

UC Berkeley

Lamma: A Journal of Libyan Studies

Title

A Pool of Water: Perspectives on the Libyan Revolution

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5px7d30d>

Journal

Lamma: A Journal of Libyan Studies, 1(0)

Author

Anderson, Lisa

Publication Date

2020

Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

A Pool of Water: Perspectives on the Libyan Revolution

Books reviewed (in chronological order):

Hisham Matar, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*, New York, Random House, 2016

Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, eds., *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015

Christopher Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014

Ethan Chorin, *Exit the Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution*, New York: Public Affairs, 2012

Maximilian Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa*, Montreal: Baraka Books, 2012

Lindsey Hilsum, *Sandstorm: Libya in the Time of Revolution*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2012

Alison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012

THE UPRISING THAT BROUGHT DOWN THE REGIME of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya in 2011 was a conflagration that touched every Libyan, both within the country and beyond, and transfixed observers throughout the world. As upheavals convulsed neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, the drama, daring and difficulty of the rebellion in Libya provoked the Arab League and the United Nations to acquiesce in a NATO-led military intervention; it briefly seemed that the whole

world cared about the future of Libya. The capture and execution of Qaddafi at the end of October 2011, after ten months of brutal battle, was both a remarkable victory and, as it turned out, an enormous challenge. The rebuilding of Libya was not a task the rest of the world cared to take on nor a project for which Libyans themselves were well-prepared.

Like a pool of water, Libya seems to reflect the images of those who peer into it as often as it reveals its own depths. This review of books published in the aftermath of the uprising illustrates the puzzling complexity of this small country.¹ The debates about the country's role in the world, the character of its leaders, the meaning of its history and the prospects for its future are all on display. All these books were published in English within five years of the revolution;² all but one of them are by Europeans or Americans—journalists, government officials, and academics—the exception is a memoir by a British-Libyan novelist, Hisham Matar. As he remarks:

All the books on the modern history of the country could fit neatly on a couple of shelves...A Libyan hoping to glimpse something of that past must, like an intruder at a private party, enter such books in the full knowledge that most of them were not written by or for [them], and, therefore, at heart, they are accounts concerning the lives of others, their adventures and misadventures in Libya, as though one's country is but an opportunity for foreigners

¹ As is always the case in works on Libya, the authors of these works follow widely differing conventions in transliterating names of people and places. Although it has meant some inconsistency in this essay, I have reproduced each authors' usage without comment or correction, confident that readers will be able to determine who and what is being discussed. The numbers that follow direct quotations refer the reader to the pages of the relevant volume.

² Frederic Wehrey's *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018) was published seven years after the demise of the Qaddafi regime and therefore falls outside the scope of this review. It bears mentioning, however, for it may illustrate the value of a little historical perspective; it is easily the best single volume available on Libyan politics today, exhibiting not only extensive knowledge but unusual sympathy with the many Libyans who struggle to secure peace and prosperity at home.

to exorcize their demons and live out their ambitions.³

The books examined here bear out Matar's observation: they are as often about the hopes and dreams of foreigners as they are about Libya itself, reflecting all too well the country's struggle to define its place in the world and to write its own history.

103

International influences: Libya in the world

A useful starting point in examining how the literature about the Libyan uprising portrays the country is to look at the geopolitical context. After all, Libya had been a "pariah state" for decades when the rebellion broke out, only relatively recently rehabilitated, and still a mystery to many outside the country. As Chorin tells us in his gossipy, well-informed and often affectionate account, he volunteered to serve as the commercial/economic officer at the newly opened US Liaison Office in Tripoli in 2004-6 because "there were few places in the region...that could be said to be so exotic."⁴

Two of these books see Libya almost entirely as a puzzle piece, or perhaps better, as one of the billiard balls of classic realist international relations theory. The fact that the authors know little about the country is no impediment to their arguments since they are concerned with the geopolitics of international support for the revolt.

Christopher Chivvis, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation who was, as he puts it "working in the Pentagon at the time," provides a clear, dispassionate, technocratic account of the decision-making that led to the NATO intervention. He argues that

the need to design cost-effective solutions to crises such as the one that occurred in Libya in March 2011 will be with us for many years. The study of what was and was not accomplished in Libya gives insight into both the limits and the potential for liberal intervention—the use of force to protect the basic liberal values of human

³ Hisham Matar, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*, 131–32.

