutes by Vansittart and Eden, BD, Series II, Vol XVIII, pp. 724–726.

<sup>29</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 14.

finally drive the British out of the Mediterranean basin to create an Italian *Mare Nostrum*.

Eastern Libya and the borderlands with Egypt became the main battleground of the North African theater of the Second World War. Mussolini believed Italian Libya to be a major asset in the war campaign. He ordered Governor Balbo to organize the army in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In Tripolitania, the Fifth Army was formed to counter French–Tunisian forces; in Cyrenaica, the Tenth Army had to counter the British–Egyptian forces. After the Vichy regime took power in France and Tunisia became less of a threat to the Axis powers, a large number of troops of the Fifth Army moved to the east to strengthen the military presence there. The Tenth Army also incorporated the Italian Libyan Colonial Division that had fought in Ethiopia, now rebranded as the First Libyan Division Sibelle, consisting of around 7,000 Libyans and named after their commander. It also incorporated a second Libyan division, “Division Pescatori”, and in 1938, Libyan-born paratroopers staffed two battalions stationed in Castel Benito airport, which later on became Tripoli International Airport. Cyrenaica, in the four years that followed, would be occupied three times by the Axis powers, and three times by the Allied powers. As part of the Western Desert campaign, the opposing powers went back and forth – with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy attempting to reach as far as the strategic Suez Canal. Balbo, at the end of June 1940, lost his life in a plane crash in Tobruq and Graziani took over command.<sup>30</sup> Upon taking office, Graziani started preparing for an invasion of Egypt, which was to start the moment Germany invaded England. As that did not happen, Graziani initiated, on September 13, 1940, the campaign into Egypt. He made some modest advances and reached the village of Sidi Barrani, some 240 kilometers from Tobruq. However, a British counterattack three months later, under the leadership of British General Archibald Wavell, pushed Italian troops some 800 kilometers west to Benghazi and the Allied forces took around 130,000 of Mussolini’s soldiers as prisoners.<sup>31</sup> In January 1941, British and Australian troops were able to capture Tobruq. Libya ultimately proved to be a weak spot for the Axis. Italy was unable to defend its North African front line and Germany needed to withdraw troops from Northern Europe to help its key ally. In the hope of tipping the balance,

<sup>30</sup>Folco Quilici, *Tobruk 1940: Dubbi e verità sulla fine di Italo Balbo*, Mondadori, 2006.

<sup>31</sup>Thomson, *England in the twentieth century*, p. 193.

Adolf Hitler first sent his air force and later additional land forces. Initially, these reinforcements paid off and Rommel's *Afrikakorps* was able to drive the British out of Tobruq and to push further into Egypt. In October 1942, at El Alamein, the decisive battle took place in which the Axis powers lost 60,000 troops and 500 tanks to British General Montgomery.<sup>32</sup> Winston Churchill himself regarded this victory as a turning point for the entire war. He allegedly stated: "It may almost be said, before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat."<sup>33</sup>

The Italian army had incorporated a number of Libyans. However, most of the colonial subjects saw the war as a way to forward their own local interests and rid their lands of the Italian occupation. They wanted to align with the victorious powers in order to gain more independence in a new postwar reality. Initially, the tribal leaders of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and the Fezzan could not agree which side to back. In Tripoli, a majority argued that Britain had no chance of survival against the Axis Powers. The Sanussi of Cyrenaica disagreed and in the end, the majority of the tribes agreed on a unified resistance led by Emir Sidi Mohammed Idris, the only man considered to have the right stature and leverage for such a role. Sidi Idris believed that he now had the opportunity to change the course of history. No real choice existed in his mind: if the resistance succeeded, the country could recover; if it failed, nothing would be lost, given the fact that the country was already in the hands of the enemy.<sup>34</sup> The Sanussi leader was convinced that siding with the British was the best option. During his time in exile, he had remained in good contact with the British governors and had offered his knowledge and troops for the fight against the Italians. After Italy's entry into the war, Henry Maitland Wilson, commander of the British forces in Egypt, formally invited Idris to ask his followers to join the campaign. Idris sent out an invitation to the tribal elders in early August 1940, stating that "this is to inform you that the British government has decided to begin at once to organize battalions of the Sanussi Arab tribes in order to restore to them their liberty and emancipate their country from the hands of the Italian oppressors, and to

<sup>32</sup> See for example Bryn Hammond, *El Alamein: The battle that turned the tide of the Second World War*, Osprey Publishing, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV: The hinge of fate*, 2005 edition (1945), p. 545.

<sup>34</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 29.

secure their independence".<sup>35</sup> A British–Cyrenaican force was formed and tribal leaders from Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and the Fezzan adopted a set of principles expressing their full confidence in the British government. This collaboration agreement was an important stepping-stone to the postwar Cyrenaica claim to independence.

Especially in Tripolitania, most tribal elders had remained skeptical of cooperation with European colonial forces. The British administration had refused to give any official, recordable promise with regard to future independence. Sidi Idris had repeatedly requested Britain to issue a written statement, hoping to remove this cause of disagreement between the different tribes and extended families he represented. London ignored these requests and when General Wavell occupied Cyrenaica in the winter of 1940–1941, he did not utter a word about establishing a Sanussi-led government. As a result, Cyrenaican leaders joined their Tripolitanian brothers in protest and Sidi Idris addressed a letter to the British minister of state in Cairo, Oliver Lyttelton. Lyttelton understood the urgency of the matter and convinced the Foreign Office to issue a public statement. Thus, on January 8, 1942, Anthony Eden finally issued a communiqué praising the Sanussi and their war efforts, using the meaningful words: "His Majesty's government is determined that at the end of the war the Sanussi of Cyrenaica will in no circumstances again fall under Italian domination."<sup>36</sup> Montgomery signed the proclamation of the British occupation of Libya on November 11, 1942, reiterating: "The British government has thanked Sayed Mohamed Idris el Sanussi for the assistance he has given to the Allied cause and has promised that the Sanussi will not again be subject to Italian rule. While the British Army rules the country, it wishes to establish friendly and cordial relations with the people".<sup>37</sup> The British authorities had set up a headquarters in al-Marj in 1942 and moved it to Benghazi in the following year. While London cloaked its commitment in rather abstract terms and did not mention any form of independence nor anything about Tripolitania, it comforted the majority of Libyan resistance leaders and kept them, for the moment, sufficiently united.

With these substantial losses, Mussolini's dream of a Mediterranean empire rapidly fell apart. Financially, Italy could not afford its colo-

<sup>35</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>36</sup> House of Commons Debates, Vol. 377 (1942), cols. 77–78.

<sup>37</sup> Lord Rennell of Rodd, *British military administration of occupied territories in Africa during the years 1941–1947*, London, 1948, p. 251.

nial enterprise and pursuing colonies the way Italy had done had led to a steadily declining standard of living in the mainland. On January 23, 1943, Italian rule in Libya officially ended and the British Military Administration (BMA) became fully responsible for the governance of the territories. The British explained that their occupation was to be temporary. The War Office, instead of the Colonial Office was assigned the administration of the occupied territories and General Montgomery emphasized that he would “not enter into questions relating to political affairs of the future”.<sup>38</sup> Initially, Italian law remained in place, though purged from Fascist amendments.

In the south, the Free French forces under Colonel Jacques-Phillipe Leclerc had used Chad as a base to attack Mussolini’s troops in Libya and had been able to move into Kufra (1941) and the Fezzan (1942–1943).<sup>39</sup> The Free French made some efforts to build up goodwill with the local population. Not only did they bring back numerous individuals from the Fezzan who had fled or migrated to Chad and other French-ruled territories during the Fascist occupation, soldiers received the order to respect the property and the customs of the natives of the Fezzan. They were instructed to repeat that the Free French were waging war against the Italians, and the Italians alone.<sup>40</sup> The French presence in the southern part of Libya and the ambition of the Free French to remain in the area and introduce the franc as the key currency of exchange did, however, alarm London. But Anthony Eden, in 1942, convinced the British War Office that the Fezzan was of little value and not a strategic priority for Britain. Free French troops thus occupied these desert lands, following an agreement between the British and Leclerc. Charles de Gaulle, the top leader of the Free French forces, believed control over the southern part of Libya to be an important step for the future of French foreign policy. He wrote in his memoirs: “the conquest of the Fezzan would place into our hands a chip over the future destiny of Libya”.<sup>41</sup> In 1943, the Free French introduced the new currency to the territories, but the move turned out to be a mistake, as some of the regional tribes rejected it and regional trade suffered as a result. A topic of debate was whether the French should link the

<sup>38</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> See Eric T. Jennings, *French Africa in World War II*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Jennings, *French Africa*, p. 132.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Jennings, *French Africa*, p. 133.

desert towns to Algeria or to Chad. Initially, the Fezzan was incorporated into Southern Algeria and one of the refugees brought back by the French, Ahmed Bey Seif el Nasr, was appointed governor. At the same time, Colonel Raymond DeLange retained his position as French governor.

The wars had devastated Libyan territory. In addition to the physical and mental harm done to the local inhabitants, the lands had suffered from serving as a battleground for more than a decade. Mines and other explosive devices littered the coastline and abandoned war equipment rusted away. The residues of the war would cause injury and death long after the war was over. The colonial struggle, followed by the world war, had instilled in the population a widespread distrust of all things Western.<sup>42</sup> The small agricultural base was shattered as the British takeover sparked an exodus of Italian settlers from Cyrenaica and the leftovers of the Italian-run economy disappeared together with its farmers and settlers. The British invited the indigenous tribes to take care of the Italian farms and crops, but due to a lack of expertise, most crops went to waste. Tripolitania was less affected than Cyrenaica during the wars and there, after 1943, many Italian settlers remained. Their numbers increased as settlers from Cyrenaica moved westwards. In these dire circumstances, the British Military Administration provided a new economic impulse. New markets opened up and British expenditure eased the financial situation in the Libyan provinces. Gradually, the British took over control of all commercial hubs. Trade with Italy almost came to a standstill.<sup>43</sup>

Victory was on the side of the Allied Forces and on July 25, 1943, the Fascist Grand Council dismissed Mussolini as an acknowledgement of defeat. The new government under Pietro Badoglio decided to switch sides, and the new Italy declared itself loyal to the Allied forces. The terms of surrender and the fate of Italian Libya remained substantial points of contention between Italy and its new allies. The United States – one of the new world powers that emerged in the postwar era – called for a rapid rehabilitation of Italy. Washington wanted to be able to count on Italy as a valuable contributor to the international economy and to the military battlefield.<sup>44</sup> For Washington, Italy had never been a traditional or a direct enemy. By the end of the war, the US' key foreign policy objective was

<sup>42</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> George Henry Becker, *The disposition of the Italian colonies, 1941–1951*, Geneva, 1952.

<sup>44</sup> Moshe Gat, *Britain and Italy, 1945–1949*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996, p. 10.

to curb communism and stay ahead of the Soviet Union. This new, overarching struggle, cast its shadow over all regional theatres, including the Mediterranean. For practical reasons, it was willing to consider Fascism and the Italian people as two distinct, separable, entities, as from the US perspective Italy was not a substantial threat to the basin. The real threat came from the Soviet Union, which was trying to expand its influence in Greece and Italy as well as in the Libyan provinces.

Britain had a much harder time forgiving Italy. Anthony Eden made few efforts to hide his personal hostility towards the Italians. Nonetheless, prime minister Winston Churchill prioritized alignment with the US above everything and, in that cause, he argued that despite the fact that Italy was a military and financial wreck, it was needed for a successful *Operation Overlord* in Normandy to defeat the Nazis. Britain, as part of its new ambition to become America's staunchest ally, had to accept Italy as an important partner in the new Western institutions that emerged after the end of the Second World War.

The UK's political, military and financial degradation from first-order to second-order power had consequences for the British Empire. After the war, the UK found itself in a financial crisis, which forced it to rethink its costly imperial foreign policies. Ever since its opening in 1869, the Suez Canal had been the main connector of the British Empire. British military bases in the area comprised 38 army camps and ten airfields. Suez was, at that time, Britain's largest military base.<sup>45</sup> After the war, Britain recognized it would have to grant India independence. In an attempt to compensate for the loss, Ernest Bevin, the British foreign secretary, visualized the Middle East territories as capable of transformation into a new, British-governed, prosperous economic federation thus retaining some form of British hegemony in the Mediterranean basin.<sup>46</sup> London requested the US to concede "senior partner" status in the confiscated enemy territories in the Mediterranean, including in Libya. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt was reluctant to grant Britain an explicit privileged status in the Mediterranean and unwilling to give Britain implicit powers over Italy.<sup>47</sup> While falling in line with Washington's policies, Britain

<sup>45</sup> Michael J. Cohen, "The strategic role of the Middle East after the war", in Michael J. Cohen and Martin Kolinsky, eds., *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East*, London: Frank Cass, 1998, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen, *Demise of the British Empire*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Gat, *Britain and Italy*, p. 11.

did try to make Italy's rehabilitation into the Western camp as difficult as it could. In the negotiations for a peace settlement with Italy – negotiations that lasted until February 1947 – Britain brought in clauses on the limitation of Italy's military fleet, including for its air force and navy. The Mediterranean island of Pantelleria was to be demilitarized and Italy was not allowed to start any new military projects in Sicily or Sardinia. In addition, the victorious countries forced Italy to transfer Fiume and other parts of the eastern borderlands to Yugoslavia. Lastly, Rome had to renounce all claims related to its former colonies.

From the Italian perspective, the terms of the Peace Treaty showed once more the hubris and the disregard of international justice by its European peers. Italy's foreign minister, Count Carlo Sforza, stated: "We feel, as Italians and as world citizens, that for the future we have the right to count on a radical revision of this Treaty which will paralyze and poison the life of a nation, cramped into a territory which cannot feed it."<sup>48</sup>

Revision of the Peace Treaty terms became a cornerstone of Italian foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of the war. Sforza, as one of his first acts as foreign minister, requested a meeting with his British counterpart. Ernest Bevin replied that he would ignore the request until the Italian parliament ratified the Peace Treaty. Italy's parliament, having no alternatives, ratified the Peace Treaty on July 31, 1947, which then came into effect on September 15. Bevin kept his promise and following the ratification, he wrote a warm-hearted letter to Sforza stating: "With good will on all sides these matters [of the Treaty] can receive reconsideration (...) a desire to re-establish the old bonds of friendship between us is not lacking."<sup>49</sup>

In October 1947, Sforza visited Bevin with high hopes for considerable revisions and concessions. In particular, he expected Britain to withdraw objections regarding the return of Libya to Italy. After all, Sforza reasoned, Italy had acquired Libya long before Mussolini came to power and Italy's pre-Fascist colonial record was not very different from other European powers. However, while Bevin was willing to provide some concessions, when it came to this colonial question, he regarded the demand as absurd.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> FO371/67736, 28 February 1947.

<sup>49</sup> FO371/67749, Bevin to Rome, 14 September 1947.

<sup>50</sup> FO371/73199, Conversation with the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 13 March 1948. See also Sforza, *Cinque anni a Palazzo Chigi: la politica estera Italiana dal 1947 al 1951* Rome: Atlante, 1952, p. 137.



In the postwar period, the former Italian colonies in Libya became an obsession for both Italy and Britain. Benedetto Croce, one of Italy's most distinguished intellectuals of that time, condemned the 1947 treaty. In his eyes, it deprived Italy of her "dignity and legitimate pride". In particular, he deplored the unconditional surrender of those colonies that Italy "had acquired by her blood and administered and elevated to civilized European standards by her genius and by expenditure of her all too scarce financial resources."<sup>51</sup>

For Italy, giving up its colonies symbolized the end of Italy as a power of significance. Sforza and prime minister Alcide De Gasperi wanted Libya back in order for Italy to play at least a "secondary role in international politics and economics and [could] become a brilliant second in the Mediterranean and the Middle East".<sup>52</sup> Italians lobbied relentlessly for the return of the colonies and did so during many of the negotiations about the new European, transatlantic and global institutions that saw the light of the day after the end of the Second World War. At every possible occasion, Italy kept raising the issue of treaty revisions and the need for clarity regarding the future of its former colonies. Britain, in its turn, was well aware that denying Italy its colonies was as close as it could get to punishing its former enemy in light of Washington's more conciliatory stance. At the same time, London was trying to keep Libyan territory within its own sphere of influence in an attempt to hold on to at least the shadow of what once was a great British Empire.

The back and forth on the colonies affected the negotiations around a common security approach for the West – both with regard to the 1948 Brussels Treaty and the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). During the talks on the Brussels Treaty, UK Ambassador Sir Victor Mallet wrote to London that the Italians were steadily gaining confidence and that "it is already evident that their horns have come out very much since De Gasperi's victory".<sup>53</sup> De Gasperi, winner of the 1948 general election, was unwilling to bring Italy into a military alliance on conditions of inferiority. Italy, in his view, could not regard itself as equal to other nations as long as the colonial issue remained unresolved. Foreign secretary Bevin responded that Italy was blatantly misunderstanding its position. He remarked "if the Italian Government wants further concessions, it is more likely to achieve

<sup>51</sup> Seton Watson, *Imperial hangover*, p. 171.

<sup>52</sup> FO371/67745, Rome to FO, 11 July 1947.

<sup>53</sup> FO371/73191, Rome to FO, 27 April 1948.

its aim by putting its own house in order with proper schemes of social reform and by generous co-operation in the rehabilitation of Europe rather than by a policy of open and elementary blackmail.”<sup>54</sup>

Italy ignored these words and tried to link its potential adherence to the Brussels Treaty officially to the fate of its former colonies.<sup>55</sup> Britain was against Italian membership and with regard to NATO, Britain initially kept a rigid line of non-inclusion of Italy. Britain did not just view Italy as a former enemy, but also based its stance on the strategic consideration that it wanted NATO to be a geographically limited body. Unlike France, who wanted to include parts of North Africa in the proposals, Britain hoped to keep the entire Mediterranean out of NATO. That way, Britain could potentially create its own security system in the southern region, where it, rather than the United States, would be the leading partner.<sup>56</sup> Providing the new dominant view, the Americans insisted on including Italy into the European security system, regardless of British opposition. Italy submitted to the US an official application for NATO-membership. Secretary of state Dean Acheson issued a memorandum outlining the dangers inherent to the exclusion of Italy and President Truman endorsed Italian membership.<sup>57</sup> In the end, new global power relationships ruled that London fell in line with the Americans. Italy proudly attended the NATO signing ceremony on April 4, 1949, together with Britain. But despite the fact that the fate of the Libyan provinces was mentioned in many of the postwar negotiations, the question of what to do with them was left unresolved.

<sup>54</sup> FO371/73191, FO to Rome, 6 May 1948.

<sup>55</sup> FO 371/73191, 23 June, Italian ambassador in London, Gallarati-Scotti.

<sup>56</sup> Effie G.H. Pedaliu, *Britain, Italy and the origins of the Cold War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 157–159.

<sup>57</sup> Gat, *Britain and Italy*, pp. 176–177.

## Libya: A By-Product of Great Power Politics

After the defeat of the Italians and the end of the Second World War, the victorious powers divided Libya once again into its historically recognized regions. This time Britain administered Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, while France ruled in the Fezzan. The new, Western administration further institutionalized the internal and external borders and international debates on the future of the former Italian colonies in North Africa solidified the three areas as specific regions. The geographical units displayed a broad variety of political, economic and social systems. Local communities organized political life in different ways, which had consequences for questions related to future governance. In the south, the Fezzan, tribes and clans were the units that attracted political loyalty. The Seif el Nasr clan, with strong ties to the French, was one of the dominant political forces there. In the eastern area bordering Egypt, tribal elders were in charge. There, the Sanussi received ample backing as the leading force and constituted a relatively solid political entity with historical legitimacy gained through religious leadership as well as through their decisive role in the resistance to the Italians. In the Western region, Tripolitania, political affairs functioned slightly differently. The family nucleus received more recognition and interests were organized more often along political and ideological lines. Initially, continuing the policy of the Italians, the British Military Administration outlawed the formation of political parties. Nevertheless, political thinkers had found their ways around the official regulations and established their gatherings under umbrellas such as the Literary Club,

the Sporting Club, the Workers' Club or the Reform Club of Misrata. When the war formally ended, Tripoli soon witnessed the establishment of several political parties. While none of them was able to gain the upper hand in any credible way, amongst the generally shared objectives were independence, the establishment of a Republic and membership of the Arab League.

The economic situation in Libya had slightly changed with the handover of power from Italian to British and French forces. In the immediate aftermath of the war, under the British Military Administration, the Italian legal code remained applicable and several Italian administrators remained in office in Tripoli. However, now lacking vast governmental subsidies and without the assurance that Libya was to stay Italian, development programs set up by the Italian colonists floundered. Currency changes had also led to a lack of credit for trading activities with Italy. The Allies had largely mopped up Italian lira to finance the military campaign to liberate the Italian mainland.<sup>1</sup> The British Barclays Bank had taken over the property of the Banco di Roma and the British had officially replaced the lira with the Military Authority Lira (MAL). This newly introduced MAL quickly became the unit of exchange most commonly used in Tripolitania, set at par with the Italian lira. In Cyrenaica however, local populations preferred to use the Egyptian pound and in the Fezzan, administrated by the Free French forces under General Leclerc, the Algerian Franc circulated.<sup>2</sup> From Italy's perspective, as voiced in October 1949 by the Banco di Roma, Italy was still the default economic partner for Libya. The natural flow of trade was in their view obstructed by a lack of liquidity and foreign exchange. Pounds were difficult to obtain for the Italian government and Italian entrepreneurs preferred to trade in lira.<sup>3</sup> A local system of quotas regulated imports, which turned out to be detrimental for Italian-Libyan trade. According to Rome, the picture that emerged after the war, with Britain as Libya's main trading partner, was a distortion of reality.

The war having ended, discussions started on the future of the former Italian provinces. The key players included the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and to a lesser extent, Italy.

<sup>1</sup>G.A. Bowers and A.N. McLeod, "Currency unification in Libya", *IMF Staff Papers*, 2 (3), 1952, p. 443.

<sup>2</sup>Bowers and McLeod, *Currency unification*, p. 441.

<sup>3</sup>UNICREDIT, Banco di Roma, XI.3.I.4, UA 20, Attachment to the letter of Ugo Foscolo, Amministratore delegato del Banco di Roma, 5 October 1949.

The 1947 Paris Peace Treaty with Italy, through article 23, had obliged Italy to renounce all right and title to the Italian territorial possessions. There would be a year's delay from the time of the negotiated Peace Treaty to the decision on the future of Italy's colonies. The four key powers involved established a committee to investigate the local situation in the provinces before making a decision. US secretary of state, James F. Byrnes, proposed that, in case the main powers made no decision within the year, the matter was to be referred to the newly established General Assembly of the United Nations.<sup>4</sup> Consensus between the "Big Four" existed on that Libya was of no great value in terms of economic activity. Neither did its population base bring any real advantages in terms of military manpower. Nonetheless, it was the perception of Libya's geostrategic value in the newly emerging Cold War that would make consensus over the future of the territories, within the year, impossible.

All of the states involved had different ideas of what that geopolitical value of the Libyan provinces was. During the war, London had started to appreciate the geopolitical value of Libyan territory and had realized the usefulness of bases at the crossroads of continents.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the war, British foreign minister Anthony Eden was adamant that "these Italian overseas possessions do not come under the control of potential enemy states, as they flank our sea and air communications through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and provide bases from which Egypt, the Sudan and Kenya could be attacked".<sup>6</sup> Britain was mainly interested in the eastern province of Cyrenaica, seen as conveniently located for imperial defense. The international governments considered the maritime bases of Tobruq and Benghazi useful, first-rate outposts that added great value to British defense and transport infrastructure in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> London's key interest was therefore to keep the base at Tobruq, while it would happily outsource to others the administrative burden for the rest of the provinces.<sup>8</sup> In Washington, political leaders saw North Africa as peripheral; the main objective was to keep the territories in the Western political

<sup>4</sup> See Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya and the United States, two centuries of strife*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, pp. 44–47.

<sup>5</sup> See Saul Kelly, *Cold War in the desert: Britain, the United States and the Italian colonies, 1945–52*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>6</sup> FO371/50790, Memorandum by Eden, 13 July 1945.

<sup>7</sup> FO371/50782, Memorandum by Bevin, 29 August 1945.

<sup>8</sup> FO141/869, Rough notes regarding proposed solution of post-war Cyrenaica, p. 1.

and economic sphere. Moscow in its turn believed the territories to be relevant for an expansion of its sphere of influence in North Africa. The Soviet Union saw Libya as a springboard providing easy access to other parts of the Mediterranean, including Southern Europe. Italy was flirting quite seriously with communism and the Soviets hoped that support for a return of the colonies would be in the favor of Italy's communists. The French focused mainly on the Fezzan, the Libyan hinterland and aimed at holding on to landing rights in that area. They perceived a crucial link between Algeria, Tunisia and Chad, all (still) within the French zone of influence.

The negotiations and proposals on the future of the Libyan territories exposed the lingering animosity between the British and the Italians. Italy itself was not one of the main decision-makers, but eagerly lobbied to retain influence over its former colonial lands. Italian prime minister Ferruccio Parri and foreign minister Alcide de Gasperi fervently defended Italy's retention of its sovereignty in Tripolitania and West Cyrenaica. East Cyrenaica could become a strategic zone instead.<sup>9</sup> In their view, Italy's benign colonization efforts had been fundamentally different from the exploitative imperialism of France and the United Kingdom. They wanted the comforting assumption held by the international community towards mainland Italy—that Fascism was an erroneous period in history, far detached from mainstream Italian thinking—to be applied to its overseas territories as well. Initially, the Soviet Union, France and the US had expressed willingness to return the territories to Italy in exchange for wartime support. Going against the mainstream UK opinion that Italy should be punished by the loss of its colonies, British ambassador Mallet expressed the belief that the best way of preventing Italy from going communist could be by coming out in favor of Italian trusteeship for its colonies, including Tripolitania, “but obviously with the exception of Cyrenaica. I realize objections but urge we should go as far as possible”, as Mallet stated in 1948.<sup>10</sup> For Italy, the retention of overseas territories would provide a way to keep a presence in the global political game. Rome propagated the message that the British Administration had created an awful mess in Libya and that its propaganda had created a situation in

<sup>9</sup> *Italy and the United Nations, Carnegie endowment for international peace*, New York: Manhattan Publishing Company, 1959, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> FO37/73156 Rome to FO, 17 February 1948.

which no Italian dared to go out at night “for fear of having his throat cut by an Arab.”<sup>11</sup>

The Italians kept arguing that the underdevelopment of the Libyan provinces was exactly the reason why Libya should return to Italy. It would be a burden to everyone else and Italians had shown their ability to cultivate the desert soil in the past. On the other side, the BMA and London promoted their constructive relationship with the former Italian territories. By 1950, Britain had overtaken Italy in trade volume with Libya, both in exports and imports. At the end of October 1950, UK imports were worth £1,687,320 and exports £702,081. Italy was second with £570,524 of imports and £604,633 of exports.<sup>12</sup>

The debate on the future of the territories included a small number of local inhabitants, but their opinions counted predominantly as evidence or backing for the positions of those that were sitting around the international negotiation table. During the consultations and negotiations, all stakeholders used propaganda tools to try convince the others, including the Libyans, of the right way forward. Records show that cash handouts were a common means of trying to influence public opinion.<sup>13</sup> The British issued reports on opinion polls stating that the Italians were loathed throughout the provinces, while remaining Italian institutions in Tripoli, such as the Banco di Roma, sent home information stating exactly the opposite: most Tripolitarians were in favor of an Italian protectorate as they knew that they could not be self-governing and were against the English occupation.<sup>14</sup> The Italian ministry of Italian Africa actively spread its views about the future of the colonies and portrayed Italy as the only Mediterranean power capable of and willing to accept the governance of Libya. The Arabs, the ministry claimed, had been fond of the Italians, and only the Sanussi in the east had fallen under British influence and displayed anti-Italianism.<sup>15</sup> In their turn, the British disseminated pamphlets about Italian rule in Tripolitania calling upon the inhabitants not to forget what the Italians had done to them, to their families and their lands. Much of the message was about how one should not forget to thank God for sending the Italians to hell. The text then continued with praise for the

<sup>11</sup> WO 230/247, Note by Jon Kimche, 21 March 1948, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4. UA20, Distribuzione degli scambi durante il 1950.

<sup>13</sup> WO 230/247, Note by Kimche, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4 UA20, documents of 7 February 1949.

<sup>15</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 105.

UK: “See, Tripolitania brothers, how the British Military Administration increases your level of autonomy, how it opens schools for every sort of education, has set up national tribunals, and how it has made people vote for municipal elections.”

The leaflet ended with the words “long live Libya and its friend the United Kingdom, friend of Egypt and of the Arab east”.<sup>16</sup>

Within the Libyan provinces themselves, conflicting ideas circulated, but the vast majority opposed a return to Italian rule. In some of the more urban and connected areas, inhabitants followed closely the international discussions of what would happen with their lands. The majority however just relied on hearsay. The slogans stenciled on walls in the provinces ranged from “long live free and democratic Libya” to “be fair with us and do not urge us to shed blood”.<sup>17</sup> Libyan political groups had been asked to express their views to the Committee and those that did, advocated independence. These included the United National Front, the National Congress Party, the National Council for the Liberation of Libya, the National Association of Refugees from Libya and East Africa, the Association of Libyan ex-servicemen and the Jewish Community of Tripolitania.<sup>18</sup> An ingrained suspicion of anything foreign in Libya was widespread: Western wars had resulted in a wrecked Libya with a mutilated population. The local inhabitants would not forget the colonial war and the intra-European struggles on their soil as easily as the Europeans forgot or ignored the damage they had inflicted. A violent and negative experience with the West became one of the few tenets of a collective history and a collective feeling of purpose.

Of the three provinces, Cyrenaica had the most coherent ideas around what it wanted to achieve beyond independence. Emir Idris al Sanussi evoked the British promise that Cyrenaica would in no circumstances fall under Italian rule again. London had not given too much thought to the consequences of that promise at the time when it made it, but over time, it came to realize that supporting the Sanussi in their ambitions was also in its own best interests. Advocating for an independent, British-minded monarchy matched the strategy implemented elsewhere during the times of

<sup>16</sup>Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4. UA 20, Attachment to message of Tripoli office of Banco di Roma to Ugo Foscolo, 11 April 1949.

<sup>17</sup>WO 230/247, BMAT 1534, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>See Scott L. Bills, *The Libyan arena: The United States, Britain, and the Council of Foreign Ministers, 1945–1948*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995.



decolonization. Backing local independence and supporting the will of the local people resonated well, both at home and in Washington. Britain thus pushed through the independence of Cyrenaica and empowered the Emir to enact a constitution for the province, which was drafted in close consultation with the British authorities. Britain saw an independent Cyrenaica as a step towards eventual independence of the whole of Libya “either as a single state or as two separate states.”<sup>19</sup>

The US supported this approach, while Italy, as well as Egypt, opposed it. The French looked at the developments with skepticism and perhaps with jealousy at the exclusive British–Sanussi relations that unfolded. Cyrenaica proclaimed itself independent on June 1, 1949, flying a black flag with a white star and crescent of the Emirate of Cyrenaica. The design was the base for the flag as would be adopted by the United Kingdom of Libya two years later. In his first speech, the Emir paid ample tribute to Great Britain for its friendship and its assistance.<sup>20</sup>

The Constitution of Cyrenaica, partly based on the model of Sudan, foresaw a division of powers between the local government and the chief administrator of the territories, the British Resident. The Cyrenaicans took charge of all internal affairs, while Britain kept authority over a number of legal and financial matters. The British Resident also remained entitled to rule by decree in foreign affairs, defense (including public order), and matters regarding Italian property.<sup>21</sup> Not everyone in Cyrenaica was pleased with these developments and the continuation of British influence. As was the case elsewhere in the Arab world, Republican, nationalist and pan-Arab ideals attracted the younger generation. In Benghazi, this current of political thought organized itself in the Omar al-Mukhtar Club. Others in the east saw the British influence as detrimental to their community’s social mores. British families often occupied the best residential areas and enjoyed better water and electricity supply than most locals, which exacerbated negative perceptions.<sup>22</sup>

Despite a more unified political vision, Cyrenaica was smaller and had a much less developed economy than Tripolitania. In a unified state, Tripoli would naturally take up a leading role as the most powerful region.

<sup>19</sup> “Progress in Cyrenaica”, *The Spectator*, 9 June 1949, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Khadurri, *Modern Libya*, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Khadurri, *Modern Libya*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Libyan Studies Society, *Libyan Studies: Annual report of the society for Libyan Studies*, Volumes 17–19, 1986, p. 174.

