

# The Road to Revolution

by Anthony Ham

*“Why does our country long for us so savagely?  
What could we possibly give her that hasn’t  
already been taken?”*

—Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men*

## Tripoli, late November 2010

“The other day, all of a sudden, it really began to bother me: will I ever see a day when there’s no Qaddafi ruling over us? That son-of-a-bitch . . .”

We are walking, F and I, along the north-western perimeter of Tripoli’s Green Square, beneath a mural, several stories high, of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. Flaky and omnipresent, despot of all he surveys, the Colonel is smiling, oblivious to the fury that will soon sweep him from power.

I have known F for almost ten years and within minutes our conversation, like most conversations in Libya, has turned to the man who has ruled the country for forty-one years. F is a successful businessman, at least by Libyan standards, and he has learned to play and pay the system; he has someone—friend or family, he cannot say—within Colonel Qaddafi’s inner circle. And in Libya, access to that circle means everything. But F, who has spent his entire adult life in Colonel Qaddafi’s Libya, is no friend of the Colonel.

In three weeks, a 26-year-old unemployed man named Mohammed Bouazizi will set fire to himself in the central Tunisian town of Sidi

Bouazid, in the process igniting the fires of Arab anger across the region. Within ten weeks, dictators in Tunisia to the west and Egypt to the east will have been swept from power. Three months from now, much of Libya will be under opposition control. Colonel Muammar Qaddafi will be dead within a year.

But, of course, we know none of this as F engages in what has for decades passed for political debate and opposition in the Arab world: we walk in silence until there is no stranger within earshot, whereupon F, his back to the wall, begins to talk quietly.

“Every Libyan knows this story. In 1973, a sheikh from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) came to Libya. Back then, the UAE had nothing, not even a hospital, so he came to Libya for medical treatment. Later, he said that he hoped that the UAE could one day reach the level of Libya.” F laughs to himself, shaking his head. “We could have been Dubai.”

He waits until a group of young men pass.

“Qaddafi destroyed everything in this country. We have lost two generations.”

And yet, F knows that such talk, if not overheard, means little.

“People have learned to live with Qaddafi. We have no choice. No, it is what will come after him that everyone wonders and worries about. It is something we find very difficult to imagine.”

No one—neither Libyans nor those of us who claim to know Libya well—would see the second revolution coming. For Libyans these daily con-

versations were a means of moral survival; they never truly believed that the changes of which they dream would ever come to pass. For the rest of us, we came to view Colonel Qaddafi as one of the benign eccentrics of our age, an ageing comic celebrity-statesman, mellowing with the years. As we walked the streets of Libyan cities and towns, we saw a country at peace, a people living in relative prosperity. In our private conversations we mistook for apathy the despair that accompanied talk of discontent. And perhaps we even believed that Colonel Qaddafi no longer posed a danger to his own people.

Therein lies the genius of dictatorship: any other Libya seems incomprehensible. Later, looking back, it will become clear that the conditions that would spark into revolution—the sense of helplessness, the pent-up anger, the visceral hatred for a man who held the country in his fist for forty-one years—were always present.

When we part, F warns me to be careful.

“There is a big meeting of world leaders in Tripoli in a few days—the whole world now wants to come and shake Qaddafi’s hand. The city will soon be crawling with security. It is a good time for you to leave. You should go into the desert. There you can talk without fear.”

### **Hamada al-Hamra, October 2005**

More than a mere geographical designation, the Sahara Desert is Libya’s savior and its harbinger of doom. From the desert comes the country’s greatness: vast underground resources from beneath the sands—oil, water and natural gas—promise untold riches. At the same time, the desert threatens to consume Libya: the Sahara occupies 95% of Libyan territory and the remainder, the densely inhabited coastal strip, is at chronic risk of desertification; the country is an environmental catastrophe in waiting.

But there is more to it than that. The Sahara has always been a source of stories that go to the heart of how Libya’s rulers see themselves and their country. And for ordinary Libyans, it is from the desert, devoid of the protections and intrusions of governments, that parallel accounts emerge, revealing more than they tell.