⁴ Chorin, *Exit The Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution*, 3.

rights, the rule of law, and constitutional government.⁵

104

Chivvis seems oblivious to the fact that virtually none of those “liberal values” existed in Libya to be protected, either before or after the NATO intervention, and he spends relatively little time on Libya as such—the controversies he recounts are all in Washington. He does acknowledge that “the intervention will certainly look different if Libya collapses back into a lengthy civil war [or] another dictator emerges from the fray”⁶ but this simply begs the question of whether those who planned and executed the intervention should have considered the domestic political scene more carefully.

In fact, Chivvis documents astonishing ignorance about Libya in Washington, describing what he calls “basic uncertainty” and outlining “a number of conceivable outcomes” that any informed Libya watcher would have deemed outlandish: “If the country ended up divided between a liberated east and Qaddafi ruled west postconflict planning would only be necessary in the east. If there was a negotiated settlement in which Qaddafi stepped down but the regime stayed in power, it was unclear how reconstruction would proceed.” And even when more plausible scenarios were considered, the uppermost concern seems not to have been their desirability but the budget: “There was also...growing concern that Qaddafi might conduct a scorched earth campaign that could make postwar resource requirements skyrocket.”⁷

Chivvis acknowledges mission creep: the ostensible rationale of the NATO intervention—the new United Nations doctrine known as “Responsibility to Protect”—quickly became regime change. But he says, “there is no evidence for claims that the United States and its allies duped other members of the Security Council into voting for a limited intervention when they fully intended to topple Qaddafi from the outset...”⁸ Perhaps not, but US President Barack Obama declared that Qaddafi had “lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what it

⁵ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, xv.

⁶ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, 14.

⁷ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, 144–45.

⁸ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, 179.

right for the country by leaving now.”⁹ This sounds a lot like a call for regime change.

Chivvis’ declaration that the operation “has rightly been hailed as a success” also obscures the fact that its objectives were ambiguous and changeable. “In seven months of operations,” he says, “the intervening powers maintained an arms embargo, facilitated humanitarian relief, created and sustained a no-fly zone, and helped protect Libya’s civilian population from depredation at the hands of Qaddafi’s forces.”¹⁰ Yet that is not entirely true, however, since arms poured into the country throughout the fighting. As for “longer-term political objectives,” he tells us that it will be “many years” before we know if they were achieved. No doubt that is true, since no-one seems to know what they were.

Maxmilian Forte, a professor of anthropology at Concordia University, is sure he knows what the objectives of NATO intervention were and he rehearses his argument eloquently, if ultimately unpersuasively, in *Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO’s war on Libya and Africa*. Forte summarizes his position succinctly: the West is driven by neo-imperialism and “NATO’s campaign represents the continued militarization of Western and especially U.S. foreign policy and the rise of the new ‘military humanism.’”¹¹ This argument is plausible; after all, the notion that some governments have the “responsibility to protect” the citizens of another country against their own rulers has been a convenient rationale for imperialists for centuries. Recall that, when they invaded the Libyan territories in 1911, the Italians announced that they had come “not to subdue and enslave the populations of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and other countries of the interior, now under bondage to the Turks, but to restore them their rights, punish the despots, make them free and in control of themselves, and to protect them against those very despots...”¹² The ease with which the NATO

⁹ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, 117.

¹⁰ Cited in Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO’s War on Libya and Africa*, 174.

¹¹ Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, 9.

¹² Quoted in Eileen Ryan, *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya, 1911-1931* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

mission slid from “protection of civilians” to “regime change” gives ample reason for skepticism about such humanitarian intervention.

106

Forte begins to lose this reader, however, when he further argues that the purpose of this militarization was to “disrupt an emerging pattern of independence and a network of collaboration within Africa that would facilitate increased African self-reliance.”¹³ Certainly, there were many non-Libyans, in Africa and elsewhere, who appreciated Qaddafi’s willingness to flout Western norms and rules. Nelson Mandela, for example, was deeply appreciative of Libyan support for the ANC during apartheid, as were many other less well-known or, perhaps, less successful anti-imperialist and revolutionary movements, from the IRA to the PLO. Yet a criticism of the NATO intervention, even one that sees it as an integral part of a vast American neo-imperial strategy in Africa, need not be quite as uncritical and forgiving of the Qaddafi regime as Forte is.