However, in the absence of any family or clan that could realistically be acceptable to all as a royal family, Tripolitanian political elites preferred to see Libya develop into a unified republic rather than a monarchy. Bashir al Sadawi's National Congress Party represented this view. In the southern Fezzan, the small, poor population cared mainly about ensuring substantial political representation in the new Libya. Initially, the tribal leaders of the Fezzan feared being cut off from the coastal provinces and being annexed by French territories in the south. Already, the French had made Ghat part of southern Algeria's administration while Ghadames was incorporated in the French division of southern Tunisia. After being assured of inclusion in the plans for a new Libya, the Fezzan's key demand became to be treated at par with the other two provinces. Fezzan's elites cared much less about the actual leadership of a Libyan state, knowing that they themselves could not aspire to it.<sup>23</sup>

A year after the signing of the Peace Treaty, the Great Powers had not reached consensus. The US, the UK and France had sufficiently aligned positions to provide one single final report with recommendations. The Soviets, however, would not agree with these conclusions and issued their own report—advocating the return of the former colonies to Italy. Consequently, the UN General Assembly became the official platform for discussion and decisions. Unlike the UN Security Council, in this new forum, no single state could exercise a power of veto. Instead, decisions needed a two-thirds majority. On April 6, 1949, the First Committee of the Assembly, dealing with Political and Security Questions, initiated discussions on the issue of the Italian colonies. As might be expected, the discussions in this multilateral forum proved to be sclerotic and often inconclusive, while activity at bilateral levels intensified to bring about desired outcomes in the General Assembly. The 1949 Bevin–Sforza proposal was the most important example in this regard. Ernest Bevin, who had succeeded Anthony Eden as UK foreign minister after the Labour Party's election victory in 1945, and his Italian counterpart Count Carlo Sforza, decided to draft their own—highly controversial—plan to divide Libya. Circumventing the UN channels as much as possible, the result was a bilateral agreement calling for a UN supervised Libyan state, with British trusteeship over Cyrenaica, French trusteeship over the Fezzan and Italian

<sup>23</sup> Ann Daerden, "Independence for Libya: The political problems", *Middle East Journal*, 4, (4), 1950, pp. 395–409 and Adrian Pelt, *Libyan independence and the United Nations*, Carnegie, 1970, pp. 180–181.

trusteeship over Tripolitania, as well as a partitioning of Eritrea between Ethiopia and Sudan and Italian trusteeship over Italian Somaliland. Cyrenaicans actually received the Bevin-Sforza plan with moderate positivity, but the British Embassy reported strikes in Tripoli and a crowd of around 2,000 protesters came out to demonstrate against the proposed Anglo-Italian compromise.<sup>24</sup> Protesters assaulted a number of Italian inhabitants and shattered windows of Italian-run shops. On May 13, the British authorities proclaimed a state of emergency in the Libyan territories, four days after the presentation of the plan.<sup>25</sup> The General Assembly rejected the Bevin-Sforza proposal, but only by a small minority. Sforza complained: “The sacrifices made by Italy in regard to her former African territories have failed to satisfy a majority composed mostly of delegations representing colored people and small nations.”<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the proposal failed not because delegates thought it was an inappropriate proposal for the future of Libya, but because it had not taken into account the new geopolitical realities. The proposed European division of Arab territory failed to acknowledge the waning colonial times. The opposition of the Soviet Union led to its rejection, with the symbolic decisive vote coming from Haiti—the reason why one of the more prominent streets in Tripoli carried the name of the Caribbean island state. The episode did heat up the debate within the General Assembly. Member states felt an increased pressure to come up with a solution and a majority of member states started supporting the idea of Libyan independence in the near future. These members included the US, which was afraid that any more delay would play out in favor of the Soviet Union. The US started backing the idea of an independent Libya with the UK as its key patron, so that Washington itself could focus elsewhere. In October 1949, reconsidering his options, Count Sforza changed his strategy as well and announced to the First Committee that Italy was in favor of independence for all her colonies at the earliest possible moment. Sforza declared that the Italian people desired to follow Britain’s farsighted and generous example of cultivating friendships with all newborn states.

<sup>24</sup> Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4. UA20, 24 June 1949, Banco di Roma in Tripoli to Conte Giorgio della Croce and Ugo Foscolo. See also Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4, UA20, letter from Tripoli to Ugo Foscolo, 20 May 1949.

<sup>25</sup> Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4. UA20, 24 June 1949, Tripoli to Conte Giorgio. See also Banco di Roma, XI.3.1.4. UA20, Tripoli to Ugo Foscolo, 20 May 1949.

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, May 19, 1949, quoted in Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 132.

During the General Assembly meeting of November 21, 1949 at Lake Success in New York, the member states adopted UN Resolution 289, deciding on the creation of an independent and sovereign state of Libya no later than January 1, 1952. The Resolution tasked representatives from the three Libyan regions to meet together in a National Assembly in order to draft a constitution. A UN Commissioner, together with a ten-member council, was charged with assisting the new Libyans to draft this constitution, to set up their sovereign state institutions and to come up with an initial government plan. In December 1949, the UN appointed Adrian Pelt, a former Dutch journalist and press agent, as the UN Commissioner for Libya. According to his own memoirs, a high-ranked UK official remarked to his wife at a dinner: “Madam, I wish your husband the best of luck, but to be quite frank I am afraid he is going to break his neck.”<sup>27</sup>

Libya indeed turned out to be a difficult file. Nonetheless, it was predominantly the interference of international actors that often made Pelt’s work as good as impossible. Many tensions existed between the UN Mission and elements of the British military and civilian staff as well as other member states.<sup>28</sup> Pelt also noted that the suspicion between the three provinces actually strengthened the hands of the administering powers, Britain and France, in the implementation of their divisive policies.<sup>29</sup> Discord amongst the Libyans was evident from the moment they had to nominate delegates for the ten-member council called for in the UN Resolution. The council was stipulated to consist of representatives from Egypt, France, Italy, Pakistan, the UK, one representative from Cyrenaica, one from Tripolitania and one from the Fezzan, plus someone representing the minorities in Libya. The commissioner himself was the tenth member. After consulting with the key stakeholders, Pelt had requested the provinces to forward their respective candidates for council membership. Only the Fezzan was able to send in one single name. Cyrenaica submitted eight names and Tripolitania seven. The minorities added four names. Pelt had to make the selection himself, choosing Mustafa Mezran from Tripolitania, Ali al-Jerbi from Cyrenaica, Ahmed al Hajj al Sanussi for the Fezzan, and for the minorities the Italian Giacomo Marchino.

The global powers, the British Administration in particular, indeed put substantial efforts into influencing the UN Commissioner’s views

<sup>27</sup> Pelt, *Libyan independence*, p. 112.

<sup>28</sup> See Pelt, *Libyan independence*.

<sup>29</sup> Pelt, *Libyan independence*, p. 222.

on the future governance structure of the Libyan state. Within the UK Administration, several competing ideas circulated. Based in Tripolitania, Governor Travers Robert Blackley proactively forwarded proposals to develop a constitution for Tripolitania, in parallel to the one drafted for Cyrenaica. He believed that both provinces could form autonomously and then be linked in a loose federal construct at a later stage. The constitutional drafting process was to go hand in hand with the Libyanization of all ranks of the civil service to the greatest practical extent, and the development of the powers and responsibilities of municipalities. The UK could offer capacity building workshops for local civil servants, so as to bring them up to a point where in the future, they themselves could lead the decisions on the final form of the Libyan state. The proposal also outlined that senior and junior British officers should have key positions at every stage of the constitution-drafting process. Blackley believed that embedding these officers in the relevant (new) councils was the most effective way to develop a Libyan civil service and “produce a class of responsible politicians”.<sup>30</sup> An alternative proposal existed which aimed at actually bringing together representatives of the three provinces and have them decide on a broadly acceptable final form of a unified state and from there, outline the necessary interim steps. The overall argumentation behind this approach was that the only possible form of unity Libya could achieve “was some not very close federal bond” and that even achieving this would take already many more years than the UN envisioned.<sup>31</sup> The various British proposals naturally reflected British interests as the British foreign minister’s main objective remained a treaty with Cyrenaica (and Cyrenaica alone), satisfying British military requirements. Britain wanted its financial and military commitments to extend to Tripolitania as little as possible. Bevin argued in favor of Blackley’s plan of keeping Tripolitania and Cyrenaica separated where feasible. While the UN had clearly stipulated that Libya was to be a unified state, Bevin wanted to integrate the provinces only at the most rudimentary level, anticipating or hoping that real unity would not be achieved.<sup>32</sup> For example, legislative power in Cyrenaica rested with the Emir. The British reasoned that giving legislative power in Tripolitania to a parliament instead, would create a welcome obstacle to any substan-

<sup>30</sup> FO 371/73807, Proposals for a Tripolitanian Constitution, 1949, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> FO 371/73807 Reaction to Blackley’s Constitution Proposals for Tripolitania, 1949, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> FO 371/73807, Constitutional Development in Tripolitania, 2 December 1949.

tial future unity. The British General Lewis pointed out that this stance would probably run counter to the UN decision, the views of the UN Commissioner and the preferences of the inhabitants. According to Bevin, it was though, much in line with what Emir Idris of Cyrenaica himself envisioned, namely “separate ministerial and parliamentary arrangements” and a “confederation in which the only common factors are the Emirate and flag”, perhaps with some customs and defense arrangements.<sup>33</sup>

The UN Commissioner, having slightly different ideas to the UK representatives, established a preparatory committee for the Libyan National Assembly, also known as the “committee of twenty-one”. Membership consisted of seven representatives from each Libyan region. In its first meeting, the committee adopted its rules of procedures and elected Mohammad Abu As’ad al-Alim, from Tripolitania, as its chairman. Two deputies represented the other two regions. The committee decided that the National Assembly was to have 60 members, 20 from each region. The assembly convened and was able to come to an agreement on some fundamental issues: Libya was to be a federal state, with a federal government and parliament complemented by three regional parliaments, as well as two capitals. The majority agreed that the new Libyan state should be a constitutional monarchy ruled by Mohamed Idris el Sanussi. The assembly appointed a committee to draft a constitution and that committee then established a working group of six members, assisted by UN experts and other advisers, mainly British. The group convened for the first time on November 25, 1950 and gathered 43 times between then and November 1951.<sup>34</sup> Chaos prevailed during the meetings, and the inexperienced members relied heavily on Western, in particular British, advisers and UN mission staff. The constitution of Cyrenaica served as a model and as such the document enshrined indirectly many of the UK’s preferences. Those preferences did not naturally reflect ideas about the separation of legislative, executive and judiciary powers, liberalism and representative democracy as were advocated at home in London. Instead, the view from London was that preserving Cyrenaica (or now Libya) as a reliable ally,

<sup>33</sup> FO 371/73,807 Constitution Proposals Tripolitania, 1949, De Candole’s reactions to Constitutional Proposals for Tripolitania, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> See Ismail R. Khalidi, “Constitution of the United Kingdom of Libya: Background and summary”, *Middle East Journal*, 6, (2), 1952, pp. 221–228.

was more important than exporting democracy.<sup>35</sup> As recommended by London and Washington, the king was put above all in the constitution and was granted absolute power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister and all other ministers. He also could dissolve parliament at will. Thus, Libya was set up to become a relatively authoritarian state with the king as the highest authority. In September 1951, the Committee presented the draft constitution and the text was adopted a month later.

The US backed the approach taken towards Libyan independence, observing that if the Libyan constitution were to guarantee King Idris preponderant influence, this would translate into a decisive voice for Britain and indirectly into appropriate protection for American interests.<sup>36</sup> The Libyan monarchy was to be shaped in a way that it would become one of several Western-loyal monarchies in the Arab world. It was an imperfect though cheap and rather effective substitute for the loss of direct British imperial rule in the Middle East and elsewhere. Pelt had also raised concerns about Libya's immediate economic viability and concluded that any future Libya could not be expected to be self-sustainable as an independent economy. The UN decided to make the future Libyan state eligible for substantial technical assistance, including for after its declaration of independence and before it had become an actual member of the United Nations. The support was judged necessary for the development of Libya's economy, for its social progress and for the improvement of its public administration.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, with hardly any self-generated income, Libya was unlikely to be able to balance its budget. It was foreseen that the country would need one or more dedicated international patrons to pick up the tabs. With independence looming, the territories started preparing for new monetary arrangements and the unification of the currency. The new Libyan currency would be introduced in early 1952 and be pegged to the pound sterling in order to avoid its immediate collapse.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> William Roger Louis, "American anti-colonialism and the dissolution of the British Empire", *International Affairs*, 61, 1985, p. 404.

<sup>36</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States [hereafter FRUS], 1951, Volume I, Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State Webb to the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Lay), Washington, 30 April 1951, pp. 1319–1320.

<sup>37</sup> UNG.A. Resolution 398 (V) on technical assistance to Libya, adopted on 17 November 1950.

<sup>38</sup> FRUS, 1951, I, Webb to Lay, 30 April 1951, p. 1319 and FRUS, 1950, Volume V, Acting Secretary of State to the Consulate in Tripoli, Washington, 5 May 1950, p. 1621.

The most difficult parts of shaping Libya had been to have King Idris think beyond Cyrenaica and also take charge of Tripolitania and the Fezzan, and to have him agree on endowing Libya with two official capitals—Benghazi and Tripoli. To illustrate, the king even refused to have his picture printed on the national currency. Pelt and others had convinced Cyrenaica's leaders to sign up to a federation, sufficiently loose for their region to remain in essence autonomous. In Tripolitania, people understood that the Sanussi would rule in their region with reluctance at best. And not all agreed that Libya should align with the emerging Western camp in the Cold War. In May 1951, Sidi Idris made his first official visit to the western capital of Libya, Tripoli. Before his arrival, security forces had arrested more than a 100 potential spoilers. Despite the precautionary measures, the king-designate was greeted by a group of angry protesters and several hand grenades. Nevertheless, on December 24, 1951, in the safe environments of Benghazi, King Idris I declared Libya an independent state under the official name of The United Kingdom of Libya. Symbolically, he did so from the premises of the old residence of the former Italian governor.

The handover of power to the new Libyan authorities went relatively smoothly. Throughout the process towards independence, the UK and the French had continued to administer the Libyan provinces. They gradually transferred their competences to the new Libyan leaders. The partial independence of Cyrenaica triggered the transfer of some competencies in the east. By April 1951, a provisional federal government was inaugurated, headed by Mahmoud el-Muntasir from Tripolitania. He also held the portfolios of judicial affairs and education. The last transfer of powers coincided with the official declaration of independence and, under the new constitution, the first general elections in Libya took place on February 19, 1952, confirming the legitimacy of the Muntasir-government. It would, however, be the last election in which political parties competed with each other, as soon after these first elections, the monarchy decided to ban the formation of political parties. Subsequent elections took place with all candidates listed as independents.



## The “Cyrenaican” King and the Anglo-American Alliance

True independence remained an illusion for Libya. In the first 17 years after independence, Libya functioned as a loyal Anglo-American vassal state, administered by a king relying heavily on London and a set of British advisers. During the eight years London administered the key cities in the Libyan provinces after the defeat of the Italians (1943–1951), it had decided on all issues related to foreign, economic and financial policy. Britain had strategically invested in personal relations with the emerging Libyan elites, many of whom took up leading positions in the Sanussi monarchy. King Idris and his followers proved loyal allies in the West’s struggle against communism and Arab nationalism and provided the US and the UK in particular with leverage over Libya’s economic development and access to useful military assets. Despite the arid nature of Libyan soil and the underdeveloped skills of its population, Britain’s interest in keeping close ties with Libya grew steadily during these years. The military bases in Libya had proven their great value. London sought to retain permission to use these bases, partly to ensure rapid access to Egypt, Libya’s more powerful neighbor and a country of much greater interest to all external actors—except perhaps for Italy. Not long before his death in 1951, the British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, underlined the importance of having a base from which Britain was capable of supporting a

major campaign in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> London deemed the El Adem base, 24 kilometers south of Tobruq, a viable and reliable choice.

To capitalize on relationships it had built, and to institutionalize its privileged position, Britain encouraged its Libyan allies to move quickly towards an official bilateral alliance, through which the UK would become Libya's most important international partner. The new British Ambassador, Sir Alec Kirkbride, had set up office in the eastern city of Cyrene, and dedicated his time to pushing for an Alliance Treaty between Libya and Britain. This Anglo-Libyan Treaty was signed in Benghazi on July 29, 1953 and governed the bilateral relationship for the next 20 years. In the treaty's first article, Britain and Libya promised each other not to adopt, with regard to foreign policies, positions inconsistent with the spirit of the alliance or attitudes that could create difficulties for the other party. The text also included a mutual defense clause.<sup>2</sup> An agreement on military and financial matters accompanied the main text of the Anglo-Libyan Treaty.<sup>3</sup> Britain pledged to supply the Libyan army with all necessary equipment, while Libya granted Britain continued use of military facilities on Libyan soil as well as access to its territory for training purposes. Britain also obtained the right to supervise and control aircraft, vehicles, other means of transportation as well as assets of strategic communications on Libyan territory. British authorities could use Libya's civilian airports and British forces gained free entry and passage around Libya's military and otherwise vital infrastructure.

The British desire to influence developments in Libya was part of a larger strategic attempt to remain a player of significance in the Middle East region.<sup>4</sup> The world wars had severely weakened the British position on the global stage and financial and political reasons had forced London to give up colonies and protectorates. Losing India in 1947 was indubitably the biggest blow to British imperialists and some in the administration hoped

<sup>1</sup> TNA CP (50), 283, Cab 129/43, Memorandum to the Cabinet by the Foreign Secretary, 27 November 1950.

<sup>2</sup> See text of the Alliance Treaty between Libya and Britain in: J.A.S. Grenville and Bernard Wasserstein, *Major international treaties of the twentieth century. A history and guide with texts*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2000, p. 713.

<sup>3</sup> See exchange of notes between Britain and Libya constituting an interim agreement concerning certain financial and military matters, 21 March 1953, accessible through: <http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/pdf/1953/TS0022.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951: Arab nationalism, the United States and postwar imperialism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

that the Middle East, together with territories in Africa, could compensate for that loss. As part of this strategy, Britain lobbied to have its wartime regional allies in the Middle East morph into a chain of loyal, independent monarchies. The Sanussi in Libya constituted one of the links, their peers in Jordan, Iraq and most of the Gulf region formed additional links. At the same time, Britain maneuvered itself into a strong relationship with the new Western superpower that had emerged after the Second World War, the United States. London expected the US to help preserve British interests in the Middle East until London itself had regained strength. Britain became Washington’s staunchest ally and the US, indeed, supported British initiatives in Libya and elsewhere. For the Americans, halting the advance of the Soviet Union in North Africa and the Middle East was key and Washington analyzed newly independent states as either in their camp, signing up to democracy and a liberal market economy, or as adversaries in the Soviet camp, following the hostile communist model. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and secretary of state John Foster Dulles valued Libya’s central location and considered it a strategic link in the system of overseas military bases the US was constructing, with the objective of policing the Arab lands and the Mediterranean basin. Libya could be an excellent buffer in American eyes: an ally to keep Algeria and Egypt—both flirting with Moscow—apart. As Dulles expressed in 1953, “in case of war, Libya can become the door or the barricade to the East (...) it is a bridge between North-African and West-African countries”.<sup>5</sup>

The Americans also pursued an official agreement with the new Libya. During the Second World War, the British had granted their American allies rights to the Mellaha airbase, close to Tripoli. The Italians had constructed the base in 1923 and the US had renamed it the Wheelus Field Base. The US legation had been upgraded to embassy level in September 1954; Colonel John L. Tappin was appointed as the first US Ambassador to Libya. The growing Soviet threat reinforced America’s eagerness to retain its military rights in Libya and this was realized through a formal US–Libyan Agreement which was negotiated and ratified in October 1954.<sup>6</sup> The agreement stipulated that it was subject to renegotiation by

<sup>5</sup>FRUS, 1952–1954, Volume IX, Memorandum of a conversation between J.F. Dulles, Secretary of State and Mahmoud el-Muntasir, Prime Minister of Libya, Tripoli, 28 May 1953, p. 166.

<sup>6</sup>St. John, *Libya and the United States*, p. 70.

December 24, 1970.<sup>7</sup> In addition to granting rights to use the base, the compact allowed US troops to occupy and use other areas of the country for military purposes and Libya pledged to ensure American military personnel were not hindered in any of their activities. The conduct of US forces would fall outside of Libya's jurisdiction, even when it caused injury or death to Libyan nationals. Libyans were banned from US designated areas. In 1955, Ambassador Tappin stated that the base, hosting 4,600 US citizens, was "a little America on the sparkling shores of the Mediterranean".<sup>8</sup> Within several years, "Wheelus" grew out to be the US's largest strategic and best-equipped base in the Mediterranean, serving as a vital link in the US Strategic Air Command.

Britain and the US were not the only ones impatient to engage Libya. France, in the war years, had controlled the southern territories, thereby expanding the already substantial French zone of influence in sub-Saharan Africa. Like the UK, Paris tried to maintain as much influence as possible in overseas territories in order to retain its global standing. Mainly focusing on Francophone Africa, it tried to consolidate its position in the Fezzan. Even though empty and of little economic value, the desert interested Paris due to its proximity to its (former) African territories, its usefulness for military bases and because of the prospects of large amount of subsoil minerals. Following the British example, France signed a Franco-Libyan Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborliness in August 1955.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Union also tried to expand its influence in North Africa. The Soviets wanted a foot in Libya, for exactly the reasons the US hoped to keep them out. For Moscow, Libya constituted the connection between the communist-leaning states of Egypt and Algeria. In Egypt, often the trendsetter in the region, the Arab nationalist Gamal Abd el-Nasser had risen to power through a 1952 coup led by General Muhammed Naguib. Nasserist Egypt became the heart of a rediscovered Arab assertiveness, one that was vehemently opposed to American patronage. In Algeria, the violent struggle for independence from France had started with 1954's *Toussaint Rouge*, when anti-Western Algerian nationalists staged a series

<sup>7</sup>FRUS, 1950 Volume V, Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President, Washington, 18 October 1951, p. 1346.

<sup>8</sup>Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup>See Andre Cocatre-Zilgien, "Les accords Franco-Libyens", *Annuaire français de droit international*, 1956 (2), pp. 242-254.

of attacks on police and military targets.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the new but impoverished state of Libya was pleased with this overwhelming attention from powerful and wealthy external powers. Desperately in need of financial aid and allies guaranteeing its security, Libya's leaders kept the administration running on the many millions of dollars received in foreign aid and rents paid for the use of its Western-built military bases. Donors of development aid, nonetheless, often expected political loyalty in return, and London appointed a financial and economic adviser as well as an auditor to ensure that funds channeled to Libya were allocated in an acceptable manner.

The Italians, the former colonists and wartime enemies, were reluctant to give up influence in Libya and were looking for opportunities to restore the bilateral relationship. Rome watched Libya's servitude towards the British and the French with envy and anger. Media outlets cried out that Libya now, instead of an independent state, had become a pseudo-protectorate of Britain. However, the facts on the ground were such that, while the British, French and Americans controlled the military-strategic elements of the country, the small domestic economy was still largely in the hands of the Italian community. Even though numbers had dwindled quickly during the war, an estimated 40–50 thousand Italian citizens resided in Libya, owning most of the fertile land in Tripolitania. The exodus of the Jewish community from Libya, due to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, had further enhanced the position of Italian businesses, as they successfully jumped into the entrepreneurial lacunas created.<sup>11</sup> Despite the remaining agricultural and other economic links, the colonial past and the atrocities inflicted during the 32 years of Italian rule tainted political relations with the new Libya. In particular, the issue of property rights spoiled every Italian attempt to establish constructive, forward-looking bilateral relations. The displacement of Italians during and after the war, especially in Cyrenaica, had created the issue of absentee owners. In line with the Hague Convention, the British governor had appointed a Custodian of Enemy Property for Italian assets. After the war, a UN Resolution gave Libyans the right to "receive, without payment, the movable and immovable property located in Libya owned by the Italian

<sup>10</sup> Charles O. Cecil, "The determinants of Libyan foreign policy", *Middle East Journal*, 19 (1), 1965, pp. 20–34.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice M. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya: coexistence, persecution, resettlement*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008.

state”.<sup>12</sup> Wanting to target only state properties, Resolution 288 (V) stipulated that private property rights had to be respected. However, from the moment the resolution was adopted, arguments arose over what belonged to the public domain and what should be considered private property. After all, during the Fascist period, the lines between private and public property had blurred. Another area of conflict was that of war reparations. Libya demanded substantial reparations while Italy dismissed these claims on the basis that Libyan territory had been an integrated part of Italy during the war. Therefore, it argued, no legal basis for such claims existed.<sup>13</sup> Negotiations were stalled until early 1955, when on an Italian initiative, talks reopened. This time they led to an agreement, signed on October 2, 1956 and ratified by the Libyan King on March 30, 1957.<sup>14</sup> The agreement had the double purpose of removing the thorny question of property disputes and of boosting commercial relations. Libya pledged to respect the property of the Italians living in Libya, while Italy agreed to pay pensions and compensations to those Libyans who had been working in its service.<sup>15</sup> An Italian pledge of one million Libyan pounds for economic reconstruction indirectly satisfied the demand for war reparations. A similarly large amount of money was provided in credit and earmarked for Italian goods to stimulate trade relations.<sup>16</sup>

For the first decade of its existence, Libya had little to bring to the negotiation table and as such remained highly dependent on the wishes of its unofficial patrons. The discovery of oil in commercial quantities drastically changed Libya’s negotiation power vis-à-vis the West. During the Italian occupation, geologists had already spotted oil traces in water wells and in 1940, the Italian state agency *Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli* (Agip) had started explorations in the Sirte basin. Operations were halted during the war years and after the war, the UK took over where Italy had left off, with American firms and others following suit. By 1947, most oil companies concluded that Libya was blessed with large amounts of the

<sup>12</sup>Resolution 288 (V) on Economic and Financial Provisions Related to Libya, 15 December 1950, Yearbook of the UN 1950, New York 1951, pp. 357–59.

<sup>13</sup>Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, pp. 276–277.

<sup>14</sup>Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 276.

<sup>15</sup>Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 277.

<sup>16</sup>Official Gazette Vol VIII March 25, 1958, no 5.

black gold.<sup>17</sup> Adding to the euphoria, Libya’s oil was located west of the Suez Canal and turned out to be of extremely high quality. In June 1959, Esso announced the discovery of a large oil deposit in the eastern town of Zelten, Cyrenaica. While communicated as the first large discovery, Zelten was in fact the sixth discovery of great significance in Libya, but the British and American companies responsible for earlier finds decided not to inform the Libyan government. They feared that the moment Libyan politicians grasped the significance of these developments, they would start resisting external influence and could create problems for the Western military bases.<sup>18</sup>

For Libya, oil would in many ways have a liberating effect, but while many hoped that oil could make Libya finally independent and autonomous, in reality oil caused Libya to need Western technical expertise and advice more than ever. Oil further increased the interest of external actors, and many of them tried maneuvering their national businesses into a privileged position by exploiting the inexperience of Libya’s new decision makers and their lack of understanding of the complexities and dynamics of the international oil industry and markets. A large number of external advisers was involved in drafting Libya’s first Petroleum Law, which was a follow-up of the 1953 Mineral Law. Britain was pushing for a clause in which all concession rights had to be offered to British companies first. Only when rejected, they could go to others.<sup>19</sup> The suggested stipulation was supported by the “fact” that the UK had been the first to search for oil back in 1943. Fortunately for Libya, by 1954, Mustafa Bin Halim had succeeded Mahmoud el-Muntasir as prime minister and he wasted no time in condemning Libya’s Western servitude. Blaming his predecessors for playing the game of foreign policy with one card only—Libya’s alliance with Great Britain—Bin Halim opposed the suggested clause, pointing at the detrimental effects of monopolies created in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Most Western companies did perceive the final 1955 Petroleum Law as progressive and its enforcement increased investors’ confidence.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Gurney, *Libya: The political economy of oil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> TNA FO 371/138,785, Libya discovery of oil—Note by the Foreign Office, 3 June 1959.

<sup>19</sup> Frank C. Waddams, *The Libyan oil industry*, London: Croom Helm, 1980, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 326–330.

Until its abolition in 1963, a retired Dutch Shell executive chaired the associated Petroleum Commission.

Bin Halim and other Libyan politicians soon got entangled in a difficult balancing game between pleasing their Western allies and pleasing their Arab allies. They knew that it was necessary as well as beneficial to work with Western patrons and advisers. However, as elsewhere in the decolonizing Middle East and North Africa, a new generation of Libyans grew up with stronger anti-Western feelings and bought into ideologies related to Arab nationalism or pan-Arabism. To accommodate these societal trends, the Libyan establishment saw that it was essential to cultivate cordial relations with other Arab states, Egypt in particular.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, Libyan elites were grateful that the UK and the US helped them train Libyan police and military forces, but this collaboration also meant that these forces were deployed to contain not only anti-monarchical, but also anti-Western spirits. In contrast to what the West said it stood for at home, it encouraged the Sanussi not to allow any trade unions or political movements to flourish.

The policy was not least inspired by the fact that the public mood in Libya was in general negatively disposed to the strong links between the Libyan establishment and the West. The Arab League, which Libya had joined in 1953, rebuked King Idris and his governments for their slave-like behavior. The influential Egyptian radio broadcaster *The Voice of the Arabs* incessantly attacked the Libyan government for being a puppet of the West. Bin Halim was concerned about these allegations, but also knew how to use them as bargaining chips in negotiations with the West. In conferences with his European and American counterparts, Bin Halim emphasized the risks and the efforts it took to please the West, arguing that the Wheelus agreements put Libya at great risk of an Egyptian attack.<sup>22</sup> Nasser regularly referred to his Libyan brethren as traitors and helpers of the Western imperialists. In Nasser's view, the real danger came from the UK rather than the Americans. The latter was believed to offer economic aid without imposing itself, while the UK in his views retained a strong sense of nostalgia for colonial times. Afraid of antagonizing Egypt, Libya decided to reject participation in the 1955 British-encouraged Baghdad

<sup>21</sup> See Charles O. Cecil, "The determinants of Libyan foreign policy", *Middle East Journal*, 19 (1), 1965.

<sup>22</sup> FRUS, 1952–1954, Volume XI, Consul at Benghazi (Summers) to Department of State, Benghazi, 16 April 1954 pp. 585–9.



Pact and Bin Halim promised the Egyptian president that as soon as Libya reached financial autonomy and stability, all long-term agreements with the West would be terminated. Libya could not be isolated from general developments in the Arab world.

The battle over Libyan loyalty heated up further with the 1956 Suez crisis when Britain, together with France and Israel, unsuccessfully challenged Nasser.<sup>23</sup> Libya's streets cried for reprisals against UK forces, while the Egyptian military attaché in Libya started distributing arms and encouraged attacks on British installations.<sup>24</sup> The Libyan cabinet was divided over the question of which side to back. In the end, prime minister Bin Halim decided to support Egypt, stating that: "The decision [the nationalization of the Suez Canal] is a wise and courageous step which we hope will be carried out successfully (...) The negative attitude of the Western Powers raises doubts as to their intentions in giving free economic aid to small powers"<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Bin Halim expelled the Egyptian military attaché, which cost Bin Halim dearly in popularity, both domestically and with the Egyptian authorities. To compensate, the Libyan government consented to the clandestine passage of Egyptian arms to Algeria, provided that none of the lethal materials were stored in Libya itself. Two years later, in July 1958, Libya's streets rejoiced once again, this time over the Baathist revolution in Baghdad. King Idris strongly condemned the bloody event, which included the slaughtering of the Hashemite Royal family of Iraq. Just like himself, the murdered King Faisal II and Crown Prince Abd al-Ilah had been loyal allies of the West. Following the revolution and the establishment of an Iraqi republic, the *Voice of the Arabs* accused Libya of being one of only two states that had not yet recognized the new Iraqi government.<sup>26</sup> That other state was Israel. Fearing overflows, British troops mobilized in the eastern part of Libya to restore order, a move that only caused the number of protesters to swell. In the end, the Libyan government calmed the crowds by reaching out to Cairo, calling

<sup>23</sup> See for example Richard John Worrall, "The strategic limitations of a Middle East client state by the mid-1950s: Britain, Libya and the Suez Crisis", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (2), 2007, pp. 309–347.

<sup>24</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 273.

<sup>25</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, pp. 269–70.

<sup>26</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 42.

Libya an integral part of the Arab nation and declaring Libya's continued opposition to foreign intervention in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

Successive Libyan governments understood that the strong association with the West was a cause of domestic unrest. Still, King Idris kept relying heavily on London and Washington and did not want to jeopardize the relationship. According to a 1960 report, the Libyan establishment supported the ongoing British military presence out of fear of their own citizens as well as out of mistrust of their Arab neighbors. There was also an economic element to the wish to retain good relations as Libyan businessmen close to the rulers benefited greatly from the expats' spending patterns.<sup>28</sup> But the paradox remained that on the one hand, Libya's authorities wanted to keep as many security guarantees from the West as possible, whereas at the same time, these ties led to more unrest. Britain itself, due to fiscal difficulties at home, was reducing the number of its troops in the Arab region and proposed to decrease its presence in Libya. Prime minister Harold Macmillan, back in 1957, had resolved that keeping control over the most vital strategic hubs—"the Gibaltars"—would suffice until Britain regained strength.<sup>29</sup> Increasingly, Britain started to rely on its more powerful ally the United States and the UK's Chiefs of Staff Committee argued that British interests in Libya and elsewhere in the Arab region could be safeguarded under the American banner.<sup>30</sup>

As part of this strategy, Britain proposed to cut the number of British troops in Libya from 8,000 in 1956 to 2,000 by the end of 1958. The British military would remain present in the Eastern Province of Cyrenaica, to discourage Egypt from any hostile action in Libya and to protect the royal family. At the same time, London proposed to slash financial aid by more than two-thirds to £1.25 million.<sup>31</sup> These plans upset the Sanussi as well as the Americans. El-Muntasir stated that any such act would be considered treason and added that the proposal outraged King Idris himself, who felt hurt as he held a strong, historically nurtured loy-

<sup>27</sup>Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, pp. 239–240.

<sup>28</sup>TNA FO 371/147,494, Riches to Ross "Oil in Libya: future problems", Benghazi, 20 January 1960.

<sup>29</sup>Louis, *The British Empire*, p. 32. And see Harold MacMillan, *Riding the Storm 1956–1959*, Harper and Row, 1971.

<sup>30</sup>TNA DEFE 7/1013, Chiefs of Staff Committee: "Anglo-American interests in Libya", Note by Secretary, January 9, 1957.

