

RUTH FIRST

# Libya

The Elusive Revolution

## Part II: The Limits of Independence

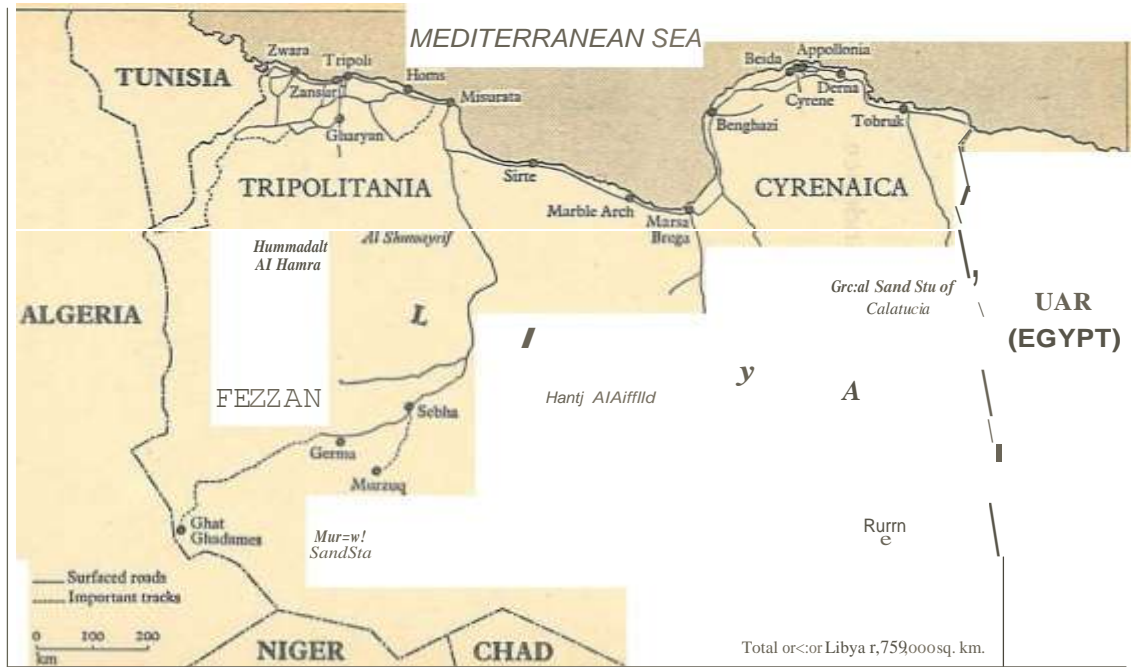
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## Part II: The Limits of Independence



## 2 Hostage to History and Geography

The Ancient Greeks gave the name Libye to all North Africa west of Egypt, but for many centuries the terms Tripoli or Barbary (after the corsairs who practised piracy in the Mediterranean) were used instead. It was in 1934, after the completion of the Italian conquest of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, that the two provinces were united under Italian over-rule as the colony of Libya. The independent State that was established in 1951 kept that name as the one associated with the region from ancient times.

The political divisions of the former provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan corresponded with the country's natural physical barriers and differences. Geography had made the ancient affiliations of the two coastal regions dissimilar — Cyrenaica's early history was influenced by Greece and Egypt, whereas Tripolitania fell under Rome and was close to Tunisia. The Arab invasions had unifying effects on the population, as did the Turkish occupation in the sixteenth century. But the three provinces were never closely unified, and successive foreign powers, whether they controlled all of modern Libya or only parts of it, generally continued to follow the natural divisions of the country in the shape of their administrations. Libya in more recent times has been not so much an artificial political entity as one which physical conditions mitigated against. The basis for the modern state was laid by international diplomacy after the end of the Second World War, but it was to be the demands of the oil economy which created a unified state.