Qaddafi deployed Libya’s vast oil wealth to buy friends and allies throughout Africa quite instrumentally and cynically. This was not about “African self-reliance”—Nelson Mandela’s longstanding loyalty to Qaddafi notwithstanding—so much as sowing disorder across the continent. As the British journalist Lindsey Hilsum recounts in *Sandstorm*, her fast-paced and even-handed account of the uprising, students came from all over the world to Qaddafi’s World Center for Resistance against Imperialism, Zionism, Racism, Reaction and Fascism. “But the list of African alumni is striking for the chaos they brought to their home countries: Charles Taylor, who turned Liberia into a killing ground...Foday Sankoh, whose forces in Sierra Leone were notorious for chopping off people’s arms and legs; Laurent Kabila, who ousted Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire and presided over an equally brutal regime...”¹⁴

Forte focuses his defense of Qaddafi’s regime in a clever and provocative focus on Sirte, both as Qaddafi’s favored city within Libya and as his choice for the capital of the “United States of Africa” he hoped to build. Few observers would give Sirte the prominence in Libyan, much less African, history as Forte does, and it provides a

¹³ Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, 137.

¹⁴ Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, 154.

useful lens through which to examine the support for the Qaddafi regime. But in portraying Libya under Qaddafi as “prosperous, independent and defiant,”¹⁵ Forte understates the damage the regime wrought both within Libya and beyond its borders. Moreover, in using Libya as a case study of Western neo-imperialism in Africa, he misses the role of other international actors. The history of the involvement of Turkey and Qatar, Egypt and the UAE, for example, whose support of rival factions among the revolutionaries remained a serious hindrance to reconciliation many years after the Qaddafi regime had collapsed, is yet to be written but should not be forgotten.

If the nature of international support for the Libya uprising is still contested, the same is even more true of the domestic scene within Libya. Indeed, the several “current history” accounts of the Libyan revolution under review here provide striking illustration of the use of history itself as both a weapon and a shield, and most of the foreign analysts seem to be unaware of (or perhaps unconcerned by) the political biases embedded in the interpretations of Libyan history they recite.

The Recent Past: Divisions within the Old Regime

Let us start with what should be a simple question; how did the uprising start? Obviously, we know that in a context of upheaval in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, the arrest of human rights lawyer Fathi Terbil sparked a demonstration in Benghazi on 15 February by around 200 relatives of prisoners killed by Libyan security forces in a well-documented massacre in Abu Salim Prison in 1996. A ‘Day of Rage’ followed on February 17, during which there were protests across the country. On February 20, Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, “the reformist son, negotiator, compromiser and his father’s foil” gave an incendiary speech in which he “had gone, apparently overnight, from being the compensator for his father’s lunacy to a replica of it.”¹⁶ Soon thereafter the Minister of Justice resigned from the government, to be followed by the Interior Minister, the chief prosecutor, and numerous

¹⁵ Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, 10.

¹⁶ Chorin, *Exit the Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution*, 197.

ambassadors. By February 27, the formation of a National Transition Council was announced in Benghazi to act as the “political face of the revolution.” The uprising was underway.

108

As Chorin reminds us, many, if not most, of the prominent figures in the early days of the uprising had worked within the system, as lawyers, judges, diplomats; they were members of what might be called the reform wing of the Qaddafi regime. He thus dates the beginning of the end of the Qaddafi regime to the failure of both the regime and the US to take advantage of the 2003 deal that ended decades of Libyan isolation. It could have “afforded an opportunity for both sides, Libya and the West, to make a break with the past, to refashion the relationship into something more mature and potentially sustainable.”¹⁷ He asks “a key question...whether the Libyan youth, the raw material of the revolution, could have sustained this uprising, without an added element, a cadre that could coordinate actions in the wake of the ‘Day of Rage’ and resulting street battles, while articulating the rudiments of a plan....” And his answer is unequivocal:

Qaddafi’s reformists, and the concentric circles of individuals who either found reformist dialogue profitable or believed it was possible, provided this critical ingredient. Ironically, then, many people who were “of the regime” and are currently criticized for the association, may have been a necessary transitional ingredient. Would the US have responded to the pleas for help from individuals about who they knew absolutely nothing?¹⁸

Whether he knows it or not, Chorin echoes a longstanding hypothesis in political science that the breakdown of an authoritarian regime begins with cracks in the regime itself. “Hard-liners” and “soft-liners” appear and the soft-liners make tacit or explicit alliances with members of the opposition—what Chorin describes in the Libyan context as “the Islamist opposition, commercial activists and dissident groups.”¹⁹ In peaceful transitions, the reassurance that members of the regime

¹⁷ Chorin, *Exit the Colonel*, 306.