To Herodotus, the Sahara was a playground

for the bored young sophisticates of Ancient Greece: “A group of wild young fellows, sons of chieftains in their country, had on coming to manhood planned among themselves all sorts of extravagant adventures, one of which was to draw lots for five of their number to explore the Libyan desert and try to penetrate further than had ever been done before.” They returned with fantastical stories of tribes of tiny people and of lands inhabited by wizards.

It was from the Sahara that Libya’s greatest historical empire arose. For more than a millennium from 900 BC, the Garamantes Empire ruled over the desert from the Wadi al-Hayat (Valley of Life) and Wadi al-Ajal (Valley of Death), which are one and the same, southwest of Sebha. They controlled the trade routes of the central Sahara, introduced camels and wheeled transport into the desert, and famously made the desert bloom by tapping its reserves of underground water. Such was their power that they kept the Roman Empire from penetrating the Libyan interior, forever altering the course of African history.

Later, much later, the Sahara would become the wellspring for so much mythmaking of the Qaddafi era. Libya’s leader has always made much of his desert origins; he was born in a tent, to a humble Bedouin family. And it was to the desert in the mid-1970s that he retreated, Christ or Prophet-like, to reflect and write *The Green Book*, which forever defined him as the revolution’s philosopher king.

Now the Sahara may fall within the regime’s control, at least for a while longer, but it is a remote realm largely free of government surveillance. Here, amid the freedom of the sands, listening to the sound of the desert wind is akin to putting your ear to a sea shell, and hearing an approaching storm.

Such winds blow without respite on the Hamada al-Hamra, the Red Plain of the northern Sahara, in north-western Libya. Atop the void, upon a *tabula rasa* as devoid of landmarks as of signs of life, there is profound drama in the emptiness of the landscape. At its greatest extent, this massive tableland of sedimentary limestone, scoured and picked clean by wind

and sand, stretches more than 300 miles from west to east, and almost 200 miles from north to south. The horizon could be minutes away or a lifetime.

H, my guide and friend, lights what will be the first cigarette of many. H was born one month after a 27-year-old Colonel Qaddafi overthrew the decrepit monarchy of King Idris, and seized power in the 1 September 1969 Revolution; H has known no other Libya. He is also the calmest man I know. Mistaking it for vacancy or ill-humor the first time we met, I now know it as the purest capacity for silence. He pulls himself up and looks to the four empty corners of the earth; he smiles.

M, another friend of long standing, has long elfin ears, angular features and a tendency to physically uncoil as he speaks. He is a city dweller and in perpetual motion; the desert makes him restless. A sixty-something-year-old retired air force captain, M belongs to Colonel Qaddafi's generation and is old enough to remember the excitement of the revolution's early days.

Then, as now, the Arab world was in uproar: on the Arab street, the humiliating defeat in the 1967 war against Israel had fuelled widespread anger with the old guard of leaders. On a visit to Benghazi in June 1970, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the adored figurehead of Arab defiance, told a frenzied crowd, "In leaving you, I say to you: My brother Muammar Qaddafi is the representative of Arab nationalism, of the Arab revolution, and of Arab unity." It can be difficult to imagine now, but the young Colonel Qaddafi was once a symbol of hope and generational change.

H, who was just eight months old at the time, remembers none of this, of course, although its story is well-known to him; throughout his life, propaganda lauding the heroic Libyan masses and tales of the Colonel's epic deeds have stood in the place of a meaningful national narrative.

But M remembers the 1969 revolution vividly. As news of the monarchy's overthrow reached Tripoli from Benghazi, M was confined to barracks while commanders wavered in their support. He deserted, heeding the revolutionary government's call to arms, and with a handful of

his comrades he made his way to the centre of Tripoli, to what is now Green Square, to secure the city for the revolution. "It was like the dawn of a new age," he tells me. "When the revolution began, we believed anything was possible."

The 1970s in Libya were a whirlwind of change, with revolutionary rhetoric and regime paranoia the defining characteristics of the decade. The Libyan state was abolished and a *jama'ahiriya* ("state of the masses") took its place. In theory, the country was ruled by committees open to every adult Libyan. In practice, Colonel Qaddafi's word was law and a vicious cycle of repression began. Newly formed Revolutionary Committees vented the regime's revolutionary zeal on opponents, real and imagined; assassination and coup attempts, often led by Islamist groups, were commonplace. For a time, Libya had the highest per-capita prison population in the world.