In 1968 Libya's population was estimated at about 1.8 million.\* Approximately seven eighths of that population is clustered near

\*Preliminary returns of the 1973 Census give the Libyan population as 2,257,037. (Men: 1,200,246; women: 1,056,791.)

the coast in the vicinity of Tripoli and Benghazi. The overall population density of the country is about 2.7 persons per square mile; in all Africa only Mauritania has a density as low as this. Only 2 per cent of the vast land area is arable. The 1964 census showed that of every 100 persons enumerated, 79 were settled, 9 were semi-nomadic, and 12 were nomadic. The settled population includes urban dwellers and agriculturists of fixed residence, though the latter may move during the planting and harvesting seasons. The semi-nomads move to the areas to which their tribes migrate during winter and summer in search of pastures for their livestock. The province with the highest population of semi-nomads was the Jebel Akhdar in the highlands and plateau areas of northern Cyrenaica. There is some settled farming along the coast, round the desert oases, and in the Tripolitanian hills, but shifting cultivation is the pattern in the semi-desert and the Cyrenaica Jebel. There is no substantial peasantry, which is one of the characteristics which most distinguishes Libya from the Arab societies of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the Maghreb.

Libya is and always has been hostage to a hostile geography. Twice the size of her neighbour Egypt, she stretches from the Mediterranean to deep into the sand seas of the Sahara; sharing a frontier with Sudan, and, across the Tibesti mountains, with Chad and Niger. A great burning desert void lies between the narrow coastal strip with its cities by the sea and the peoples of the interior clustered round the remote oases. The Greek geographer Strabo compared Libya to a leopard skin whose spots represented the settlements scattered in the desert. But if geography has held Libya's various parts in suspension from one another, it has also presented formidable obstacles to the successive invasions of twenty-five centuries; for while these have overrun the coastal strip, they penetrated little of the desert interior. From the Phoenicians, the Greeks in 600 B.C., and the Romans, through the Sicilian Normans and the Knights of St John in A.D. 1530, to the Ottoman empire twenty-one years later, and then Italy in 1911, each invasion has linked Libya to the footnotes of yet another chapter in Mediterranean or Near East history. But who were the original Libyans?

Herodotus, writing about 445 B.C., recorded that a ten-day journey from western Egypt to the oasis of Augila reached the Garamantes, 'an exceedingly great nation who sow the earth they have laid on the salt'. Ancient geographers and historians made them out to be half legendary, endowed with fierce physical stamina, who clashed with the power of Rome as it thrust into the interior. Sifting field-work evidence from legend, archaeologists find that the earliest Garamantian site thus far discovered is Neolithic in culture and belongs to the first millennium a.c.<sup>1</sup> The Garamantes were Hamitic peoples. One investigator has argued their kinship to the Tuaregs; others that they were a Mediterranean Berber type. The Garamante kingdom was still in existence when the first Arab invaders reached and conquered Fezzan in the seventh century.<sup>2</sup> It seems certain that their capital was the city of Garama, today the site of Old Germain the Wadi al Ajal in the Fezzan, ideally placed for the control of the Saharan trade routes if these flourished in antiquity as in medieval times.

When Rome was building its empire, the North African coastal fringes were joined to it, and in their offensive against the desert tribes, Roman generals even marched their legions against the Garamantes as far as Ghadames, 250 miles from the coast, and then to Germa, 350 miles south-east. The economy of Roman Tripolitania was agricultural, enriched by Saharan trade. Under the early empire the land was farmed by Berber peasants and smallholders. Later, larger state-owned or landowner properties forced the small farmer off the land, and the big estates were worked by the landless Berber.<sup>3</sup> There developed an urban elite which included Romanized Afro-Phoenicians; the name Tripolis, the Three Cities, was first used at the end of the second century. The tribes of the Sirtica desert raided but never conquered the towns of Tripolitania on the western coastline or Cyrenaica, the Greek city settlement on the eastern. It was the Vandals from Europe who ousted the Roman governing class but then abandoned the territory to the desert and its peoples. The Berber tribes reverted to nomad pastoralism. On the pre-desert slopes of southern Tunisia and Tripolitania there appeared in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. the great Berber tribal

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confederation of the Zenata, camel-mounted pastoralists who augmented their resources by pillage.<sup>4</sup>