<sup>31</sup>FRUS, 1955–57, Volume XVIII, Telegram from the embassy of the UK to the Department of State, London, January 15, 1957, pp. 465–6.

alty towards the British establishment, but none towards the Americans. Abdul Majid Kubar, Libyan prime minister at the time, suggested that the proposals went against the terms of the 1953 Anglo-Libyan Treaty: the British government should have consulted Libya on issues that were so closely related to its security and its independence.<sup>32</sup> The withdrawal plans irked the Americans; secretary of state John Foster Dulles believed that the British decision to reduce aid and troops could endanger Western positions in North Africa.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, in the words of vice-president Richard M. Nixon, the US just had to "pay the bill".<sup>34</sup> The Americans were willing to cover the budgetary gap, until, when economic difficulties were overcome, Britain could resume its payments.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, the negative pressure made London postpone the withdrawal and aid was cut less drastically. Britain kept providing the Libyan army with light materials, though leaving training and heavy material to the United States. Consequently, US spending in Libya increased rapidly and by 1960 the US had spent more than \$100 million dollars in aid in Libya, making the country the single biggest per capita recipient of US financial aid in the world.<sup>36</sup> In March 1957, Congress had approved a package of \$200 million for the Arab region, to root out communist sentiments. Meeting Nixon in Tripoli, Bin Halim echoed what the US wanted to hear: the Libyans, like the Americans, abhorred international communism; the Soviet ideology contradicted the spiritual principles of Islam. Expressing gratitude for America's generous assistance, he managed to top up the allocated aid by pointing at the constant criticism Libya received from its Arab neighbors for being so close to the Western camp.

In the early 1960s, oil started to shake up the Libyan economy and the country's social and political dynamics significantly. Foreign investors were extremely interested in this emerging resource, and by 1960, around 20 oil companies were active over a total of 65 percent of Libya's land

<sup>32</sup>FRUS, 1955–57, Volume XVIII, Editorial note, pp. 504–506, October 1957, the American ambassador in Libya, John L. Tappin, and the British Ambassador, Walter G. Graham.

<sup>33</sup>FRUS, 1955–57, Volume XVIII, Telegram from the DoS to the Embassy of the UK, Washington, 21 November 1957.

<sup>34</sup>FRUS, 1955–57, Volume XVIII, Memorandum of discussion at the 321st meeting of the NSC, Washington 2 May 1957, p. 484.

<sup>35</sup>FRUS, 1955–57, Volume XVIII, Telegram from DoS to Embassy in Libya, Washington, 4 May 1957, p. 486.

<sup>36</sup>*The New York Times*, 13 December 1959.

surface.<sup>37</sup> Three years later, petroleum counted for 98.7 percent of the country's exports. Few incentives existed to diversify, to develop any other sectors of the economy, and oil substituted foreign aid as the main source of income. Between April 1958 and March 1960, foreign aid grants still subsidized around 58 percent of Libya's federal budget. Four years later, exports outpaced imports by two to one and between 1962 and 1968 Libya's GDP rose from 177.2 to 835.3 million Libyan pounds. According to the ministry of planning, during the last years of the monarchy, annual growth rates stood at 20 percent.<sup>38</sup> The growth of oil wealth increased the number of stakeholders in Libyan politics. A new generation was asking for more representation and for changes in government policies. Under prime minister and foreign minister Mohieddine Fekini, appointed in 1963, new ideas started to find their way into Libya's political life. Fekini urged Libya to take a more independent foreign policy stance. His vision was to position Libya as a cultural and political bridge for its Arab brothers.<sup>39</sup> He advocated increasing the pressure on Western powers and demanded more accountability from the monarchy. Fekini also participated in the founding conference of the Organization of African Unity held in Addis Ababa in 1963. The conference called for the removal of foreign ("postcolonial") bases from African and Arab territory, a call that resonated also with the citizens of Libya. Many in the country believed oil had now made economic aid redundant and there was little understanding of why the government did not demand the closure of the British and American military bases.

The king, however, detached from regional political developments and dismissing the wishes of the younger generation, remained unwilling to challenge his Western allies. Fekini was replaced as prime minister by Mahmoud el-Muntasir and in 1962, King Idris requested the British to not only protect the country against external threats, but also against internal ones. Libya did however gradually move away from full dependency on Western financial aid. Instead, a more complex interdependence arose in which Libya had a much better bargaining position than before.

<sup>37</sup> P. Barker and K.S. McLachlan, "Development of the Libyan oil industry", in: J.A. Allan (ed), *Libya since independence*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1982, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Planning, national accounts 1962–1971, Tripoli, quoted in Allan (ed), *Libya since independence*, p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> TNA FO 371/173,238, Tripoli, April 1963: "Prime Minister Statement in Parliament, March 31, 1963" in VT 1015/24.

A growing number of Libyan politicians and businessmen realized that the quantity, the quality and the location of Libyan oil could be exploited much better. In 1962, Libya joined OPEC and started implementing measures to decrease the oil companies' sway. The Petroleum Law was adjusted in order to obtain greater control over pricing and production and the Libyan government pressured companies to cede a larger share of the profits.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, as long as the British-minded monarchy was in place, oil would not drastically change Libya's foreign policy.

In 1963, Libya witnessed a series of centralizing administrative reforms. These could be mistakenly interpreted as the outcome of successful state and nation building. The decentralized system put in place back in the early 1950s had proven inefficient. Especially in Tripolitania, where the political landscape was highly fragmented, decision-making turned out to be complicated and cumbersome. None of the Tripolitanian elites seemed to be able to get the upper hand in the province. One representative, Sayyid Saddiq al Ridha, summarized the situation (by 1954) as one in which the dictatorial methods of the governor of Tripoli had caused widespread dissatisfaction. However, he concluded, "the Tripolitanians seemed such a spineless crowd that it did not seem to matter. There were no leaders in Tripolitania worthy of the name and the individuals that aspired to such roles were hopelessly at odds with one another."<sup>41</sup>

Despite the internal bickering, there was agreement on at least one point: Cyrenaica was judged too dominant in all fields of government activity.<sup>42</sup>

In essence, the 1963 centralization was forced upon Libya by external powers and was more than anything related to the rapidly emerging oil economy. The changes in governance answered to the demands of international oil companies as well as to changes in Libyan society, where oil had created a growing number of groups that wanted a stake in the country's oil wealth and a say in its governance and redistribution.<sup>43</sup> The main deposits of oil could be found in the Sirte basin in the middle of Libya's stretched coastline, in the border area between Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and the Fezzan. When oil started flowing, the industry requested a uni-

<sup>40</sup>Vandewalle, *Modern Libya*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup>FO 1021, 10,122/5/54, Kirkbride to Bromley, 28 June 1954.

<sup>42</sup>FO 1021, British Embassy in Libya (Cyrene), Aide Memoire from Sir Alec Kirkbride, 6 September 1954.

<sup>43</sup>Vandewalle, *Modern Libya*, p. 65.

form taxation system, a coherent regulatory structure and clearly defined property rights. In response, the Libyan authorities created a ministry of planning and development and remodeled the banking system, with the central bank gaining competencies to harmonize rules and regulations. The adjective “united” was dropped from the official name of the country in order to reflect its less federal nature. Instead of consisting of three provinces, the Kingdom of Libya was divided anew, this time into ten governorates with reduced powers.

Managed wisely, oil could have drawn the Libyans closer together and centralization of the administration could have reinforced this. Unfortunately, thinking and acting remained local; instead of sharing the wealth for the betterment of all, political intrigues and power rivalries magnified as the stakes got higher. Cyrenaican elites were unwilling to have their Tripolitanian brethren enjoy a fair share of the oil wealth and were reluctant to give up a fair share of government positions. Centralization strengthened the king’s entourage and its ability to redistribute the wealth in a way that was politically beneficial for those in charge. In addition, the Cyrenaicans insisted that the head of the new national police had to be from the eastern region, which had led to the majority of police officers having eastern roots, many with tribal affiliations with the Sanussi.<sup>44</sup> While centralization could have contributed to strengthening a national feeling, instead it strengthened nepotism. Tribal allegiances found their reflections in the state’s networks and bureaucracies. Changes in government went hand in hand with changes in privileged networks, making Libya an inherently unstable polity.

On paper, King Idris had the competences to play a disciplining and unifying role. Unfortunately, the royal family focused predominantly on Cyrenaica—and cared especially for the historical homelands around al-Bayda, Tobruq and Benghazi, while having little consideration for Tripolitania or the Fezzan hinterlands. The Sanussi monarch had no real ambitions to further unify his young country other than as a sign of goodwill to its international supporters. He did not have the strong character required to manage the country’s competing personalities, tribal feuds and rival interests. According to the American ambassador in Libya, having had many teas and luncheons with King Idris, the omnipresent subject of interest to the Royal Family was the past, present, and future of Cyrenaica

<sup>44</sup>Vandewalle, *Modern Libya*, p. 66.

and the rebuilding of Benghazi.<sup>45</sup> Uninterested in national politics and never enthusiastic about spending time in Tripolitania, the king left many responsibilities to his royal entourage, the so-called *Diwan*. The *Nazir*, Idris’ chief adviser, often interfered in the name of the king—sometimes without the king’s knowledge.

The West was aware of the turmoil in the Libyan monarchy, though it had little capacity or willingness to understand the depth and the details of the tribal and political dynamics. As early as 1957, the UK ambassador was reporting that:

It seems to me that, in any case, the position of the British and American rights to maintain bases in Libya will become more precarious once the present ruler of the country disappears from the scene and a younger generation of politicians, who are more susceptible to emotional appeals of extreme nationalism than their elders, are left without a leader, guide and mentor. We can confidently assume that the Egyptians and their associates will do all they can to foster any development in Libya which will affect us adversely.<sup>46</sup>

In 1963, the British ambassador wrote that Libya had changed dramatically and that a new class of lawyers and young intellectuals had started questioning the foundations of the Sanussi kingdom. Britain, the ambassador advised, should invest quickly in building up relations with these newly emerging group of influencers and should refrain from emphasizing its ties with the military establishment and the monarchy.<sup>47</sup> The American ambassador in Libya wrote home that British, American and Libyan relations were at a turning point.<sup>48</sup>

With power relations in Libya changing, Italy saw a chance to rebuild some of its former influence. Italy’s postwar elites, deprived of colonies, had strongly advocated the decolonization of the British and French Empires. Italy played a pro-Arab card and voiced its support for several independence movements. This created a favorable political environment for Italian business, with Italy promoting itself as the bridge between the West and the emerging nations and economies of the independent Third

<sup>45</sup> Yehudit Ronen, *Qaddafi’s Libya in World Politics*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Alex Kirkbride, “Libya—which way facing?” *African Affairs*, 56 (222), 1957, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> Massimiliano Cricco, *Il petrolio dei Senussi*, Edizione Polistampa, 2002, p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> FRUS, 1961–63, Volume XXI, Telegram from the DoS to the Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, Washington, 26 July 1963, pp. 155–156.

World.<sup>49</sup> Italy had supported Moroccan independence forces as well as the National Liberation Front in Algeria. Energy magnate Enrico Mattei was a key player in identifying opportunities in the decolonizing world. To the chagrin of Britain and France, wherever they withdrew forces, Mattei persistently attempted to move in with his state-led energy company. The *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* (ENI), the energy holding company Mattei directed, forged profitable partnerships with Egypt (1955), Iran (1957), Morocco (1958), Libya (1959) the Sudan (1959) and Tunisia (1961).<sup>50</sup> All these countries started to reclaim national control over the oil industry and Mattei's strategy was one of openly challenging the cartel of the "Seven Sisters", the largest oil companies dominating the industry by offering more favorable terms.<sup>51</sup>

Libya had started prioritizing its dealings with state-owned companies, understanding that government-to-government agreements could be more beneficial from a political perspective than purely commercial deals. ENI, in its approach to newly independent states, stressed the need for equal partnerships, with "financial co-participation and joint technical and commercial management in terms of perfect equality".<sup>52</sup> In Libya, Mattei offered a 50–50 division of profits and 25 percent Libyan ownership of assets.<sup>53</sup> Mattei died in 1962 in a private plane crash, the cause of which was never clarified. Certainly, Mattei had made a great number of enemies during his career. Despite the death of its charismatic leader, by the end of the 1960s, ENI had secured a substantial part of the concession rights in the postcolonial Arab world, including in Libya. Italy had become Libya's largest source for imports in both relative and absolute terms and Italy imported almost a quarter of its energy needs from Libya, after a considerable shift in supply had taken place from the Gulf to North Africa

<sup>49</sup> Charles R. Dechert, *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, profile of a state corporation*, Leyden: Brill, 1963.

<sup>50</sup> See Mark H. Hayes, "The Transmed and Maghreb projects: gas to Europe from North Africa", in: Victor, David G., Jaffe, Amy M. and Hayes, Mark H. (eds), *Natural gas and geopolitics: from 1970 to 2040*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> The Giants, or the Seven Sisters, included the three companies coming out of Standard Oil Trust: Exxon (Esso), Mobil and Socal, and four other companies: Gulf, Texaco, Shell and BP.

<sup>52</sup> ENI archive [hereafter ENI], digital archive, Speech Mattei.

<sup>53</sup> ENI ASE, H.III.5., NUA 61b, UDC 82.



due to the uncertainty in the Suez Canal.<sup>54</sup> Rome was also the first to conclude a joint venture with the Libyan General Petroleum Corporation (LIPETCO), which was established in 1968. Through that agreement, ENI secured many additional contracts and projects. For example, by the end of 1968, the Italian company ASSEIL operated 102 petrol stations in Libya and for the *Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale* (IRI), another Italian state holding, Libya had become the second largest extra-European market (after the US). Other beneficiaries included car-maker Fiat and communication leader Olivetti, the electric power utility company Montedison, banks and several infrastructure companies.<sup>55</sup> On the eve of the 1969 Free Officers coup that was to overthrow the Sanussi monarchy, Libya was the fourth global supplier of oil, forecasted to become the first by the end of the decade.<sup>56</sup> West-Germany, Britain and Italy together absorbed 75 percent of Libyan oil.<sup>57</sup> Noteworthy also is that Switzerland covered 80 percent of its oil needs from Libyan sources. The day of the coup, minister of petroleum, Khalifa Musa, had spontaneously expressed Libya's extreme satisfaction with ENI's approach.<sup>58</sup>

The openness to the West had made Libya grow economically, but also eroded the legitimacy of the Sanussi regime. Following the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, violent anti-Western and anti-Jewish demonstrations broke out in Tripoli and Benghazi. King Idris decided to send a small contingent of Libyan soldiers to Egypt, to rebut pro-republican forces that depicted him as “an agent of British imperialism”.<sup>59</sup> Several Libyan officers close to the royal family also suggested interventions within Libya itself, but the king rejected this, fearing civil war. Feeling greatly threatened, King Idris moved his household closer to the British military base in the

<sup>54</sup> ENI, Direzione estera, BA.II.3, UDC 201, NUA 170D, ENI Giuseppe Ratti to DG Economic Affairs of Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Giovanni Vincenzo Soro, 24 July 1970.

<sup>55</sup> ENI, Direzione estere, U.VI.4, UDC 131, NUA 2F4F, Report on aspects of Italian presence in Libya, December 1968.

<sup>56</sup> ENI, Direzione estera, BA.II.3, UDC 201, NUA 170D, MAE DGAE Ufficio VII to ENI SSICE, 3 April 1969.

<sup>57</sup> ENI, Direzione estera, BA II.3, UDC 201, NUA 170D, MAE DGAE Ufficio VII to ENI SSICE, 3 April 1969.

<sup>58</sup> ENI, Presidenza Raffaele Girotti, UDC 74, I.II.4, NUA 3360, Ministry of State Companies to ENI on collaboration in the energy sector, 1 September 1969.

<sup>59</sup> ENI, Relazioni estere, U.VI.4, UDC 131, NUA 2F4F, Situation in Libya, 22 June 1967.

east, while simultaneously, understanding that these Western bases had become a symbol of Libya's slave-like behavior, requesting the Americans and British to withdraw, or to at least show that negotiations on this had started. London had wanted to scale down its presence for a long time and withdrew a number of troops from Benghazi in 1967. Troops left Tripoli in March 1966, ending 23 years of British presence in the Libyan capital. By the end of 1967, only 2,000 British troops remained, most of them stationed in the vicinity of the Royal Family's residences in Cyrenaica. The UK proposed to the Americans a secret agreement in which Britain would keep its treaty obligations with Libya, but would transfer these to the Americans, without any intervention by the United Nations.<sup>60</sup> Britain, its leaders assured Washington, was willing to take up a loyal, secondary role in the plan.<sup>61</sup> The Americans rejected the proposal.

The continuing reliance of the monarchy on the West was not the only reason for popular unrest. Libyans also turned against the monarchical establishment because it was increasingly perceived as unacceptably corrupt. Libya was created as a byproduct of Great Power rivalries. The regions of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and the Fezzan were artificially glued together into an independent state. For almost two decades, a mutually beneficial alliance had existed in which the West, Britain and the United States in particular, supported Libya's development financially and materially. Libya provided the West with military bases, privileges in economic development, and a regional ally in an increasingly hostile Arab world. Within Libya though, the different provinces, towns and tribes looked at each other as well as at the West with great suspicion. Strong disagreements about governance had made Libya a loose federation of three provinces, all with their own parliaments, rules and procedures as well as two capitals. The constitution had left many uncertainties regarding the division of powers between the national and the provincial levels. Political squabbles at the provincial level often resulted in obstructions at the national level. Oil wealth had raised the stakes of being empowered, while the complicated governance structure, the lack of regulation and of impartial oversight of resources led to deteriorating administration practices and unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. For those with access and connections,

<sup>60</sup>TNA, FO 371/190,490, "Anglo-US Talks on Libya".

<sup>61</sup>FRUS, 1964-8, Volume XXIV, Memorandum of Conversation: UK Defense Review: Reduction of British Forces in Libya and US Commitments there, Washington, 27 January 1966, pp. 112-113.

informal channels and bribes smoothed the system while the daunting bureaucracy became a way to keep out competitors. Foreign companies adjusted their strategies accordingly and increasingly relied on individuals capable of approaching and lobbying at the level of senior officials, especially in the royal *Diwan*. The practice was accepted at the highest levels and ENI officials wrote home that "many are the individual interests and it is known that these in Libya weigh rather more than any economic argumentation."<sup>62</sup>

Like their peers, ENI soon became a skilled player in this game of personalized politics and knew to link itself to several high officials that represented real power in Libya. To illustrate with an excerpt from the ENI archive:

Following the request made by Mr. Ahmed Haggi (...) I received His Excellency Mohamed El Gamari. He, after stating that all Libyans go to him to get to the King, has declared himself available to help us being favored in the issuance of petroleum permits asked in Libya. Only if we were already dealing with his brother-in-law Omar el-Shalhi regarding this issue, would he withdraw his offer. If not, he is at our disposal.<sup>63</sup>

Corruption, nepotism and favoritism exacerbated political intrigues and fed into disillusion and skepticism towards national politics and its Western allies. For many Libyans, the value of a national "state" was not always clear. That the practices reached the highest levels of politics and that this had become a topic of discussion in local coffeehouses did preoccupy the king. In July 1960, he wrote a letter to all civil servants condemning corrupt practices. Unfortunately, the letter was leaked to the press and the king's personal confirmation of widespread mismanagement only encouraged opponents to point out the monarchy's failures.<sup>64</sup>

A third factor in the erosion of King Idris's prestige and domestic standing was his inability to produce an heir. All his children had died in infancy. This had created a serious succession issue, as the constitution stipulated that no proposal could be made to review the provisions related to the monarchical form of government and the order of succes-

<sup>62</sup> ENI, ST.Org.Pres, 262, 4813 I.V.2. Memo written by Marcello Boldrini, Rome 18 October 1965.

<sup>63</sup> ENI, ST.Org.Pres, Memo written by Marcello Boldrini, 18 October 1965

<sup>64</sup> Khadduri, *Modern Libya*, p. 300.

sion to the throne. That order of succession was specified elsewhere in the constitution as being the male heirs of King Muhammed Idris al-Sanussi “the oldest after the oldest, degree after degree”.<sup>65</sup> Following this line, the official heir was a nephew of King Idris, Hasan al-Rida. Many of those that had observed him, including the UK Foreign Office and King Idris himself, shared the opinion that al-Rida was unsuited for the job.<sup>66</sup> According to a British official, the young man gave the impression of being immune to any educative attempts and seemed incapable or unwilling to enlarge his cultural and linguistic horizons.<sup>67</sup> There were also doubts about al-Rida’s political preferences. During a June 1967 Arab Summit in Khartoum of June, he had strongly agreed with anti-Western rhetoric. King Idris had apparently contemplated changing the course of history by transforming the monarchy into a republic and granting the Shalhi family a prominent role.<sup>68</sup> He was particularly fond of Omar el Shalhi, his private secretary, as well as of his brother Abdul Aziz, a senior officer in the army.

The monarchy was on its last legs, but Western understanding of what was happening in Libya remained limited. In the 1967 annual report, the British embassy in Benghazi wrote that:

no one trying to look five months ahead last January would have predicted that Benghazi and Tripoli would be battlegrounds for mobs stirred up by Cairo radio, that one of our Embassies would be burnt, that Libyan oil would cease to flow, that we should be asked to close our bases, and that all British influence should seem to have vanished overnight.<sup>69</sup>

The conclusion of the embassy was nonetheless that the events had mainly positive consequences. The king was now supposedly more aware of the inability of his police and military forces to stand up to internal subversion and external threats. Libya was becoming more authoritarian and a nationwide security service had been established by decree. The existing Public Security Force in Tripolitania and the Fezzan as well as the Cyrenaican Defense Force had also started ordering additional armored cars and other military equipment—conveniently boosting British industries. The king

<sup>65</sup> *The Libyan Constitution* (1951–1969), Chapter V, Article 44.

<sup>66</sup> Cricco, *Il petrolio*, p. 155.

<sup>67</sup> Cricco, *Il petrolio*, p. 153.

<sup>68</sup> Cricco, *Il petrolio*, p. 155

<sup>69</sup> TNA, Annual Report of British Embassy (1967), January 1968.

had replaced pro-Egyptian prime minister Hussein Maziq with Abd al Qadr Badri, who ruthlessly blacklisted and arrested any disloyal elements in the government and beyond. The fact that his list also included personal and tribal rivals ultimately made him resign in favor of the young Abd al Hamid Bakkush, who put together a promising cabinet of young, moderate graduates. The British Embassy believed that most British and American interests—six months after the embassy had been set ablaze—were safe again.<sup>70</sup>

Libya during monarchical rule had remained close to its Western patrons, the US and Britain in particular. Building up its oil industry, the Libyan elites relied heavily on foreign companies and foreign advisers and settled with policies and commercial deals that were not always in its best interest. The court's close collaboration with the West increasingly alienated the Libyan citizenry, a large part of which wanted Libya to follow the example of Nasser's Egypt. The West, reluctantly, recognized that the rule of King Idris was highly unlikely to continue and all Western capitals started anticipating a coup. The key question revolved around who, or what group, to back as the best alternative to the monarchy.

At the close of 1968, London also concluded that supporting the Sanussi heir would not be in the interest of Britain. Officials started expressing the idea that regime change might better suit British interests. The British ambassador was urged to keep this line of thought secret, especially toward his American colleague in Tripoli.<sup>71</sup> The British wanted the transition of power to come from within higher military echelons, and they supported Colonel Abdul Aziz el Shalhi. London hoped that Shalhi could overthrow the monarchy and guarantee the King and his entourage a safe exit.<sup>72</sup> In October 1968, London agreed to supply additional weaponry to the Libyan army but deliberately kept crown prince al-Rida, who was already ruling the country *de facto*, out of the loop. Instead, the agreement was concluded directly and in secret with Colonel Shalhi. The British also lobbied to provide a military training program in Libya and on August 6, 1969 Shalhi agreed to the installation of British trainers, partly to help him monitor the younger army officers who might be plotting against the older guard. Shalhi had planned his own coup in detail and had set September 5 as the execution date; physical preparations were

<sup>70</sup>TNA, Annual Report Libya, 1967.

<sup>71</sup>TNA, FCO 39/452, Speares to Sarell, London, 9 January 1969.

<sup>72</sup>Quoted in Cricco, *Il petrolio*, p. 158.

supposed to start on August 31.<sup>73</sup> In the meantime, a group of younger army officers had organized itself with similar intentions. When these young officers took note of Shalhi's intentions, they decided to stage a coup to prevent Shalhi's coup, which in itself had been preventive in nature. The younger officers planned their act for September 1, 1969. The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), headed by Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi, had two good reasons to strike on that particular day. First of all, according to a persistent rumor, the king had written his voluntary abdication in early August and was to make this official on September 2.<sup>74</sup> Secondly, many of Qaddafi's men had received a note to relocate to Britain on very short notice for military training.<sup>75</sup> About three months prior, in June 1969, King Idris and Queen Fatima had left the country and Hassan al-Rida had been appointed as regent. Officially, the king went to Athens to get his rheumatism treated. Just before he left, both the British and American ambassadors had been called back to their respective countries to take up different offices. The king, afraid, had lamented that his two "custody angels" left him alone in an environment of intrigue and conspiracy.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup>TNA, FCO 39/442, British Military mission in Libya. Report for quarter ending 30 September 1969, Tripoli, 23 October 1969.

<sup>74</sup>Letter of Queen Fatima to Eric de Candole, 13 September 1969, in E.V.A. de Candole, *The life and times of King Idris*, published by Mohamed Ben Ghalbon, London, 1990.

<sup>75</sup>Interview of Colonel Qaddafi on UAR Television on 2 Sha'ban 1389 (14 October 1969) in Meredith O. Ansell and Ibrahim Massaud al-Arif, *The Libyan Revolution: a source-book of legal and historical documents*, Stoughton: Oleander Press Edition, 1972, p. 83.

<sup>76</sup>Cricco, *Il petrolio*, p. 161.

## Qaddafi's Coup: Erasing Historical Deviations

The military coup by a group of junior officers, on September 1, 1969, took the world by genuine surprise. The coup was executed in a highly efficient and well-timed manner. The perpetrators quickly seized the principal government buildings of all major Libyan cities as well as the most relevant media outlets. They arrested and locked up the senior officers involved in preparations for rivaling coups, including Colonel Shalhi. The citizens in the western cities and villages of Tripolitania largely welcomed the change in governance. In the east, especially around the city of Tobruq, the new rulers had a much harder time establishing themselves. Three months after the revolutionary coup, the British ambassador assessed the event as being irreversible. The new regime had consolidated its hold on the country even though strong opposition remained, in particular in Cyrenaica.<sup>1</sup> The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), with Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi in its midst, had Libya embark on a new political adventure, one which would last more than four decades.

Qaddafi soon proved to be the group's strongman, masterly Machiavellian in the way he consolidated his regime. He balanced curtailing domestic opposition with the prevention of a countercoup or international intervention. At home, from the very start, he focused on weakening the legitimate sources of power: the monarchy and the religious establish-

<sup>1</sup>TNA, Annual Report of British Embassy (1969), 16 January 1970.

ment. King Idris was sentenced to death in absentia, impeding his return to Libya. Crown Prince Hasan al-Rida was put under house arrest and later forced to move into a structure at the public beach in Tripoli. Only in the late 1980s were he and his family allowed to travel to London. The bureaucracy associated with the monarchy was gradually sidelined as, after a short period of knowledge and skills transfer, widespread anti-corruption investigations created room for a new generation of bureaucrats. Many of the King's supporters found refuge in places like Cairo, London, and Rome. Stripping the monarchy of power went hand in hand with discrediting the religious establishment. Most Libyan religious scholars (the *ulama*) had been close to the royal family and religiously conservative Libya had endowed them with natural legitimacy. Qaddafi, sensing a potentially powerful source of opposition, declared the established *ulama* to be superfluous and started peppering his own political messages with Islamic terms and concepts. By providing a slightly different interpretation of the scriptures, he tried to give Islam a nationalist and revolutionary twist.<sup>2</sup> For example, he called for a reform of the Islamic calendar so that it started with the death of the Prophet instead of the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Medina. Qaddafi's new ideas were met with a high dose of skepticism, especially in the most devout eastern provinces.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Qaddafi and the RCC consolidated power through a popularization of anti-Western feelings and by building solid tribal alliances in favor of their rule. Confronted with a strongly fragmented political landscape, the new rulers searched for common ground in anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism. Qaddafi depicted the West as preventing the development of the Arab world, as well as its unity. History, in his view, did little to show the advance or progress of any Western civilization, rather, it pointed to a constant drive to dominate other lands and other people's cultures. The revolution proclaimed by the RCC was built on the utopian idea of freeing Libya from foreign influences in order to uncover a true Libyan national spirit. As a start, the RCC decided to change all street signs into Arabic and to refurbish the impressive Tripoli Cathedral into the equally impressive Algeria Square Mosque. Militant speeches and rhetoric, combined with highly publicized acts of

<sup>2</sup>Ray Takeyh, "Qadhafi and the challenge of militant Islam", *The Washington Quarterly*, June 1998, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup>Yahia Zoubir, "Islamisme radical et lutte antiterroriste", *Maghreb-Machrek*, 184, Spring 2005, p. 54.



hostility against Western interests served the triple purpose of bolstering domestic legitimacy, attracting attention at the international level, and settling accounts with former occupiers, including Italy, Britain, and France. To further stigmatize the Sanussi rule, Qaddafi portrayed the Royal Court as a Western creation.

The revolutionary coup changed the regional balance of power in Libya. Power moved away from Benghazi, Tobruq, and al-Bayda towards a new set of cities and families, predominantly around Tripoli, Sirte, and Sebha. While Qaddafi's ideal initially was to destabilize the tribal tissue of Libya—in the name of modernization—ultimately his rule remained grounded in tribal alliances. Group identities were used to keep individuals in check. Until 1969, Qaddafi's own relatively small tribe, the Qadhadfa, had been rather insignificant, but quickly grew in importance. Others that benefited from the change in the country's administration were the Magarha and the Warfalla tribes, as their members started staffing the revolutionary police and intelligence forces.<sup>4</sup> The Magarha were predominantly located in the Fezzan and around Sirte, while the members of the large Warfalla tribe originated from around Bani Walid, though had settled all over the country. The tribes and clans in the east, which had been closer to the monarchy, received relatively few positions of influence in the new regime and started to feel marginalized.<sup>5</sup>

While Qaddafi and his followers successfully silenced a large part of the opposition, they did have to ward off attacks from within their own ranks as well as from other active centers of resistance. With every challenge to Qaddafi's authority, the regime became stricter and more authoritarian. The first such challenge arose from within, when, in December 1969, the minister of defense, Adam al Hawwaz, and the minister of the interior, Musa Ahmad, attempted to dethrone Qaddafi. A day after the thwarted coup, the RCC issued a constitutional proclamation, designating the RCC as the highest authority in the Libyan Republic, responsible for ministerial appointments and dismissals and in full charge of the army. Anyone rising up against the regime would be sentenced to death. A new cabinet was inaugurated, in which Mu'ammar el-Qaddafi appointed himself as prime minister, while also taking on the responsibilities of the minister

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Baxley, "Shifting loyalties: Libya's dynamic tribalism", *Harvard International Review*, 33 (2), 2011, pp. 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> See Wolfram Lacher, "Families, tribes and cities in the Libyan revolution", *Middle East Policy*, 18 (4), 2011, pp. 140–154.

of defense. Qaddafi's confidant Abdessalam Jallud became deputy prime minister and minister of the interior. A second serious attempt to reverse the developments of 1969 was staged by loyalists to the former monarchy. In July 1970, exiled Prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Sanussi, a cousin of King Idris, ordered the overthrow of the RCC, allegedly with support from the Nasr al-Din clan in the Fezzan, from Saudi Arabia, and from America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The plot—which foundered—was said to have involved 5,000 Chadian mercenaries.<sup>6</sup> While difficult to prove, some pundits claim that Italian intelligence services warned Qaddafi of the impending danger.<sup>7</sup> The RCC reacted to this event, in August 1971, by setting up a special court to try those tribal leaders from the southern Sebha region accused of allying with foreigners to counter the revolution. A third and last serious attempt in the years after the revolutionary coup came in August 1975, when Bashir Hawadi and Omar el-Muhayshi, two key members of the RCC, tried toppling Qaddafi. They also did not succeed.<sup>8</sup> In 1977, Qaddafi proclaimed his *Jamahiriyah*, an eccentric People's Republic.

The revolution was not only political in nature. The RCC had strong ideas about the management of the country's oil-based economy, which was judged to be more dependent on Western companies than was acceptable. In general, the key overarching concept the regime tried to implement was that of "Islamic Arab socialism"—a form of socialism that could go hand in hand with religion. In practice, the set objectives entailed economic diversification, sustainable exploitation of natural resources, agricultural self-sufficiency, industrial development, and nationalization of the work force. Qaddafi's socialist tendencies made him gain popular support, as the regime provided higher minimum wages, lower rents, free schooling, and housing for those in need, as well as interest-free-state-issued loans. By 1969, the Italian community still owned the large majority of profitable farms in the western coastal parts of the country, while in the east many of the larger farms were the property of the Sanussi establishment. The regime confiscated these lands and invited the Libyan popu-

<sup>6</sup> John Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1981, p. 139. For a more detailed account of this coup attempt, see John K. Cooley, "The Libyan menace", *Foreign Policy*, 42, 1981, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Mezran and Varvelli (eds), *Libia, Fine o rinascita?*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> John K. Cooley, *Libyan Sandstorm*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982, p. 166.

lation to purchase plots on interest free credit and at subsidized rates. The government made livestock and other farmer's essentials available at around 10 percent of their real value.<sup>9</sup> The regime also invested heavily in irrigation, with undeniably impressive results. Unfortunately, without the skilled labor needed for modern farming, the way the soil was treated proved unsustainable. The local population was also often uninterested in caring for the previously profitable vineyards and many of the agricultural estates ended up abandoned.<sup>10</sup> The country's industrialized sectors all related to oil and gas production and the regime, hoping to increase self-sufficiency, decided to build refineries in Libya and invest in petrochemical and metallurgical industries in order to diversify away from its dependence on the export of crude oil. The cities of Marsa Brega, Ras Lanuf, and Zuwara became key centers for these new industries. Last but not least, Qaddafi allowed for a private sector, but only as long as companies did not contradict the regime's approach.