¹⁸ Chorin, *Exit the Colonel*, 268.

¹⁹ Chorin, *Exit the Colonel*, 270.

itself will be afforded a role in a successor government or at least a safe exit is often part of an explicit political pact; in revolutionary transitions, history suggests that the “liberals” in both the regime and the opposition are more likely to be cast aside during a Jacobin Reign of Terror.²⁰

Hilsum is less sanguine than Chorin about the potential of the post-sanctions regime in Libya, arguing, “while Libya was emerging from isolation, the regime was becoming less of a dictatorship and more of a mafia.... Qaddafi’s cousins and in-laws has always been appointed to senior positions, but now it was the children’s turn.”²¹ In fact, they are probably both right: like Gamal Mubarak in Egypt, Saif al-Islam wanted to inherit a regime that reflected the imperatives of power in the twenty-first century and that required reform. The Libyan regime’s increasing reliance on kin went hand-in-hand with a simultaneous systematic outreach to regime skeptics and even opponents in the years between 2003 and 2010.

That Saif’s interest in reform was instrumental should probably have been no surprise but when Saif gave his uncompromising speech on February 20, 2011 the shock and disappointment was widespread. Chorin, Hilsum, and Alison Pargeter, a research analyst and consultant based in London, whose *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi* is an often casual and even flippant account of Libyan history and politics, all spend pages parsing Saif’s motives. They, like many of the Libyans who worked with him, wonder whether the Saif they saw in that speech was a sincere reformer whose father and brothers had intimidated him into abandoning his liberal convictions or an unprincipled prince who had professed liberal convictions merely to win international and elite support for his ambitions. Certainly the process of negotiation around resolution of the Lockerbie affair and the relinquishing of all capabilities to manufacture or deploy weapons of mass destruction (WMD), both of which Saif championed, suggest more expediency than sincerity, a willingness to do—and pay—anything to lift sanctions that were damaging the family patrimony. As Hisham Matar puts it in his

²⁰ The first is exemplified by the transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s; the second by the historic revolutions—France, Russia, China and, most recently, Iran—in which the radical ideologues eventually turned on their moderate, liberal or nationalists, allies.

²¹ Hilsum, *Sandstorm*, 168–69.

memoir of his search for his father, a prominent opposition figure who was imprisoned in Abu Salim Prison and probably perished in the 1996 massacre, “watching Seif’s speech was like watching someone tear off a mask.”²²

Pargeter seems to have it right when she says “Saif Al-Islam increasingly came to replicate his father...just as his father insisted that he had no formal position and was merely the leader of the revolution, so Saif Al-Islam kept repeating that he was simply leader of Libya’s civil society.”²³ He was, in other words, a modernized version of an arbitrary, capricious and self-absorbed ruler—and the fact that he was the best hope of the reformers did not change that. In many ways, the absence of serious, thorough-going and genuine commitment to political principles among those who, in Chorin’s words, “found reformist dialogue profitable or believed it was possible”²⁴ disabled those same reformers when they were released from their roles in the old regime.

Peter Bartu in Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn’s excellent edited volume, *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, describes the consequences of unprincipled leadership for the Transitional National Council:

A shared anxiety throughout the eclectic group of lawyers, academics, former Qadhafi ministers and ambassadors, youth, political prisoners, women, and regional representatives and Qadhafi oppositionists from the diaspora was to show that they had not seized or assumed power. They felt they could claim only to speak and act on behalf of the Libyan people on issues where there was broad consensus.... After forty-two years of Qadhafi, the Libyan opposition, obsessed about legitimate representation, trusted neither themselves nor the outside world...²⁵

²² Matar, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*, 203.

²³ Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*, 208.

²⁴ Chorin, *Exit the Colonel*, 268.

²⁵ Bartu, “The Corridor of Uncertainty: The National Transitional Council’s Battle for Legitimacy and Recognition,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its*

Opposition—and, let it be said, courage—brought these rebels together, but they were not temperamentally rebellious or even particularly assertive; they were modernizers, incrementalists and reformers, who had little experience of open debate about policies and procedures and no common vision of the future. After decades in the shadow of a corrupt and corrupting regime, political compromise too often seemed to mean moral compromise; political choices too often seemed to represent existential decisions. There were few ways to establish and maintain trust in this eclectic group and too many ways to evoke the past to justify special pleading. And in that at least, they were certainly representative: indeed, in many ways they were a microcosm of Libya as a whole.