Mounted Arab forces first crossed into Cyrenaica in 642: with no resistance till they reached Tripolitania at the far end of the country. Fezzan was penetrated by 663. The Berbers, both the nomads of the interior and the farmers of the coastlands, were alternately cooperative and rebellious. In the mountains and the desert, where they guarded their independence for centuries, Islam was accepted, but Arabic and Arabs were not; and after the first Arab conquest, North Africa, including Libya, remained overwhelmingly Berber. The first Arab invasion was no more than a kind of preliminary colonizing effort that left small groups of newcomers in the country who were assimilated with the indigenous population. But in the eleventh century the tribes of Bani Hilal and Bani Sulaim,\* which had crossed from the Arab peninsula into the Nile valley and then into North Africa, came with their flocks and their families, and over time they assimilated the Berbers and their social groupings. The Bani Hilal mostly moved westward into Tripolitania and Tunisia, while the Bani Sulaim settled primarily in Cyrenaica, to subjugate as clients the tribes of the earlier invasion. Scholars now doubt the view accepted since Ibn Khaldun that the Bani Hilal pastoralists were responsible for the destruction of agricultural prosperity in the Maghreb. It is now argued that the political and economic decline of the Maghreb preceded and facilitated the Hilalian invasions.<sup>5</sup>

In the Fezzan, Arab penetration was slowest, and for a while trade remained the monopoly of the Berber tribes and their camel caravans. Medieval Fezzan was an independent state on the great Saharan trade trail, with cities boasting markets,

\* On Arab tribes, see Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed* (Penguin, 1973): 'A tribe was made up of clans which, rightly or wrongly, acknowledged some kind of kinship. Each tribe had its eponymous ancestor. The ideologists and politicians of the desert worked out genealogies in which the ties of kinship attributed to these ancestors reflected the various relations between the groups that bore their names.' The basic groups of social and economic life were clans or sub-tribes, their numbers dictated by the necessities of life in the desert. Tribes were thus defined by kinship, and consisted of family groups which intermarried and cooperated in economic activity.

mosques, and baths; doctors of law; poets; and holy men. The desert was criss-crossed with caravans carrying not only local but also international traffic. The states of Kanem and Bornu were linked to North Africa by the trade route from Lake Chad to the Libyan coast.<sup>6</sup> Tripoli, standing at the narrowest crossing of the Sahara, was thus the gateway to the interior of Africa. The great trans-Saharan trade system was to be destroyed only in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when French and British imperial penetration of the Senegal and Niger-Benue river basins diverted commerce from the Sahara to the Atlantic. By then, too, the Mediterranean had become an economic backwater; for Western Europe's maritime states, exploiting the sea route to the Indies, had by-passed the North African outlets of the ancient African caravan routes.

Samir Amin has described<sup>7</sup> how Africa was predisposed by geography and history to a continental development, organized round the major inland river arteries, but was condemned by the entry of mercantilist trade to be 'developed' only along its narrow coastal zone. The domestic trade between herdsman and crop farmers, the outflow of exports and the spread of imports had constituted a dense and integrated trading network dominated by African traders. For the colonial trading houses to capture this trade, they had to control its flow and re-direct it towards the coast; thus the colonial system destroyed African domestic trade and reduced the African traders to subordinate agents, or eliminated them altogether. For many of the societies of tropical Africa, the trans-Sahara trade had become the basis of their organization, and for centuries the Mediterranean societies and those of tropical Africa had been united; so that the vicissitudes of one had rapid repercussions on the others. The shifting of trade routes, especially the change of centre from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, led to the decline of several formerly flourishing and autonomous African states. In particular it was to leave Libya, through which many of the trade arteries had coursed, high and dry.

From the mid-sixteenth century Libya was a province of the Onoman empire, ruled by a Turkish Bey supported by Turkish officials and a body of Janissaries, or the Turkish mercenary



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military caste. But Ottoman rule in North Africa was never very firmly established, and effective authority passed after some time from the Sultan's representatives to military commanders and pirate captains. In 1711, after almost two centuries of rule from Constantinople, power was seized by the Karamanli, a leading family of Cologhli founded from an admixture of Janissary, Arab, and Berber. The Karamanli dynasty ruled for 125 years; and during this time it extended control to parts of both Cyrenaica and Fezzan, thus anticipating by over a century the shape of the Libyan state which the European powers were subsequently to claim as their creation. For as long as central African trade continued along the oasis routes to the ports of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, there were well-established connections running from the Bedouin tribes of east and west, through the oasis dwellers, to the tribes of the deep interior, where the nomads of Libya controlled the routes and to a large extent supplied the transport for the caravans. Tripoli in the nineteenth century was the home of bankers and wholesalers and the headquarters for most of the trading firms operating in the interior. Ghadames, according to Barth, was the residence of wealthy merchants who embarked all their capital on commercial enterprises; and in all the southern termini like Timbuctoo and Kano there were resident agents of the Ghadames firms. Most of the men of the town were traders themselves and known all over the Sudan. Western travellers commented on the business acumen of the Ghadames people: "They calculate with profound nicety the expense of carriage to distant countries, duties, customs, risk, trouble, the percentage that their goods will bear, and even do business by means of bills and unwritten agreements or promises."<sup>8</sup>