"Those who he put in prison were those who tried to kill him," M assures me, ever willing to forgive the young Libyan leader who promised so much. "There were more than 30 assassination attempts against him. If someone tries to kill you, what else can you do?"

And despite the repression, M still remembers why, as a foot soldier of the revolution, he was an unquestioning supporter of the young Colonel Qaddafi.

"When *The Green Book* came out in the 1970s, people queued up to buy it. I was one of them. And it said many nice things—houses for everyone, freedom. We said to ourselves, 'This is good.'"

"And was *The Green Book* good for Libya?"

"A writer should always follow what he writes."

"And has he done that?"

"No."

On the Hamada, the wind has dropped. H and M are lost in memories and it is difficult to know how much time has passed. Then, H speaks again. "From the 1980s, the life was very difficult, even more than before," he remembers. "My family was OK—not rich, but OK—but many families could not survive. The country was closed. We were enemies with Tunisia,

with Egypt, with Sudan. We were at war with Chad. From Europe we were closed. Nothing, no goods, no tourists, no airplanes could come in and we could not leave. Libya was a prison.”

Libya had disappeared from view.

### **The Black Years**

In private conversations, Libyans often speak of the decade from 1978 to 1988 as the “black years.” By 1979, 100,000 Libyans—more than three per cent of the population at the time—had fled into exile. Libyans lived in a state of almost permanent fear and chronic uncertainty as political prisoners disappeared into the prison system, never to emerge. Unpredictable shifts in policy—one short-lived self-sufficiency drive required that Libyans raise chickens in their own homes—dictated that the economic situation lurched from one disaster to the next; all private businesses were shut down and critical shortages of basic food stuffs ensued. A pointless war with Chad from 1980 to 1987 further drained Libya’s already depleted coffers. Between 1983 and 1988 real GDP per capita declined by over 40%. With salaries stagnant, Libya became the world’s most expensive country in which to live.

“Back when I was a child,” H tells me, “we had nothing. There were only government shops. When you heard that there was meat or milk, you would go to the shop and find 100 people waiting there and you had to fight them to get anything. If you heard that some dresses had arrived, the same thing, except that you couldn’t ask for large, or small. You would fight your way to the front and then find that all they gave you was a dress for a child, even if you had no children.”

“It was the same when I got older,” says H. “One time I went to Turkey—I think it was in 1987—and brought back bananas as a gift. But I could only give them to my closest friends and family because they were such a luxury. Some of them had never seen a banana before. Can you imagine?”

I can’t.

By the mid-1980s Libya was in a seemingly inexorable downward spiral of violence, poverty

and international isolation. Libya’s involvement in international terrorism had become an open secret in diplomatic circles. By 1984, the US and UK had broken off diplomatic ties and, in 1986, US president Ronald Reagan described Colonel Qaddafi as “this mad dog of the Middle East” and “the most dangerous man in the world.” Soon after, US missiles rained down on Tripoli and Benghazi, killing over 130 people and directly targeting Colonel Qaddafi’s Tripoli compound, the Bab Al-Aziziyah barracks. UN sanctions, imposed in 1992 in response to Libya’s refusal to hand over the two suspects in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, would last for seven years; as a direct result of the sanctions, the Libyan government would later claim, Libya lost an estimated US\$30 billion in oil revenues and 21,000 Libyans died, unable to leave the country for medical treatment.

With Libya cut off from the outside world, the cycle of opposition and repression intensified. This was particularly true in Libya’s northeast where tribal allegiances, an eternal sense of grievance at the overthrow of the king, and perceptions of government neglect had always made the region the most dissatisfied corner of Colonel Qaddafi’s Libya. Libyan governments may reside in Tripoli, but power and the impulse for change has always, in the modern era at least, come from the east.

For most Libyans it was another lost decade.

### **Qaddafi Survives 1988–2010**

On another occasion, I gently probe H for glimpses of Libya behind the all-obscuring mask of its ruler. “Were people afraid during the bad years?”

“Why should we be afraid? The Libyans, we are a simple people. We are not in politics. All we want is to live a good life, to have enough to eat, for our families to be OK. That is what we worried about.”