Mistrust: the social fabric of Libya

All the books under review underscore the pathological distrust that characterized Libya in this period. The willingness of ordinary Libyan youth to take extraordinary risks to rid themselves of a cruel and capricious government clearly inspired the older generation that made up the NTC and its allies. But in the willingness of so many young people to put their trust in God and rush into battle was also a devastating testament: there was little else deemed trustworthy. Decades of dissembling, dishonesty and deceit had eroded even the most simple and ordinary civic virtues. Several authors recount the story of the Eshkal brothers as emblematic. Hilsum, for example, tells us that:

one of the rebel's key assets was General Mohammed Eshkal [also known as Barani Eshkal in some accounts]... whose brigade guarded Bab al Aziziyah and much of central Tripoli. In 1985, during a period of plotting and unrest within the inner circle, Qaddafi had ordered the execution of his brother, Colonel Hassan Eshkal. General Eshkal had quietly nursed his grievance for more than a quarter of a century. He had tried to join the rebels several months earlier but they told him to stay in place until the time came. This [the final siege of Tripoli in August

2011] was that time. Some say he ordered his men to lay down their arms, others that he just disappeared and left them leaderless.²⁶

112

In fact, much of the energy of the rebellion reflected decades of simmering resentment and bitterness; virtually no Libyan family was untouched by the arbitrary and compromising demands of the regime. As Dirk Vandewalle puts in the Cole and McQuinn volume, the Qaddafi regime:

had systematically destroyed not only the necessary institutions of a modern democratic polity, but also the supporting norms and arrangements—trust in the system, interpersonal trust, the willingness to provide guarantees to those who lose out in political contestations—that sustain democratic systems... The NTC and its backers encountered a low sense of political community and a *saue-qui-peut* attitude among Libya's citizens.²⁷

Ironically, among the few incubators of trust was prison. As Mary Fitzgerald tells us in her contribution to the Cole and McQuinn volume,

if anything united Libya's disparate Islamists, it was not so much ideology—beyond a shared and often vaguely formulated wish for government rooted in sharia law—as the bonds formed during incarceration in Abu Slim. Many imprisoned there speak of it as a formative experience, during which ideologies, strategies and tactics were debated.... “Ironically, you could say one year in Abu Slim was worth several on the outside in that we could talk with less fear,” recalled Abdullah Shamia, a senior Brotherhood figure who spent eight years in Abu Slim, and later held the economic portfolio in the National

²⁶ Hilsun, *Sandstorm*, 248. Also see Pargeter, *Libya*, 241.

²⁷ Vandewalle, “Libya's Uncertain Revolution,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 22.

Transitional Council.²⁸

113

Thus, the protests about Abu Salim were not only the spark that set off the uprising but also a tacit acknowledgement that prison itself was a virtually unique site of intellectual ferment and comradeship. Hisham Matar recounts a conversation with the author and editor Ahmed Faitori. In 1978, Faitori and other young writers had been invited to a regime-sponsored book festival; all the participants were then arrested, most to spend a decade in prison. Faitori reflected: "Qaddafi thought he was hurting me. Instead, he gave me dozens of writer friends. I now have a house in every village and town across the country."²⁹ Fitzgerald quotes another revolutionary leader: "There were former prisoners in every Libyan city, with relationships of great trust which created a strong secure network which grew quickly during the revolution because it was difficult to disrupt."³⁰

If prison was a refuge and an incubator of trust across kin and region, the very lack of prison time seems to have deprived everyone else of such attachments. Those incarcerated, if they were not killed, were left to their own devices for years and they developed deep and abiding intellectual and emotional ties. Those formally at liberty by contrast were subject to arbitrary and unpredictable but constant harassment, physically less painful perhaps but emotionally agonizing: temptation, surveillance, abuse, enticement, and humiliation. Matar recounts Saif al-Islam's perennially unfulfilled promises to provide information about Matar's father as a series of bizarre and excruciating episodes of hopes raised and dashed. It was almost as if the ordinary associations of being free and being incarcerated were turned inside out: perhaps a young dentist from Sirte quoted by Hilsum speaks for those outside of prison: "we each have Qaddafi inside us, Muammar killed us, and we think the solution is more killing".³¹

²⁸ Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place: Libya's Islamists During and After the Revolution," in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 179.