In 1835, after the fall of Algiers to the French and Mohammed Ali's achievement of near-independence for Egypt, Turkey re-occupied Tripoli to prevent any further loss of territory that was nominally part of the Ottoman empire. As long as Libyans paid their taxes, Turkish rule was indifferent and remote. By then Turkey was the sick man of Europe, and her rule was inefficient and corrupt. The Turkish revolution of 1908 gave Tripolitania and Cyrenaica representation in the parliamentary regime then

installed. And among the Tripolitanian representatives who went from Libya to Istanbul was Suleiman Baruni, who was to play an important part in the resistance of the next decade.<sup>9</sup> Something of the ferment of discussion current in the movement of Young Turks, concerning problems of religion and nationality, of freedom and loyalty and constitutionalism, reached the small groups of Turkish-influenced intellectuals in Libyan towns. But if small urban constituencies were being co-opted into the Turkish constitutional reform, in Cyrenaica the tribes were in effect ruled by the Sanusi on behalf of the Turks. It was, according to Evans-Pritchard, effectively a Turco-Sanusi condominium.<sup>10</sup>

It was the spread of the Sanusi order which had given a great fillip to Islam in the Sahara and also to trade. While commercially the Fezzan-Bornu route had been the most important till the mid 1850s, in the latter half of the century the Cyrenaica-Kufra-Waddai trade route on the other side of Libya began to overtake it. The prosperity of this caravan trade was largely the result of Sanusi enterprise and protection, and the order's wealth, as well as its temporal power, grew from its exploitation of the meagre resources of this region of the eastern Sahara.

The founder of the Sanusi order, Mohamed ibn Ali al-Sanusi, called the Grand Sanusi, was born in Oran in Algeria in the late 1780s of a family claiming descent from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. Sayyid Mohamed studied at Fez where he came into contact with several of the fraternities of Morocco; then he set out, accompanied by disciples, through the Sahara and Tunisia, Tripolitania, and Cyrenaica to preach greater Islamic unity and a return to the religion of the Prophet, purged of the dross and irrelevance accumulated over centuries of decadence. In about 1843 he established his first *zawiya* in Cyrenaica in the Jebel Akhdar. The choice of Cyrenaica was not accidental:

Of all North African countries, Cyrenaica was a political vacuum, and the Grand Sanusi, who knew the area well, did not just tumble *in it*. Algeria was gradually being occupied by the French. Tunisia was undergoing a difficult period in her history. Egypt had already been

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ruleout . . . In addition Cyrenaica provided an outlet to Central Africa, an area which the Grand Sanusi must have thought of as a possible field of expansion. <sup>11</sup>

It was the grandson of the Grand Sanusi, Sayyid Amir Mohamed Idris, who became head of the order in 1916 and was later to become King of Libya.

The Sanusi are Sunni or orthodox Moslems,\*

which means that in faith and morals they accept the teachings of the Koran and the Sunna, a collection of traditions about the life and habits of the Prophet, whose example in all matters should be followed by believers. Most Orthodox Muslims recognise further doctrinal sources –like the *ijma*, general agreement among those of the faithful capable of holding an opinion on such matters, and *qiyas*, determinations of what should be believed or done by analogy with the teachings and life of the Prophet. The founder of the Sanusi order, like the founders of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, also a revivalist order with emphasis on the return to pristine Islam, rejected both.<sup>12</sup>

The Sanusi Is therefore a highly orthodox order of Islam. Evans-Pritchard writes:

. . . the rigorous orthodoxy of the Order, and especially its insistence on conformity to the original teachings of the Prophet, meant that the faith and morals which the Prophet preached to the Bedouin of his day, and which they accepted, were equally suited to the Bedouin of Cyrenaica, who in all essentials were leading, and still lead, a life like to that of the Bedouin in Arabia in the seventh century.<sup>13</sup>

The Sanusi are also an order of Sufis. 'Orthodox Islam,' writes Evans-Pritchard,

tends to be a cold and formalistic religion. The gulf between God and man, spanned by the bridge of the Imams among the Shi'ites, is too wide for simple people, and its rules and regulations deprive it of warmth and colour. The need for personal contact and tenderness finds expression in the cult of Saints, in Sufi mysticism.<sup>14</sup>

Sufism, it has been said, 'appealed to the popular imagination because it supplied men with spiritual satisfaction and vitality against the rigidity of the law and its teaching'.<sup>15</sup>

\* Islam is divided principally between the Sunni and the Shi'a. The basis for the division was a dynastic quarrel in the early days of Islam, but it has since become one of rite and belief. See the *Cambridge History of Islam*.

In North Africa Islam had been to the end of the fourteenth century a religion of the towns and cities. Later this began to change. Islam became primarily rural.

The *zawiya* (monastery) replaced the mosque ... as a centre of learning ... Sufism gathered popularity ... and more and more the Shaikh became a saint and his *baralla* (blessing) rather more than his learning gave him an exalted position. The Sufi himself changed. He was no longer of the same calibre and integrity as the early mystics. The net result was that Islam grew narrower in outlook and lost sight of tolerance. Then the spirit of *tawakkul* (fatalism) spread among the Moslems ... The erudition and knowledge came to a standstill. Sufism gathered popularity but it lost its great tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Libya alone in North Africa was untouched by later reformist movements and teachings, like those of Mohamed Abdu, which proclaimed a return to the sources of the faith, yet contained a response to the challenge which faced Islam in the contemporary world, and whose approach opened the way to the development of a secular nationalism. The Sanusi movement was a revivalist movement pure and simple, aiming to restore what the Grand Sanusi conceived to be the original society of the Prophet.

The Sanusi order won over the nomad and semi-nomad Bedouin tribes of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Egypt, and the oasis folk. It did not make much impression on the peasants and townsmen in northern Tripolitania and the Nile valley. 'The Order,' wrote Evans-Pritchard, 'poured its vitality southwards along the trade routes to the interior of Africa, into the Fezzan and the various regions (then) called the French Sahara and French Equatorial Africa.'<sup>17</sup> The headquarters of the Order and the seat of its Islamic university were at Jahgub, an oasis which bisected one of the trade routes from the coast to the Sahara. Alongside the prophets, the learned men and the cultivators of the oasis *zawiyas*, flourished the traders who controlled the slave traffic at its peak. Many of the brethren of the *zawiyas* acted as guides, transport providers, and caravan escorts from the depots and resthouses for slave and other caravans along the route. Indeed, many of them were themselves merchants and slave traders, 'charging fees in money and in kind for the honour and protection they bring to the caravans with which they may be

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travelling; in fact the holier the person, the more he charges'.<sup>18</sup> The Sanusi profited both by directly engaging in trade and transport and through customs dues collected at the centres through which the caravans passed.<sup>19</sup>

In small-scale societies as these in Africa, where dominant classes were able to extract only limited surpluses due to the difficult ecological conditions and the low development of the productive forces, long-distance trade of the kind dominated by the Sanusi played a decisive role in transferring some of the surplus of one society to another, and in providing the basis of the wealth and power of the ruling groups.<sup>20</sup> The Sanusi headed a religious-political organization; but at the same time their leading families constituted a ruling class, from their control over resources of land and water and over trade.<sup>21</sup> It was the Sanusi organization that clashed with France's colonial armies as they advanced northwards from the then French-held Congo to Lake Chad; and as the twentieth century opened, the Sanusi, in alliance with African states and tribes, were fighting a *jihād* against the advancing French forces. Sanusi envoys recruited volunteers as far north as Benghazi to fight with the Tuareg round Lake Chad.<sup>22</sup> And by 1902, the French advance had been temporarily blocked at Kanem. It was in this mobilization against French colonialism's threat to their trading monopoly that the Sanusi tested their network of alliances and its military capacity. By then practically all the oases, the nomadic population between Egypt and the Sudan and Tuareg territory, were Sanusi. Some of the more prosperous town merchants who had dealings with the Bedouin tribes and sent caravans into the Sahara found it advisable to be received into the Order, and for this reason there was in all the towns of Libya a body of the richer citizens who belonged to it.<sup>23</sup>