This claim to simplicity is an oft-heard refrain in Libya. Even so, every Libyan knows someone who suffered at the hands of Libya’s internal security forces. A cousin of H’s father spent six years in prison; he was released only when, in

1988, with internal opposition mounting, Colonel Qaddafi personally bulldozed the walls of Furnaj Prison, setting free a number of political prisoners.

H nonetheless maintains that the whirl of state-sponsored political violence left most Libyans if not indifferent, then largely unscathed. “Everyone who was against the government, they left. Everyone else, we just tried to survive.”

For some Libyans, it seems, Colonel Qaddafi’s greatest crime has been the unnecessary difficulties of daily life in a rich country. That he is a tyrant has, for the most part, been peripheral to their lives.

Going further, many Libyans are remarkably willing to forgive their dictator for his past excesses. This willingness owes much to Colonel Qaddafi’s finely honed instincts for self-preservation and his ability to reinvent himself to save his political skin.

With his regime, and Libya itself, close to collapse in the late 1990s, Colonel Qaddafi pulled off a series of masterstrokes that would ensure the survival of his rule.

First, he handed over for trial the two Libyan agents accused of involvement in the Lockerbie bombing and paid compensation to the families of the victims; sanctions were duly lifted. Colonel Qaddafi then set about repositioning himself as a reliable ally in the war against Islamic extremism. In the 1990s, Libya had been the first government in the world to issue an arrest warrant for Osama bin Laden. Qaddafi later condemned the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and publicly justified the US invasion of Afghanistan as an act of self-defense, in the process denouncing the Taliban as “godless promoters of political Islam.”

In the most dramatic back flip of all, on 19 December 2003 Colonel Qaddafi announced that Libya would relinquish its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and open its weapon sites to international inspections. He did so, he said, because “the program started at the very beginning of the revolution. The world was different then . . . There is never permanent animosity or permanent friendship. We all made

mistakes, both sides. The most important thing is to rectify the mistakes.”

Some things didn’t change. In 2004, when asked about parliamentary democracy, Colonel Qaddafi replied, “Elections? What for? We have surpassed that stage you are presently in. All the people are in power now. Do you want them to regress and let somebody replace them?”

But the Colonel’s stunning reversal of direction saved his revolution, and, for the first time in decades, allowed Libyans to breathe a little. International trade resumed, the fledgling tourism industry began to flourish and Libya’s moribund oil industry was suddenly awash in foreign investment.

“It’s true that I can’t imagine Libya without Qaddafi,” H tells me. “But if it wasn’t him, it would have been someone else. If he leaves me to live my life in a good condition—if I have food and a house for my family—I don’t care if he stays for 100 years. Unless you want to be president, for normal people like us it’s the same whether Qaddafi is there or not. As long as he lets us live.”

“What will happen when Qaddafi dies?”

H smiles enigmatically.

“After Qaddafi? As Qaddafi himself said, all Libyans will be president.”

### **Secret US embassy cable, Tripoli, 26 October 2009 (released by Wikileaks)**

1. Reform-minded Libyans are “cautiously hopeful” regarding the recent appointment of Seif al-Islam al-Qadhafi as “General Coordinator.” While Seif al-Islam is widely seen as a reformer, embassy contacts note that he will face continued resistance from the Libyan old guard. Some observers believe that the appointment was meant to give the regime a “new lease on life” and counter subtle yet growing voices of opposition, particularly with respect to corruption.

2. [Seif al-Islam al-Qadhafi] has a lot of good ideas, but he has been too outspoken about them in the past.” Echoing the warning of other embassy contacts, xxxxxxxxxxxx noted that Seif’s position would only be effective if empowered with the authority to make decisions and act on them.

3. xxxxxxxxxxxx argued that the regime was stagnating and that voices of opposition were subtly rising across the country, particularly from the poorer, eastern areas. “The people see what the rest of the world has and know that the country is wealthy, but they do not see any of the wealth. They wonder where it goes.” A young Libyan businessman and son of xxxxxxxxxxxx, echoed this refrain, telling us that “Brother Seif will solve these problems of corruption.”