Paradoxically, the ambitious plans to create more self-sufficiency in many ways increased the Libya's dependency on the West. The new industries the regime wanted to build heavily relied on foreign skilled labor and technology and sophisticated pitches by high-powered consultants persuaded the young and inexperienced policymakers to embark on capital-intensive projects that were not necessarily optimal from a Libyan perspective. Also, nationalizing the workforce turned out to be a burdensome task and became a barrier to rapid development. The monarchy had already encouraged international companies to hire more local staff in order for the country to profit from knowledge and skills transfer, though the government had never made this mandatory. The RCC adopted a more directive approach: from 1970 onward, at least 51 percent of any economic activity in Libya had to be owned by Libyans. In addition, in all companies established in Libya, the majority of staff, as well as the president of the company, had to be Libyan. In joint ventures, 90 percent of the staff needed to be Libyan and they had to receive at least 80 percent of the revenue.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, it soon became clear that the large and ambitious projects the RCC wanted to execute were doomed to fail if these nationalization quotas were strictly implemented. Libya's human capital lacked the skills and expertise to lead and manage such projects. Thus, in the end, a great part of the technical

<sup>9</sup>Vandewalle, *Oil and state-building*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup>ENI, Direzione Estera, Report on the Libyan economy, 1973.

<sup>11</sup>ENI, "Report on the Libyan economy", 1973.

staff, as well as those with entrepreneurial skills and positions, remained expat workers, often from the West.

A revolution also seemed to take place with regard to Libya's foreign policy, at least on the surface. Libya changed from being a reactionary kingdom allied with the West to a progressive Arab republic emphasizing Arab nationalism and anti-Western stances. Qaddafi tried to forge alliances in the Arab and African world, encouraged anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, and claimed non-alignment in the Cold War context. Oil, contracts, investments, uncertainty, subversion, and apparent irrationalism became the regime's main foreign policy instruments. The junior officers that had supported the RCC in their coup had partly done so out of admiration for their neighbor Egypt and especially for the leadership of Abd el-Nasser. Ironically, by the time of the 1969 coup, Nasser had already lost most of his revolutionary feathers. He died from heart failure at the end of September 1970 and Qaddafi might have felt it was his calling to take Nasser's initial ideas of Arab unity forward and to break the artificially constructed borders of the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, the new Libyan regime pushed incessantly for mergers and unifications, but with disappointing results. Nasser, Qaddafi, and the Sudanese president, Jaafar Numeiri, had agreed on a federation of states, with Syria joining in April 1971. The project collapsed because Syria did not want to ban its Communist Party and Egypt's new government under Anwar Sadat seemed more interested in Libyan money than in true integration.<sup>12</sup> Out of protest against the new Egypt under Sadat, in September 1973, Libya sent 20,000 troops on a march to Cairo, hoping that the Egyptian people would join in his efforts in pan-Arabism.<sup>13</sup> The Egyptian authorities halted the Libyan caravan at the border, sparking hardly any civilian protest. Under Sadat's rule, Egyptian–Libyan relations cooled. Sadat reasoned that closer relations with Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel served the Egyptian national interest better than the illusionary ideas of pan-Arabism and after the 1973 October War many Arab leaders took a more pragmatic stance towards the Arab–Israeli conflict. Libya's erratic

<sup>12</sup>See National Archives and Research Administration [hereafter NARA], POL LIBYA-UAR, 1970–1973, RG 59, Intelligence note from the bureau of intelligence and research of the department of state “UAR-Libya, UAR presence in Libya increasing”, Washington, 7 January 1970.

<sup>13</sup>Geoff Simons, *Libya: the struggle for survival*, Basingstoke:Palgrave Macmillan, 1993, p. 269.

leader was shunned as an extremist, as against the current of the time he stepped up his anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric. Feeling betrayed and ignored, he boycotted sessions of the Arab League and withdrew the Libyan ambassador to Egypt. Disappointed with his former mentor-state Egypt, Qaddafi looked for pan-Arab fervor elsewhere. In 1973, he advocated a merger with Algeria and, in January 1974, he and Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba signed the Djerba Agreement, committing to the establishment of an Arab Islamic Republic. The treaty got quickly abrogated as Tunisia's nationalist Destour Party as well as Algeria fiercely criticized the agreement. In August 1981, Libya, Ethiopia, and Yemen put together on paper a formal alliance and Libya proposed unity with Chad and The Sudan. When everything seemed to fail, Qaddafi showed his desperation by reaching out to King Hassan II of Morocco, who he had previously called the most vile and reactionary of all kings.<sup>14</sup> The hostilities between these North African states rested on the fact that Libyan authorities provided support for the Polisario front, which was working to liberate the Western Sahara from Moroccan occupation. At the same time, Hassan II accommodated Libyan opposition figures in Morocco, offering them a base for their operations. Unsurprisingly, the implementation of the resulting 1984 Oujda Treaty failed.

By far the most notorious element of Qaddafi's foreign policy became his involvement with and support for terrorist groups. *The Green Book*—the short booklet outlining the Libyan dictator's simplistic world vision—professed that “all states made up of diverse nationalities for religious, economic, military or ideological reasons will eventually be ripped apart by national conflict until every nationality gains its independence”.<sup>15</sup> Qaddafi depicted his own revolution as a national liberation struggle against exploitation, imperialism, and colonialism, and the obsession with erasing the colonial past was a recurrent theme in his speeches. Assigning himself a universal mission, he was eager to support rebellions with a nationalist background. He called upon other states to free themselves from ongoing psychological and cultural colonization and to punish those that had stolen manuscripts, monuments, and

<sup>14</sup>Mansour El-Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi: the politics of contradiction*, University Press of Florida, 1997, pp. 122–127.

<sup>15</sup>Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi, *The Green Book, Part three: the social basis of the Third Universal Theory*, p. 73.

history in order to display it in the museums of their imperialist capitals.<sup>16</sup> The Qaddafi regime established the *Maktub Tasdir al-Thawra* (Office for the Export of the Revolution) for this purpose and provided support to a plethora of armed rebellions, including training, weapons, money, cover, and sanctuary. Beneficiaries ranged from Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Uganda's Idi Amin.<sup>17</sup> The main criterion for support was that a group was fighting against imperialism or against Western puppet regimes. Freedom fighters or terrorist leaders such as Abu Nidal, Carlos Ilyich Ramirez, George Habash, and Ahmed Jibril all built up personal relationships with the Libyan leader.

What initially worried the West even more than Libya's support for terrorism was its claim to non-alignment in the Cold War that was raging all over the globe. For the West, this meant that Libya was dealing with the Soviet Union. After all, in 1977, Qaddafi added the adjective "socialist" to the state's official name, signed a defense agreement with Algeria in 1975, and, in November 1982, concluded an Alliance of Friendship with North Korea. In January 1983, Libya signed Treaties of Friendship and Cooperation with Bulgaria and Romania.<sup>18</sup> Qaddafi himself believed that his revolutionary ideas offered a third way, different from capitalism or communism. In a 1973 interview, Qaddafi explained that, with regard to the Soviet Union, he tried to separate official political relations from ideological relations. He vowed that he, and Libyans, disagreed with almost all tenets of Communist thought, including for religious reasons, but that Libya still could have excellent relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> For Qaddafi, non-alignment meant dealing with both Cold War camps, manipulating the fears of both sides and preventing too much dependency on any one side.<sup>20</sup>

Libyan foreign policy was for the most part an extension of Qaddafi's personal ideals and ideas, often implemented in an ad hoc manner. Initially, Qaddafi's close friend Abdessalam Jallud balanced Qaddafi's ideologi-

<sup>16</sup> See for example Qaddafi's speech at the non-aligned movement conference in Algiers, 5–9 September 1973: <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=141485&dl=2472&dl=1345>

<sup>17</sup> See Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA*, New York, Palgrave, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> IISS Military Balance, 1984, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Le Figaro*, Interview with Qaddafi, 20 April 1973.

<sup>20</sup> See Mu'ammer el-Qadd(th)afi, *Discourses*, Valletta: Malta, Adam Publishers, 1975.

cally driven stances with a healthy dose of pragmatism. Still, as a result of bad planning and inconsistent ideas at the top, over time Libya had several bodies that somehow had a mandate to undertake foreign policy initiatives. The institutions involved included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Libyan Foreign Liaison Secretariat, the Secretariat for External Security, the Secretariat of Justice, the General Intelligence and Military Intelligence, the Libyan Special Security Forces, the Revolutionary Committees, the Islamic Call Society, the Office for the Export of the Revolution, and many individuals with personal agendas. The overlapping responsibilities and the lack of actual decision-making power kept Qaddafi and his small inner circle in charge at all times. As a result, Libyan diplomats stationed abroad often found themselves in embarrassing situations as they were unaware of initiatives—subversive or not—launched by other elements of the Libyan state outside of the official diplomatic channels. Perhaps one of Qaddafi's key personal foreign policy goals was to be (or at least feel to be) a regional and global player of importance. He believed that his own worldview, the Third International Theory, could prevail in the post-colonial world. Thus, in diplomatic efforts, especially with regard to newly independent states, the Libyan regime pressed for the signing of joint communiqués to express faith in cultural revolutions, rejection of capitalism and communism, the complete understanding of the third way as written down in *The Green Book*, as well as the non-recognition of the State of Israel. To make sure these diplomatic efforts received the desired level of media coverage abroad, Qaddafi insisted on bringing his Bedouin heritage along whenever on official business, either in the form of pitching a traditional tent to spend the night in or in non-compliance with the prevailing Western standards of dress and behavior. The Libyan leader was reluctant to give in to a form of soft imperialism by conforming to Western standards of etiquette and protocol.

Qaddafi's wish to be a player of importance was reflected in the steady buildup of Libya's military force. As a great admirer of weapons and technology, defense procurement was always a substantial budget item. In 1971, the defense budget stood at \$84 million. In 1978 this had grown to \$448 million, to \$1410 million in 1986, and to \$2700 million in 1991.<sup>21</sup> Between 1970 and 1986, the Libyan army grew from 15,000 to 71,500

<sup>21</sup> IISS Military Balance, 1970–1993.

troops and was complemented by a 40,000-head strong civil militia.<sup>22</sup> In 1970, Libya had only six Centurion medium tanks produced by Britain. By the mid-1980s, it owned 2,360 Soviet-produced tanks and 2,150 other armored vehicles, as well as more than 550 modern fighter jets. West-German and French forces combined were unable to match these numbers.<sup>23</sup> Britain and the US, who had been the main arms suppliers during the monarchy, started to show reluctance to sell weaponry to Qaddafi because of his apparent closeness to the Soviets and his anti-Western rhetoric. As a result, the Soviet Union quickly became the largest supplier of defense materials to Libya, with France, Italy, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Brazil also listed as substantial suppliers.<sup>24</sup> In this area as well, Libya was increasing rather than decreasing dependence on external forces. The planes, helicopters, armored vehicles, and other equipment needed substantial maintenance and few Libyan nationals had the right skill set to take up these jobs. Moreover, Qaddafi preferred not to have too many Libyan nationals with in-depth knowledge about his military capabilities and the ability to use strategic assets, as he reckoned that one day in the future such knowledge could be used against him. In general, the advanced weaponry accumulated was at no point matched by the necessary operational capacity. As a consequence, international defense companies added extensive maintenance contracts to their sales, making the Libyan regime dependent on foreign advisers, technicians, and trainers. As a result of all this, according to some analysts, only Libya's poorer neighbors, including Tunisia and Chad, should have felt threatened.<sup>25</sup>

Qaddafi had a vision of unleashing and cultivating a Libyan national spirit. He believed that this could be achieved through the elimination of all detrimental foreign influences. The British and American military bases had to be dismantled, and the remaining Italian community be expelled. Six weeks into the revolution, the new leadership demanded the closure of the British El Adem base and the American Wheelus Field Base. The bases, according to the RCC, represented a too visible remnant of the imperialist and colonial past. Plus, he reasoned, these foreign bases could very well be used as a safe haven for those opposed to his rule. Thus, during a rally in

<sup>22</sup> IISS Military Balance, 1970–1993.

<sup>23</sup> El-Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi*, p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Maurizio Cremasco, "Two uncertain futures: Tunisia and Libya", in Robert O'Neill, *Prospects for Security in the Mediterranean*, Macmillan, 1988, pp. 187–205.



Tripoli, on October 16, 1969, Qaddafi stated that: “The era of the bases on our territory is over because we accept neither bases, nor strangers, nor imperialists, nor invaders. This is a clear break with the past that we want to make clear to both friends and enemies. We will liberate our soil from the bases, from the imperialists and from the foreign forces at all prices. The evacuation is an absolute necessity. It is the prerequisite of our freedom.”<sup>26</sup> Qaddafi positioned his request to the British and Americans as in total contrast to the former monarchy’s policies. In reality however, King Idris had forwarded similar demands—albeit less drastically and perhaps less sincerely. As the first secretary and head of the chancery in Tripoli (1962–1966) saw it, King Idris had already found himself under great pressure from domestic forces to “reduce, if not eliminate altogether” the British and American military presence.<sup>27</sup> Adding to the context was the fact that the 20-year contracts issued in the 1950s were about to expire and the British and Americans anticipated a scale down. Britain had proactively proposed troop withdrawals for financial reasons and because Libya became less interesting from a geostrategic point of view, as military strategies started to take into account the presence of nuclear capabilities and the impact of long-range missiles. In this new security environment, having outposts in North Africa seemed less essential. Nevertheless, the desert land base of El Adem was the biggest base of the Royal Armed Forces (RAF) outside of the UK and, just like Wheelus Field, had formed an excellent training center for jet fighters practicing attacking tanks in desert lands.<sup>28</sup> In the view of the new Libyan leaders, the bases represented the cornerstone of the monarchy’s foreign policy and constituted symbols of their country’s subordination to the Western world. As such, they needed to be removed.

Still, despite the condemning words during Qaddafi’s domestic rallies, Washington and London understood that all was not lost. Diplomatic correspondence prior to the negotiations regarding the closure of the military bases shows that the British authorities were aware that showing willingness to comply was a prerequisite for safeguarding the com-

<sup>26</sup> Ansell and al-Arif, *The Libyan Revolution*, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> British Diplomatic Oral History Project [hereafter BDOH Project], Churchill College, Cambridge University, interview with Ivor Thomas Mark Lucas, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> BDOH Project, interview with Adrian John Sindall, desk officer Libya (1967–1970), p. 14.

mercial interests built up during the years of the monarchy.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the fiery anti-Western rhetoric displayed in the squares of Tripoli was balanced with subtle, private messages behind closed doors. There, the regime explained the demands as a way to normalize commercial relations based on a new, this time equal, partnership. In essence, the RCC asked the West to erase the past and to reset the bilateral relations. As expectations were managed well, the negotiations over El Adem started on December 8, 1969 and lasted for only five days. The UK ambassador to Libya, Sir Donald Maitland, when reflecting on the talks with Qaddafi, prime minister Jallud, and minister of foreign affairs Saleh Buyasseer, remembered Qaddafi as a nervous young man. According to him, the Libyan side confessed after two or three sessions that “they had fully expected the British to invade and to restore the monarchy”.<sup>30</sup> Another British member of the negotiation team remembered “many nocturnal sessions in barracks in Tripoli with submachine guns on the table on the Libyan side, pencils and pens on our side”.<sup>31</sup> Abiding by the British demands, Libya agreed that no other foreign power would be allowed to take over the bases. The British were also pleased that they could sell a large number of the military installations and equipment and would receive financial compensation for the closure. The two parties agreed that the last British soldier was to leave the base by March 31, 1970.<sup>32</sup> Aware of Qaddafi’s appetite for ceremonies and show, the British actually decided instead to quietly abandon the base days before the deadline. As a last act and as a reminder of why the British had arrived in Libya in the first place, three decades prior, the British commander made his way to the British war cemetery to sign the visitor’s book.<sup>33</sup> The base, which had passed from Italian into British and now into Libyan hands, was, renamed Gamal Abd-el Nasser Air Base. Among other things, it would in the near future host a substantial number of French-developed Mirage warplanes.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, FCO 39/390, Letter from Ambassador Maitland to Minister of Foreign Affairs Stewart: “Colonel Qaddafi and the future of Anglo-Libyan relations”, Tripoli, December 2, 1969.

<sup>30</sup> BDOH Project, interview with Sir Donald Maitland, 11 December 1997, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> BDOH Project, interview with Sir David Alwyn Gore-Booth, second secretary in Tripoli (1969), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> TNA, FCO 39/391, Letter from Maitland to Stewart, “Anglo-Libyan relations: the turning of a page”, Tripoli, 22 December 1969

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, p. 142.

After having concluded the Anglo-Libyan talks in a relatively constructive manner, the Libyans turned to the Americans. Negotiations over Wheelus Field took place between December 15 and December 23, 1969 and ended with an agreed final date for withdrawal of June 30, 1970. The Americans had tried to convince the Libyans that the base could be used as a shared training facility, but the Libyans rejected this proposal.<sup>34</sup> By June 11, the evacuation was completed and the base was renamed the Ukba bin Nafi Air Base, after an Arab army commander who, in 644, had captured Barqa (Cyrenaica) and Tripolitania as part of the first wave of Islamic conquest. Nowadays, the air base is known as Mitiga International Airport. The dates of the withdrawals of the British and Americans were incorporated in Libya's expanding list of annual national commemoration days celebrating the leadership's achievements.

After the dismantling of the Anglo-American bases, the regime turned to the Italian community—another clear legacy of the colonial period. At the time of the 1969 coup, around 20,000 Italians had resided in Libya. They were considered the economic backbone of the country, as Italians owned the large majority of the productive agricultural sector as well as a good part of the artisan shops and several important banks. The British Embassy's second secretary, in July 1969, described Tripoli as “very Italian in its feel. Vines were still being grown on the hills at the back and there were Italian restaurants and so on”.<sup>35</sup> However, in Qaddafi's innovative national narrative, the Italians had to become once again the historical enemy all Libyans could unite against.<sup>36</sup> In October 1969, the RCC closed all Italian schools and the government abolished privileged treatments such as higher ceilings for money transfers.<sup>37</sup> It also issued a new set of rules around property sales for Italians residing in Libya: every future transfer needed approval from the ministry of justice, with the money from the financial transactions to be kept in a special Libyan bank until it was approved by the Libyan authorities.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> St John, *Libya and the United States*, p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> BDOH Project, interview with Sir David Alwyn Gore-Booth, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Pietro Nenni, *I conti con la storia. Diari 1967–1971*, Milan: Sugarco Edizioni, 1983, p. 194.

<sup>37</sup> ENI, Direzione Estera, BA II 3, UDC 203, NUA 1717, Closure of Italian schools in Benghazi, 6 November 1969.

<sup>38</sup> Angelo del Boca, *Gli italiani in libia*, Bari: Laterza, 1988, p. 469.

Sensing that their position was not going to get any better under the new regime, Italians started to leave Libya. Between September 1969 and January 1970, around 830 Italians set sail, followed by another 3,000 between January and July 1970.<sup>39</sup> Soon after, demands for repatriation grew to around 200 a week. The Italian authorities in Rome initially believed that the Italian residents in Libya exaggerated the threats, and even the Italian ambassador in Tripoli was of the opinion that the Italian community was far too important for Libya to be expelled. He informed foreign minister Aldo Moro that it was safe to assume that Libya needed the Italians more than the other way around. He was quickly proven wrong. In July 1970, during the commemoration of the Italian occupation of Misrata, Qaddafi started comparing the Italians currently residing in Libya with the settlers of the times of Giovanni Giolitti and Benito Mussolini. In his view, these colonizers had to leave, as they represented an undesirable past. Minister Buyasseer accused the Italians of having conducted a policy of annihilation in Libya, pointing out the concentration camps from Sollum to Sirte.<sup>40</sup> Soon after, Qaddafi decreed that all Italian property had to be returned to the Libyan people without providing compensation to the legitimate owners. After all, he pointed out, the Libyans had suffered great losses during the colonial period and the soil had ultimately belonged to the Libyan tribes.<sup>41</sup> Italian residents were given 30 days to declare all their possessions to the Libyan authorities, including not only real estate, but also vehicles, animals, and equipment. Adding to the punishment, Italian citizens resident in Libya saw their bank accounts frozen.<sup>42</sup> The authorities in Rome tried to persuade the RCC to treat the Italian community with more dignity and asked to postpone the looming expulsion by a year. This bid was unsuccessful and within three months all remaining Italians were forced to abandon their belongings and leave the country. The patrimony left behind included around 37,000 hectares of the best land, at least 1,750 houses, villas, and apartments, 500 shops and restaurants, and around 1,200 vehicles.<sup>43</sup> The Italian cemetery, the

<sup>39</sup> Del Boca, *Italiani in libia*, p. 469.

<sup>40</sup> ASMAE, summary of the “Incontro fra il ministro degli Affari Esteri On. Aldo Moro e il ministro degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Araba di Libia Salah Messud Buessir” Beirut, 1 August 1970.

<sup>41</sup> ASMAE, Borromeo to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, telegram no. 30,002, 21 July 1970.

<sup>42</sup> “Bloccati I conti dei connazionali”, *Il Messaggero*, 29 July 1970.

<sup>43</sup> Mino Vignolo, *Gheddafi: Islam, petrolio e utopia*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1981, p 137.

*Sacrario dei caduti italiani* in Tripoli was also dismantled.<sup>44</sup> In October 1970, Qaddafi announced “the end of the hated Fascist Italian colonization” claiming “the Libyan Arab people’s freedom had been completed”.<sup>45</sup> In Qaddafi’s world, the Italian presence had been “more dangerous than the military bases because it dominated everything and was like a cancer in the body of the country”.<sup>46</sup> The most renowned Italian expert on the colonial period, Angelo del Boca, wrote instead that “a community that, for several decades had been the engine of the country, which had built its infrastructure, was brutally chased out as if it constituted a cancer in Libya that had to be eradicated as quickly as possible”.<sup>47</sup>

At its core, neither the Italian authorities, nor the Libyan regime wanted to see a serious breach in bilateral relations. In his initial speech in Misrata, Qaddafi urged others to put in order those things that had been unnatural and to replace asymmetrical, post-colonial ties with partnerships between equals, based on mutual benefits.<sup>48</sup> Following the expulsion, Aldo Moro received a message stating that the dismissal of the Italian community was not meant to harm the bilateral relations between the two countries. Libya merely wanted to abolish a “historical residual” and to make “corrections” to the past.<sup>49</sup> The logic Qaddafi applied was a simplistic one of erasing what he saw as errors of history, something that matched his deterministic worldview in which every nation needed to develop on its own terms in order to create a harmonious international order. Thus, the paradox that arose was one in which the expulsion of the Italian community went hand in hand with increased Libyan–Italian cooperation in the commercial realm. To start with, firms contributing to Libyan development had been exempted from confiscation. The authorities considered around 500 Italians as “good ones” and allowed them to stay. They also judged

<sup>44</sup> ENI, Direzione Estera, BA II 3, UDC 203, NUA 1717, “Sacrario dei caduti italiani di Tripoli”.

<sup>45</sup> BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts, ME/3437/A/2–6.

<sup>46</sup> BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts, ME/3445/A/6.

<sup>47</sup> Angelo del Boca “Prefazione”, in Arturo Varvelli, *L’Italia e l’ascesa di Gheddafi: la cacciata degli italiani, le armi e il petrolio (1969–1974)*, Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2009, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> ENI, Relazioni Estere, U.VI.4, UDC 131, NUA 2F4F “Su nuove basi i rapporti economici con la Libia”.

<sup>49</sup> ENI, Segretaria del Presidente Eugenio Cefis, I.I.4. Folder E85, Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs Najm to Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Aldo Moro, 22 September 1970.

around 1,800 technical workers indispensable for the oil industry.<sup>50</sup> After the expulsion of the Italian community, the economic ties between Italy and Libya advanced in a climate of collaboration. In 1970, ENI underlined that, to enhance Italy's national and economic interests, it was key to diminish the resident Italian presence in Libya "until the community is so small that it has no voice".<sup>51</sup> ENI resonated Qaddafi's line of thought and believed that "a contradiction exists between the interest of modern Italy and the presence of Italians in ex-colonial places. They are the expression of an Italy that was largely agricultural, but the current Italy has not much to do anymore with the economics and politics of Italy of thirty years ago. Today, stiffening Italian nationalism towards an Arab country would seriously challenge oil supplies and would lead to a paralysis of our economy (...) We should not compromise our economic needs for a community which is historically and socially overcome."<sup>52</sup>

The directors of ENI, Eugenio Cefis and Raffaele Girotti, indicated that ENI did not want to leave Libya, that they had great trust in Libyan crude oil, and that they saw Qaddafi as one of their most promising partners.<sup>53</sup>

Politicians in Rome were expected to react strongly to the expulsion of the Italian community. Proposals within the ministry of foreign affairs included a media campaign to crush the "myth of an exploitative Italy" by showing how much Italy had contributed to the development of Libya and by showing that the Italians actually deserved credit for building up the Libyan economy.<sup>54</sup> Also proposed was retaliation against Libyan property in Italy and the freezing of Libyan assets located in Italy. However, these assets belonged predominantly to opponents of the regime, to exiles and to the few remaining Jewish inhabitants of Libya. In the end, only two options seemed feasible: interrupting the maritime telephone cable that Italy had constructed—on which all Libya's communication depended—or, as the least damaging option of all, a call for legal action.<sup>55</sup> After weigh-

<sup>50</sup>Varvelli, *Ascesa di Gheddafi*, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup>ENI, Relazioni Estere, "Su nuove basi i rapporti economici con la Libia" and ENI, Direzione Estera, BA II 3, UDC 203, NUA 1717.

<sup>52</sup>ENI, Relazioni Estere, U.VI.4, UDC 131, NUA 2F4F, 13 October 1970, Servizio Relazione Pubbliche "La Libia, la comunità all'estera e gli interessi dell'Italia moderna".

<sup>53</sup>Varvelli, *Ascesa di Gheddafi*, p. 76.

<sup>54</sup>ASMAE, appunto del vice-direttore A.P. Perrone Capano, 22 July 1970, quoted in Varvelli, *Ascesa di Gheddafi*, p. 116.

<sup>55</sup>ASMAE, verbale della IV riunione del gruppo di lavoro per l'esame dei problemi connessi con la situazione determinatasi in Libia, DGEAS, 5 August 1970.

ing the costs and the benefits, the decision makers opted for a call for legal action and the official reaction to the expulsion of the Italian community in Libya was limited to a statement that these actions violated the general norms of international law, of UN Resolution 388 of 1950, as well as of the Italian–Libyan Treaty of 1956. ENI lobbied hard for such a half-hearted response to the Libyan hostility towards the Italian community.

Next on Qaddafi's list were the international oil companies themselves. The Libyan government was determined to take ownership of an ever-larger part of its country's oil and natural gas production, to better monitor the energy reserves and to establish a number of related industries within the country.<sup>56</sup> At the end of January 1970, Qaddafi convened a meeting with the oil companies, somewhat sarcastically greeting the Western managers as guests bearing "the discomfort of the desert for exploiting natural resources for the welfare of humanity and the interest of both parties".<sup>57</sup> A summation of concerns followed: the price of Libyan oil was far below its quality, given its pureness, its proximity to markets and its low extraction costs; the percentage of Libyan employees was minimal and those working for the oil companies did not receive proper treatment and had only limited training opportunities; also, oil companies drove up domestic prices and destroyed local markets by predominantly importing consumer goods from abroad. Qaddafi wanted all of this to change and, preempting the Western assumption that Libyans could not do without them, he concluded with the words: "the Libyan people, who have lived 5,000 years without oil can live another few years without it in order to achieve their legitimate rights".<sup>58</sup> The RCC hoped to create a more equal distribution of financial profits and general benefits, to increase the regime's negotiation power vis-à-vis the West and to enhance Libya's profile as a revolutionary frontrunner in the Arab region and other places in which the West exploited economies through the extraction of natural resources. With the additional financial resources, the regime hoped to be able to realize its ambitious domestic and international development plans.

<sup>56</sup> Ambasciata d'Italia in Libia, "Rapporto sull'economia libica 1973", in ENI archive, ENI, Direzione Estera, BA II 3, NUA 175 B UDC 210.

<sup>57</sup> ENI, Presidenza Raffaele Girotti, UDC 74, I II 4, NUA 3360, 30 January 1970, "Qaddafi in the meeting with oil companies".

<sup>58</sup> ENI, Presidenza Raffaele Girotti, UDC 74, I II 4, NUA 3360, 30 January 1970, "Qaddafi in the meeting with oil companies".

In Libya, the oil industry was not just run by large companies, but included a good number of smaller, independent firms with few concession rights outside of Libya. Occidental Petroleum, “Oxy”, for example, received 97 percent of its total oil production from Libya, while for a giant like Esso, Libyan wells contributed only 3 percent to the total extraction.<sup>59</sup> This diversity provided the RCC with an easily manipulative commercial landscape. In a hub-and-spoke manner, the RCC negotiated with every company individually, starting with the most vulnerable company (“Oxy”) and the easiest mechanism to influence: prices.<sup>60</sup> In April 1970, the Libyan authorities established an Oil Price Committee, mandated with the fair determination of prices of Libyan oil, which had to take into consideration its quality, type, and location.<sup>61</sup> “Oxy” quickly agreed to a price increase of \$0.30 per barrel, a significant change for those times. These price negotiations started a dynamic that would quickly see prices double, triple, and quadruple. The price of Libyan oil went up from \$3.7 dollars per barrel in January 1972 to \$15.8 dollars per barrel in January 1974.<sup>62</sup> OPEC’s 1971 Teheran Agreement facilitated the Libyan policy, as it called for cuts in production levels. Most Western companies acquiesced to the higher price levels. They perceived them as a setback, but a fair and somewhat necessary one. Several years later, the British ambassador at the time concluded in an interview: “What Qaddafi was insisting on was not unfair, why should the oil companies set the price of somebody else’s product? Why shouldn’t the oil states play the market as it were? I think this was a very good move on Qaddafi’s part; it clarified the situation and removed an anomaly.”<sup>63</sup>

The demands of the RCC, while voiced in a highly theatrical way, hardly came as a surprise because the international companies had anticipated change. In the last years of the monarchy, requests for a greater share in oil revenues had become more pronounced and King Idris’s gov-

<sup>59</sup> Vandewalle, *Libya since independence*, p. 75.

<sup>60</sup> See dissertation of Shukri Ghanem, later Prime Minister of Libya: Shukri Ghanem, *The pricing of Libyan crude oil*, Adams Publishing House, 1975.

<sup>61</sup> ENI, Presidenza Raffaele Girotti, UDC 74, I II 4, NUA 3360: 15 April 1970, “Decision by the Revolutionary Command Council establishing the oil prices committee” and see John Anthony Allan, *Libya: the experience of oil*, London: Croom Helm, 1981; and P. Barker and K.S. McLachlan, “Development of the Libyan oil industry”, in: J.A. Allan (ed), *Libya since independence*, pp. 37–54.

<sup>62</sup> ENI, Bilancio e Rilazione 1973.

<sup>63</sup> BDOH Project, interview with Sir Donald Maitland, p. 17.



ernment had taken measures to prevent oil companies from lowering the posted price. In 1965, OPEC had enforced a royalty expensing agreement and, in 1968, concession holders had been confronted with conservation regulations. The RCC continued and intensified this trend rather than initiated it.

The fear of the West was that the RCC would use oil as an instrument of foreign policy at a time when Europe was experiencing a relative oil shortage. In 1971, Western Europe absorbed 87 percent of Libyan crude oil, 62 percent of which was destined for the European Community. Italy consumed most of it (23.9 percent), followed by West Germany (18.5 percent), the UK (16.2 percent), and France (12.6 percent). The US absorbed only 5.6 percent of Libyan crude oil.<sup>64</sup> The fear of the West quickly became reality when, on December 7, 1971, the RCC issued Law number 115, thereby nationalizing all shares held by British Petroleum Exploration Company (BP), including those of the biggest oil field in the country, the Sarir field that BP had discovered in the oil-rich Sirte basin a decade prior.<sup>65</sup> The Arab Gulf Exploration Company (Ageco, later renamed AGOCO) took over BP's shares. While the increase in posted prices was an economic correction, the nationalization of BP's shares was aimed at hurting British interests.<sup>66</sup> To emphasize the targeted political nature of the decision, the Libyan authorities left the shares of the American company Bunker Hunt in the Sarir field untouched and explicitly stated that the law was a direct reaction to British foreign policy. In particular, Libya was upset about the November 1971 confiscation by Iranian forces of the three islands in the Straits of Hormuz, which belonged to one of the Emirates about to join Abu Dhabi a month later to form the United Arab Emirates. The islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa officially fell under British protection, but London decided not to react to the Iranian aggression. The weekly newspaper of the Libyan armed forces, *Al Jundi*, wrote: "Great Britain is at a crossroads and needs to choose which path to follow; but

<sup>64</sup> ENI, Ambasciata d'Italia in Libia, "Rapporto sull'economia libica 1973", in ENI Direzione Estera, BA II 3, NUA 175 B UDC 210.

<sup>65</sup> C.J. Lewis, Note on Sarir Field, <http://www.searchanddiscovery.com/documents/sarir/images/lewis.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> R.B. von Mehren and P.N. Kourides, "International arbitrations between states and foreign private parties: the Libyan nationalization cases", *American Journal of International Law*, 75 (3), 1981, p. 476.

before it chooses, it has to gauge issues in a totally different light than previously, as the Arab Republic of Libya acts before it talks and strikes before it threatens (...) Great Britain knows that we can delay and even cancel the compensation, that there are British stakes in other companies operating in Libya and that a rupture in the commercial relations with Libya can bring grave damages.”<sup>67</sup>

London was left unimpressed. The nationalization of its assets did not seriously threaten oil supplies nor did BP suffer much as a company.<sup>68</sup> Britain regretted to see its position in Libya wane after so many years of privileged relations with the Sanussi monarchy. However, falling in line with the approach of its strongest ally, the US, had become the overriding foreign policy principle. With the discovery of oil in the North Sea basin, London’s interest in shaping developments in Libya further declined.

