

## Testimony

# Fear and Revolution in Libya

### Elephant in the Room

Recently, I was chatting on Skype to a Libyan friend in Tripoli when halfway through the stilted conversation – inevitable when the raging violence and bloodshed threatening that friend's very existence is the elephant in the room – I panicked. What if the person on the screen

Like me, most people I grew up with were raised to not open their mouths in public, and some not even in private.

wasn't really who I thought he was? What if some security apparatus had hacked his account? Should I really be chatting to him? Not sure what to do, I kept the conversation mundane, avoiding mentioning names of common friends and navigated the conversation towards harmless topics. We even discussed the weather! Thankfully, I don't think he noticed and we signed off with his invitation to come and enjoy the glorious weather on the beach in Tripoli this summer, "inshallah" (so God will), wink, wink. A few days later, I was chatting to another friend who had emigrated from Libya several years ago in search of better opportunities, and I found myself in the same situation. Only this time, I was the one whose identity was suspect. In the middle of the conversation, my friend panicked about discussing what was going on in Libya with me, and half-jokingly asked me if I was really who I claimed to be. I half-jokingly reminded him of a favorite meal we had shared over a decade ago and he relaxed slightly. Those two incidents sum up the environment of fear

in life under Gaddafi's regime. In Libya, fear is pervasive and borders on the paranoia.

We never discussed politics or the regime when I was growing up in Libya or during the different periods of my life when I lived there. I did not even know if my friends supported the regime or were critical of it. So when I first read Hisham Matar's novel, *In the Country of Men*, a few years ago, I cried. It was the first time I had read or heard another person's account of events I had lived through. Suleiman, the protagonist in the novel, was roughly the same age as I was during the late 1970s and early 80s, and the events he witnessed were eerily familiar. I too had witnessed televised interrogations and executions. I too had relatives who disappeared – a second cousin working in Libya was jailed for three years for a passing remark he made among coworkers on the country's involvement in the war in Chad. And I too had been hushed by my parents in case I said something in public. And like me, most people I grew up with were raised to not open their mouths in public, and some not even in private. While the extreme paranoia of the 1980s gave way to more relaxed attitudes in the 1990s, criticism extended only to corruption and nepotism in the country, and then only among close circles of family and friends. Gone were the public hangings and assassinations of the 1970s and 1980s, but people were still picked up and jailed for even a whiff of dissent and many people lost their lives under torture. We continued to watch the news on television with the windows closed, if there was anything broadcast which was critical of Libya.



Nahla Daoud

Nahla Daoud is a Syrian expatriate who grew up in Libya and continues to consider the country home, having returned to live and work there at different periods of her life. She currently works as a research specialist, with emphasis on social development, and resides in Dubai.

### Timid Calls for Change

That profound, ingrained fear among the older generation, and to a lesser degree among the younger generation, continued to grip

While most of the Arab world was unaware of the events playing out across Tunisia, Libyans were following the uprising there very closely and contemplating their own actions.

Libyan society until the start of the uprising in neighboring Tunisia in late 2010. While most of the Arab world was unaware of the events playing out across Tunisia, Libyans were following the uprising there very closely and contemplating their own actions. Emboldened by the protests across the border, and plagued by the same rampant unemployment, soaring living costs and endemic corruption, Libyan activists began to set up groups on Facebook calling for reform in Libya and an end to corruption. Naturally, most of the activists operated under aliases and not their real names.

The overthrow of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and the start of the Egyptian revolution on January 25 served to heighten the calls for reform in Libya and in early February, Libyan activists set a date for their uprising – still under the umbrella of reform – for the 17th of February. In an unprecedented and surprise move, Gaddafi reportedly met with a number of the activists on February 8 in Tripoli to reassure them that their demands would be met and to convince them to close down their pages on social media platforms, namely Facebook. Gaddafi's calls went unheeded and the number of members on the Facebook pages swelled.