4. xxxxxxxxxxxx stated that the younger generations are particularly frustrated with their country’s slow economic development and lack of employment opportunities, estimating unemployment at 30 percent. xxxxxxxxxxxx believes the regime is concerned about this frustration exploding into violence. With Seif at the top, xxxxxxxxxxxx reasoned, Muammar al-Qadhafi thinks he will fool people into believing that real change is taking place.”

### **Close to the Libya-Algeria border, southwestern Libya, December 2010**

Another campfire, this time in the desert massif of the Jebel Acacus in Libya’s extreme southwest, and M is in a reflective mood. All around us, the sun-blistered, wind-blasted outcrops of the Central Sahara possess a hallucinatory beauty: millennia of winds have fashioned rocks into the strangest shapes, and caves conceal paintings by unknown artists dating back over 12,000 years, to a time when the Sahara, the youngest desert on earth, was a land of plenty.

There is, as ever in such moments, an echo of campfires past and as M prepares the tea, he returns to his childhood.

“The tea, for us, is very special. I remember when I was a child, my family was very poor and we lived in a tent. It was during the Italian occupation. There was no work. There were no hospitals, and when my mother was to give birth, she went with my father away from the tent, where we all waited until we heard the baby crying, and my father came to us and said—‘Now you can come.’”

M’s face is aglow, bathed in firelight.

“Some nights we didn’t have food, but every night they prepared the tea. My mother would

then sit at the door of the tent and call us to her. We sat—one here, one here, and so on. And she would tell us stories until we fell asleep. Then she would carry us, one by one, each to his or her bed.”

But there are no longer any innocent memories in Libya.

“These are the things that you must understand, the reasons why we prefer Qaddafi to what came before. You must understand where we have come from. Back then, we had nothing. At least now, the life is better.”

And M’s life has indeed improved significantly since I last saw him, thanks to Colonel Qaddafi’s largesse, his willingness to use burgeoning oil revenues to buy time, and the compliance of his people. M retired in 1993 on a government pension of 260 Libyan dinars (US\$207) a month, a figure that remained unchanged for fifteen years; suddenly, in 2008, his monthly pension rose to 700 dinars (US\$557).

“Has Qaddafi made himself rich?”

“His sons, yes, they are very rich. He has taken care of his sons. But all Qaddafi cares about is writing his name in history, just like these people who painted these paintings thousands of years ago. That is all he wants—that people will still be talking about him long after he’s gone.”

And what about ordinary Libyans? What do they want?

“All we want, all we *ever* wanted is that they give us, or at least they leave us alone and let us have a good life. That when our children grow up, there will be peace and they will be able to find jobs. That there is the rule of law. And that you don’t wake up one morning to find that everything has changed.”

“What do you *really* think of him?”

Even though there is no one for hundreds of miles in any direction, M looks around to be sure no one is listening.

“Compared with other Arab leaders, Qaddafi is good. He built the country, gave us roads, electricity, free education, free medical care. There was none of this at the time of the revolution.”

“But aren’t you afraid?”

“Of course. All the time. You must always be careful what you say, who is listening. Qad-

dafi says that he is not the leader, that he has no power, that there is democracy with the People's Committees. But I cannot even move my keys—like this—unless he says so.”

As always, I ask M to try and imagine what and who will follow Colonel Qaddafi. And as always, it is the name of Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi—Colonel Qaddafi's second son by his second wife, the face of reform in Libya—and no one else, whose name enters the conversation: after more than four decades, Libya's political space has contracted to the extent that the Qaddafis represent both government and opposition.

M is not hopeful: “If it is Seif, it will be the same. He speaks now about reform, and he is different to his father, a different generation. He has been to Europe, he has studied there, and he has seen the freedoms. But once he is in power, he will look around him and see all the things his father had to do to stay in power, and he will do what he has to do. He will do what it takes.”

“Is there any chance that the army will overthrow Qaddafi?”

“No, Qaddafi has never trusted the army and he makes sure that they have no power. Their equipment is outdated and he has divided them so that they can do nothing on their own. The real power lies with the paramilitary brigades and militias—they have the latest equipment, they are all very well paid, and they all come from Qaddafi's tribe.”

“And they would never turn against him?”