Italy instead kept its focus on reviving a privileged position in Libya, to help secure its own energy needs and to promote itself as the natural Western interlocutor for relations with the newly independent Arab states. Only days after the RCC’s coup, the Italian ambassador wrote to Rome that “the Italian public administration has the great responsibility of protecting a wide range of interests that are not to be compared—in number, qualification and intensity—with those of other countries and there seems to be a necessity to develop an approach towards the new situation in Libya which is Italian, exclusively Italian”.<sup>69</sup> The cancellation of a deal for British anti-aircraft missiles and tanks, threats by Qaddafi to withdraw Libyan Sterling reserves from the London banking system, and the recent British military withdrawal encouraged the Italian ambassador to write to foreign minister Moro that the void left by Britain and the US provided an opportunity for Italy.<sup>70</sup> The ambassador concluded that the Italian position should become ever stronger in the economic field, as well as in the cultural and military field, both relative to the rest of the world as well

<sup>67</sup> ENI, Direzione Estera, BA II 3, UDC 208, Folder 1747, Ambasciata d’Italia Tripoli a Ministero degli Affari Esteri, telesspresso n 2498 “Libia: Nazionalizzazione delle attività della British Petroleum, 14 December 1971.

<sup>68</sup> James Bamberg, *British Petroleum and Global Oil 1950–1975: The Challenge of Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 250.

<sup>69</sup> ASMAE, Calenda a MAE, letter no. 2631, attached to telesspresso, 11 September 1969.

<sup>70</sup> ASMAE, Calenda a Moro, telesspresso 3303, 12 November 1969.

as relative to Italy's immediate allies.<sup>71</sup> Aldo Moro understood that these were the right set of circumstances to resuscitate Italy's prominent position: "We are ready to cooperate with the new Libyan leaders as shared interests link our two countries. Our populations understand each other and our economies are complementary, as the flow of economic exchanges shows. (...) In us, not a minimal residual remains of the colonialism of the last century and we are content that others know this and feel this. Ours is only politics based on respect and cooperation, something we wish to lead the way in. It is with this goal in mind that we are present in the Mediterranean."<sup>72</sup>

Given its energy dependencies, Italy also had limited alternatives as diverting oil imports from Libya to the Gulf region was hardly an option. The Italian position would be strengthened first and foremost through ENI, which enjoyed the most substantial connections in Libya. ENI increasingly served as the outpost for Italy's foreign policy in Libya and the Italian company Agip, as part of the ENI group, established itself quickly as a privileged partner to Qaddafi's regime.<sup>73</sup> On September 1, 1973, the fourth anniversary of the RCC's takeover, the regime announced that, from then onwards, international companies' shares needed to be at least 51 percent Libyan owned. Agip/ENI, however, managed to receive slightly better terms than the other international oil companies involved in Qaddafi's Libya, settling instead on a fifty-fifty split of assets. This privileged treatment, in ENI's view, was justified by the fact that the company was "the first to follow the Libyan government in its policy of participation, which was adopted from the start of the production at the Bu Attifel oil field. ENI had therefore never been able to make lucrative money as had the other companies operating in Libya, when production still took place with exclusive entitlements."<sup>74</sup>

Other Italian companies also presented themselves successfully in the Libyan market. In the mid-1970s, 75 percent of the cars circulating in Libya were built by Fiat. This was a significant increase from the 1950s, when the Turin-based company entered an entirely British-dominated

<sup>71</sup> ASMAE, Calenda a Moro, *telespresso* 3303, 12 November 1969.

<sup>72</sup> *Annuario IAI-ISPI, Relazioni Internazionali*, Speech of Moro, 21 October 1969, p. 950.

<sup>73</sup> ENI Annual Yearbook, 1972. See also Allan, *Libya since independence*, p. 40.

<sup>74</sup> ENI, Direzione Estera, BA II 3, NUA 171 C, UDC 205, Promemoria.

market with only 6 percent.<sup>75</sup> Libya itself also invested in many Italian firms, often to the concern of Italy's Western allies. For example, Fiat's director, Gianni Agnelli, announced the construction of a factory in the USSR, for which he used Libyan money that bought Tripoli a 10 percent share in Fiat.<sup>76</sup> In December 1976, Agnelli announced a deal with the Libyan government worth \$415 million. That investment made Libya the second largest stakeholder in the company, inferior only to the Agnelli family itself.<sup>77</sup> Tripoli had offered more than three times the market value for the shares and claimed two out of 15 seats on the board of directors, in addition to one of the five seats on the company's executive committee.<sup>78</sup> Agnelli depicted the deal as being strictly financial, while the Libyans did exactly the opposite. The deputy governor of the Libyan Central Bank announced: "We have no intention of limiting ourselves to the role of mere investors who just cash in our dividends. If we had wanted that we would have bought shares on the stock exchange (...) we want to intervene in the management of the company."<sup>79</sup>

Soon after, Qaddafi pressured Agnelli to replace the director of the Turin-based newspaper *La Stampa*, Arrigo Levi.<sup>80</sup> As an anecdote, it is worth quoting an excerpt of an interview that the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci held with Qaddafi in 1979<sup>81</sup>:

Fallaci: OK, let's move on. Colonel, how can you be so indulgent with terrorists, and see them as a phenomenon of a society that has to be torn down, yet still maintain excellent relations with leading representatives of that society? Apart from doing business with the Americans, what about the deals you cut with Gianni Agnelli?

Qaddafi: Gianni who?

Fallaci: Gianni Agnelli. The chairman of Fiat.

<sup>75</sup> ENI, Relazioni estere, U.VI.4, UDC 131, NUA 2F4F "Su nuove basi i rapporti economici con la Libia.

<sup>76</sup> Alan Friedman, *Agnelli: Fiat and the network of Italian power*, London: Harrap, 1989, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> See for substantive background in this subject: Friedman, *Agnelli*, 1989.

<sup>78</sup> Friedman, *Agnelli*, p. 174.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Friedman, *Agnelli*, p. 177.

<sup>80</sup> Luigi Vittorio Ferraris (ed), *Manuale della politica estera italiana 1947-1993*, Laterza, 1996, pp. 276-280.

<sup>81</sup> "Gheddafi told Oriana: "You massacred us", *Corriere della Sera*, 2 December 1979, <http://www.corriere.it/International/english/articoli/2011/02/23/oriana-fallaci-interview-gheddafi-1979.shtml>

Qaddafi: Fiat? My company?

France, less constrained than the UK by the alliance with the US, was also eager to keep trading with the new leadership in Libya. Despite the decolonization of North Africa, Paris never tired of trying to increase its influence in the Mediterranean. Consecutive French presidents showed few misgivings about bestowing Qaddafi's Libya with a highly advanced air force and a great amount of assault weaponry. Just after the coup, a great opportunity arose in the eyes of the French. The Arab-Israeli War of June 1967 had forced France to adhere to an arms embargo on the region. As a result, France canceled a sale of 50 Mirage V planes. In November 1969, the Qaddafi regime hinted that it was willing to buy from the embargoed deal.<sup>82</sup> Sensing that its European allies would vehemently oppose such a transaction, France openly denied interest. But, soon after, Paris admitted to having made a deal with Libya for 15 of the embargoed aircrafts. Still some days later the number had risen to 50, and another couple of days later French minister of defense Michel Debré announced a deal of 110 Mirages, to be delivered by 1974.<sup>83</sup> Libya lacked capable pilots, had no technicians and no maintenance staff and, as a result, France would receive generous payments for the training of around 200 pilots and an additional 3,000 ground staff.<sup>84</sup> In the broader picture of regional politics, the sale of the Mirages was also seen as a way to increase French goodwill on the side of the "progressive" republics in the MENA region (versus the British inspired reactionary monarchies). The deal was profitable but risky and indeed angered France's Western allies, Italy in particular. French pilots flew Mirage planes during a grandiose air show in celebration of the first anniversary of the revolutionary coup, just weeks after the brutal expulsion of the Italian community. The US and others were afraid that Libya would sell the planes to Egypt, or worse, use them against Israel.

Of all the Western allies, the United States took the most cautious, if not hostile approach towards Qaddafi's Libya.<sup>85</sup> The US was especially suspicious about Libya's claims to a non-alignment policy. After all, the Libyans had invited Nasser to Libya on the day of the signing of the Wheelus Field

<sup>82</sup> Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, p. 143.

<sup>83</sup> Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, p. 144.

<sup>84</sup> Wright, *Libya: a modern history*, p. 146.

<sup>85</sup> Intelligence Note "UAR-Libya, UAR presence in Libya increasing", 7 January 1970, SNF 1970-1973, RG 59, NARA.

Base withdrawal agreement.<sup>86</sup> And soon thereafter, around a thousand Egyptian troops were stationed in Libya, while the RCC requested 300 Egyptian military advisers to train the secret services and police forces. Libyan cadets initially received military training in Egyptian academies instead of in its own training department. Moreover, Libya incessantly called upon states to break relations with Israel and had shown its willingness to use commercial contracts and energy flows as political weapons. In 1972, the US withdrew its ambassador from Tripoli and imposed export controls on military equipment and aircraft. Nevertheless, it could continue trading through companies in third countries. For example, in 1973, Italy sold to Libya several Augusta helicopters as well as 20 Chinook helicopters manufactured in Italy under US license as well as material of US design or origin.<sup>87</sup> The Americans kept a small diplomatic presence in Libya to help safeguard its country's interests "based on Libya's large land area and strategic location in North Africa, its considerable oil resources, which US firms play a major role in exploiting and its active role in Arab and African politics, and elsewhere".<sup>88</sup>

The West looked for ways to keep commercial channels with Libya open, while at the same time trying to politically isolate Qaddafi's regime. Western capitals tolerated some of the RCC's policy changes, including those of closing the Western military bases and the new regulations around the oil industry. While detrimental for Western interests, the West could explain these as necessary evils to placate Libya's domestic and regional audiences. However, the West was less merciful with regard to Qaddafi's financial and technical support for subversive groups, especially given that his support reached groups that actively challenged governments in the West.

<sup>86</sup> See Cricco, *Il petrolio*, p. 199.

<sup>87</sup> See declassified material from the US Department of State (released 30 June 2005), "Transfer of Italian helicopters to Libya", March 1973, <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=82709&dt=2472&dl=1345>

<sup>88</sup> See declassified material from the US Department of State (released 20 March 2014), "US goals and objectives update for Libya", sent on 12 May 1984:

<http://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=305400&dt=2694&dl=2009>

## Reagan and Libya: Bullying the Rogue

The image of Libya as the supreme terrorist state with its leader a quintessential, dangerously irrational madman first emerged in the 1980s. While the US had always seen Qaddafi's rule as problematic, during Ronald Reagan's period in the White House the West elevated Libya's regime above many other dictatorial regimes as the purest example of evil. Qaddafi and his eccentric, manipulative, and frequently violent ways would soon represent all Third-World leaders lacking respect for American power. Of all Qaddafi's flaws, it was support for international terrorism that made Reagan step up the pressure against Libya. Several key European allies, Italy in particular, initially opposed Reagan's hostility and continued building positive relations with the regime. Nonetheless, when in 1988 Qaddafi stood accused of masterminding the explosion of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, America's unilateral sanctions were supplemented by multilateral sanctions in the frameworks of the United Nations and the European Community. But whereas Qaddafi was ridiculed and resented in the capitals of the West, he often received praise and recognition in other parts of the world, for the way he stood up against the former colonial and imperialist forces and invested in deprived Third-World economies.

At the end of the 1970s, several developments led to speculation that the United States' influence in the Middle East was in decline. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that same year and the growing influence of OPEC suggested that the balance of power in the region was shifting. At the same time, movements appeared that,

through the use of violence, started to challenge Western interests all over the globe. These clandestine groups received funds from countries such as Iran, Syria, and Libya. When the Reagan administration took office in 1981, the president and his inner circle singled out Libya as the most suitable place to flex America's muscle and combat the idea that the US was losing its ability to influence the course of history. Perhaps Iran and Syria were the bigger villains, but sheer population size, societal composition, and geopolitical importance ruled these countries out as direct targets for Washington's campaign against unruly regimes. Libya, a country with a small population, few regional friends, and of little geopolitical value to the US and Russia beyond its oil fields, was considered the least risky place to exert power.

Reagan did not have to look far to justify action against Libya: Tripoli financed subversive groups in Central America and elsewhere. Libya meddled in the politics of Chad and Tunisia, was opposing the State of Israel, tended to have Communist aspirations, and influenced other post-colonial regimes to take a hostile stance against the United States and its European allies. Hardliners within the Administration, and allegedly within the CIA and the National Security Council, helped to provoke president Reagan into military action against Qaddafi. Seymour M. Hersh wrote in a 1987 *New York Times* article that an official of the CIA had explained that the best way of getting Reagan's attention was through visual means. As such he and his colleagues fabricated a 15-minute long movie on the psychological profile of Qaddafi "to show the nature of the beast".<sup>1</sup> The US accused the Libyan authorities of attempting to assassinate the US president, as well as US allies including the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and King Hussein of Saudi Arabia. That Qaddafi had brutally murdered Libyan citizens at home and abroad was a true fact, but no evidence existed of attacks against international political leaders. At some point, messages even emerged about Libyan hit squads entering the United States with the aim of killing president Reagan. Remembering the episode, an official quoted in Hersh's article recalled: "We came out with this big terrorist threat to the US government. The whole thing was a complete fabrication."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "Target Qaddafi", *The New York Times*, 22 February 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Hersh, "Target Qaddafi". See also Themba Sono, *Reaganism over Libya: politics of aggression*, International Center for Democracy, Langley Park, 1984, pp. 45-105.



Relations between Libya and the US gradually deteriorated. Reagan eagerly took on every opportunity to challenge the Libyan regime and did not shy away from economic and military provocations. In December 1979, Libya first appeared on the US state department's list of state sponsors of international terrorism. Some months later, the American Embassy in Libya went up in flames, leading to its full closure. In August 1981, the US Sixth Fleet, stationed in the Mediterranean, downed two Libyan fighter jets above the Gulf of Sirte, just north of Qaddafi's birthplace. Qaddafi claimed the Gulf as Libya's national, territorial waters. Washington instead perceived it as part of the international waterways. After less than a year in power, Reagan banned US citizens from travel to Libya and urged all Americans residing in Libya to leave the country as soon as possible. In March 1982, he gave the US Navy orders to increase tensions with Tripoli by provoking Libya once again in the Gulf of Sirte. At the same time, Reagan issued an import ban on oil from Libya. The US boycott was extended to include selected high-technology products related to oil recovery and Washington started to deny export licenses for goods that could be used for terrorist purposes or could contribute directly to the advance of petrochemical industries. In November 1985, the US further banned trade related to refined petroleum products and restricted all travel. On January 7, 1986, Reagan invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, whereby the US prohibited all purchases from and exports to Libya, banned US–Libya maritime and aviation connections, banned trade in services relating to projects in Libya, prohibited transactions relating to travel by Americans to Libya, banned credit or loans for the transfer of anything of value to Libya or its nationals, and froze Libyan assets under US jurisdiction.<sup>3</sup> Libya had become a no-go country for Americans in all aspects.

America and the European allies within NATO clashed repeatedly over the preferred approach to rein in Libya's exuberance. Europeans generally judged Qaddafi's hostile rhetoric as a tool of domestic politics and as a by-product of excessive nation building efforts. Europe argued that the West should keep communication channels open in order to prevent Libya from drifting further towards the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> According

<sup>3</sup> Executive Order 12543, "Prohibiting Trade and Certain Transactions Involving Libya", 7 January 1986. [http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/search/speeches/speech\\_srch.html](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/search/speeches/speech_srch.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Bruce St John, "The Soviet penetration of Libya", *The World Today* 38 (4), 1982, p. 138.

to Europe, America was too focused on provoking escalation, whilst the US alleged that Europe was too lenient and forgiving. Europe had good reasons to advocate accommodation rather than confrontation, as its relations with Libya were conditioned with larger trade volumes, more substantial foreign direct investment, oil, and other energy dependencies, as well as geographical proximity. Italy and Malta were particularly cautious about antagonizing their neighbor and assessed relations with Libya from a longer-term perspective and with more emphasis on the potential consequences of hostile actions against the Qaddafi regime. For all these reasons, in 1981, Europe had a lukewarm reaction to American attempts to isolate Libya and ignored the efforts of US secretary of state Alexander M. Haig to convince Europeans to boycott Libyan products or engage in other economic sanctions. Haig reported back to the White House: "Some of our European partners will proceed as they have in the past with their own independent policies with respect to Libya and that means in the case of some, and maybe most, no change whatsoever".<sup>5</sup>

In Libya, the implementation of Qaddafi's worldview as written down in *The Green Book* added greatly to the state's expense sheets. Not only was it costly because of the provision of all basic needs to Libyan citizens, it also increased uncertainty for investors, stifled individual initiative, and hollowed out property rights. Depressed world markets, low oil demand, and high supply made Libya's oil revenues fall from \$21 billion to \$5.5 billion between 1981 and 1986. Output levels of 1981 were below those of 1964, with Libyan production of crude oil dropping from 3,320,000 barrels a day to 1,790,000 barrels a day, declining at an annual average rate of 6 percent.<sup>6</sup> Libya had great difficulties selling its crude oil, but as a non-diversified economy had little else to offer the world. Struggling to pay for the necessary imports, the country's economy suffered severe bottlenecks and needed to halt the import of a range of consumer goods.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, this negative economic outlook did not hold Qaddafi back from embarking on a number of prestigious and costly infrastructure works. The Great Man Made River Project was probably the most notorious of all, with its ambitious objective of bringing drinking water from

<sup>5</sup>"NATO allies refuse to back US actions against Libya" *The New York Times*, 11 December 1981, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Allan, *Libya since independence*, pp. 46–9.

<sup>7</sup>Vandewalle, *Oil and state-building*, p. 84.

a basin in the desert to the coastal plains of Libya through an extensive network of pipelines crossing the desert.

The regime, guided by *The Green Book* and Qaddafi's Third International Theory, institutionalized an increasingly unconventional political structure and governance system. In March 1979, the General People's Congress officially adopted a bifurcation of power, separating formal authority from revolutionary authority. Qaddafi resigned as the official leader of the state and declared himself the "Guide of the Revolution"—an office outside of the formal state structures, which made him untouchable.<sup>8</sup> The Guide subjected all existent political bodies to the oversight of Revolutionary Committees. These were themselves tasked to set up Revolutionary Courts that would rule based on Revolutionary Law. He forced the cessation of any private sector activities. Entrepreneurs were depicted as parasites whose activities did not contribute to the productive activities of the state and the revolution. As a result, more and more people became dependent on the public sector and the state, which increased the ability of the regime to manipulate its citizens.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, for the average Libyan citizen, the standard of living went down drastically. Between 1970 and 1995, GDP per capita fell by more than 70 percent. Foreign goods were increasingly difficult to get a hold of, except for on the black market where a premium was paid.<sup>10</sup> Those least attached to the regime and with the least contacts in the establishment felt the impact of sanctions and the developments towards an unplanned economy most severely. All of this resulted in a rise in inequality and corruption.

In the meantime, another new generation was growing up in Libya. On paper, Qaddafi had done an excellent job educating his people as the number of people with advanced academic degrees was growing steadily. However, many got their degrees from Libya's idiosyncratic education system with few connections to the national or international job market. The indoctrination with the unrealistic theories and ideas of *The Green Book* was taking its toll on large groups of Libyans, providing them with skills and subjective knowledge others might consider useless. Even at home, while

<sup>8</sup> Vandewalle, *Modern Libya*, p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> See Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi*, pp. 72–83 and pp. 92–102.

<sup>10</sup> "US Raid Haunts Libya", *MERIP Middle East Report*, no 141, Hidden Wars, July–August 1986, p. 37. See also T. Niblock, "Libyan Foreign Policy", in A. Ehtesami and R. Hinnebusch (eds), *The foreign policies of Middle East states*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001, pp. 213–234.

Qaddafi advocated education of the masses, expats remained necessary in most positions that added value to the real economy. Libyans instead bloated the public sector bureaucracy, often in jobs that added no value to the economy.<sup>11</sup> The majority of Libyan citizens had perhaps also little incentive to work or to work hard, as they could comfortably live on the financial handouts of the state—in exchange for backing the regime.<sup>12</sup> Qaddafi had organized his social contract in a way that meant he needed substantial funds to reward individuals, tribes, and families. Social upheaval was contained with substantial economic incentives and handouts at the individual and group level. Families often depended on state salaries and other state benefits for their subsistence, which created an effective manipulative tool for those controlling the flow of such funds. An expensive state security apparatus kept in line those dissidents not persuaded by money alone. Opponents often decided to leave Libya and live their lives in exile.

By breaking the economy, the US hoped to erode the legitimacy of Qaddafi's regime and to shatter the socioeconomic contract the regime relied on. But the unilateral US sanctions predominantly hurt American businesses without having the desired effect in Libya itself. Libya continued to sell its oil through Europe and was able to trade via spot energy markets. American companies kept their shares in the Libyan market through subsidiaries based in Europe.<sup>13</sup> As a result, within the first 13 months following the oil trade ban, UK imports from Libya actually increased by 350 percent, mainly due to its function as a hub for American companies.<sup>14</sup> The asset freeze the US imposed also had a limited impact. Libya was able to shift most of its liquid assets elsewhere before the freeze came into effect and it was estimated that less than 2 percent of Libya's total overseas investments was affected.<sup>15</sup> In May 1987, the US General Accounting Office reported that: "The practical impact of the US trade sanctions on Libyan oil production is minimal because of the extensive foreign availability of oilfield equipment, services and supplies (...). The

<sup>11</sup> See Alison Pargeter, "Libya: reforming the impossible?", *Review of African Political Economy*, 33 (108), 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi*, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Gideon Rose, "The United States and Libya", in Richard N. Haass (ed), *Transatlantic tensions: the United States, Europe and Problem countries*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999, p. 143.

<sup>14</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU] Libya Country Report 3, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Vandewalle, *Modern Libya*, p. 154.

short term effect of the sanctions has been a loss of revenue while Libya continues to reap the full benefit of its oilfield operations".<sup>16</sup>

When Reagan made Qaddafi into a state enemy, the opposition in exile saw an opportunity to get the backing of Washington in their struggle to change the political outlook in Tripoli and elsewhere in the country. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, opposition was getting more organized and started constituting a serious threat to Qaddafi's rule. In 1977, Fadil Masudi founded the Libyan Democratic Party and Mahmud Suleyman el-Maghrabi, former Libyan ambassador to the UK, set up the Libyan National Grouping the following year. The former Libyan ambassador to India, Muhammed Yusuf Maghariaf, called into being the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL) in October 1981 and started operating from Khartoum. NFSL members included personalities such as Mustafa Abushagur and Ali Zeidan, and later General Khalifa Haftar. A number of other, smaller groupings also emerged, including the Monarchist Libyan Constitutional Union, Al-Haq, Al-Burkan, and the Libyan Liberation Organization led by former Libyan prime minister Abdul Hamid al Bakkush. The Muslim Brotherhood had organized themselves a year before Qaddafi's coup, but its activities were frozen soon after. The organization resurfaced as the "Islamic Group—Libya" in 1980 in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Different groups represented different views on Libya's future, relied on different sponsors, and operated from various bases. In 1987, Major Abd al Munim al Huni, a former RCC member, set up a loose coordination mechanism aimed at uniting the opposition around the single goal of toppling Qaddafi.

Qaddafi fought Libyan dissidents both at home and abroad. On occasion, European capitals became the stage of the regime's campaign to chase (and kill) the "stray dogs" of Libya. The regime actually accused the West, together with their regional agents—Sudan in particular—of training terrorists, given the fact that they offered refuge to Libyan dissidents. British officials believed the Libyan Ambassador to the UK, Moussa Koussa, helped orchestrate several assassinations in their capital.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in EIU Libya Country Report 3, 1987, pp. 21–22. Another study, conducted in 1995, had shown that a full-scale oil embargo would have the regime collapse within a year, as it was judged to lack an industrial base or agricultural self-sufficiency. See EIU Country Report 2, 1995, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Omar Ashour, "Between ISIS and a failed state: The saga of Libyan Islamists", working paper for *The Brookings Institution*, August 2015.

These included the killing of BBC World Service journalist Mohamed Mustafa Ramadan and Libyan lawyer Mahmud Abu Salem Nafa.<sup>18</sup> Opposition groups staged several attacks against Qaddafi's regime. Al-Burkan claimed responsibility for the killing of the Libyan ambassador in Rome in 1984 and a year later of an Embassy officer in that same city. The NFSL, allegedly supported by the US and Saudi Arabia, plotted coups and, also in 1984, staged an armed assault on Qaddafi's Tripoli compound "Bab al-Azizia". In the same period, exiles were involved in the detonation of a car bomb near Benghazi that injured one of Qaddafi's close aides. In the months that followed, around two thousand people got arrested and eight of them were sentenced to public hanging. One of the survivors of this episode was Salem al-Hassi. More than 25 years later he was appointed the highest intelligence officer in post-Qaddafi Libya (and soon after was again removed from that post). Several other prominent former NFSL members would also take up high-level posts in Libyan politics after the fall of the Qaddafi regime, including Maghariaf, Zeidan, and Haftar.

Ronald Reagan's anger with Qaddafi's regime was geared towards its support for international terrorism. In addition to being suspected of providing financial support to a myriad of groups that somehow matched with Qaddafi's ideals, Libya was also held directly responsible for the 1985 bomb attacks at Rome and Vienna airports, the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship, as well as the 1986 bombing of a discotheque in Berlin, a popular hangout for American soldiers. The US considered the airport attacks, which killed 19 people and injured many more, a legitimate reason for escalation. In 1985, US secretary of state George Shultz argued that the US had the right to use military force against states supporting terrorism as "a nation attacked by terrorists is permitted to use force to prevent or pre-empt future attacks".<sup>19</sup> In March 1986, the US launched *Operation Prairie Fire*. With the objective of provoking such an escalation, the US Navy crossed Qaddafi's self-defined line of death in the Gulf of Sirte. What followed was a three-day military confrontation in which Libya launched two missiles at American reconnaissance planes—

<sup>18</sup> Alison Pargeter, *The rise and fall of Gaddafi*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 103–105.

<sup>19</sup> Speech by Ronald Reagan at the National Defense University in Washington, January 1985.

and missed. In retaliation, US forces destroyed Libyan air defenses and sank several Libyan patrol boats, killing more than 70 on board.<sup>20</sup>

The bomb explosion a month after the airport attacks, in the Berlin dance bar *La Belle*, gave Reagan further pretext to step up the military confrontation. The bomb resulted in the death of army sergeant Kenneth Ford and the injury of a number of American servicemen. With the military campaign that followed the US hoped to either kill the Libyan leader or generate sufficient domestic upheaval to topple the rogue from within. In mid-April 1986, the US bombed Benghazi and Tripoli under the banner of *Operation El Dorado Canyon*. Targets included the Bab al-Azizia barracks where the Qaddafi family resided, but the family was able to escape due to a pre-warning, which some claim came from the Italian politician Bettino Craxi.<sup>21</sup> The evidence that was said to exist that proved direct Libyan responsibility or even involvement in the nightclub bombing was never made public. German investigators in the *La Belle* case never found any link to Libya and stated they had no reason to believe Libya was the perpetrator of the attacks. *Operation El Dorado Canyon* resulted in the loss of one American warplane and around 30 Libyan casualties, but it failed to topple the rogue.

The UK authorities had been cautious in their reactions to Libyan provocations. This attitude changed when the violence accidentally led to the death of a British citizen. On April 17, 1984, the NFSL organized a rally in London, in front of the Libyan Embassy, to protest the public hangings of suspects involved in the storming of the Bab al-Azizia barracks. The Libyan leadership was angered, as apparently the Libyan ambassador had been unable to prevent the gathering despite repeated warnings. In reaction to the public display of discontent with his regime, Qaddafi ordered the ambassador to kill at least one of the protestors.<sup>22</sup> Bullets were fired into the crowd and, most likely unintentionally, fatally hit a 25-year old police officer, Yvonne Fletcher. The Libyan staff member suspected to have fired the bullet claimed diplomatic immunity and returned to Libya overnight. Thirty years later no one had yet been charged for the murder, though investigators were said to be closing in on a key suspect. Reacting

<sup>20</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> “Andreotti e il ministro libico confermano Craxi avvertì Gheddafi del bombardamento USA”, *La Repubblica*, 30 October 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Andrew, *The defence of the realm: the authorized history of MI5*, Penguin, 2010, p. 689.

to the Fletcher case, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher decided to break off diplomatic relations with Libya. She ordered the Libyan People's Bureau in London to close down, curbed arms sales to the North African country, imposed tighter visa restrictions on Libyan nationals, and cut trade credit lines. In the British Embassy, only one British employee stayed behind to support the dwindling number of British nationals in Libya and later on, the Italian Embassy was asked to take on a British interests section. Qaddafi was concerned, as he knew he needed access to European funds. He tried appeasing London by proposing the establishment of a special committee to investigate the Fletcher incident. He personally guaranteed the safety of all remaining 8,000 British subjects in Libya and also offered a prisoner swap. London rejected the offer, whereupon Qaddafi ceremonially released two Britons from prison on "purely humanitarian" grounds—just at the time when several members of the British parliament visited the country. In another attempt to win back Thatcher's goodwill, Qaddafi offered to donate £250,000 to a police fund for widows and orphans. However, as he refused to acknowledge official responsibility for the death of Ms. Fletcher, the British Foreign Office dismissed all these placation attempts as "little more than blood money".<sup>23</sup>

The Fletcher case was only one of the reasons Thatcher decided to stop dealing openly with Libya. Developments in Malta and concerns related to domestic conflicts also provided the necessary incentives to see bilateral relations deteriorate. Britain had been afraid that socialist Malta, led by prime minister Dom Mintoff, would provide Qaddafi access to the strategically located Maltese bases. Malta, a hub in the Mediterranean, had long been a loyal ally for Britain. However, as part of the budget cuts, British forces withdrew from the island on March 31, 1979 and Valletta was desperately searching for new forms of rent and income. Libya offered Malta large amounts of budgetary and other aid and Britain feared that Malta would grant the Libyans access to the bases. Britain, distrusting the new Maltese government, vehemently opposed this flirting of its former ally Malta with its new enemy Libya. Another reason behind the disintegration of British–Libyan ties was the support Qaddafi provided for the British miners who, with their strikes, caused Thatcher one of her biggest domestic headaches. Thatcher was outraged when Qaddafi and Roger Windsor, chief executive of the National Union of Mineworkers, amicably

<sup>23</sup> Ronen, *Qaddafi's Libya*, 2008.



embraced each other during a visit in 1984.<sup>24</sup> A last major reason behind the change in attitude towards Libya was the alleged transfer of Libyan weapons and ammunition to the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Adding a sense of urgency, Irish and French naval forces had intercepted materials, including semtex, coming from Libya and going to the Irish militants.<sup>25</sup>

Washington was pleased to see the UK move closer to its own, more confrontational policy line on Libya. President Reagan and state secretary George P. Shultz understood that substantial change in Libya could only be realized with the genuine support of European allies. After the Fletcher incident, Washington pressured London to escalate the situation into a military confrontation. Thatcher, while not convinced that sanctions could have any effect without the backing of other key European states and unwilling to start a military attack, decided to provide logistical support to the 1986 airstrikes on Tripoli and Benghazi, which meant that the American F-111 bombers executing the attacks flew from British bases. The British public was largely opposed to these airstrikes and the Union for Journalists even decided to send a letter of condolence to Qaddafi, apologizing for the raid.<sup>26</sup> Many feared repercussions on British citizens abroad. Indeed, a day after the bombings, British foreign secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe stated that he had “firm evidence of direct Libyan involvement” in the kidnapping and killing of two British citizens in Lebanon, Philip Padfield and Leigh Douglas, widely regarded as a reprisal for the attacks.<sup>27</sup> In reaction, Britain deported 21 Libyan students and Libya retaliated with the expulsion of more than 100 British citizens. Thatcher had her own reasons to support the US air raids on Libya. By participating in *Operation El Dorado Canyon*, she showed loyalty to the United States and appreciation for Washington’s support in the Falklands War. She wished to avoid American disillusionment and disappointment with its key European ally. For the British government, the decision was not so much about what was good for Libya as it was about what was good for the special relationship with Washington. Supporting the US in its

<sup>24</sup>Nicholas Hagger, *The Libyan revolution: its origins and legacy. a memoir and assessment*, O books, 2009.

<sup>25</sup>Simons, *Libya and the West*, p.127.

<sup>26</sup>“Thatcher criticized” *The New York Times*, 18 April 1986, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup>Joseph Lelyveld, “Tension in Libya: Tripoli and the hostages”, *The New York Times*, 19 April 1986, p. 4. See also BBC, 17 April 1986. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/17/newsid\\_4693000/4693188.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/17/newsid_4693000/4693188.stm)

military campaign was an act of solidarity and an acknowledgment of an alliance that meant more to Britain than to any other European country.<sup>28</sup> Britain was alone in that stance; all other European governments denied US warplanes passage through their airspace for this mission. Hans van den Broek, director for external affairs of the European Community at the time, believed the military action “would do serious damage to the transatlantic relationship”.<sup>29</sup>

Of all the Western relationships with Tripoli, the one with Rome remained strongest of all throughout this period of hostilities. Commercial ties flourished as in January 1979 the two countries signed an agreement for bilateral economic cooperation. Libya promised to provide Italy with an additional 20 million tons of crude oil for the years 1979 to 1983 and Italy’s ENI received favorable terms for import and export from the Libyan Arab Foreign Bank in Tripoli.<sup>30</sup> Through a joint operation with LIPETCO, ENI received between 60,000 and 80,000 barrels of oil a day. Another important new contract was that of a major Italian telecommunication firm, Sirti, to operate the national telephone network in Libya. Italy benefitted from the deterioration of relations between Libya and Britain, and Italian firms maneuvered themselves agilely into a greater role in Libya’s oil sector and in projects related to Libya’s ambitious development plans.<sup>31</sup> In the political sphere, Italy hoped to lift its own international profile by playing a mediating role between the US, the UK, and Libya. In the 1980s, socialist Bettino Craxi and Christian-democrat Giulio Andreotti were the dominating characters in Italian politics. Both had substantial foreign policy ambitions in the Arab world and emphasized the growing responsibilities in southern direction.<sup>32</sup> For them, this meant that Italy should conduct a clarifying and mediating policy in a spirit of friendship. Italy “should be looking at all the positive and useful facets that could emerge, aiming at a betterment of the relations where possible, as is in our own and Libyan interest”.<sup>33</sup> Considering the dependency on Libyan

<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey Smith, “The British scene”, *Foreign Affairs* 64 (5), 1986, p. 935.