### The Unthinkable Happens

While few outside Libya had taken the calls for demonstrations seriously, the events that unfolded in Benghazi surprised everyone.

Everyone's attention had been focused on uprisings and potential uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, and people predicted Algeria or Yemen would be next in line for regime change, while Libya would be one of the last places to rise. After all, there had been no blatant signs of social or political turmoil, but to those familiar with the Libyan situation, Benghazi and the eastern region had long been a thorn in Gaddafi's side. On February 15, two days before Libya's scheduled day of rage, security forces arrested Fathi Terbil, a prominent lawyer from Benghazi who represented the families of some 1,200 prisoners massacred in Tripoli's Bu'sleem prison in 1996. Most of those killed in Bu'sleem were from Benghazi and the eastern region. Terbil's arrest sparked widespread protests in Benghazi's main square and the rest is history.

This time, unlike previous uprisings in the country, Libyans everywhere and not just in the eastern region, rose. On February 20, the protests reached the capital, Tripoli. Four decades of pent-up fear and anger erupted on the streets across the country and were mirrored abroad as Libyan émigrés, long cowed by Gaddafi's spies in Europe and the United States, demonstrated in front of Libyan embassies and consulates, denouncing Gaddafi's oppressive rule in solidarity with their countrymen under siege. Online, Libyans intensified their contributions on online social media, and Facebook and Twitter became the platforms from which they petitioned the world to stand up and take note of their struggle. These platforms served the revolutionaries in Libya well in the first days of the uprising, given the absence of any independent media presence in the country. While Gaddafi and his associates denied that any protests were taking place, hundreds of video clips were uploaded and news was shared on Facebook and Twitter, discrediting the regime's lies. Libyans were still united in fear, inside the country and abroad, but the need to speak up on behalf of friends and family being massacred in large cities and small towns across Libya prevailed over their fear. Numerous threatening speeches

by Gaddafi and his son Saif al-Islam served to fan that fear but also made the Libyans more determined to push forward and overthrow Gaddafi. There was no doubt in anyone's mind anymore that to back down now was a guaranteed death sentence for most Libyans and their family members who had taken part in the protests or voiced their support for the revolution online or on television.

### An Emerging War

The international community, which had previously known Libya only through the bizarre antics of its leader or for its indictment in terrorist plots, began to pay attention to Libya's rebels. Emboldened by widespread defections from the army and political leadership in the eastern region and the element of surprise, the rebels launched a number of critical attacks on Gaddafi's troops, forcing them to beat a hasty retreat out of Benghazi and the eastern province of Cyrenaica. The rebels announced that the latter had been liberated, albeit at a cost of hundreds of civilian deaths and much destruction to the region's infrastructure, and called on their countrymen in the west to do the same.

By then, Gaddafi's forces had overcome their surprise and had begun to organize. Rebels in Libya's western region faced a formidable adversary. News began to emerge from Tripoli of thousands of African mercenaries patrolling the streets of Tripoli; friends reported the erection of frequent and random checkpoints across the city, where mobile phones and computers were searched for any incriminating photos or videos of demonstrations; mobile phone networks and the Internet were cut to disrupt rebel communication channels and quell the flow of news coming out of Tripoli; neighbors were kidnapped by Gaddafi's security forces for suspected support for the revolution or because family members had appeared on television speaking to the international media; weapons were distributed to Gaddafi's supporters, putting the city's population at the mercy of the personal whims of thousands of unrestrained

armed militiamen. An untimely heart attack almost got a friend killed twice – beseeched by neighbors to transport their dying father to the hospital in the middle of the night, the friend found himself staring down the barrel of a machine gun when Gaddafi's troops stationed in the hospital insisted he was there with someone injured from the demonstrations. Only when the troops barged into the operating room and made sure for themselves that the patient had indeed suffered a heart attack and was not injured did they let my friend go. Making their way back home at dawn, my friend's car came under fire. When he finally managed to stop the car, my friend found himself staring down the barrel of a machine gun once again. He does not know if it was divine intervention or the sight of his neighbor's wife and daughters wailing and imploring the soldiers not to shoot that saved them, but they were allowed to pass.