“Never. They know that if Qaddafi goes, they will be on their own.”

“And what about the Islamist threat? Are the Islamists popular enough to take power?”

“No, that could never happen in Libya. Libya is not Algeria. It is not Iraq. The people here don't believe in that kind of Libya, or in that kind of Islam.”

“But couldn't the Islamists seize power by force?”

M doesn't answer and it is clear that he is agonizing over what he can tell me.

“It is time to sleep,” he says finally, throwing sand on the fire. “Tomorrow there will be time to talk.”

By morning the wind has picked up again, and over breakfast M is unusually circumspect, his greetings perfunctory, his demeanor weighed down with the cares of the world. And he brings unwelcome news.

“A couple of days ago, three men entered Libya from Algeria, close to Ghat, just on the other side of these mountains.”

“Al-Qaeda?”

“Al-Qaeda. They killed two policemen and two of the attackers were shot. The third blew himself up with a suicide vest.”

“The same thing happened four or five years ago, when four men—one Algerian and three Libyans, Al-Qaeda—crossed the border, this time near Ghadames,” M continues. “Three were killed and they captured the fourth and took him to Tripoli.”

Three or four men is hardly an invasion, but this is worrying news nonetheless. For three decades until the mid-1990s, aborted uprisings led by Islamist groups littered the timeline of modern Libya. Failed army rebellions in Misrata in 1993, and again in Benghazi two years later, were reportedly linked to groups such as the National Front for the Salvation of Libya and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. The membership of these groups largely consisted of battle-hardened Libyans returned from the conflicts in Afghanistan.

When I ask M how he knows about the latest incursion, he hands me his cell phone. Just as grainy video scenes circulating from cell phone to Facebook and Twitter will become a staple of the revolution that will sweep the Qaddafis from power, the jumpy video footage that I see on M's phone has been circulating like wildfire among Libyans in recent days.

The video shows Libyan soldiers and plain-clothes security men milling around alongside heavily armed 4WDs and pickups. In the background, from time to time, the sound of single gunshots, then the crackle of machine-gun fire. The video jumps to cars on the move—time has passed, although it is unclear how much—then to a rocky knoll where the camera closes in on a bloodstained man, bearded and in purple robes. He is lying on the ground, his head turned at

a strange angle. “Shabaab,” they say. “A young man.” The footage ends.

The footage is evidence of nothing, just as much of the “evidence” of the later anti-Qaddafi uprising will be, on its own, inconclusive and unverifiable. Stories such as these are not even second hand—they are rumors and whispers. But those who are willing to speak with me all independently tell the same story. And there is no doubt in my mind that it means what they say—that Libya remains vulnerable if not to an Islamist takeover then to an extremist attack, if not now then in any future vacuum of power.

On the night we return to Sebha, M comes to me: “You have been lucky. The south has just now been closed. I don’t know if it is because of last week, or because more Al-Qaeda members have crossed the border. All I know is that foreigners are no longer allowed to enter the desert. Qaddafi wants to cleanse the area.”

As I leave Libya a few days later, news arrives in Tripoli from just across the border: a young Tunisian man has set himself ablaze. Soon, the protests will begin.

#### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 3 February 2011**

AH: Do people think that what is happening in Tunisia and Egypt could happen in Libya?

F: History is being made in the Arab world. Our guy has been in charge for almost 42 years despite many attempts to topple him. He knows how to survive. If Libyans follow the steps of our neighbors, he would not mind sacrificing half of the Libyan people in order for him to crush any movement of change. He’s much bloodier than the previous ruler of Tunisia and the current ruler of Egypt. Libyans are talking, but the Libyan situation is not the same. On the one hand, Libya is a huge country, and while there are many similarities between Libyans throughout the country there are, also, differences that might tear the country apart in case of an uncontrolled uprising, jeopardizing the unity of Libya. The regime here has been taking a few steps to avoid seeing the streets of Libya becoming like the streets of Cairo today and the streets of Tunis a couple of weeks ago. They are offering young people loans to solve the housing crisis and loans

to help them set up small projects to help solve the unemployment problem. Will the Libyans make their move soon? It’s not clear yet.

AH: There have been no street protests yet?