²⁹ Matar, *The Return*, 102.

³⁰ Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place," 180.

³¹ Hilsum, *Sandstorm*, 265.

Blame and Credit: Victory has a thousand fathers

114

This distrust and appetite for revenge had two particularly deleterious consequences for efforts to organize a polity and government after the collapse of the Qaddafi regime. As Marieke Wierda shows in her essay in the Cole and McQuinn volume, efforts to create an institutional framework for transitional justice were overwhelmed by the complexity of assigning blame:

Membership in Qadhafi's intricate security web was vast; for instance, Qadhafi's Revolutionary Committees, used to identify and persecute political opponents, number between 60,000 and 100,000. A related problem was that many Libyans who may not have participated directly in acts of oppression benefited financially from the former government. A large number, over half a million, were exiled to Tunisia, Egypt and other countries following the revolution. ... The question of who should be punished for which actions (or affiliations) was therefore highly contentious...³²

In this context, calls to exclude people associated with the Qaddafi regime—"political isolation"—soon trumped "transitional justice." Although the NTC had originally proposed to disqualify only those who, in the Chairman's formulation, had "blood on their hands," by the summer of 2012, the process had become, as Wierda puts it, "more about current political power struggles than addressing the past."³³ Yet by disqualifying all those with any association with the Qaddafi regime, the revolutionaries deprived themselves of virtually all experience of running an administration or managing a country.

The second and related negative consequence of the atmosphere of distrust was a remarkable rivalry over credit for the uprising and its success. Much of this competition was indirect, through symbols and stories of the past. In this, many of the foreign reporters and analysts are often credulous and presumably unwitting accomplices, taking

³² Wierda, "Confronting Qadhafi's Legacy: Transitional Justice in Libya," in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 158.

³³ Wierda, "Confronting Qadhafi's Legacy," 160.

stories of past heroism at face value. Hilsum, for example, tells us uncritically “the 2011 revolution was in part a fight over the legacy of Omar Mukhtar. It was also about reclaiming the heritage of the Sanussi.”³⁴ For some revolutionaries, this was certainly true; the early adoption of the flag of the pre-Qaddafi monarchy as the banner of the revolution by the Benghazi-based NTC was calculated to evoke both the history of resistance in the eastern province and its attachment to the Sanusi Order whose leader had been king. That the Order and the monarchy were far less widely admired in the rest of the country was well known to the revolutionary leaders, of course, but their inclination to inclusiveness was halfhearted. They believed, with some justification, that Benghazi had been particularly poorly treated by Qaddafi. As Pargeter puts it,

The brutality that the Colonel had employed against the east fostered an extreme resentment... [that] exploded so spectacularly in February 2011, when the east finally took its revenge.³⁵

Still, there were other protests, other narratives and other heroes. Pargeter herself observes:

It was not only in the rebellious east that Libyans were rising up. Al-Zawiya, in the west of the country, came out against the regime on 19 February...The next day clashes broke out in Misrata, where rebels took control of the centre of the city. ...There were uprisings on 18 and 19 February just meters from Qaddafi’s Bab Al-Aziziyah residence...³⁶

But the early struggles of the capital and western towns were rarely credited in the early days of the uprising. Sean Kane, in the Cole and

³⁴ Hilsum, *Sandstorm*, 19. Hilsum then gives us an error-riddled account of the history of the Sanusiyyah, which is particularly disappointing, given how detailed and accurate so much of the rest of the book is, but Idris did not flee to Egypt “during World War II.”

³⁵ Pargeter, *Libya*, 171.

³⁶ Pargeter, *Libya*, 223.

McQuinn volume, remarks on the “proprietary eastern feelings over the revolution and a perception that western towns were late to support it” and correctly suggests that “...maintaining a stable Libya will be difficult if its politically hyperactive eastern region does not buy into the new order.”³⁷ But to say, as he does, that “resistance to the Italian occupation, the shaping of the 1951 independence constitution, and most recently, with the 2011 revolution, all emanated from Benghazi”³⁸ merely exacerbates the regional rivalry. In fact, resistance to (as well as collaboration with) the Italians was widespread across the provinces while the 1951 constitution was engineered by Western powers through the new United Nations. The understandable pride of easterners in their role in modern Libyan history, and in the rebellion itself, need not sanction a wholesale rewriting of that history.