<sup>29</sup> George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> ENI Archives, Rome, 18 October 1979.

<sup>31</sup> EIU Libya Country Report 4, 1995, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Carlo Santoro, *L’Italia e il Mediterraneo: questioni di politica estera*, Rome, *F. Angeli*, 1988, p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> Bettino Craxi, “Pace, sicurezza, indipendenza”, *Reazione al Comitato Centrale del PSI*, Roma, 27–28 November 1981, in Bettino Craxi, *Pace nel Mediterraneo*, Venice, Marsilio

energy imports, the roughly 15,000 Italians that resided in Libya as teachers, technicians, and businessmen, and given these political ambitions, the Italian authorities reacted in an extremely cautious way to assassinations and spillover effects from Qaddafi's hunt against dissidents.<sup>34</sup> Mohammed Salem Rtemi, a Libyan millionaire businessman was found dead in Rome in March 1980 and a month later Abdul Jalil al Aref was murdered in the Via Veneto. Abdallah Mohammed el-Kasmi was shot dead near Termini train station in Rome.<sup>35</sup>

Underneath the solidarity and unity created in the Cold War, deep-rooted national ambitions and tensions existed between the allies in NATO and the European Community. Italy blamed the US and the Soviet Union for the increased tension in the Mediterranean. Rome believed it would be better off when global powers, including the US, stopped meddling in Mediterranean affairs. At the other side of the Atlantic, the US saw Andreotti's numerous meetings with Yasser Arafat, Qaddafi, and other Arab leaders—dubious ones in its view—as harmful to the coherence of NATO and the European Community. In the 1980s, several crises had broken out around the Mediterranean basin. These included the Iranian Revolution that had started in 1979, the 1982 Lebanon War, and events such as the 1985 Achille Lauro and Sigonella affairs. Italy resented Reagan's brazen approach towards North Africa and the Middle East and felt that, since France had pulled out of the military command of NATO in 1966, Italy had been carrying a disproportional share of the burden for Europe's southern defense. Receiving little in exchange, Italy believed it was solving crises caused by its more powerful allies.<sup>36</sup> In the Achille Lauro affair, members of the Palestine Liberation Front hijacked an Italian ship off the Egyptian coast. An American citizen was murdered in the act. Italian mediation had led to the release of the ship, but in the aftermath of the event, Andreotti, Craxi, and Reagan disagreed on what should happen to the captured hijackers. Italian politicians were willing to support PLO leader Yasser Arafat and to negotiate a safe passage for the hijackers. For Italy, this was the perfect opportunity to show its NATO allies that,

editore, 2006, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> "Heimatlose Hunde", *Der Spiegel* 25, 16 June 1980. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14325053.html>

<sup>35</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> Renato Ruggiero, "The Atlantic Alliance and Challenges to Security in the Mediterranean: problems and policy choices", in Robert O'Neill, *Prospects for security*, p. 214.

despite not being a key international actor, Rome maintained a special relationship with the Arab world. Reagan was fiercely opposed to the idea of providing the hijackers free passage and requested the extradition of the Palestinian guerilla leader Abu Abbas, who was believed to be behind this act of terrorism. Thus, Reagan decided to intercept the plane carrying the perpetrators, with American fighter jets redirecting it to the NATO air base in Sicily, Sigonella, an act which in itself led to another diplomatic row between Italy and Washington.

*Giulio d'Arabia*, as Andreotti was nicknamed, advocated a constructive dialogue with Qaddafi. Reagan's decision to bomb Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986 had outraged Rome. Italy emphasized the lack of evidence and warned that military action was likely to provoke a further explosion of violent extremism and political fanaticism. Qaddafi's response to the attacks included firing two missiles in the direction of the Italian island of Lampedusa. The missiles hit no more than seawater, but the Libyan regime claimed to have successfully destroyed the entire island. The tensions sparked another outflow of Italians. Within a year, the numbers of Italian citizens resident in Libya dwindled from around 17,000 to 2,200.<sup>37</sup> Still, given the geopolitical constellation, there was a limit to how far Italy could go in challenging the American policy line without compromising its own interests. For example, pressured by the US during the tenders for Reagan's star wars project, the Agnelli family sold back the Libyan shares in Fiat, because as long as Libya was heavily involved in companies that wanted to bid for American projects, the US would not consider these as eligible contenders. As a consequence, Libya was bought out of Fiat—with immense profits for Tripoli.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, except for some British support, the 1986 *Operation El Dorado Canyon* had remained a US affair. The raid failed to kill the Libyan leader and did not cause any substantial rebellion in Libya either. Some pockets of opposition existed and some additional unrest was sparked, for example, through the murder of Ahmad al-Warfalli, a Revolutionary Committee member. But overall, to the West's disappointment, exiles found themselves largely unable to mobilize significant numbers of Libyans for their cause. As a counter narrative, Qaddafi emphasized the evil intentions of Washington, urging the Libyans to unite against this common threat and this external

<sup>37</sup> Janet Stobart, "Italy distances itself from Libya", *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 May 1986, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> See Alan Friedman, "Agnelli, Fiat and the network of Italian power", 1989.

enemy. Qaddafi spread the story that the United States wanted to replace him with a CIA-trained opposition loyal to the American imperialists. In this regard, the raid provided a timely nationalist rally cry and additional financial incentives for those in support of the regime. In at least some aspects, one could argue, even the economic sanctions benefited Qaddafi in his quest for legitimacy, as these prevented him from wasting money on foolish, unnecessary, and inefficient military projects.<sup>39</sup>

Two years after the US air raids, European allies and others started to fall in line with the US's denunciation of Libya as a terrorist state. At the heart of this shift was the bombing of two passenger planes, one above Scotland, the other one above Niger. On December 21, 1988, a suitcase bomb travelling on Pan Am flight 103 from London to New York caused a Boeing 747 to explode mid-air above the Scottish town of Lockerbie, leaving 270 people dead. The majority of the victims had been Americans on their way home for Christmas. On June 14, 1989, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 635 expressing concerns over the increase in aviation terrorism. Only a few months later, in September 1989, flight 772 of the French airliner UTA, on its way from the Congo via Chad to Paris, exploded above the Ténéré desert in Niger. The crash took the lives of 171 passengers, including a large number of French citizens. London and Washington, soon joined by France, pointed the finger at Libya. In the US, George H. W. Bush had taken over the American presidency and wanted to switch his foreign policy to focus more on Iraq than on Libya. Instead of undertaking further military escalation in Libya, he called for extensive, multilateral economic sanctions under the UN umbrella. In November 1991, Qaddafi was requested to extradite two Libyan suspects for the Lockerbie bombing, Abdelbaset el-Megrahi and Lamin Khalifa Fhimah, as well as four suspects in the Ténéré case, including Qaddafi's brother-in-law Abdullah el-Senussi. In contrast to the West, Libya judged the Montreal Convention on Civil Aviation of 1971 applicable to the disputes, given that all conflicting parties were signatory to this convention, which called for the extradition of the suspects to a neutral country if there was doubt whether a fair trial could be held in the indicting country. Libya wanted to use this option and got the backing of the Arab League to press for this. Until 1999 the US and Britain rejected this idea while at the same time Libya refused to extradite the suspects.

<sup>39</sup> EIU Country Report 2, 1995, p.16.

With a broader coalition forming against the Qaddafi regime, the UN once again became the key platform to plan the international community's approach towards Libya and its future. In 1992, under UK presidency, the UN Security Council adopted Resolutions 731 and 748, banning air travel and arms sales to Libya and calling for significant scale downs in diplomatic representations. With Resolution 883 of November 1993, the Security Council extended multilateral sanctions to include a ban on the sale of oil-related equipment and a freeze of Libya's overseas assets. Rumors about a Libyan nuclear weapons program and preparations for chemical warfare with poison gas produced at a factory in Rabta added to the image of Libya's regime as the ultimate evil.<sup>40</sup> The sanctions imposed were up for renewal every three months. Roughly speaking, opinions regarding the usefulness of sanctions were split between those that tried tightening them (led by the US) and those eager to ease them (led by Italy, Germany, Russia, and China). The seven-year period of multilateral sanctions (April 1992–April 1999) did much more harm to the Libyan economy than the unilateral sanctions of prior years. This time, Libya needed to turn to the black market for many of the goods it would otherwise import legally. Goods became suboptimal, more expensive, and their delivery unpredictable. The value of the Dinar declined while price inflation eroded standards of living. Wages were frozen and travel and education in the West became extremely difficult. Still, the sanctions did not lead to regime change. Libya remained the richest African country on a per capita basis and many companies found ways to circumvent the sanctions. The economic decline did, however, increase popular unrest, both from the liberal opposition as well as from the more religiously conservative opposition. In its usual game of musical chairs of governing bodies, on September 1, 1994, Qaddafi announced the set up of a new organizational structure by adding 250 Cleansing Committees to the governance structure, which was soon followed by a commune system, apparently inspired by the 1871 Paris Commune.<sup>41</sup> In reality, real power never left the hands of Qaddafi and a small inner-circle of associates, while repression pushed the opposition forces ever further underground.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Francois Daguzan, "De l'ennemi no 2 au premier de la classe, analyse de l'abandon réussi d'une politique de prolifération", *Maghreb-Machrek*, 184, Spring 2005, p. 68 as well as Geoff Simons, *Libya, the struggle for life*, New York, 1996, p. 257.

<sup>41</sup> Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi*, p. 88.

In Washington, the Republican Party secured majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate during the 1994 Congressional elections. With this strong political mandate, they stepped up their campaign to confront rogue states, states that actively and violently opposed global American influence. Still unsatisfied with the decline in investments in Libya and aware of the imperfect implementation of sanctions, the US started considering secondary sanctions against Libya's European partners. The US had been angered to see some of the Libya-related oil business go on much as it had before the sanctions. Whereas the US wanted to step up the pressure on Libya, Europeans felt it was time to ease sanctions and find an alternative solution to the Libyan problem. The oilfields abandoned by Western companies and taken over by the LNOC initially experienced a decline in output due to a lack of expertise. However, in 1993, the LNOC had signed a \$5.5 billion joint venture for development of the Western Libyan Gas Project with one of its oldest partners, Agip-ENI. The project foresaw an undersea pipeline bringing gas from close to Sabratha to Sicily. Wanting to put a hold to these practices, the US Congress signed into law the Iran and Libya Sanction Act (ILSA) in August 1996.<sup>42</sup> Congress had mainly focused on punishing Iran, with Libya an afterthought. In the congressional hearings on the bill, more than 90 percent of the debate focused on Iran.<sup>43</sup> Libya, however, got added as a subject of the bill through the efforts of Democrat Edward Kennedy, whose electoral constituency in Massachusetts counted several vocal families of Lockerbie victims.<sup>44</sup> With this law in place, the American president had to impose sanctions on any foreign company that invested more than \$40 million in any year for the development of Libyan petroleum resources or in any country that violated the imposed UN sanctions.<sup>45</sup> Europe vehemently opposed ILSA and tried hard to circumvent its provisions. In November 1996, the European Union actually passed a blocking statute making it illegal for European companies to comply with extraterritorial applications of the US law such as ILSA and threatened taking the dispute to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Tony Blair, Britain's prime minister at the time, was one of the most adamant in pressuring US president Bill Clinton

<sup>42</sup> See for example Kenneth Katzman, "The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act", *CRS Report*, 26 April 2006. <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/66441.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Vandewalle, *Modern Libya*, p. 171.

<sup>44</sup> Haass, *Transatlantic tensions*, p. 152.

<sup>45</sup> Bruno Cova, "Extra-territorial Reach of the US Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996", *Oil and Gas Law and Taxation Review*, 14, 1996, pp. 449–58.

to ease the international sanctions on Libya and Iran. The US understood that the Europeans would not comply with the provisions and in 1997 agreed to provide waivers for European companies doing business with Libya (as well as Iran and Cuba) while trying to convince Congress nothing had changed in the US policy towards Libya.<sup>46</sup>

Multilateral sanctions weakened the Libyan economy, but they also provided Qaddafi with goodwill in some non-Western parts of the world. While the West depicted the UN Resolutions against Libya as a victory for international law and justice, the Libyan regime created a narrative in which the whole episode emphasized a tendency to desecrate universal justice. The UN Resolutions, in Qaddafi's view, had become instruments of the most powerful members of the UN Security Council. They were used as a political weapon against the poorer and less influential members of the international community. Libya focused its strategic communications on revealing how the Security Council, after the implosion of the Soviet Union, had become a tool of Anglo-American politics—an allegation resonating in many postcolonial states.<sup>47</sup> In Qaddafi's rationale, the international financial and legal institutions and practices, including humanitarian interventions, constituted the core of a neocolonial project. Lockerbie, the sanctions, and the isolation of Qaddafi's Libya were all regarded as American-British manipulations of the purpose of international organizations and world public opinion. The sanctions and the hostile relations with the West and large parts of the Arab world, made Qaddafi reconsider his foreign policy focus. The reactions from the Arab world to the sanctions highlighted Libya's isolation even in its own region. As a consequence, Qaddafi started to search more intensively for partners in other parts of the developing world, where the call for a re-equilibration of global decision-making powers could count on genuine support, especially when large grants were offered in return.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Qaddafi officially announced abandoning pan-Arabism in favor of pan-Africanism. New billboards appeared all over the country depicting Qaddafi with a large, green

<sup>46</sup>Stuart Eizenstat, "Hearings on Sanctions in US Policy", testimony before the International Relations Committee in the House, 3 June 1998, 105 Congress 2 session, GPO 1998, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup>Delphine Perrin, "La politique juridique extérieure de la Libye", in Olivier Pliez (ed.), *La nouvelle Libye*, Paris: Karthala/Iremam, p. 29.

<sup>48</sup>Yahia H. Zoubir, "Libya in US foreign policy: from rogue state to good fellow?", *Third World Quarterly*, 23 (1), 2002, p. 38.



colored African continent. Africa was also a lucrative market to sell off older light weaponry, in exchange for natural resources and support in the UN and elsewhere. Qaddafi's oil money was welcomed in the poorer African states, where new names of mosques and streets would remind people of the generous Libyan support. Needless to say, France and Britain frowned upon Libyan interference in francophone Africa and in the former British territories of Sudan and Uganda.

As part of the change in foreign policy strategy, Qaddafi decided to conclude the conflict with Chad over the contested Aouzou Strip. A non-ratified Franco-Italian Treaty signed at the conclusion of the First World War had allocated this 114,000 square kilometer of desert borderlands to Italy, as compensation from France and Britain for not giving Italy control over any of the German colonies. After the Second World War, France wanted to reintegrate the area within Chadian territory and the 1955 Franco-Libyan Treaty, signed by King Idris, allowed for this. The King had acquiesced, even though the strip was supposedly endowed with large uranium deposits. Qaddafi was determined to claim the lands back under Libyan control and was willing to dedicate a large number of resources, manpower, and material to this cause. That former Sanussi loyalists had been plotting against him from this specific area only increased his resolve.<sup>49</sup> After several episodes of war, Libya, in 1987, finally recognized Chad's sovereignty in the Aouzou strip. Khalifa Haftar had been the chief commander of Libyan forces in Chad and was taken prisoner at the conclusion of the war. Even though he was seen as one of Qaddafi's protégés, he and many other prisoners were publically disowned. Haftar, outraged, joined the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), settled in the US and worked for the CIA before returning to Libya during the 2011 uprisings. Three years later, he would become the key military commander of the more secular side of Libyan politics and one of the largest spoilers to bring an end to the civil war that broke out in 2014.

In February 1997, some 40 African leaders gathered in Tripoli to express their support for Qaddafi. Soon after, all these African heads of states could be heard calling for the lifting of sanctions on Libya. Nelson Mandela praised Qaddafi's efforts in supporting development in Africa. In a follow-up conference of African heads of states in Tripoli, a year later, Qaddafi established the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-

<sup>49</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 286.

SAD). This new regional organization, which started with six members but quickly grew to 27 members, had its offices in Tripoli and was led by a Libyan secretary general. The organization included an African Bank for Development and Commerce, also based in Tripoli. The common ground among the members was a lucrative relationship with Libya, rather than similarities in economic or political outlook. Emphasizing and proclaiming Libya's African identity was useful to increase support in the UN General Assembly for lifting of the sanctions.

Qaddafi's regime recognized the effect sanctions and the stifling business environment were having on the domestic population. A new generation was coming of age that had not witnessed the 1969 coup and all the problems the RCC had tried to solve. The youth was frustrated with the international suspicion, the political isolation, the inability to travel, and the lack of economic opportunities. Benghazi and the cities further east felt especially underprivileged, with unemployment rates higher than in other parts of the country. Sensing the potential to become a serious threat to its continuation, the regime became more brutal towards the armed opposition under the banner of Islam. Tripoli tasked the Revolutionary Committees to suppress those in support of political Islam, referring to the Islamists as sick animals that needed to be exterminated—calling political Islam worse than HIV/Aids.<sup>50</sup> The Islamist opposition was predominantly located in east Libya. Repression—including through air raids—silenced many, but further radicalized others. The cities of Al-Bayda and Derna, located in the Green Mountain area, became hot beds of Islamist opposition. In the mid-1990s, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) emerged on stage with an assassination attempt on Qaddafi. The LIFG was largely run by returning jihadi fighters from the Soviet–Afghan war and Abdel Hakim Belhadj was selected as the Emir of the organization. Another opposition movement that sprung up inside Libya's borders was the Islamic Martyrs' Movement. Many of the political opposition figures ended up behind bars. The 1996 massacre in the Abu Selim prison would become the symbol of the regime's brutality. While exact numbers remain unknown, according to Human Rights Watch, around 1,270 prisoners lost their lives.<sup>51</sup> A large number of inmates had been locked up for crimes of thought.

<sup>50</sup>Yahia H. Zoubir, "Islamisme radical et lutte antiterroriste", *Maghreb-Machrek*, 184, Spring 2005, p. 57.

<sup>51</sup>Lindsey Hilsum, *Sandstorm*, Penguin Press, 2012, pp. 91–108.

Some within the regime, including Abdessalam Jallud, started expressing concerns about the course Libya was taking. Jallud and his backers urged Qaddafi to mobilize the country's resources more efficiently and initially Qaddafi was persuaded to abandon the most extreme economic policies. In 1987, the regime announced a series of reforms, including some careful liberalization efforts to move away from the state monopoly on imports and exports.<sup>52</sup> Small, private businesses were once again seen as acceptable and Qaddafi publicly started arguing for more space for a private sector. New laws were adopted allowing for joint stock companies, for foreign currency accounts, commercial banking, and import permits for private enterprises. By 1993, Libya was making efforts to promote tourism and to provide more security for foreign investments. The proposals were promising, but most of them remained paper exercises as the adopted laws barely got implemented. In the end, Qaddafi knew very well that the same Western leaders he denounced in front of the camera, held the key to the continuation of his regime. More than 80 percent of Libyan exports and 60 percent of imports were with the European Community and to get the sanctions lifted Libya would have to court or manipulate the most relevant European actors, Italy and Britain. Italy was tied closely to the Libyan economy, while Britain was closer to Washington. Both were interested in playing the role of privileged external power in Libya. The gradual erosion of compliance with the sanctions reinforced the need for a political settlement.

Reagan advocated a military solution to Qaddafi's hostilities towards the West, thereby alienating most of the US's allies in NATO. Europe's relations with Libya remained too entwined to provoke and confront the dictator in such explicit ways. London, be it reluctantly, did prioritize its alliance with Washington. Losing the US and the UK as commercial competitors, Rome and Paris identified opportunities to strengthen their own relations with Tripoli. Only at the turn of the century, when combating international terrorism became top of the agenda, did the US change its policies towards Libya. Behind the scenes, European politicians and international companies with high stakes in Libya were the key drivers of that change.

<sup>52</sup>Dirk Vandewalle, "Qadhafi's 'Perestroika': economic and political liberalization in Libya", *The Middle East Journal*, 45 (2), 1991, pp. 216–31.

## Reconciliation and Fighting Islamic Extremism Together

For a short period of time at the beginning of the 21st century Qaddafi's Libya and the West found sufficient common ground for reconciliation. With European states leading the efforts, the international community welcomed Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi back into its midst and rebranded Libya from a pariah state to an example penitent. Libyan and Western interests converged around combatting violent Islamic extremism, mutually beneficial trade and investment deals, and the overall need for stability in the Arab region. Ordinary Libyans had suffered from their country's international isolation more than any of the political and business elites. Scarcity, corruption, and cronyism were easy ammunition for the Islamist opposition, which used societal hardship as a powerful recruitment tool. Qaddafi felt on the one hand threatened by dissent at home and on the other hand, in the context of the post 9/11 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, feared a US pre-emptive attack.<sup>1</sup> Normalizing relations with the West was the best policy option for Qaddafi's regime. Tripoli understood that, to influence Washington, it first needed to convince Europe—Britain in particular—of a new, liberal, and pro-Western course. The regime hired some well-paid Western firms and advisers to help it cleanse its image abroad while international oil companies

<sup>1</sup>See Luis Martinez, "Libya: the conversion of a 'terrorist state'", *Mediterranean Politics* 11 (2), 2006, pp. 151–165; and Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, "Who won Libya? The force-diplomacy debate and its implications for theory and policy", *International Security* 30 (3), 2006, pp. 47–86.

successfully lobbied with their respective governments for changes in the sanctions regime.<sup>2</sup>

Already in August 1998, the UN Security Council had passed Resolution 1192 enabling the 1999 suspension of the multilateral sanctions on Libya. Four years later, the sanctions were lifted altogether. The decision was prompted by the change in policy of the UK and the US in the Lockerbie trial. London and Washington accepted Qaddafi's request to hold the trial in a third country, The Netherlands, but under Scottish law and with Scottish judges. Responding to this opening, Qaddafi agreed to the extradition of the two Libyan nationals indicted for the 1988 Lockerbie bombing. Abdelbaset el-Megrahi, head of security of Libyan Arab Airlines, and Lamin Khalifah Fhimah, station manager for the same airliner, were handed over and placed under arrest at Camp Zeist, a military area in The Netherlands. Legal experts frowned upon the proceedings of the trial and the outcome was believed to be a political compromise: on January 31, 2001, el-Megrahi was found guilty—on flimsy evidence—while Fhimah was acquitted.<sup>3</sup> In parallel, in Paris in 1999, six Libyans indicted by France for the Ténéré bombing were tried and convicted, be it in absentia as Qaddafi refused to extradite a key suspect, his brother-in-law Abdullah el-Senussi. The real breakthrough came in early August 2002. During a landmark visit of the British secretary of state for foreign affairs to Sirte, Qaddafi officially renounced terrorism and recognized the responsibility of Libyan officers in the Lockerbie and Ténéré bombings, even though he still refused to admit any official state involvement. Qaddafi offered the families of the 270 Lockerbie victims generous compensation payments and made a similar gesture to those that had lost loved ones in the fatal UTA flight, the attack on the Berlin discotheque as well as to the relatives of police officer Fletcher, who had been shot during a demonstration in front of the Libyan Embassy in London. Qaddafi sent an official letter to the UN Security Council acknowledging responsibility for these events and by joint Anglo-Libyan and American-Libyan letters, both dated September 9, 2003, the parties publically “agreed to discontinue with prejudice the proceedings”. Within a month, the Security Council lifted the already suspended multilateral sanctions.

<sup>2</sup>“Libya documents: A programme to enhance the international reputation of Libya”, *The Guardian*, 4 March 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Simons, *Libya and the West*, pp. 141–163.

Both the West and Libya had an interest in normalization; most businesses waited in anticipation for the changes to come. For example, in August 1998, British Aerospace, Europe's largest defense contractor, started negotiating a multibillion dollar deal to rebuild Libya's civilian and possibly military capabilities and infrastructure—as soon as legally possible.<sup>4</sup> On July 7, 1999, London restored diplomatic ties with Tripoli. Several months prior, negotiations had started with a series of informal, off-the-record conferences. Gradually, these meetings grew in scope and eventually included discussions on matters such as Libyan foreign policy in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Fletcher case, the Lockerbie case, illegal migration flows, and Libya's program to produce weapons of mass destruction. Co-opting Qaddafi's Libya had been part of British prime minister Tony Blair's policy of critical engagement with isolated regimes.<sup>5</sup> If it is true that back in 1996 MI6 was seriously involved in an attempt to assassinate Qaddafi, the change in approach could be considered rather radical.<sup>6</sup> Blair visited Qaddafi on March 25, 2004. The visit was given symbolic weight by portraying it as the first visit to Libya by a British prime minister since Winston Churchill in 1943. To the outside world, the visit confirmed Qaddafi's Libya's new status as a respectable member of the international community. For sure, both Blair and Qaddafi enjoyed the international spotlight, but beyond the political significance of the trip, commerce was a large driver of the reconciliation efforts. Blair returned from his trip with several important, lucrative commercial agreements, including a \$513 million gas exploration deal for the Anglo-Dutch company Shell.<sup>7</sup> A Libyan British Business Council (LBBC) saw the light of day in 2004, with large British firms such as HSBC, Barclays, and the Wood Group leading members. On average, the LBBC represented around £1.5 billion of annual

<sup>4</sup>David Gow and Richard Norton-Taylor "BAe admits to Libya talks", *The Guardian*, 20 August 1998, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Y. Ronen, *Qaddafi's Libya*, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup>Former MI5 officer David Shayler claimed that an attack had failed because the wrong car had been bombed. Former MI6 officer Richard Tomlinson backed this story, but British authorities have always denied. On 12 February 2000, a top secret report linking MI6 to the assassination attempt appeared on an American site, "UK Eyes Alpha" and gave information about contacts between MI6 and the Middle Eastern agents who tried to blow up Qaddafi's car. British Home Office ordered a criminal investigation under the Official Secrets Act into the leaking of the document. See Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup>"Blair hails new Libyan relations", *BBC News Online*, 25 March 2004.

bilateral trade.<sup>8</sup> In May 2007, British Petroleum signed a \$900 million exploration deal with access to offshore acreage. Three decades after the company had been forced to leave the country due to the hostile nationalization of its assets, BP returned to Libya. Shortly after all sanctions were lifted, the UK Trade and Investment Authority ranked Qaddafi's Libya to be the fourth most attractive overseas market for UK exporters.<sup>9</sup>

Italy was another state that believed it was in the driver's seat in efforts to normalize relations with Libya, and wished to make its role as visible as possible. Rome had long advocated the lifting of the sanctions against its former colony, which it had only reluctantly backed in the first place. During the initial years of the sanction regime, Italy's Western allies largely ignored its arguments and lamentations about the detrimental impact on Italian businesses. Italy's control over the implementation of the sanctions was conveniently less than optimal. On national television, Libya regularly expressed appreciation for the Italian government quietly allowing the violation of the sanctions. Initially, violations came mainly from African states. In April 1998, Italy was mentioned as the first European state ignoring the ban by having two Italian planes arrive in Libya.<sup>10</sup> During a G8-summit held in Birmingham a month later, Romano Prodi stated: "I am extremely satisfied with the role played by Italy. I have insisted a lot to Clinton and Blair and in the end, my reasoning has prevailed. We are facing something big: a change in the grand politics of sanctions as an instrument to regulate relations with Cuba, Libya and Iran. I am very content that Italy has contributed a lot to this outcome".<sup>11</sup> Italy, as well as the Vatican, offered assistance to Libya in helping it shed its rogue status and leverage its extensive knowledge of international terrorist networks as a valuable chip in the normalization process. The Pope called for an end to the sanctions, showing satisfaction with Libya's respect for

<sup>8</sup> "British business's taste for Libyan oil money exposed", *The Telegraph*, 27 February 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/8349563/British-business-taste-for-Libyan-oil-money-exposed.html>

<sup>9</sup> See for example Derek Lutterbeck, "Migrants, weapons and oil: Europe and Libya after the sanctions", *The Journal of North African Studies* 14 (2), 2009, pp. 169–184 and Yahia H. Zoubir, "Libya and Europe: Economic Realism at the Rescue of the Qaddafi Authoritarian Regime", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17 (3), 2009, pp. 401–415.

<sup>10</sup> See Ian Hurd, "The strategic use of liberal internationalism: Libya and the US sanctions, 1992–2003", *International Organization* 59 (3), 2005, pp. 495–526.

<sup>11</sup> Daniela Pioppi, "Protagonista o comparsa? Il ruolo dell'Italia nel processo di normalizzazione della Libia", *Afriche e Orienti*, 3, 2002, p. 53.

freedom of religion as well as for its cordial treatment of the Christian community within the country.<sup>12</sup> One day after Libya extradited the two Lockerbie suspects as per the requirements for the suspension of the sanctions, Italian minister of foreign affairs Lamberto Dini visited Libya. Italy had kept a semi-diplomatic presence in Libya throughout the sanctions period and had tried to keep the impact of sanctions on economic relations as limited as possible. In 1996, under the supervision of Libyan minister of foreign affairs Omar al-Muntasser, Italy's oil company ENI and the Libyan National Oil Company (LNOC) had signed an agreement to complete a 595-kilometer long gas pipeline from Ghadames to Sabratha at the Libyan coast to terminals in Gela in Sicily.<sup>13</sup> The project had a long history, going back to 1976, when Agip had discovered oil and gas in the offshore Buri field close to the Tunisian border.<sup>14</sup> Dini and Muntasser set up an Italian–Libyan Joint Commission and pledged a close working relationship in order to, once and for all, overcome the negative legacy of the colonial past and to start a new chapter in Libyan–Italian relations.<sup>15</sup> The Greenstream pipeline, as part of the West Libyan Gas Project, was opened on October 7, 2004, in the presence of the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. The day was chosen symbolically: what used to be the anti-Italian “Day of Revenge” in Libya became the “Day of Friendship”. By 2011, the pipeline was providing around 10 percent of Italy's total gas demands, carrying eight billion cubic meters of methanol per year. ENI owned 42 percent of the gas transported, the LNOC 58 percent.<sup>16</sup>

The Italians played a key role in putting the improvement of relations with Libya on the communal European agenda. In April 2004, Prodi, in his role as president of the European Commission, received Qaddafi in Brussels. The visit marked the lifting of the European sanctions and the easing of an arms embargo that had been imposed on Libya in 1986. EU member states praised the regime's efforts and Qaddafi elaborated at length on the benefits that had been bestowed upon his country after the shedding of the rogue status and expressed hope to his European audience

<sup>12</sup> Simons, *Libya and the West*, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid al-Rodhan, *The changing dynamics of energy in the Middle East*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> ENI Archive, ECOS XXVIII, Francesco Guidi, “Energia dal mare e dal deserto”, *ECOS* n. 5, 1999, pp. 34–52.

<sup>15</sup> See Mezran and De Maio, “Between the past and the future: Has a shift in Italian–Libyan relations occurred?”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 12 (4), 2007, pp. 439–451.

<sup>16</sup> ENI Archive, ECOS XXVIII, Guidi, pp. 34–52.



that “we shall not be obliged or forced one day to go back to those days when we bomb our cars or put explosive belts around our beds and around our women”.<sup>17</sup> The deliberations also led to an agreement on technical cooperation to combat illegal immigration and to Libya’s support in the activities undertaken by Frontex, the European border management and protection agency. In 2009 Libya obtained €20 million from the EU to help fight illegal immigration.<sup>18</sup> Prodi’s first invitation to Qaddafi had actually been extended in 2000, but back then such a sign of reconciliation was judged premature as Libya showed itself unwilling to subscribe to the EU’s new framework for its policies towards the Arab region under the Barcelona Process. In addition, the invitation had upset the United States. Qaddafi and Prodi did meet that same year on more neutral soil, in Egypt, and in a less official fashion, to discuss a way forward.<sup>19</sup>

While Europe was eager to welcome Qaddafi back as a legitimate counterpart, the US remained more cautious in its approach. Britain and Italy in particular tried to push the American policy stance into a milder direction. In 1999, a US–Libya Dialogue Group was announced at a conference held in Malta, and in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the relations between Tripoli and Washington started to warm up. In a 2002 speech, president George W. Bush omitted mentioning Libya as part of the axis of evil. By that time, Qaddafi was offering valuable support and intelligence in the fight against (Islamic) terrorism. The Libyan authorities used their expert knowledge of international terrorism and other clandestine networks in their push for normalization. They successfully positioned Libya as the repentant rogue and a trustful and knowledgeable ally in the fight against Islamic militancy.<sup>20</sup> Libya was one of the first to express support following the 2001 terrorist attacks and emphasized that, three years prior, it had warned the world against the threat posed by Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The contacts from previous periods, as well as the practice of arbitrary imprisonment of suspects provided the regime with a treasure trove of intelligence. To make the West understand the value of the intelligence Libya had at its disposal, Qaddafi’s confidant and head of

<sup>17</sup> Statement at Brussels press conference, 27 April 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Zoubir, *Libya and Europe*, p. 409.