F: A couple of days ago, the state security arrested Mr. Jamal al-Haji an outspoken opponent of the regime in front of Mizran Mosque after the sunset prayer. They did that in front of people who were leaving the mosque after prayer. They want to silence all the voices that will certainly take advantage of the events in Egypt and Tunisia to incite Libyans to do the same. We have to be more careful in Libya. We simply do not need an uprising that might split the country into more than one state. That will be devastating.

AH: Thanks F. And keep your head down . . .

F: Even if I keep my head down I can’t keep my mouth shut. In Libya you pay for that too . . .

#### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 17 February 2011, the day after the first protests break out in Benghazi following the arrest of a human rights campaigner**

AH: What’s the mood like in Tripoli today?

F: Tripoli is under control. There were some demonstrations yesterday and the day before, mainly in eastern Libya and in the Western Mountains. In Benghazi and Al-Bayda, some people were shot and killed. Qaddafi has sent his son Sa’adi to Benghazi to reach a compromise deal with demonstrators. This coming week will be decisive for the uprising.

#### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 18 February 2011**

AH: And what are people saying? What do your friends in Benghazi tell you?

F: More people were killed today in Benghazi and Al-Bayda, including members of the security forces. Al-Bayda is out of control and so is Darna. People want change but many are afraid of the consequences if things go wrong . . . As long as Tripoli is under control, Qaddafi is relatively safe. If Tripoli erupts, then the end of the regime is near. So watch for Tripoli . . .

#### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 18–20 February 2011**

AH: It now seems to have reached Tripoli.

Are we nearing the end?

[Internet services in Tripoli are sporadic, and F answers two days later]

F: We aren't that near yet, but soon will be. Qaddafi is not going to leave without turning the whole country to a bloodbath. If Caesar burned Rome, Qaddafi would not mind burning the whole of Libya. His son (Seif) gave a disappointing speech a couple of nights ago, and people were convinced: Qaddafi the father is Qaddafi the son. The end is not very near, but it's only a matter of time before we get rid of one of the worst dictators in history.

### **Phone call to S, close to Tripoli, 22 February 2011**

After days of trying, I finally get through to S.

"Everything is fine," he tells me. "My family is safe and there is no danger."

"What will happen?"

"Nobody knows."

"And what is it like right now? I heard there is fighting in Janzur and in Tajura?"

"Everything is normal. There is nothing in Janzur, nothing in Tajura. The problems are in central Tripoli, and only at night. I was there until 1 a.m. last night, but I was not in uniform and I was driving in an unmarked car. Everything was calm."

It is then that I remember that S now works for the government, for the police who provide security for visiting foreign dignitaries. I am too relieved to hear that he is alive to ask the right questions. It only after I hang up that I begin to wonder: Whose side are you on?

### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 23 February 2011**

AH: Are you all right?

F: Qaddafi gave a speech yesterday. He's going to burn the country and burn himself as well. First, eastern Libya has been liberated FOREVER from Qaddafi's rule. Here in Tripoli, the situation is calm, but both sides are preparing for the big battle: the battle to liberate Tripoli and end Qaddafi's regime. The regime is staging a big campaign to prove that people are still supporting his regime. Foreign companies have begun leaving the country and in a couple weeks

or so, most foreigners in Libya will be gone. The battle will begin after that.

### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 1-2 March 2011**

AH: Any news?

F (now writing under a pseudonym): Sorry for getting back to you late. I was in my hometown near the Tunisian border. Horrible scenes there for foreigners trying to flee the country. They closed the border yesterday (the Libyan side). Nalut is under the control of its own people. Qaddafi's forces are blockading the town, as is the case with Az-Zawiya. Yesterday, in Tajura (east of Tripoli) one more victim was buried. Mourners were shouting anti-Qaddafi slogans. Army tanks loyal to Qaddafi are positioned in a semi-circle around Tripoli (20 km from city center). I have spotted about 12 sites with tanks with soldiers stopping cars and searching them in an attempt to prevent smuggling arms into the city.