In fact, what Wolfram Lacher and Ahmed Labnouj observe about the Nafusa Mountains in the Cole and McQuinn volume is true of the entire country:

As over the past century, each mountain town is now writing its own history of the war. The accounts of each community’s contribution to the revolution differ sharply from one town to another, as do perceptions of each’s involvement with the regime during the war. Downplaying other communities’ role has become an integral part of the struggles over the history of the revolution. For Nafusa Mountains communities to overcome the problem of factionalism, they will have to negotiate a common history of the war.³⁹

All of Libya will have to negotiate a common history. Hilsun observes that “in Misrata, they were creating their own myth, in which no other Libyans featured” and she reports that “The sole exhibit to be stolen from the Tripoli Museum during the conflict was the possessions of Ramadan Al-Swehli, Misrata’s answer to Omar Mukhtar, who had fought against the Italians.”⁴⁰ McQuinn echoes this worrisome

³⁷ Kane, “Barqa Reborn? Eastern Regionalism and Libya’s Political Transition,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 214, 225.

³⁸ Kane, “Barqa Reborn?” 226.

³⁹ Lacher and Labnouj, “Factionalism Resurgent: The War in the Jabal Nafusa,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 284.

⁴⁰ Hilsun, *Sandstorm*, 279.

observation:

The 17 February Revolution defines modern Misratan identity—domestically as well as internationally. Misrata is now known as the besieged city that survived Qaddafi's onslaught and (perhaps more infamously) captured and killed him. To many Misratans...this was their "manifest destiny," a legacy of [Al-Swehli's] vision for a liberated Libya with Misrata as its nucleus. And it is the legacy of the insurgency against the Italians and their suffering that became an enduring cultural reference in Misrata and Libya more generally.⁴¹

117

But in fact, the story is more complicated. The resistance to the Italian invasion and occupation was widespread and sustained, and certainly not "wholly-owned" by any locality. So, too, the struggle to recover from the cruelty and negligence of their imperial experience and ultimately to win independence after World War II ended Italian control was hardly unique to a single province or individual. That the Qaddafi regime manipulated the telling of the country's history, appropriating Omar al-Mukhtar as a symbol of the Libyan resistance in part to deprive Cyrenaicans of a local hero, is clear, but it should not excuse further manipulation.

But the story is also complicated because local identities are increasingly mythical attachments. Like Americans who celebrate their "ethnic origins" in places neither they nor their parents have ever seen—the Italy and Ireland of family tradition is long gone—so too Libyans often commemorate attachments to places they hardly know. Hisham Matar's family is from Ajdabiya but he was born in New York and raised in Tripoli; he never lived in the eastern province. McQuinn reports that when asked why protests did not take place in Misrata in the early days of the uprising, he was told "in Misrata, the majority of the people were wealthy, they did not care whether Qadhafi stayed or went, but when [the killing of protestors in Benghazi] happened, everything changed. We all have family in Benghazi. By killing people there, Qadhafi made a mistake; he forced us to choose sides."⁴² In fact, as Kane points out, the eastern province, once the home of the most

⁴¹ McQuinn, "History's Warriors: The Emergence of Revolutionary Battalions in Misrata," in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 254.

⁴² McQuinn, "History's Warriors," 234.

tribal of politics, is no longer so homogenous:

118

Eastern Islamists...appeared most established in the parts of the east where the...tribes were not present, notably certain neighborhoods of Benghazi and, especially, the city of Dirna. Major parts of these populaces migrated from Misrata and other western Libyan cities during the mid-twentieth century and thus shared few genealogical ties with the... tribes. Religion—and political Islam specifically—may have therefore become an alternative form of social solidarity and political identity for these migrant families. ... During the revolution itself, these fissures did not fatally undermine the NTC or the civil society that supported it because of their common opposition towards Qadhafi.⁴³

Cole and McQuinn argue that the community “narratives are stronger, more distinct and self-contained than one single ‘Libyan’ narrative. Yet those narrative strands, read together, weave into a single thread that, while discordant, is uniquely ‘Libyan.’”⁴⁴ That may be true but it is hard to imagine how a tapestry will be woven of these threads if they are not ultimately acknowledged by the Libyans themselves as a shared and collective history. There is much to celebrate in being Libyan—people remarkable for their resilience in the face of adversity and steadfast in their dreams for future generations. Matar reminisces about “the strong years, when my parents had the confident manner of couples that, notwithstanding the usual apprehensions of parents, regard the future as a friendly country.”⁴⁵

To restore that confidence, Libyans will have to recall the traditions of heroism that were both selfless and generous. For that, we might give the last word to Hisham Matar’s father. When his wife and sons beg him to abandon his work in the opposition, Jaballa Matar admonishes them: “Don’t put yourself in competition with Libya. You will always lose.”⁴⁶ God willing; we can only hope that there are still those who are prepared to sacrifice so that Libya flourishes.

