



THE MAKING OF A PARIAH STATE

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The Adventurist Politics of Muammar Qaddafi

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sicker, Martin.

The making of a pariah state.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Libya—Foreign relations. 2. Qaddafi, Muammar.

3. Libya—Politics and government—1969—

I. Title.

DT236.S56 1987 961'.204 86-30543

ISBN 0-275-92667-2 (alk. paper)

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-30543

ISBN: 0-275-92667-2

First published in 1987

Praeger Publishers, 521 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10175

A division of Greenwood Press, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated to my wife Ahouva, without whose constant support and encouragement it could not have been written.

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1

Introduction

Throughout their long history, the peoples of Libya have demonstrated an irrepressible desire for independence and self-determination. This drive has proven to be both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. It was manifested as strength in unrelenting opposition to subjugation by others, and as weakness in a chronic inability to coalesce into the unified political force necessary to preserve the very independence valued so highly.

From the very dawn of recorded Libyan history to contemporary times, there has been an endless stream of peoples and nations who aspired to subdue the country in order to benefit from its important geographic position on the northern coast of Africa. It was this consideration that first brought enterprising traders to the area from Phoenicia on the Lebanese coast, as early as the twelfth century B.C. They established a trading colony at Carthage, in present-day Tunisia, from which they gradually extended their control eastward to the Sirtica Desert. About 800 B.C., they founded the “Land of the Three Cities”—Oea (modern Tripoli), Sabratha, and Labdah (later Leptis Magna)—the land of Tripolitania. The Phoenicians traded gold and precious stones, ebony and ivory, and animals and birds, all of which were to be found deep in the African hinterland, and were made accessible through the north-south caravan routes that ran from the northern coast to sub-Saharan Africa.

From their bases in Tripolitania, the Phoenicians were able to dominate much of the trade of the Mediterranean basin. Envious of the power that the Phoenicians derived from their commanding position on the African coast, in Carthage and Tripolitania, the Hellenes from the

Aegean region to the east established their own base of operations at Cyrene, at the eastern end of the Gulf of Sidra. By the time of the death of Alexander the Great, another four cities, Appollonia, Tolemaide, Tokra, and Hesperides formed a federation known as the Pentapoli Cyrenaica. From here they challenged the economic hegemony of Carthage. Tripolitania thus became an intrinsic part of the Punic world of Carthage, while Cyrenaica became a western outpost of the Hellenic world of Greece. From this early period, Libya was pulled in two directions, a fact that has directly affected the historical path of the country to this day.

The traditional westward orientation of Tripolitania and the eastward orientation of Cyrenaica is well captured in the legend of the Philaeni. According to this story, the Carthaginians of Tripolitania and the Hellenes of Cyrenaica decided to draw the boundary between their worlds by having runners depart at a given time from their respective centers and to set the border at a line drawn from the sea and intersecting the point where the runners met. When the Cyrenes, to their dismay, encountered the Carthaginian runners almost at the eastern end of the Sirt, they questioned whether the Carthaginians had not cheated. As a token of their good faith and honesty, the Carthaginian athletes, the brothers Philaeni, offered to be buried alive at the spot. Over their graves, the legendary Altars of the Philaeni were erected to mark the division of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania throughout all subsequent history.

With the destruction of the Carthaginian state in 146 B.C., both Carthage (Proconsular Africa) and Tripolitania became Roman provinces for more than four hundred years. The Romans, like the Phoenicians and Hellenes who had preceded them, were confined to the coastal region by the indigenous peoples they encountered as they attempted to expand southward into the interior. While Roman armies succeeded in penetrating deep into the Fezzan in southwestern Libya, they were unable to dominate the central interior of the country, where they were challenged by the local tribesmen. As Roman power began its decline, these fierce tribesmen, the Lebu, pushed the Romans back to the very outskirts of the coastal cities. It was these highly independent people, who in modern times came to be known as the Berbers, after whom the country was named Lubis, or Libya.

In 429, the Vandals crossed into North Africa from Spain and established a kingdom at Carthage that included Tripolitania. They, in turn, were conquered by the Byzantines in the sixth century. While the

latter nominally incorporated the territory into the Byzantine Empire, it was to little effect. Byzantine rule and authority were continually challenged by the Berber tribes, who were constantly in rebellion.

The following century brought significant and unparalleled change in the wake of the sweep of Arab armies westward across North Africa. The forces of the Caliph Omar, under the command of Amr ibn el-As, conducted a campaign of conquest that soon reached Tripoli (642) and the Fezzan. In 670 they invaded *Ifriqiya* and they took Carthage in 693. The Arab onslaught was resisted with great ferocity by the Berber tribes, who were subdued only after a good part of the country was laid waste. The Arabs succeeded where the Romans and Byzantines had failed. They mingled and intermarried with the Berbers and, over time, managed to get most of the tribespeople to adopt Arab culture and language and, above all, Islam.