People are talking about Qaddafi's plan to retake Benghazi by force. The oil export port of Al-Brega was retaken by Qaddafi forces and they are targeting Ajdabiya next. I think Qaddafi will hang on for a while. It's not going to be easy for an unarmed crowd to face highly armed forces eager to shoot their own people. Don't forget that in 1996, he ordered the killing of political prisoners in Abu Salim prison. In about four hours 1230 prisoners were killed, and until today nobody knows where these victims were buried! Qaddafi, knows how to survive, he's been in charge for nearly forty-two years and survived many coup attempts.

Keep your fingers crossed for us.

### **Email from Tripoli, 25 August 2011**

F: Finally the internet is back. Everybody is ok. We're entering the final stage to end Qaddafi's era. Most of Tripoli is breathing freedom, but still it's not finished yet. As I write this message the battle of Abu Salim, on the southern outskirts of Tripoli, has just begun. Other regions have not been liberated yet. One of them is Sirte, Qaddafi's hometown. Qaddafi and his sons are still hiding. Arresting Qaddafi will end everything, even if he is not caught soon, the whole country will be under control in a couple of weeks.

### **Email from Tripoli, 6 September 2011**

H: My brother. My family and I are OK. Finally Qaddafi fell down. You are welcome to a free Libya.

### **Emails to/from Tripoli, 10 November 2011**

F: I'm sorry for not replying earlier. Things are getting back to normal very slowly. Forming the transitional government has taken too long, and finally they agreed upon the prime minister and it'll take at least two more weeks to form a government. The political struggle has already begun, and hopefully, all parties will respect the rules of the game of democracy. In my judgment, it'll take no less than six months to have a hint of which direction this country will take. Some factions and regions will wait to see whether everything will be alright before deciding on handing over their guns. Let's hope that people will be wise enough to appreciate freedom and remember those who paid their lives to end the too-long era of Qaddafi.

AH: How did it feel to see Qaddafi being captured and killed? And what was it like during those long months when Tripoli was still under Qaddafi?

F: People were really relieved to see him gone for ever. Although it was a horrible scene to see him killed like that, the general impression is that he died the way he chose for thousands of Libyans to die. There was no way that revolutionaries would wait for a court to decide Qaddafi's fate. The same thing happened to similar dictators like Mussolini of Italy and, less than two decades ago, to Ceausescu of Romania.

During the last six or seven months of Qaddafi's control, the anti-Qaddafi people were in real jeopardy. Thousands were detained, and most of them never returned alive. I was very lucky not to be detained. My name was passed to them, but they went to the wrong person. The day before the Battle of Abu Salim, I was informed that some of Qaddafi's agents were coming to my house to assassinate me by sound-proof gun, so I had to leave with all my family very quickly.

My son joined the revolutionaries last summer. He left Libya to Tunisia through Ras Ajdir

frontier, then returned to Libya via Wasin frontier where he joined one of the fighting battalions in the Western Mountains region. Luckily, he's back home safely.

AH: Who told you that they were coming for you? And how did they know you were anti-Qaddafi?

F: In the area where I live (Abu Salim), supporters of Qaddafi and those who oppose him sometimes live side by side, so many people knew I was anti-Qaddafi. I'm well known in the neighborhood, and one of Qaddafi's supporters did not like the idea of assassinating me, so as soon as he left the place he called my relative and told him about the plot, and warned that I should leave immediately. I found two bullets through my windscreen in the morning when I was about to leave home a few days after Abu Salim was liberated. Some of Qaddafi's supporters kept their guns hidden after revolutionaries liberated the area, and it seems that they passed by in the early morning and shot the two bullets with their sound-proof pistol, possibly to say that they were still there. I guess I'm very lucky to be safe. The spread of guns is a major issue for the future of Libya. Guns are everywhere and I'm not sure that all people will be willing to hand them back. It's a major concern for me although I'm trying to be very optimistic.

### **Phone call to F, Tripoli, late November 2011**

"So much has changed since we last spoke."

"I have friends and relatives who were killed. It is the same for every family in Libya. And we are all facing a serious financial crisis. Hopefully that will improve by the end of the year. Every day that passes, things get a little bit better. Every day, the country becomes a little bit safer."

"Is freedom worth it?"

"Absolutely!"

F is silent for a moment.

"You know, I used to wonder if I would ever live in a Libya without Qaddafi, and to wonder whether I would survive to see the day when he was gone. I guess we made it." ■