<sup>19</sup> Annuario IAI-ISPI, “La politica estera dell’Italia”, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Moncef Djaziri, “La Libye: les élites politiques, la stratégie de ‘sortie’ de crise et la réinsertion dans le système international”, *Annuaire de l’Afrique du Nord* 38, CNRS, Paris, 2002.

counter espionage, Moussa Koussa, started sharing information on Islamic groups with European security services on a regular basis. To show that the regime was on the same side, Qaddafi expelled terrorist groups such as Abu Nidal. By doing so, it also played into the new provisions of the 2002 American National Security Strategy, which called upon the US to help other states in their efforts to isolate terrorists.<sup>21</sup>

In exchange for information, Qaddafi counted on Western support for combatting domestic, Islamist-leaning opposition. The regime had found it ever more difficult to control the activities of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in the mountainous areas of eastern Libya. The LIFG had allegedly allied with al-Qaeda for financial and material support and staged a series of assassination attempts on the Libyan leader.<sup>22</sup> Qaddafi's initial response to the LIFG came in the form of air strikes against its positions, repression of its activities, and arrests of its members. The West helped Libya trace the whereabouts of suspected members, engaged them through joint operations, and used information extracted from victims of rendition and torture in court cases. The UK's 2000 Terrorism Act made LIFG membership punishable with a substantial prison sentence and the group's assets in Britain were frozen. Libyan intelligence officers worked in Britain and vice versa, with documents found after the ousting of Qaddafi's regime showing a substantial level of coordination and cooperation. To illustrate, when Abd-al Hakim Belhadj was serving six years in a Libyan prison, the UK sent a list of more than 1,600 questions for the suspect. Understanding the backlash this could cause, MI5 warned Qaddafi's agent that such joint operations should never be "discovered by lawyers or human rights organizations and the media".<sup>23</sup>

The United States ultimately also warmed up to Qaddafi's charm offensive. On December 19, 2003, Qaddafi publicly announced abandoning Libya's nuclear weapon program, thereby complying with all the additional demands and conditions necessary for normalized relations with the United States. Washington knew that the ceremonial abandoning of the nuclear program was somewhat of a farce, as the program

<sup>21</sup>The American National Security Strategy of 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS), September 2002. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss3.html>

<sup>22</sup>Yahia H. Zoubir, "Islamisme radical et lutte antiterroriste", *Maghreb-Machrek* 184, Spring 2005, pp. 53–66.

<sup>23</sup>Ian Cobain, "Cooperation between British spies and Gaddafi's Libya revealed in official papers", *The Guardian*, 22 January 2015.

and Qaddafi's ambitions had never constituted any serious international threat.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the exaggerated publicity around the announcement enabled the Bush Administration to claim premature victory for the approach of deterrence taken towards Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of 9/11. Libya signed the relevant protocols of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and became a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention. As a result, the US lifted the unilateral sanctions and in February 2004 ended the travel ban. American diplomatic representation in Tripoli returned in early 2004. The mission was upgraded to a full Embassy in 2006, after the US officially deleted Libya from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Reflecting the rapid growth of the number of American citizens in Libya, an American School reopened, and in 2007, Gene Cretz was nominated as the US ambassador to Libya. He was the first to take up that position in 25 years.

International businesses were yearning for the opening up of Libyan markets and in the early 2000s, companies started anticipating a substantial number of government tenders. Libya's authorities tried to improve their country's business climate in order to attract investments. The LNOC started organizing international oil and gas conferences again and announced a new round of contracts for concessions under very attractive conditions. To enhance the investment climate, in January 2002, Libya expressed its intention to peg the Libyan dinar to the IMF's special drawing rights, effectively devaluing the currency by more than half.<sup>25</sup> To offset the negative effects at home, Tripoli cut customs duties for most imports by 50 percent. Libya also planned the unification of the existing multi-tier (official, commercial, and black market) foreign exchange system in order to create more transparency and security for external investors. Qaddafi authorized the privatization of a large number of state-owned enterprises and allowed small retailers to reopen shops and other businesses. Adding to the credibility-building efforts, after decades of dismissing any assessment or advice by international financial institutions, Libya subscribed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s Article VIII agreements. In October 2003, the conclusions of the first Article IV consultations on Libya got published, with the IMF calling for better macroeconomic management, removal of trade restrictions and subsidies,

<sup>24</sup> Daguzan, "De l'ennemi no 2", pp. 73–74.

<sup>25</sup> International Monetary Fund, *The Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya: 2005 Article IV Consultation*, April 2006.

as well as far-reaching structural reforms in the banking sector, the civil service, the educational system, and the judiciary.<sup>26</sup> Libya announced the establishment of several free zones in Libya and businesses were invited to work for five years with additional tax exemptions, investment grants, and other privileges. Showcasing the new policy direction, Qaddafi appointed Shukri Ghanem as the new prime minister. Ghanem was a known advocate of economic liberalization with a PhD from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in the United States.

Another element of great interest to the West, especially at the time of the financial crisis, was the liquidity Libya offered to the international financial system. In August 2006, the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) caused frenzy in the banking world. The fund had \$40 billion in liquid assets and invited Western banks to manage it. The manageable fund was soon expanded to around \$70 billion. HSBC became LIA's largest Western banking partner. By September 2010, that bank received \$1.4 billion from Libya for reinvestments. In Italy, Mediobanca managed LIA's money.<sup>27</sup> LIA assets found their way into Europe, from BP and UniCredit Bank, to the Italian soccer club Juventus to the London School of Economics and Pearson publishers. During the financial crisis, LIA also bought stakes in Fortis, a Dutch-Belgian bank suffering from illiquidity. The defense industry also benefited immensely from Libya's rehabilitation. The Libyan leader remained a fervent spender on military equipment, regardless of whether his country had the expertise and knowledge to use and maintain the impressive arsenal built up over the years. Russia remained Libya's largest supplier of arms, but the lifting of the arms embargo in 2003 made many companies re-enter the market. In 2009, EU member states wrote out €343.7 million worth of arms licenses to Libya, with British, French, and Italian industries in the lead. Among other deals, Italy sold six helicopters and Paris received a contract

<sup>26</sup> "Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya Accepts Article VIII Obligations", *IMF Press Release* 3/122, 23 July 2003. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2003/pr03122.htm>. And "IMF Concludes 2003 Article IV Consultation with the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya", *IMF Press Release* 3/125, 23 October 2003. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pn/2003/pn03125.htm>

<sup>27</sup> "Western funds are said to have managed Libyan money poorly", *The New York Times*, 30 June 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/business/global/01libya.html?\\_r=2&ref=global-home](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/business/global/01libya.html?_r=2&ref=global-home)

to refurbish the Mirage combat jets that had been corroding at the former El Adem base since the early 1970s.<sup>28</sup>

Qaddafi's son, Saif al Islam, played a special role in the reconciliation process between Libya and the West. Neatly shaven and well dressed, with a PhD from the London School of Economics, he was thought to embody the avant-garde of a new generation of Libyans. That new generation was depicted as reform minded, young, intellectual, strongly Westernized, and disillusioned with the idiosyncratic ideals of an old guard clinging to revolutionary ideas that had led to a scarcity of opportunities. In short, the West expected the youth of Libya to fall in line with its vision of progress, which included economic liberalization and political democratization. The West saw supporting Saif as the best strategy to combine a comfortable level of democratization with retaining stability and ensuring that the Islamist forces in the Libyan opposition would not take the lead in generating regime change in Libya. The West had sufficient reason to believe that Saif, Libya's heir-apparent, was serious about changing the country's ways. Western pundits considered his Qaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation (GICDF) a constructive international force. It had assisted with the release of kidnapped Westerners in Africa and South East Asia and it worked with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to help construct housing in the Palestinian Gaza Strip. The Foundation had also taken the lead in negotiating compensation payments for the families of the Lockerbie victims and facilitated the rapprochement between Libya and the European Union. The board of the GICDF featured several respected international experts, including the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, Benjamin Barber of the UK-based think tank Demos, and the biochemist Richard Roberts, a Nobel Prize laureate. At the beginning of 2009, Saif launched the Arab Alliance for Democracy, Development, and Human Rights, for which he tried to get the goodwill of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the National Democratic Institute, and several other respected Western institutes. His ambitious plans also included the establishment of a research institute on democracy in Europe. Perhaps the most impressive project Saif attached his name to, together with Jallud and the president of the

<sup>28</sup> "Twelfth Annual Report defining rules governing control of exports of military technology and equipment, (2011/C 9/01)", *Official Journal of the European Union*, 13 January 2011. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:009:0001:0417:EN:PDF>

Libyan Supreme Court, Abderrahmane Aboutouta, was that of redrafting a Libyan Constitution. A Libyan Constitutional Charter Committee was established in 2004 and included both prominent Libyans, such as Zahi Mogherbi, Amal Obeidi, Youssef Sawani, and Omran Bukhres, as well as renowned Western experts—from Austria, Germany, America, Belgium, and Britain.<sup>29</sup> The West supported the efforts, but inside Libya enthusiasm was far from guaranteed. After several years, father Qaddafi and the old guard rejected the Constitutional Project, probably fearing the proposed reforms might compromise their own position. In their view, there was no need to write such fundamental rules and procedures down into a legal document: Libya had *The Green Book* and Qaddafi had made Libya into an ultimate participatory democracy for eternity, under his all-compassing leadership. Nothing could change that.<sup>30</sup>

Saif el-Islam also spearheaded the initiative of establishing a constructive dialogue with imprisoned members of the LIFG and several of its exiled principals. A couple of years after the 9/11 attacks, the Libyan regime decided to provide those willing to repent with the possibility to do so, as part of the strategy to decrease the popularity of the Islamist opposition. Officials sought to win over the more charismatic leaders of the Islamist forces and encouraged interaction with non-jihadist religious figures such as Sheikh Ali-al Salabi.<sup>31</sup> The dialogue led to a substantial, more than 400-page long document titled *Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability and the Judgment of People*.<sup>32</sup> Among the authors were Abd-al Hakim Belhadj as the Emir of the LIFG, Sami al-Saadi and Abu Munzer al-Said as the group's spiritual leader, as well as Khaled al-Sharif, who acted as deputy Emir and Abdel Wahab Qaid, the older brother of Abu Yahya al-Libi, a leading member of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Published in 2009, the text was presented as a new, non-violent, code for jihad. The reintegration policy was believed to be successful. The authorities released hundreds of former LIFG members

<sup>29</sup> Ned McClennen, "Annals of Philosophy in Libya: Saif al Islam Gaddafi and the Libyan Constitution", *Critical Inquiry*, 12 September 2011. <http://critinq.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/annals-of-philosophy-in-libya/>

<sup>30</sup> "Qui a peur de Seif el-Islam?", *Jeune Afrique* 2560, 31 January-6 February 2010, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> Samia Nakhoul, "Interview with Ali al-Salabi: Libyan scholar urges help for rebels fighting Gaddafi", *Reuters Africa*, 11 March 2011.

<sup>32</sup> See for a selected translation into English: Mohammed Ali Musawi for the Quilliam Foundation. <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/fore/a-selected-translation-of-the-lifg.pdf>

from prison. They received financial compensation and were showcased as brave and positive examples of Libya's society. Saif el-Islam, referring to the LIFG leadership, stated in March 2010: "The enemy of yesterday is the friend of today (...). It was a real war, but those brothers are free men now".<sup>33</sup> The West praised the Libyan initiative as a pioneering project in successfully reintegrating radicalized individuals. Unfortunately, the policy would come to haunt the Qaddafis as several of the rehabilitated figures were to play leading roles in the 2011 rebellion and its aftermath. Belhadj started as the rebellion's Tripoli military commander and, showing an initial intention to take part in the democratic process in Libya, he founded the Al-Watan Party to run in the 2012 elections to the General National Congress. LIFG ideologue Sami al-Saadi established a rival party, the Al-Umma Party, together with Khaled al-Sharif and Abdel Wahab Qaid. Al-Sharif would soon head the Libyan National Guard and later become minister of defense. Abdel Wahab Qaid was elected to the General National Congress and was put in charge of overseeing the southern borders of Libya.

While in the first decade of the 21st century the outlook for a more international business-friendly and less erratic Libya was promising, engaging Qaddafi's Libya still meant dealing with an unreliable and immensely politicized partner who never lost his appetite for embarrassing the West. A case in point was the aftermath of the arrest and conviction of Lockerbie suspect el-Megrahi. In August 2009, after serving several years in prison, el-Megrahi was released on compassionate grounds as he was suffering from a terminal illness and was allowed to return to Libya. At the same time, a leaked cable from the US Embassy on the subject revealed the commercial and political leverage the Libyan regime had exerted on Britain and hinted at the pressure Britain had consequently put on the Scottish court to have el-Megrahi released.<sup>34</sup> Also, British Petroleum had urged the UK government to ratify a Prisoner Transfer Agreement between Libya and the United Kingdom at the time when el-Megrahi was the only eligible candidate covered by such an agreement. In October 2008, Omar Jelban, the Libyan Ambassador to the UK, had

<sup>33</sup> Omar Ashour, "Deradicalizing Jihadists the Libyan Way", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 7 April 2010.

<sup>34</sup> "WikiLeaks cables: Lockerbie bomber freed after Gaddafi's 'thuggish' threats", *The Guardian*, 7 December 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/07/wikileaks-gaddafi-britain-lockerbie-bomber>

written to the Scottish Prime Minister Alex Salmond that he wanted to discuss the medical condition of el-Megrahi and the enhancement of trade links between Libya and Scotland as two subjects linked to each other.<sup>35</sup> The UK authorities expected the release to have a largely positive effect on British–Libyan bilateral relations, including the granting of oil concessions to companies such as BP.<sup>36</sup> Given this context, the release was heavily criticized at home, in the United States, and elsewhere. Moussa Koussa, in an attempt to compromise, promised the UK that el-Megrahi would be welcomed home in discreteness and silence. Instead, Qaddafi decided to stage a hero’s welcome and mobilized all possible media outlets. The media circus surrounding the release was principally intended to please domestic audiences. Nonetheless, the move was interpreted elsewhere as a direct affront to the United Kingdom.<sup>37</sup> The release of el-Megrahi was an important foreign policy goal of Qaddafi’s Libya—both in terms of international recognition as well as to ensure the ongoing support of the Megarha tribe, which was vital for the stability of his rule. The UK was not the only one to suffer from Qaddafi’s untrustworthiness. France, for example, was scuffed in a similar way as it failed in getting Abdullah el-Senussi, suspect of the Ténéré bombing, extradited. As with el-Megrahi, Qaddafi promised France that the suspect would at least be keeping a low profile in Libya. But adding to France’s outrage, Qaddafi soon after decided to promote el-Senussi to chief of military intelligence.<sup>38</sup>

The changing dynamics of Western relations with Libya at the end of the 20th century reflected a wider recalibration of geopolitics following the end of the Cold War. On the global stage, superpower competition had been waning, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union made many speculate about what was to come next. The forecasts ranged from overoptimistic scenarios of American liberal hegemony and a world free and prosperous, to doom scenarios of clashes of civilization and another Cold or Hot War, with China or with non-state Islamist forces. In addition to the end of the Cold War, the rise of the East

<sup>35</sup>Testimony of Geoff D. Porter, PhD at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “The al-Megrahi release: one year later”, 29 September 2010. <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Geoff%20Porter%20Testimony%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>36</sup>Testimony of Geoff D. Porter, 29 September 2010.

<sup>37</sup>See Wikileaks, US Embassy Cable REF: TRIPOLI 662, “Conflicting messages on pending release of Abdel Basset Al-Megrahi”, 16 August 2009.

<sup>38</sup>See Wikileaks, US Embassy Cable REF: 04TRIPOLI131, “Chirac visit to Libya modestly successful, but not happy”, 16 December 2004.



as a new economic powerhouse and the relative stagnation in the West made governments rethink their foreign policies. Slow economic growth forced them to be more selective and more focused. Dealing with non-state actors that challenged dominant Western worldviews needed a whole new approach to diplomacy. In 1991, in a keynote address at the National Defense University, American secretary of state Colin Powell remarked: “Around the world, we see a proliferation of other nation-states seeking new ideologies, seeking new political systems, seeking new economic systems, and new alignments to deal with the 21st century.”<sup>39</sup> International business started competing in new and emerging markets in the East, but also in places such as Libya, whose economic potential was overshadowed by political concerns. Confronted with the gradual changes in geopolitical and geo-economic outlook, Western states reviewed their policies towards Libya. Rehabilitated Libya, sitting on a mountain of oil-related cash and starved of foreign investment, attracted many of those in search of new economic opportunities. With the lifting of sanctions on Libya, European giants were hopeful to re-establish themselves as market leaders and to capitalize on a competitive advantage of longstanding contacts and goodwill for supporting the lifting of the sanctions. But instead of catering exclusively to Western businessmen, Libya started to become attractive to others, including Asian and Gulf states. All these outsiders, hoping to get ahead of the curve and to carve out a privileged position for their own companies, did their best to please Qaddafi and his closest companions.

The United Kingdom realized that it had to give new meaning to the Anglo-American relationship that had been the cornerstone of its postwar foreign policy. In the decades after the world wars and after the Suez-debacle, this strategic relationship had provided Britain with an efficient way to cover up its relative decline. Britain had emphasized the Commonwealth, reliance on loyal leaders in former colonies, and the export of sophisticated military equipment and technology. Both Conservative and Labour governments knew that without special access to Washington, Britain would quickly be reduced to a middling power whose seat at the UN Security Council could be called into question. Around 2010, hoping to tap into an additional source of leverage, British foreign policymakers started emphasizing London’s “historical links, its intuitive

<sup>39</sup> Patrick M. Cronin, *From globalism to regionalism: new perspectives on US foreign and defense policies*, Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1993, p. 4.

feel for the Third World and the regard in which it is still held by many Third World countries".<sup>40</sup>

In a similar fashion, France had struggled to give meaning and substance to its postcolonial relations with the Arab world and the African continent and to legitimize its seat at the UN Security Council. Historically, France had focused on carving out an autonomous sphere of influence in the western Maghreb and francophone Africa. It had also prioritized rallying the European Union into "Mediterranean projects" so as to have Paris punch above its weight. Almost as a direct reaction to the Eastern enlargement, France and other southern states had lobbied for a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In 1995, the Barcelona Process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership followed and then, in 2008, the Union for the Mediterranean—often regarded as a prestige project of French President Nicolas Sarkozy.<sup>41</sup> Paris was particularly interested in engaging Libya. However, to France's frustration, Qaddafi consistently rejected participation in any of the European projects. For Qaddafi, not adhering to EU programs left him the freedom to deal with European states on an individual basis and to use bilateral ties as a way of controlling and manipulating Europe's political elites. The French made their first official post-sanction visit to Qaddafi in mid-December 2004. In an official assessment by the US authorities, Jacques Chirac's visit was documented as "not a happy experience" and the French delegation returned without any major deals.<sup>42</sup> According to a member of the UK Embassy, Chirac had failed to ingratiate himself with the Libyans.<sup>43</sup> Also, the day before the visit, Qaddafi had given an interview in the French daily *Le Figaro* in which he criticized French actions in Africa, especially in Ivory Coast. The relations changed for the better when Nicolas Sarkozy became president in 2007. He was eager to put France back on the map in Libya and to reap some of the benefits of Libya's rehabilitation.<sup>44</sup> Back in 2004, Qaddafi's visit to Brussels had

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Coker, "Britain and the new world order, the special relationship in the 1990s", *International Affairs* 68 (3), 1992, p. 415.

<sup>41</sup> Yahia H. Zoubir, "Libya and Europe: economic Realism at the rescue of the Qaddafi authoritarian regime", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17 (3), 2009, pp. 401–415.

<sup>42</sup> See US Embassy Cable 04TRIPOLI31, 16 December 2004.

<sup>43</sup> See US Embassy Cable 04TRIPOLI31, 16 December 2004.

<sup>44</sup> See for example B. Mikail, "France and the Arab Spring: an opportunistic quest for influence", *Fride* 5 October 2011.

set in motion negotiations for the release of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor accused of a 1998 HIV/AIDS scandal in Benghazi. In 2007, Sarkozy and his (then) wife Cécilia traveled to Libya to confirm and celebrate the release, which seemed to be concluded in exchange for a lucrative arms deal and cooperation on nuclear energy.<sup>45</sup> Sarkozy offered Qaddafi technological, political, and economic cooperation and proposed to develop a civilian nuclear program in Libya. However, Qaddafi left the proposal unanswered and showed reluctance to enhance commercial ties to the degree Sarkozy desired.

In Rome, Italian authorities had also started to plead for a more active foreign policy in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>46</sup> President Francesco Cossiga concluded that Italy, during the Cold War, had “compulsory constraints”: Italy’s “military policy was based on NATO”, its “economic policy was that of to the EEC”, its “ideology was that of the Church”.<sup>47</sup> In the aftermath of the Cold War, Italy believed its foreign policy could be more autonomous and closer aligned to what it perceived as its national interest. Already in the late 1980s, under minister of foreign affairs Gianni De Michelis, Italy had reinforced its policies towards the Mediterranean.<sup>48</sup> At the end of the 1990s, minister of foreign affairs Lamberto Dini argued that the EU could not be the optimal forum to pursue Italy’s interests in the Arab world. In line with so many others before him, he advocated greater autonomy in specific areas of the Middle East and North Africa—in Libya, Iran, and Algeria in particular.<sup>49</sup> Italy was eager to rebuild some of its historical relations. Rome saw in Libya a place where Italy was of greater importance than its historical European rivals Britain and France. The logic remained the same as a century earlier. As expressed by an Italian foreign policy analyst: “Historically speaking, Italy is the most Mediterranean country in Europe (...). At the same time (...) Italy is the most European

<sup>45</sup> “Tripoli annonce un contrat d’armement avec la France, l’Elysée dans l’embarras”, *Le Monde*, 3 August 2007. [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2007/08/02/tripoli-annonce-un-contrat-d-armement-avec-la-france-l-elysee-dans-l-embarras\\_941475\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2007/08/02/tripoli-annonce-un-contrat-d-armement-avec-la-france-l-elysee-dans-l-embarras_941475_3210.html)

<sup>46</sup> Marta Dassù, “The future of Europe: the view from Rome”, *International Affairs* 66 (2), 1990, p. 300.

<sup>47</sup> Dassù, “The future of Europe”, p. 300.

<sup>48</sup> See Stephen C. Calleya, *Navigating regional dynamics in the post-Cold War world: patterns of relations in the Mediterranean area*, Dartmouth Publishing Co, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> Lamberto Dini, “Fra Casa Bianca e Botteghe Oscure: fatti e retroscena di una stagione alla Farnesina”, intervista di Maurizio Molinari, Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2001.

country in the Mediterranean. These facts have led Italy to make the most of its geopolitical situation as part of an enlarged Mediterranean extending from the Black Sea and the Gulf in the east all the way to the Atlantic Ocean in the west.”<sup>50</sup> With the Cold War over and the sanctions on Libya lifted, Italy was eager to demarcate its sphere of influence in North Africa.

Despite the continuation of robust Italian–Libyan commercial relations after the war, the colonial period always remained a spoiler. Qaddafi seized every opportunity to use this historical period as a tool for negotiation and manipulation. For decades, none of the Italian political leaders wanted to apologize for the colonial past. Framing it as indirect colonial compensation, Andreotti agreed to the building of a hospital for handicapped people in eastern Libya (that never got realized).<sup>51</sup> In November 1988, Bettino Craxi, speaking as an individual, stated it was useless to hope for better ties with Libya as the Libyans still strongly felt there was a problem whereas the Italians simply and stubbornly ignored it.<sup>52</sup> But in 1999, prime minister Massimo D’Alema made a much broadcasted and carefully planned trip to Libya. The visit was announced as a turning point in Italian–Libyan relations as the trip initiated the resolution of the dispute over the colonial past. It also led to a promise from Qaddafi to help in the struggle against international terrorism. In the years that followed, Italian politicians made numerous trips to Libya to patch together a strong bilateral agreement that would once and for all take the sting out of the colonial past. In November 2004, Italian settlers that had been expelled in 1971 were allowed to return to Libya.<sup>53</sup> While its political rivals had done the groundwork, the Italian center-right politician Silvio Berlusconi eagerly positioned himself as the architect of this historical reconciliation with Libya. During a 2008 visit to Libya, he stepped into the spotlight as the first European leader to apologize for his country’s colonial past and the associated atrocities. Berlusconi took the credit for signing a friendship and cooperation pact with the Libyan regime, known as the Benghazi Treaty. The Treaty was presented as the initiation of a special, privileged relationship. It also aimed at safeguarding and reinforcing the

<sup>50</sup>Ludovico Incisa di Camerana, “The Mediterranean: Europe’s southern Wall”, *Limes*, “What Italy stands for”, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup>Giulio Andreotti, *Visti da vicino*, Milan: Bur, 2000.

<sup>52</sup>Varvelli, *Ascesa di Gheddafi*, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup>“Finalmente a Tripoli, casa nostra”, *Corriere della Sera*, 18 November 2004. [http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2004/novembre/18/Finalmente\\_Tripoli\\_casa\\_nostra\\_co\\_9\\_041118047.shtml](http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2004/novembre/18/Finalmente_Tripoli_casa_nostra_co_9_041118047.shtml)

longstanding mutually beneficial commercial relations Italy and Libya had enjoyed for the past decades. The agreed text included a formal closure of the colonial past and all its outstanding accusations and demands. The preamble of the Treaty carefully reminded the reader of the important Italian contribution to overcoming the period of the embargo against the Libyan Republic.<sup>54</sup> Leaders from across the political spectrum had positive views on what could be achieved through increased cooperation between Libya and Italy, together forming the ideal bridge between Africa and Europe. The Benghazi Treaty was ratified in June 2009 and was marked by the first official visit of Qaddafi to Italy. According to Libyan news channels, for the past 40 years Qaddafi would have rather visited Saturn than Italy.<sup>55</sup> Without any doubt, the visit highlighted Qaddafi's singularity. He disembarked from the plane in Rome with a picture pinned to his jacket of Omar al-Mukhtar, the resistance hero sentenced to public hanging by the Italians back in 1931. The Libyan leader had also found a direct family member of al-Mukhtar and brought him along on the trip. Qaddafi then set up his tent in the Roman public park of the Villa Doria Pamphili and invited a large group of women to listen to his worldviews. The visit coincided with the first screening in Italy of the previously banned movie on Omar al-Mukhtar, *The Lion of the Desert*. Emphasizing the "new" friendship, Italy actively participated in the 40th anniversary of the "Day of the Revolution", September 1, 2009, with the Italian air force flying over Tripoli, leaving plumes of smoke behind in the colors of the Italian flag.

Italian politicians and businessmen presented the Benghazi Treaty as a watershed, a historical normalization that overcame all past hostilities and opened the way for fruitful cooperation between two countries that, given their geographical closeness and economic complementarity, should be considered natural partners. The Benghazi Treaty also served Libyan interests as it provided the regime with further international recognition as well as material benefits, including deals promising improved infrastructure, increased investments, and bolstered trade ties. Billboards all over Tripoli praised the new alliance and the national museum dedicated an entire room to the signing of the Treaty. At the entrance of the

<sup>54</sup>See for example Natalino Ronzitti, "The Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya: New Prospects for Cooperation in the Mediterranean?", *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 1 (1) 2009, pp. 125–133.

<sup>55</sup>Maurizio Carbone and Valter Coralluzzo, "The politics of Italy's foreign policy in the Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Politics* 14 (3), pp. 429–435.

museum, visitors were greeted with large displays of both Berlusconi and D'Alema embracing Qaddafi. Italy promised Libya \$5 billion over the next 20 years as an ill-disguised alternative for colonial compensation. To create a win-win situation, the money was earmarked for Italian companies reconstructing Libyan infrastructure, with the proposals including a coastal highway reminiscent of the Italian-built *Via Balbia*. With the Treaty, Italy hoped to achieve its strategic goals, which extended beyond what Berlusconi had concisely summed up as “fewer illegal immigrants and more oil”.<sup>56</sup> Qaddafi offered a helping hand in issues ranging from the recapitalization of the Italian bank UniCredit to the readmission of illegal immigrants intercepted by Italian coast guards and subsequently placed in Libyan immigration camps. Agreements to reduce illegal immigration were implemented and, from an Italian perspective, successfully reduced the numbers. ENI managed to secure its oil-related contracts until 2042, and its gas-related contracts until 2047. Other Italian firms were promised a key role in the process of economic transformation in Libya. In August 2008, the Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company (LPTIC) embarked on an ambitious overhaul of the country's internet and phone networks, providing fiber lines at a total cost of €160 million. Italy's Sirti was awarded the contract to realize this objective for the west of Libya, the French company Alcatel-Lucent for the east of the country.<sup>57</sup> Italy's Finmeccanica signed a contract for the system of signals and telecommunications of a future trans-Maghreb coastal train line.

Italy's European allies viewed Rome's closeness to the Qaddafi regime with suspicion, or perhaps with jealousy. The cooperation with regard to illegal immigration put Rome at odds with the European Commission and others that tried to prevent the violation of human rights.<sup>58</sup> The European Court for Human Rights ruled that Italy, in its treatment of illegal migrants, violated articles of the European Convention on Human Rights. Other European powers also fiercely criticized the Italian air force's participation in the September 1 festivities. Especially London reacted negatively, as the Italian involvement came only days after Abdelbaset el-Megrahi received a bombastic welcome on his return to Libya. In September 2009,

<sup>56</sup> Claudia Gazzini, “Assessing Italy's Grande Gesto to Libya”, *Middle East Report*, 16 March 2009. [http://www.claudiagazzini.com/website/articoli/MERIP\\_reparations.pdf](http://www.claudiagazzini.com/website/articoli/MERIP_reparations.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> Russell Southwood, “Libya: LPTIC Heads for Full NGN Implementation With Pilot Local Access Projects”, *All Africa*, 26 August 2008. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200808280717.html>

<sup>58</sup> Annuario IAI-ISPI, “La politica estera dell'Italia”, p. 55.

the American ambassador to Italy, David Thorne, expressed his unease with the tight friendship between Italy and Libya.<sup>59</sup> The relations between Berlusconi and Qaddafi, who together certainly made for an extravagant couple, regularly attracted derision and criticism. In October 2010, the Italian popular magazine *Chi* dedicated five full pages to Qaddafi, who in the interview stated that Berlusconi was one of the strongest leaders in Europe. The two had no problems being seen in intimate embraces or kissing each other's hands.<sup>60</sup> The alleged *bunga bunga* connection was probably the most indecent link between the two circles of politics.

In the first decade of the 21st century, relations between Libya and the West focused on rehabilitation, reconciliation, and the building up of stronger, positive relations. Normalization after decades of political hostilities resulted from a mixture of undisclosed diplomacy, pressure from business interest groups, domestic problems in Libya, and the rise of violent extremism under the banner of Islam. With the UN sanctions of the 1990s lifted, Libya's economic fortunes started to change considerably and European and other governments tried elbowing their way to privileged positions in Qaddafi's oil bonanza. Britain and France most dramatically wanted to revamp their policies towards Qaddafi's Libya, while the US was more prudent in its approach. Italy was desperate to play a visible role in Qaddafi's rehabilitation, predominantly to preserve the substantial economic and political interests built up over the previous decades when relations between Libya and other Western powers were sour.

<sup>59</sup> *Corriere della Sera*, 16 September 2009, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Concetto Vecchio, "C'eravamo tanto amati" *La Repubblica*, 20 October 2011. <http://vecchio.blogautore.repubblica.it/2011/10/20/c'eravamo-tanto-amati/>

## Post-Qaddafi Libya: Wishful Transitional Thinking

To the regret of many Western politicians and businessmen, the West's unorthodox friendship with Qaddafi's regime did not last long. Just at the time when new large business projects were underway, policy towards Qaddafi's Libya changed drastically. Rather unexpectedly, popular protests in neighboring Tunis and Cairo chased out the longstanding dictatorial leaders and Western allies Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Muhammed Mubarak. In what became initially known as the Arab Spring, people also took to the street in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and elsewhere, asking for social dignity, political participation, good governance, and economic opportunities. The Arab Spring put Western leaders into a quandary. Citizens seemed to demand exactly what Europeans and Americans advocated: dignity, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, and did so through largely peaceful popular protests. However, despite its abundance of rhetorical statements regarding the upholding of the rule of law, democratization, and respect for human rights in its southern neighborhood, Europe had in fact long paid lip service to the now challenged authoritarian regimes of North Africa and the Middle East – and so had the United States. The West's point of reference was the Algerian experiment with democracy, which had shown in the 1990s that more freedom could lead to more chaos and gains for undemocratic political forces including Islamism. Ultimately, Europe preferred stability at its borders, whether enforced by brutal police states or not.



The Libyan case was slightly different from the Egyptian or Tunisian case. From the 1980s onwards, Islamist movements had gathered strength in eastern Libya, the birthplace of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Derna in particular had proven a fertile recruiting ground for al-Qaeda and was known as one of the more extremist Islamist cities in Libya. Jihadists from Derna, as well as from Benghazi, were a disproportionately large group among the foreign fighters in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Many different cities, tribes, and groups within Libya shared a hatred of Qaddafi's regime, which had oppressed all opposition with a heavy hand. In addition to the domestic opposition, a scattered group of exiled dissidents residing abroad got increasingly organized, including through the establishment of a National Conference for the Libyan Opposition. On February 17, 2011, the exiled and domestic opposition joined forces with the organization of a Libyan "Day of Rage". The objective was to ignite popular protests similar in scope to those witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. Perhaps to capture all possible forms of rage, the same day a commemoration protest was organized related to the 2006 publication of Mohammed-inspired cartoons by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Also, protests were called in memory of those killed in the Abu Salim prison massacre and against the arrest of a lawyer representing the families of the victims. Adding to the momentum, in the context of the Saif el-Qaddafi inspired rehabilitation project, 110 members of the LIFG were released from prison on February 16. A large number of them would play a leading role in the anti-Qaddafi struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas Tunis and Cairo had witnessed popular protest that remained largely peaceful, in Libya the marches turned violent almost immediately. Media attention highlighted the unrest that had been breeding for quite some time around Benghazi and Derna in the east, as well as in the western Amazigh-dominated areas of the Jebel Nafusa close to the Tunisian border. Pro- and anti-Qaddafi supporters clashed all around the country. In the eastern territories, those that wanted to see regime change clearly outnumbered supporters of the regime. In Tripolitania, Qaddafi's camp remained dominant and hardly any opposition was broadcasted. In different circumstances, Qaddafi would have been able to silently crush these

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A first look at the Sinjar Records", *West Point, CTC Harmony Project*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Wolfram Lacher, "Libya: a Jihadist growth market", in Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber (eds), *Jihadism in Africa*, SWP Berlin, June 2015, p. 33.

protests under the banner of combatting terrorism – perhaps with the aid of the West. But the new dynamic introduced through the developments in neighboring countries generated a very different outcome.