Notwithstanding their acceptance of Islam, the indigenous Berbers continued to struggle for independence and freedom from their Arab overlords. At the beginning of the ninth century, a smouldering rebellion against his rule forced Caliph Haroun al-Rashid to appoint Ibrahim ibn al-Aghlabid governor in Kairouan in order to suppress it. The latter established a dynasty that ruled both *Ifriqiya* and Tripolitania as an autonomous state until 909, when it succumbed to the Fatimids. Soon after Libya came under the rule of the Fatimid governor, Bulukhin ibn Zairi, the Berbers rose in revolt once again, turning the country into a bloody battlefield for more than a generation. Once again, in the eleventh century, the Libyans precipitated a period of strife by rebelling against the rule of the Shiite Fatimids based in Cairo, switching their religious and political allegiance to the Sunni caliph of Baghdad. The Fatimid caliph turned loose against Libya the Beni Hilal and Beni Suleim tribes, who, in a bitter war, ravaged the country.

By 1160, the Almohad sultan Abdel Mumin swept eastward across North Africa from Morocco to defeat the Normans, who had earlier come across the sea from southern Italy, and ended Fatimid rule in Tripolitania. The country now became part of the Almohad Empire based in Cordova, Spain. In 1207, Tripolitania came under the rule of Mohamed ben abu Hafs who established the Hafsid dynasty, based in Tunis, that ruled the area for more than three hundred years. In 1510, Khair al-Din (Barbarossa) seized Algiers and, subsequently, under the nominal suzerainty of the Ottoman sultan, extended control over Tunisia and Tripolitania, which became separate regencies within the Ottoman Empire.

The well-established pattern of resistance to central authority by the now largely Arabized Berbers continued unabated throughout the long period of Turkish rule. Like their predecessors, the Turks were only able to maintain their authority in the narrow coastal belt. In the interior, guerrilla warfare was incessant. The repeated uprisings of the Libyan tribes went on throughout the century-long rule of the Karamanlis, a dynasty founded in 1711 by a *janissary* of Turkish descent who succeeded in bringing both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica under unified control for the first time in history.

Turkey's control over Libya came to an end in 1912. Under pressure from the European powers, it granted independence to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, both of which were promptly claimed, occupied, and formally annexed by Italy. With the Italian intrusions into the country, Libyan resistance reached a new level of fury under Sayyid Idris and his extremely able commander Omar al-Mukhtar, who waged a long and unrelenting war against the alien forces. Italy did not achieve undisputed control over the country until 1931 and Libya attained independence and sovereignty two decades later.

The unbroken heritage of readiness for self-sacrifice in the name of independence has become an intrinsic feature of the Libyan personality. However, as suggested at the outset, there is a negative side to this attribute, the difficulty of bringing the Libyan people to act in concert to achieve political unity and social and economic harmony, and it is that aspect that accounts for the peculiar political culture of contemporary Libya. It is also responsible in large measure for the seemingly inherent inability of those nationalistic Libyans opposed to the regime of Col. Muammar Qaddafi to join together in effective unified action to alter the present character of the Libyan state. The opposition is real and widespread, but it manifests itself primarily in a plethora of groups, each vying for recognition and preoccupied with each other, while a growing number of individual actors have paid the ultimate price for their personal attempts to terminate the present dictatorship through assassination.

Our concern here is not to lay bare the political and social weaknesses of the Libyan body politic, but rather to argue that what Libya needs so desperately is a bold new leadership that will have the foresight and courage to remold the country. Libya has a long record of rulers but virtually none of national leadership.

The issues facing Libya today are essentially those that confronted it at independence. The first era of modern Libya's independence, that

of the monarchy, represented a period of half-hearted efforts to create a semblance of a stable state. If allowed to continue over a long period of time, it might have evolved in a direction that led to viability. However, such was not to be the case. Even if the monarchy had not been toppled by the military coup led by Qaddafi in 1969, it would most surely have been overthrown by one of several other cabals planning takeovers of their own, for both in the original federal union and in the later unified state, it had failed to build the sense of national cohesion necessary to overcome the divisive tendencies within the country.

The Qaddafi regime attempted to impose national cohesion by force and intimidation, but has succeeded primarily in creating social and economic chaos while pursuing fantastic foreign policy goals abroad and socialistic tinkering with the mechanisms of central economic planning and total political control at home. In retrospect, it seems quite clear that had Qaddafi's accession to power not coincided with an extraordinary influx of oil-based wealth, his tenure would have been far briefer than it has been. One need only compare the endless series of plans, plots, and actual attempts to overthrow Qaddafi that have occurred over the past sixteen years with the relative internal stability that characterized the monarchy over its comparable life span to see that Qaddafi's rule has always been considered by many to be an aberration, a regime without legitimacy. As noted earlier, the repeated failures to bring an end to the Qaddafi era may be attributed in large measure to the chronic inability of those opposed to the regime to act in concert.

Relative to the size of the population of the country, the Libyans who have chosen exile in preference to life under dictatorship represent a potentially potent opposition force. In conjunction with the far greater number of opponents of the regime within the country, persons who for a wide variety of reasons have not chosen or have been unable to flee from the tyranny, the total number of those in opposition to Qaddafi is quite formidable. Yet, they have failed to coalesce into a coherent force for change, once again, a reflection of their unwillingness to practice the self-restraint and self-discipline critical to effective political and military organization and action.

The people of Libya, throughout their long history, have always paid a high price for excessive individuality. That price has usually taken the form of subjugation to alien rule. Today it takes the form of subjugation to an indigenous and increasingly totalitarian dictatorship. It is important to recognize that the Qaddafi regime, for a variety of