⁴³ Kane, “Barqa Reborn?” 212.

⁴⁴ Cole and McQuinn, “Introduction,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, 1.

⁴⁵ Matar, *The Return*, 57.

⁴⁶ Matar, *The Return*, 38.

What to read

The most academic of these volumes—and in fairness, among the most recent (contributors cite both the Chorin and Hilsum books)—is Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn’s edited book, *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*. For many readers not already familiar with Libya, the descriptions of the street battles in Misrata or the tribal and town alliances in the Jabal Nafusa may be difficult; they are dense and detailed. It is, however, a remarkable collection, uniformly well-informed, intelligent and thoughtful.

119

For readers more interested in a popular survey, Hilsum’s *Sandstorm* is a brisk, engrossing account by a distinguished British journalist who spent time travelling across Libya during the uprising. It includes detailed, eye-witness account of battles between revolutionaries and Qaddafi loyalists. It has only the briefest of “Notes on Sources”—presumably because much of the reporting is her own—but the history is a bit potted, and she could have provided more background references for the curious reader. Pargeter’s *Libya* includes such footnotes but its language is distractingly casual and flippant; Qaddafi is repeatedly described as “the ever-proud Bedouin,” as if that explains his pathologies, while other Libyan actors are disparaged equally by the too cavalier language: the NTC is described as “a credible bunch.”⁴⁷

Forte, Chivvis and Chorin are more concerned with American foreign policy than Libyan politics as such. Forte is more interested in Africa than Libya, more focused on imperialism than revolution. Chivvis appears never to have visited Libya and seems only tangentially interested in the country—he is concerned entirely with “inside the Beltway” Washington maneuvering, about which he seems to provide a credible story. Chorin is evidently quite devoted to the friends he made while serving in Libya and his is the more detailed treatment of US views of the country starting with the resumption of relations in 2003.

Matar’s astonishing memoir is written with the sensibility of the novelist he is; it is a beautiful, moving book, conveying in the circumscribed story of one family the history of an entire nation. Chivvis and his colleagues in the Pentagon, as well as everyone who is in a position to make a difference to Libya, should read this book before they do anything more.

⁴⁷ Pargeter, *Libya*, 239.

What to write

120 Is it fair to ask for more, after all this? Perhaps not but I would like to see two sets of perspectives better represented.

The first, which foreigners would be well positioned to provide, is about the pebbles that are constantly being thrown in this pool of water, creating ripples that make it difficult to see both the reflections on the surface and the depths below. Who are the international patrons of the warring factions and militias, what is their stake in these proxy wars, why is Libya such an inviting arena for fighting distant battles? For more than a century now, Libya has been a terrain in which Italians and Turks, Egyptians, British and French, Americans and Russians, and now Emiratis and Qataris, have fought—for what? Does the geostrategic value of the land or the country's petroleum really justify this interference?

And, speaking of outside influence, what of the technologies of war? How much of the fighting is fed by apparently limitless supplies of weapons, by digital technologies and media platforms that inflame hatred and deepen mistrust? Were Libyans forced to confront each other without such perverse incitements, would they see themselves together in this pool?

And what might they see? It may be a lot to ask of people who have already been deprived of so much of a decent life, but I wish Libyans would write about themselves. Who might be the Libyan Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King who will tell us what the upside-down world looked like from the freedom of a Libyan prison under Qaddafi? Who can write about life as teenagers in the Nafusa Mountains, the Misrata markets, Sabha and Ajadabiya and Baida? Who will write the love stories, the family histories, the accounts of everyday life—the gossip, the weather, the childhood adventures and old people's reminiscences? Once Libyans can record ordinary life, they may be able to reclaim it, and we will all be able to see past our reflections and beneath the surface of this pool of too troubled water.