But essentially the strength of the Sanusi Order was that it coordinated its lodges to the tribal structure of Cyrenaica, which was particularly favourable to the growth of a politico-religious movement. It was a region cut off by deserts from neighbouring countries; it had a homogeneous population and a tribal system which embraced common tradition; above all the Bedouin tribes needed some authority lying outside their segmentary

tribal system which could compose inter-tribal and inter-sectional disputes and bind the tribes together.<sup>24</sup> When necessary the Sanusi used the Turkish administration to buttress their position in their dealings with the tribes, and at other times combined with the tribes to resist encroachments on its prerogatives by the Turkish administration. British intelligence reports were convinced that a Sanusi revolt against the Turkish occupation was brewing in the years immediately before the Italian invasion. But by then, the struggle against the advancing French colonial armies was running aground; and since there was a danger that two European powers would encircle Sanusi control from the coast and the interior, the Sanusi turned to an alliance with Turkey and the indispensable military help this would bring.<sup>25</sup>

By the time of the Italian occupation almost all Libyans were Arabic-speaking Moslems of Arab-Berber descent; for with the merger of the Arab and Berber streams over the centuries, the country came to have a more or less unified population. But there were enclaves of groups less uniform and closer to their original affinities. In Tripolitania, small communities of Berber still live as settled farmers along the northern fringes of the Jebel Nafusa, at Jefren and at Gharyan, and on the coast at Zwara.<sup>26</sup> The majority of these follow the Kharedjite sect of Islam, more egalitarian than the orthodox Sunni and chosen in its time to signify resentment of their Arab conquerors. In the coastal towns of merchants, pedlars, and functionaries, the Turkish strain was strong. In southern Libya a tiny community of Tebu are suspected to be the last survivors of the early Garamantes. Perhaps 7,000 of the North African population of Tuareg live in south-west Libya, mostly round the Ghat area. Once important middlemen for the caravan trade, they were economically ruined by its collapse. In 1917 there was a Tuareg revolt, aided by the Sanusi as part of their anti-French campaign, which ambushed and virtually wiped out a platoon of French camel corps. When the revolt spread, there were even Allied fears for the safety of Northern Nigeria.

In the Fezzan, Arab, Berber, Tebu, and Rausa and Bornu

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peoples are inextricably mingled, former black slaves having become lower-class sharecroppers or semi-serfs working for an imposed ruling group of Arab, Berber, or Tuareg landowners. In the desert oases, whether in the Fezzan group or round Kufra to the east, communities are more sedentary than nomad; cultivating irrigated gardens on the fringes or round the palm groves. The soil is worked by the hoe, and returns for labour are small. An analysis of three Libyan oases (Ghat, Ghadames, and Mu..rzuq) showed that the distribution of water resources was monopolized by a restricted set of family groups. In Ghat, for instance, this dominant group constituted only fifteen families among over 200 registered proprietors. Customary land usage was likewise controlled by large families who similarly dominated social and political life.<sup>27</sup>

There were, thus, vertical divisions running through oasis society; but there were also horizontal divisions among the tribes of the Fezzan, and among the Bedouin of Cyrenaica, a region of part herdsmen, part cultivators. The actual as well as the legendary lines of descent from the original Arab invasions had become the structural basis of a tribal system that strongly influenced the economic and political processes of twentieth-century Cyrenaica. The tribes divide between the Sa'adi and the Marabtin. The Sa'adi are the nine tribes which hold the country by right of conquest;<sup>28</sup> the Marabtin are the modern descendants of Arabs of the first invasion, with some Berber admixture, who were subjugated by the new invaders and compelled to pay tribute. Thus a Sa'adi tribesman has rights to the country's resources which a client cannot claim. The Marabtin, who cannot claim nobility by descent, are vassal tribes and use the earth and water by grace of the free tribes. The core of the distinction was thus property rights, for the client tribes had to be granted access to land and water by their patrons, and this privilege had to be periodically renewed. Shortage of land was not a problem, but clients had to supplicate for use of water points each year. Water, or access to it, was the prime resource,<sup>29</sup> The clients were thus compelled to produce a surplus; and overproduction still left them debarred from political power. Yet because the economy was marginal, with near-drought conditions