While other smaller cities and towns in Libya's western region such as Misrata and Zawya continued to challenge Gaddafi's control, Tripoli, lacking weapons and supply lines to the rest of the country, was terrorized into submission. As one friend from Tripoli put it, "we are tired of sitting helplessly and watching but we learnt that any desperate attempt to rise is simply suicidal". Even when Internet connections in Tripoli were restored, few went back online. Lists of Internet activists were drawn up and hunted door-to-door, news of which was enough to deter most people from using the Internet. After weeks of eschewing all communication mediums for fear of being traced or picked up, a friend called on my birthday to wish me a happy one in a simple act of defiance, determined not to miss the occasion.

### Deadly Divisions

Against this backdrop of fear, loss, frustration and desperation, Libyans began to trade accusations among themselves. Tribes that had stood by the rebels from the start of the uprising accused other tribes of wavering on the sidelines; people in the east accused the west

of being cowards; people in the west accused neighboring tribes of betrayal; everyone accused the people of the south of collaboration with the regime. Racism reared its ugly head, and the line between Libya's indigenous black population and the African mercenaries fighting with Gaddafi was blurred.

Memories of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions seemed light years away, and the hopes that Libya's winter would blossom into an Arab spring were dashed. The number of Libyans massacred at the hands of Gaddafi's troops and mercenaries had risen to the thousands. Some estimates put the number of civilians killed in the first seven weeks of the uprising in Libya at a staggering 10,000 – a figure that is difficult to corroborate given the absence of independent investigative bodies in the country and rumors of Gaddafi's forces hiding the bodies of those killed.

While initially opposed to foreign military intervention and determined to overthrow Gaddafi themselves, the high casualty figures and Gaddafi's brutal troops back on the outskirts of Benghazi, forced the Libyan people to petition the international community to intervene. Decades of mistrust of the West were put aside

Apart from a near unanimous desire to overthrow Gaddafi, there is very little debate taking place, two months into the uprising, on what Libyans expect from their government once Gaddafi is toppled or how the country's resources will be managed.

in the hope that the West would finally stand by the people of Libya instead of supporting its dictator and his oil reserves. On March 19, just over a month after the start of Libya's popular uprising, Libyans inside the country and abroad cheered as British, French and American-led

military forces bombed Gaddafi's air defense systems and signaled the start of the foreign military campaign in the country. Since then, the campaign and its actual achievements on the ground have elicited mixed reactions. Many Libyans have begun to question NATO's intentions, not because NATO bombing resulted in civilian deaths, a necessary evil that Libyans have taken in stride if the final outcome is the overthrow of Gaddafi, but because of NATO's supposedly slow response and soft approach to the bombardment of Gaddafi's forces.

### Which Way Ahead?

Amid the uncertainty and the varying positions, the lack of an agenda for the post-Gaddafi period among Libyans becomes glaringly obvious. Apart from a near unanimous desire to overthrow Gaddafi, there is very little debate taking place, two months into the uprising, on what Libyans expect from their government once Gaddafi is toppled or how the country's resources will be managed. The latter appear to be considered prizes or rewards for countries that helped the rebellion.

In late March, Libya's Transitional National Council published its vision for the future of Libya – a vision that includes the drafting a national constitution, the formation of political organizations and civil institutions and the guarantee of free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections, freedom of expression and the full rights of citizenship regardless of color, gender, ethnicity and social status. However, the Transitional National Council has done little to communicate these objectives to the Libyan population or to bridge the gap between leadership and citizens, running the risk of appearing to rule the liberated areas and their affairs in much the same way that Gaddafi ruled Libya for over 41 years. Trust and good faith in the rebels, NATO and the Transitional National Council will only take Libyans so far, against a backdrop of the ever-present fear and 41 years void of freedom and a true sense of citizenship.