The rebellions in the Arab world took Western leaders by surprise and confusion abounded about what policy stance should be taken. The initial reactions revealed the different interests within Europe. Silvio Berlusconi, when confronted with the upheaval in Cyrenaica, reportedly uttered the words “I won’t disturb Qaddafi”.<sup>3</sup> Later on, he called Qaddafi a man of great wisdom. He also stated that the rebellion in Libya could by no means be a popular revolt as the “Libyans love their leader”.<sup>4</sup> The British reaction was rather different. In contrast to his predecessor Blair, the new British prime minister David Cameron started calling for the immediate removal of what he perceived as the most erratic factor in Libya: Mu’ammer el-Qaddafi himself. France, under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, was also eager to provide backing for the new revolutionaries of Libya. In Paris, it was believed that displaying a determined reaction to developments in Libya would divert attention away from the heavily criticized previous policy decision to back Tunisia’s Ben Ali for far too long and to gamble on his ability to silence the protests.

Dismissing the hesitations of Italy and others, a coalition of Western countries, decided to single the Libyan case out to show its engagement and support for what were perceived as forces of constructive democratization. As a result, the spring of 2011 witnessed a set of relatively coordinated actions at the international and local levels aimed at providing Libya with a new future. Each for their own reasons, London and Paris took the lead in gathering support for a UN mandated intervention based on the relatively new UN endorsed principle of the Responsibility to Protect (RtP).<sup>5</sup> To prevent an alleged genocide in Benghazi and environs, Cameron and Sarkozy rallied the other UN Security Council members to vote in favor of a no-fly zone over Libyan territory. The stated imminent threat was not based on any serious analysis, but in the chaotic context of the Arab Spring, decision makers were pressed for time, and with the 1995 Srebrenica-massacre in the back of their minds, allegations were taken for

<sup>3</sup> “Non disturbo Gheddafi”, *La Repubblica*, 19 February 2011, online edition: [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/02/19/news/libia\\_hrw-12640156/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/02/19/news/libia_hrw-12640156/)

<sup>4</sup> “Berlusconi: Libiers hielden van Kaddafi?”, *De Volkskrant*, 9 September 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Alex J. Bellamy, “Libya and the responsibility to protect: The exception and the norm”, *Ethics & International Affairs* 25 (3), 2011, pp. 263–269.

granted. On February 26, 2011, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1970 in which members expressed their rejection of “the gross and systematic violation of human rights in strife-torn Libya”. The international community demanded an end to the violence and referred the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC) while imposing an arms embargo on Libya. Qaddafi’s confidants and a number of government officials were subjected to a travel ban and saw their assets frozen.<sup>6</sup> UN Resolution 1970 was followed by UN Resolution 1973, with which the member states demanded an immediate end to Qaddafi’s attacks against unarmed civilians, labeling them as potential crimes against humanity. The member states imposed a no-fly zone and tightened sanctions. But the fact that Germany, together with Brazil, India, Russia, and China decided to abstain from voting, showed that this apparently common stance on Libya would not last.<sup>7</sup> Libya’s deputy permanent representative to the UN, Ibrahim Dabbashi, as one of the first defectors of Qaddafi’s regime, had been calling for the imposition of a no-fly zone to cut off the regime’s ability to airlift arms, ammunition, and fighters to the battlefields around Benghazi and other places in the east.

Thus, under the banner of protecting civilians and with a broad mandate from the UN, on March 23, 2011, NATO launched *Operation Unified Protector*. Because generating consensus within NATO had proven difficult, a coalition of the willing was established which included a number of countries from within NATO as well as from the Arab world. The Arab League and the GCC endorsed the intervention. In addition to the enforcement of a no-fly zone, the UN provided a mandate in which the coalition was allowed to use almost all means necessary, with the one exception being the actual presence of international forces on Libyan soil. For the first time since the 1956 Suez intervention, Britain and France led a substantial military campaign, but despite the fact that they had pushed for this course of action, their coalition soon depended heavily on material support from the US as well as financial support from countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The operation also suffered from mission creep. The initial objective of the campaign had been the pro-

<sup>6</sup> Security Council Resolution 1970 (2011), adopted on 26 January 2011, for full text, see <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/245/58/PDF/N1124558.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>7</sup> See for example Jessica Bucher (ed.), “Domestic politics, news media and humanitarian intervention: why France and Germany diverged over Libya”, *European Security* 22 (4), 2013, pp. 529–534.

tection of civilians, but this soon morphed into support for the rebels in their efforts to remove the Qaddafi regime. The coalition encouraged anti-Qaddafi forces to rise up all over Libya and provided air cover, weapons, and advanced communication tools. The opposition in Libya had been extremely scattered and localized militia sprung up everywhere in the country. They either received weapons from abroad or plundered any of the large numbers of weapon depots left unguarded as a result of the struggle.

The fast-paced developments in the international arena were matched with actions in the domestic political space in Libya. In February 2011, a group of influential Libyans came together in the city of Al Bayda, in a meeting chaired by another high-level defector, Libya's former minister of justice, Mustafa Abdul Jalil. In his role as minister, he had widely been regarded as someone that dared to criticize the conduct of the regime's security and justice apparatus, in particular the practices around unlawful detentions. As a follow up to this meeting, on February 27, 2011, a National Transitional Council (NTC) was established. Mahmoud Jibril, who had grown up abroad but had also served as head of the National Planning Council of Libya between 2007 and 2011, was appointed as chair of the executive board of the new council. Abdul Hafiz Ghoga, a human rights lawyer known for his advocacy in the Abu Salim prison murder cases, became the NTC's spokesperson.

The NTC included a large group of internationally appealing personalities and as such received substantial international backing from the very beginning, with the NTC inviting the international community to recognize it as the only legitimate representation of the Libyan people. While the West believed that many of the disclosed NTC members had promising credentials, statistics on any actual domestic support for the NTC did not exist and the backgrounds of many other members remained unknown. Despite this lack of data, France decided to take the risk and within two weeks recognized the NTC as the sole official Libyan representation – most likely in an early attempt to receive additional credits from the potential future Libyan leadership. The Qatari government followed suit and immediately followed up with the conclusion of a deal to market the oil that would fall in the hands of the NTC while it gradually increased its control over Libyan territory westwards. Britain recognized the NTC in a less straightforward way, showing its endorsement by sending a small diplomatic team to Benghazi and by formally inviting the NTC to open an office in London. In March 2011, in a conference hosted by the UK,

an International Contact Group on Libya was founded, bringing together those international governments and organizations involved in the political developments in Libya and in favor of bringing about regime change. By September 2011, the majority of states, as well as the UN, recognized the new Libyan leadership.

In early 2011, foreign governments backing the NTC only had a vague idea whom they were actually providing with weapons, intelligence, and other support. Some policymakers and pundits raised concerns about the fact that those fighting on the side of the opposition seemed to include Jihadist and other extremist elements, but the NTC leadership, aware of the fact that it could not survive without generous Western and Gulf support, reassured its sponsors about the rebels' peaceful intentions and struggle for democratization and stabilization. In reality, the rebels constituted an unorganized and rather undisciplined group of strange bedfellows, only marginally answering to NTC orders. Their unity was built around one purpose only: killing Qaddafi and bringing the downfall of his regime. This brought together former monarchists, liberals, federalists, Islamists, and Jihadists. The similarities between the many different groups sometimes seemed to stop at the use of resistance hero Omar al-Mukthar's picture and name on posters, blogs, and *Twitter* accounts, in addition to their shared hatred of Qaddafi. The Libyan opposition even included fighters the West had previously opposed and tried to imprison in cooperation with Qaddafi under the banner of combatting terrorism. The most illustrative case remains the one of Abdel Hakim Belhadj, the former LIFG fighter and later head of the Tripoli Military Council. Belhadj sued Britain, stating that during the six years in prison in Libya, British intelligence officers had conducted part of the interrogations he was subjected to. His lawyers claimed they were in possession of documents showing detailed evidence of interactions between Moussa Koussa and Sir Mark Allen, former director of counter terrorism at MI6, who was later hired by British Petroleum to help secure drilling rights in Libya.

As the West had chosen the NTC to lead post-Qaddafi Libya towards a new constitution and elections, it had an interest in shaping the council into a stable, reliable, and widely recognized body. Many foreign governments provided ample military and political support to the NTC and the flurry of local militias fighting against Qaddafi loyalists. As a result, in early autumn, the regime was ousted from Tripoli and Qaddafi went into hiding. For the West, this was a significant enough occasion to celebrate the political and diplomatic victory over Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi in a con-

ference, on September 1, 2011, jointly hosted by Sarkozy and Cameron. The particular date of the September 1 was symbolically chosen to fall on what, for the past 41 years, had been the regime's "Day of the Revolution", the annual celebration of the 1969 coup that overthrew the Sanussi monarchy. During that meeting, the Western hosts emphasized that the NTC and the Libyan militias would most likely have been crushed by the regime if they had not received the backing and support of the international community, including airpower, strategic communications, money, and arms.<sup>8</sup>

Those that had helped the NTC to bring about change now started preparing for the next phase of their involvement, in which they would reap the benefits of their investments. In front of the camera, the buzzwords were democracy, freedom, unity, and stability. In the more private corners of the conference, commercial and other opportunities were discussed, with participants lobbying for their national companies to take up leading roles in the reconstruction and development of the new Libya. Much of the NTC's lobbying in the immediate post-conflict period was geared towards the unfreezing of large amounts of Libyan assets abroad – estimated at around \$170 billion. Western (and other) countries willing to free up Qaddafi's state assets often did so by earmarking it in advance, for example for postwar restructuring projects and technical assistance. Reluctant to miss out on this phase, hours before the conference, Russia decided to recognize the NTC and join the discussions. Two weeks later, Cameron and Sarkozy traveled to Tripoli and Benghazi and received a heroes' welcome. They pledged additional support and aired the message that Britain and France would stand with the Libyans until they had captured their former Leader in order to bring him to justice. On October 20, 2011, Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi was discovered hiding in his birthplace Sirte and killed by an angry crowd. French airstrikes had assisted in the operation and the discovery of his hiding place. In an act only questionably in line with the stated spirit of dignity among the rebels and the future Libyan leaders, Qaddafi's mutilated body, together with that of his son Mutassim, was displayed for several days in a cooling cell, for all to view and disgrace. Three days after Qaddafi was killed, the NTC declared Libya liberated. Cameron, Sarkozy, and others rejoiced, while Berlusconi was reported to have reacted with a dry "sic transit gloria mundi. Now the war is over". Whilst Umberto Bossi, then still the leader of the influential

<sup>8</sup> "Libya and its allies: all too friendly", *The Economist*, 12 November 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/21538208>

Italian party of the Northern League, concluded: “Now we can start sending the Libyan illegal immigrants home”.<sup>9</sup>

The Western powers backing the Libyan rebellion assumed the new leaders to be more aligned with their own political beliefs and practices. The West expected the new Libya to become a Western-style liberal democracy, with respect for human rights, gender equality, and protective of minorities. International policymakers dreamt of a Libya maintaining friendly and rational relations with its neighbors and with the West. Libya was imagined to flourish like Dubai and, with its wonderful heritage and climate, to become a popular all-year tourist destination. After all, Libya was an extremely wealthy place with, on paper, a highly educated population. Mustafa Abdul Jalil, now chairman of the NTC, repeated to the supportive foreign governments that the new Libya would indeed establish strong relations with them on the basis of mutual benefits and mutual respect. In his vision, Libya would work hard to become an effective member of the international community, would uphold international law and human rights, would establish rule of law, and contribute effectively to international peace and security. The NTC would also “take care and appreciate the nations that support this revolution, which stood by the revolution since its birth until its end. These countries will have special relations and Libya will have good and friendly relations with everyone”.<sup>10</sup> In August 2011, the NTC issued an interim Constitutional Declaration, which was presented as a roadmap for the country’s transition to representative democracy and the rule of law in a unitary state. This interim constitutional text was to remain in effect until, when the dust had settled, a Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) would be established to draft the final text and subject it to a popular referendum. Different from what the Western backers had expected, but doing justice to the religious-conservative nature of the Libyan populace, the NTC agreed that the principle source of legislation should be the tenets of Islamic Law.

Within Europe, policy approaches towards the Libyan transition had differed.<sup>11</sup> Cameron had positioned himself as a defender of the highest

<sup>9</sup> “Berlusconi: ‘sic transit gloria mundo’”, *Corriere della sera*, 20 October 2011. [http://www.corriere.it/esteri/11\\_ottobre\\_20/reazioni-morte-gheddafi-berlusconi\\_99bc1748-fb17-11e0-b6b2-0c72eeeb0c77.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/esteri/11_ottobre_20/reazioni-morte-gheddafi-berlusconi_99bc1748-fb17-11e0-b6b2-0c72eeeb0c77.shtml)

<sup>10</sup> Transcript at *Al Jazeera Libya Live Blog*, 22 August 2011. <http://blogs.aljazeera.net/liveblog/libya-aug-22-2011-1542>

<sup>11</sup> See for example Jason W. Davidson, “France, Britain and the intervention in Libya: an integrated analysis”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26 (2), 2013, pp. 310–329 and Bucher, “Why France and Germany diverged over Libya”, pp. 529–534.

moral standards, as a promoter of human rights and civilian life. He condemned those allies that did not explicitly followed his lead, pushed for sanctions, and shamed EU allies such as Italy for illicitly helping Qaddafi import gas from Sardinia to Tripoli via Tunisia.<sup>12</sup> Deviating from the mandate provided by the UN Resolutions, Cameron argued that a no-fly zone was not a “simple solution” but that it had to be one of a series of steps needed to “make sure we get rid of this regime”.<sup>13</sup> British advisers physically helped rebels to set up a joint operations center in the eastern capital of Benghazi so as to enhance coordination with NATO air strikes and to provide Libyans with necessary basic military training. In early June 2011, William Hague traveled to Benghazi to show support for the rebels and Britain declared the Libyan ambassador in London, Omar Jelban, *persona non grata*. Cameron and William Hague, the British foreign minister, blamed the former Labour government of Tony Blair for immoral dealings with Qaddafi. Blair, their argument ran, had exchanged human rights and liberties for economic profits. A BBC correspondent aptly described this as “a swift rhetorical swipe to put Britain on the right side of history”.<sup>14</sup> The change of policy direction could hardly be considered genuine given that before the popular protests in Libya gathered pace, Cameron and Hague had eagerly continued Blair’s policy of engagement and had concluded lucrative commercial deals with Qaddafi’s Libya. Perhaps most embarrassing were the revelations that only weeks before the uprisings the UK ambassador in Tripoli had negotiated with the Libyan army the sales of arms and military equipment, including tear gas and riot equipment that soon after was used for the crackdown of anti-Qaddafi protests.<sup>15</sup> Also, despite the harsh words against Qaddafi and his regime, Britain allowed Qaddafi’s former spy chief, Moussa Koussa, to defect and find safe passage through London. After the official inauguration of the NTC, Cameron

<sup>12</sup> “UK’s Cameron calls for tighter sanctions on Libya”, *Oil and Gas Journal*, 5 March 2011. <http://www.ogj.com/articles/2011/05/uk-s-cameron-calls.html>

<sup>13</sup> “Libya revolt: Cameron urges UN to ‘show leadership’”, *BBC News*, 16 March 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12755896>

<sup>14</sup> Bridget Kendall, “Libya’s challenge for UK government”, *BBC*, 7 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12669676>

<sup>15</sup> Colin Freeman and Patrick Sawyer, “UK promoted sale of sniper rifles to Qaddafi only weeks before uprising began”, *The Telegraph*, 10 September 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/industry/defence/8754379/UK-selling-snipers-to-Qaddafi-just-weeks-before-uprising-began.html>



effectively provided a sales platform for companies such as BAE Systems, Rolls Royce, and Thales. Cameron advocated and promoted human rights and democracy, but also wanted to ensure the UK remained a major arms supplier to oil-rich Libya. The UK Department of Trade and Investment estimated that, to rebuild Libya in the decade following the fall of Qaddafi, the Libyan government was to launch tenders totaling around \$300 billion. British defence secretary Philip Hammond said in October 2011 that he “would expect British companies, even British sales directors, [to be] packing their suitcases and looking to get out to Libya and take part in the reconstruction of that country as soon as they can”.<sup>16</sup> A cynical reader could conclude that British bombs tore Libya apart and British companies hoped to get paid to put it all back together. Others in British politics believed this to be the natural cause of action. Daniel Kawczynski, a backbencher of the Conservative Party and chair of the parliamentary group on Libya, for example, raised questions about the \$500 million Britain had invested in toppling Qaddafi: “Should the burden fall on those who could be counted on? Or should, in time, Libya repay those who fought with her, and for her?” He added: “In these difficult economic times, it should not be too much to ask a country with Libya’s wealth and resources to pay their share of the gold”.<sup>17</sup>

France shared many of Britain’s reasons for why it wanted to take the lead in bringing about regime change in Libya and why it actively helped in the planning of the Libyan revolt. While unwilling or unable to provide significant support to the opposition in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, or Bahrain in the initial stages of the uprisings throughout the Arab world, Britain and France were the first to call for action in Libya. Western governments believed they could rectify previous allegations of incompetence or unwillingness to support those calling for good governance, while at the same time currying favor with the future leaders of an extremely wealthy state. Paris wanted to remain important globally, as well as regionally in the Mediterranean and in Africa. Like a hundred years before, France’s geopolitical focus was predominantly on Libya’s neighbors and its borderlands. France also had an interest in building up its business interests in the oil-rich territory and was eager to, in the process, erode the privileged commercial position of Italy. While cooperating closely with Britain in

<sup>16</sup> “British firms urged to ‘pack suitcases’ in rush for Libya business”, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/21/british-firms-libya-business>

<sup>17</sup> “Rush for Libya business”, *The Guardian*.

mobilizing support for the UN Resolutions and the NATO campaign, France surprised even Britain with its hasty recognition of the NTC. Seven days after the passing of Resolution 1973, France concluded a deal with the NTC stipulating that, together with Qatar, France was to be guaranteed 35 percent of the oil contracts “in exchange for its total and permanent support of the Council”.<sup>18</sup> French foreign minister Alain Juppé added that it was only “fair and logical” for French companies to benefit and that the NTC had told him that indeed, concerning the reconstruction of Libya it would favor those who helped it from the very beginning.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout history, Italy had been particularly suspicious of French and British attempts to encroach upon its own well-established position in Libya. During the rebellion, Saif el-Islam, resonating his father’s manipulative tactics, outraged Italian leaders by stating that Italy would pay the price for its betrayal, as the war had now made France into Libya’s preferred partner for transition and mediation.<sup>20</sup> Rome had been reluctant to back regime change in Libya not only because it did not want to see its own position wane, but also because it feared its European allies underestimated the scope and the potential consequences of the intervention in Libya and were unlikely to provide the necessary technical and other assistance in the postwar period. In 2015, Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi looked back at the course of events and concluded that France and Qatar played a leading role in overthrowing Gaddafi, but left behind a humanitarian crisis for Italy.<sup>21</sup> Back in 2011, as long as victory over Qaddafi was not entirely secured, Italy’s strategy was to play goldilocks. Keeping the possibility open that Qaddafi could cling to power in Tripoli, Italy’s foreign minister, Franco Frattini, pleaded for a ceasefire

<sup>18</sup> “Pétrole: l’accord secret entre le CNT et la France”, *Liberation*, 1 September 2011. <http://www.liberation.fr/monde/01012357324-petrole-l-accord-secret-entre-le-cnt-et-la-france>

<sup>19</sup> Julian Borger and Terry Macalister, “The race is on for Libya’s oil, with Britain and France both staking a claim”, *The Guardian*, 1 September 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/01/libya-oil>

<sup>20</sup> Vincenzo Nigro, “Saif Gheddafi:”Schiacceremo i ribelli e l’Italia pagherà il suo tradimento”, *La Repubblica*, 12 March 2011. [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/03/12/news/saif\\_gheddafi\\_schiacceremo\\_i\\_ribelli\\_e\\_l\\_italia\\_pagher\\_il\\_suo\\_tradimento-13499834/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/03/12/news/saif_gheddafi_schiacceremo_i_ribelli_e_l_italia_pagher_il_suo_tradimento-13499834/)

<sup>21</sup> Steven Mufson, “Facing questions on migrants, Italy’s Renzi points to Libyan turmoil”, *The Washington Post*, 22 April 2015

and a political settlement.<sup>22</sup> But despite the clear reservations with regard to supporting the armed anti-Qaddafi opposition and a military operation so close to its own borders, Italy eventually joined NATO's efforts during *Operation Unified Protector*. Italian bases were used to carry out a large number of airstrikes against Libya's military infrastructure and against personal assets of the Qaddafi regime. On March 1, 2011, Frattini explained Italy's role: "Italy has the key role, because it is the closest geographically to Libya, because of the deeply-rooted presence there of many small and mid-sized firms that have now left but hope to return to a completely different political context, and as soon as possible. Italy is the only country that has evacuated hundreds of foreign nationals on our ships and planes. Our role is to accompany Libya on its new path, a path that the Libyans will choose though, not a return to a colonialism that the Libyans would never accept".<sup>23</sup> When Italy finally decided to turn against Qaddafi and claim a lead role, Berlusconi stated that he was sure Qaddafi now wanted him dead and, so he said, Qaddafi himself had threatened to kill him.<sup>24</sup>

With the outburst of hostilities, the ambitious Benghazi Treaty signed between Berlusconi and Qaddafi in 2008 was suspended. However, signaling that the Libyan-Italian bond was not so much a personal matter but rather an essential foreign policy objective, in December 2011, NTC leader Jalil visited Rome and together with Italy's new prime minister Mario Monti decided on a reactivation of the special relationship.<sup>25</sup> The result, in early 2012, was the Tripoli Declaration in which both leaders expressed the wish to continue their partnership. As a token of reconciliation, Monti handed the Libyan interim authorities a 2,000-year-old statue, a sculpted head of a daughter of Roman Emperor Vespasian. Back in the 1960s, it had been stolen from the splendid Roman ruins at Sabratha in the western, coastal part of Libya. The gesture resembled one by Berlusconi three years prior, when he returned the Venus of Cyrene

<sup>22</sup> "Retromarcia Frattini: "Tregua è solo ipotesi", *La Repubblica*, 22 June 2011. [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/06/22/news/libia\\_22\\_giugno-18049471/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/06/22/news/libia_22_giugno-18049471/)

<sup>23</sup> Mauro Manzin, "Frattini: "Italy ready to help the new Libya", *Il Piccolo*, 1 March 2011. [http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Sala\\_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Interviste/2011/03/20110301\\_FrattiniLibia.htm](http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Interviste/2011/03/20110301_FrattiniLibia.htm)

<sup>24</sup> "Berlusconi: Gheddafi mi vuole morto. Lo so che me l'ha giurata", *Corriere della Sera*, 11 July 2011. [http://www.corriere.it/politica/11\\_luglio\\_30/verderami\\_gheddafo\\_berlusconi\\_d9d7012a-ba72-11e0-9ed5-57850404ec1a.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/politica/11_luglio_30/verderami_gheddafo_berlusconi_d9d7012a-ba72-11e0-9ed5-57850404ec1a.shtml)

<sup>25</sup> "Monti riceve il Presidente del Consiglio nazionale libico", *Governo italiano*, 15 December 2011. <http://www.governo.it/Notizie/Palazzo%20Chigi/dettaglio.asp?d=65774>

to Libya, a statue unlawfully obtained from a Greek archeological site in eastern Libya. As had been the dynamic for the previous decades, Italy's oil company ENI played an important role in advocating the continuation of good relations between Italy and Libya. On November 10, 2011, ENI was able to restart production on its Elephant oil field in the Fezzan.<sup>26</sup> A month prior, ENI's Paolo Scaroni had been the first CEO of a major international company to visit Tripoli since the war began and already in August 2011 agreements were signed to restart the gas distribution through the Greenstream pipeline.<sup>27</sup>

Looking at the bigger picture, the removal of the Qaddafi regime was intended to upset the status quo in Libya's international relations. Those eagerly pushing for change in Libya did so not in the least to reshuffle the cards of privileged bilateral relationships and in order to conclude an additional set of high-value commercial contracts. Within Europe, France and Britain pressed hardest to (re-)shape positions to their own advantage. Italy, instead, preferred to keep the situation much like before and only at the point of no return joined the coalition to bring about change. The US watched the unfolding events in North Africa with caution and stepped up its efforts in Libya predominantly because it was not convinced its European allies would be able to stabilize Libya by themselves. Beyond the commercial incentives, Britain and France also pushed for military action to convince their peers in the UN Security Council that their seats remained justified as London and Paris remained capable of influencing global developments. In addition, there was a genuine feeling of necessity to live up to calls from the United States for more burden-sharing within NATO. France especially, since Sarkozy had brought his country back into the NATO military command, was eager to show how it could make a difference. European powers were eager to help the NTC and the allied militias advance, but their planning was for a great part focused on best-case scenarios. Once again, the desert lands of Libya were erroneously perceived as a relatively easy case for external powers to influence the course of action. The risk of spillover effects from Libya were judged to be minimal and civil war scenarios were dismissed on the basis that

<sup>26</sup> ENI archive, XXVIII, "Forty years ENI in Libya", ECOS 5, 1999, p. 39 and "Oil giant ENI restarts production in Libya", *Libya TV*, 13 November 2011. <http://english.libya.tv/2011/11/13/oil-giant-eni-restarts-production-in-libya/>

<sup>27</sup> "Italian imports of Libyan gas increase", *UPI*, 12 January 2012. [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Energy-Resources/2012/01/12/Italian-imports-of-Libyan-gas-increase/UPI-46731326377760/#ixzz1jN073moD](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2012/01/12/Italian-imports-of-Libyan-gas-increase/UPI-46731326377760/#ixzz1jN073moD)

Libya was perceived as a relatively homogeneous state, with no significant Sunni–Shi’a divide or any other societal cleavages that could be manipulated for political gains. Unfortunately, that general analysis was based on many misconceptions about what the rebels stood for and failed to take into account the distrust that permeated Libyan society and the large number of subtle societal cleavages and localized, historical conflicts that had lingered underneath Qaddafi’s dictatorial state. And while on paper Libya’s population was highly educated, most political concepts that are natural and basic to the West turned out to be alien to the Libyans. The international community believed that the new leadership could thrive on its own and that little assistance and post-conflict care was needed to make the Libyan case into a success story.<sup>28</sup> Toppling Qaddafi, it soon turned out, did not suffice to create a Dubai in the Mediterranean. From the start, the political transition was murky and marred by competing interests of individuals, tribes, and cities. Libya remained elusive and quickly drifted towards becoming a divided, failed state.

The NTC had a difficult time establishing itself in Libya and remained unable to take control of the security situation in the territories it was supposed to govern.<sup>29</sup> The implementation of plans for demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration failed. Most localized militias held on to their weapons, including heavy ones, and did not trust any new form of centralized state or army. They had lived their entire lives under a mistrusted national army and national security forces and believed that keeping control and decision making within a small circle of confidants was in their best interest. In a desperate move, many of the militia were put on the state payroll, a policy that still failed to draw the scattered armed groups under an effective, centralized and government-controlled command. Libya was also rapidly confronted with calls for more regional autonomy, especially in the eastern province. Ibrahim Jadhran, a young rebel commander, became the leader of the influential Petroleum Defense Guards and, from that position, launched a movement aimed at creating an independent “Barqa” (Cyrenaica). His forces, tasked with protecting vital infrastructure of the oil industry, remained outside any national army structure. Other militias used their prisoners as bargaining chips.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Candice Moore, “Four years after the fall of Gaddafi: the role of the international community in stabilising a fractured Libya”, *Conflict Trends* 1, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Christopher Chivvis et al., “Libya’s Post-Qaddafi Transition: The Nation-Building Challenge”, *RAND*, 29 October 2012.

For example, the local commanders in Zintan refused to hand over their trophy prisoner Saif el-Islam to the NTC for a trial under the auspices of the national judicial authorities and were even less inclined to bring him to justice at the ICC in The Hague. In a move complicating the security landscape even further, Khalifa Haftar, who had been fighting with the rebels in 2011, returned to command what was branded as the Libyan National Army. Seen by many as a former Qaddafi loyalist, a war criminal, or a renegade, his presence exacerbated the already strong distrust between the local militias. With so many different armed groups around the country and so little governance or nationally respected institutions, violence kept flaring up all over Libya. The steep increase in the supply of weapons added another dangerous dimension to the situation, as militias initially fighting for liberation partnered up with illegal trafficking networks in illicit arms, migrants, drugs, and other contraband, as well as with jihadi and terrorist organizations.<sup>30</sup> The desert hinterlands, porous borders, and the vast Mediterranean coastline provided a favorable environment for criminal and terrorist activities. With the civil strife ongoing and economic opportunities dwindling due to the fighting, such networks increasingly became attractive employers.

The NTC, after the declaration of liberation, governed for another 10 months, but the lack of support for the new national leadership was illustrated by the storming of its headquarters in Benghazi in mid-January 2012, followed by the resignation of personalities that had at some point been associated with the regime, such as Abdul Hafiz Ghoga. Nonetheless, together with the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), a special political mission set up to assist in the transition, the NTC prepared for elections and the handover of power to a democratically elected parliament and government.<sup>31</sup> A High National Election Commission (HNEC) was established to oversee the general elections that took place on July 7, 2012. As promised and planned, the NTC handed over power to the democratically elected General National Congress (GNC).

Unfortunately, two years later, a number of those elected to the GNC failed to give up their seats after losing the 2014 elections and used allied

<sup>30</sup>See for example Mark Shaw and Fiona Mangan, “Illicit trafficking and Libya’s transition”, *USIP*, 2014. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW96-Illicit-Trafficking-and-Libyas-Transition.pdf>

<sup>31</sup>See for example Alice Alunni, “Lo scontro politico tra nazionalisti e federalisti in Libia (1951–2011): l’unione fa la forza?”, *Afriche e Orientali* 1–2, 2013.

militia to make the work of the new House of Representatives and the new government close to impossible. The situation quickly deteriorated into a civil war, with Libya divided between two governments, two parliaments, and a large number of militia that only marginally reported to one of the two governments. In parallel, a Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) started work with 20 members from each historical region – Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and the Fezzan, but failed to make significant progress due to disagreements and the deteriorating security situation. Libya’s “historical midwife” was brought back to center stage as the UN once again became the organization charged with patching Libya back together, just as it had done after the end of the Second World War. Whatever national future for Libya will be carved out this time, it is once again clear that Libya continues to be a very local place and that any central authorities, whether in Tripoli, Benghazi, or Tobruq, will be moribund without the support of a great majority of local communities. The short history of Libya as a unified state has shown that only a strong national narrative, combined with an ingenious system of checks, balances, sticks, but especially carrots, can generate a situation in which local rivalries between cities or tribes can be set aside for the greater good (or evil). Showing deep suspicion towards the former regime as well as towards foreigners, the GNC and later the House of Representatives, were able to agree on few things. That anyone wanting to run for a top position in Libya could not be the holder of a foreign passport, was one of those few things.

The 2011 intervention in Libya neither brought the expected results for the citizens of Libya, nor for those foreign governments that had helped with the downfall of the Qaddafi regime. France and Britain did not receive the praise they had hoped for and struggled to lead and sustain the military campaign. The coherence of the coalition engaged in *Operation Unified Protector* was far from optimal, resources were hard to come by and internal cooperation and coordination was difficult as always. Italy and France fought a diplomatic battle over the respective roles in the NATO campaign and the Italian minister of foreign affairs threatened to establish a separate command.<sup>32</sup> In June 2011, secretary of defense Robert Gates emphasized that all European states would soon be mediocre powers. In a speech on the future of NATO, at the height of operations in

<sup>32</sup> “Senza Nato comando italiano separato: Scontro tra Italia e Francia sulla mission”, *La Repubblica*, 21 March 2011. [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/03/21/news/ombrello\\_nato-13908397/?ref=HREA-1](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/03/21/news/ombrello_nato-13908397/?ref=HREA-1)

Libya, Gates reflected: “While every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission. Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can’t. The military capabilities simply aren’t there”.<sup>33</sup> Libya’s political landscape also seemed to include many more forces hostile to the West than initially anticipated. Having former enemies such as Belhadj in positions of power certainly was not part of the UK’s initial plan. Nor did Britain expect that those calling for dignity in 2011 would proceed to desecrate graves at the British Military Cemetery in early March 2012. The West was also surprised by the resilience of the Qaddafi regime. Money from oil could buy a lot of support and Qaddafi was said to rely mainly on African immigrants turned mercenaries. Still, some of the support was real, with supporters fearing for a future worse than they had it under Qaddafi. In May 2012, angry mobs attacked the Embassies of Britain and Italy, a US consular department, and a UN office in Tripoli. In September 2012, a jihadist inspired militia looted the American Embassy and killed the ambassador. Western engagement in Libya also emphasized that Europe and the US were no longer the only game in town. When Libya exploded into violence, it witnessed an exodus of migrant workers from places such as China, India, Russia, and Brazil. And while the West hoped to shape the outcomes of the war, it found itself depending on a number of Gulf States that started to claim more prominent foreign policy profiles in the Arab region. They played into Libyan politics with their own set of ambitions. As was the case around 1911, by 2011, “Libya” was considered a country at a crossroads; a place of importance because of its location and its natural resources, but also a place that can be easily manipulated and one where emerging powers can throw around their weight and experiment with their foreign policy objectives without too many repercussions. Libya, as a unified state, remains a place that belongs neither here nor there.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Gates, “The security and defense agenda (Future of NATO)”, speech delivered on 10 June 2011. <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>



## ABBREVIATIONS OF ARCHIVES

ASMAE	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
ASMAI	Ministry of Italian Africa
DEFE	U.K. Ministry of Defense
ENI	Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, Italian Energy Company
FRUS	Foreign relations of the United States
FO	U.K. Foreign Office
FCO	U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office
TNA	The National Archives
UNICREDIT	Italian bank, successor of Banco di Roma
WO	U.K. War Office

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