over many years, the differences between patron and client tribes began to fall away; and the Sanusi, who claimed adherents among both did much to lessen the differential between client and free.<sup>30</sup> By the beginning of the century the Marabtin, though still traditionally vassals of the Sa'adi, were partially absorbed into the free tribes and no longer necessarily paid taxes for the land on which they moved. Yet while in the ordinary run of life it was often difficult to distinguish between patron and client groups, as late as the independence election of 1950, when the patron group had vast land resources under its control, all the candidates for the semi-desert areas were noblemen.<sup>31</sup> It was especially under the Italian administration that the division between client and free tribes was seen as an opening through which to drive a wedge between the Bedouin population, and some of the Marabtin took advantage of the opportunity afforded.

The bulk of the traditional urban dwellers were either descendants of merchants or marabouts from other parts of North Africa or Turkish officials of the Ottoman administration. In later years – especially after the Second World War and the discovery of oil – large numbers of Bedouin tribal adherents also moved to the towns. And though many of these continued to give primary allegiance to their tribal units within the interior, the strong bonds of rigid tribal discipline and common land ownership were missing. Thus urban representatives of the post-independence parliament were members of prominent town tribe families, and electoral contests were determined not only by rallying urban support but also by mustering Bedouin tribal links with the interior.

Yet essentially within Cyrenaica, the Sanusi remained a rural and a Bedouin Order and directed its affairs from the desert. This ran to the heart of how the Bedouin resistance against the Italian occupation was sustained for so long, and why the conqueror could not easily win. For, Evans-Pritchard writes,<sup>32</sup> while tribes and town affected one another politically, essentially town and country kept apart, with the towns dependent on the country and not the country on the towns. For in Cyrenaica there was no client peasantry bound by debt, no need of protection and trade monopoly to the towns. The Bedouin did not



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settle on the land where they could be easy prey to the usurer, overseer, and town collector. There was nothing in the Bedouin way of life which gave an opening to the usurer. Moreover the towns had no monopoly of trade, for if necessary the Bedouin could go without urban supplies or obtain them overland from Egypt as they did during the war with Italy. Consequently there were no rich landowning families living in the towns at the expense of the countryside; no aghas, beys, or pashas. And what small educated middle class existed outside the small official circle, lacked both wealth and influence. In general it may be said in Cyrenaica that the towns were not parasites on the country but had their functions as trading centres and suppliers. The markets were free, not tied to town societies. Nor could the Bedouin be coerced by force of law. The tribes were largely inaccessible and they were stronger than the towns, even with the administration behind them. The Bedouin were not afraid of the Turkish administration and they did not use the courts. The Turkish administration centred in the towns had to operate through the leading tribal shaikhs, and through the Sanusi lodges. After the invasion the Italian administration was to find the whole system operating against rather than through it.

### 3 Resistance but Conquest

Italy, it was said, occupied Libya so as to breathe more freely in a Mediterranean stifling with the possessions and naval bases of France and Britain. The colonization lasted thirty-two years, from 1911 to 1943, and together with that of Algeria, where the occupation was far more prolonged and the struggle even more cataclysmic – and of Palestine where the occupation was anomalous but bitter – this was the most severe occupation experienced by an Arab country in modern times. The object of the colonization was to incorporate Libya as Italy's fourth shore: it was to be colonization by peasant settlement, and the advent to power of Mussolini's Fascist order opened Libya to mass emigration financed and organized by the State.

Though Italy's acquisition of a North African colony has been characterized as part of the pre-First-World-War European diplomatic game, the Bank of Rome had begun its economic penetration in the last decades of the previous century. The colony was initially to be acquired by purchase. Between 1907 and 1908 the Bank of Rome's deposits in Tripoli more than doubled, and they continued to rise. This helps explain why, when in 1913 there were secret negotiations between Italy and the Sanusi, a representative of the Bank of Rome was present throughout.<sup>2</sup>

Libyans were divided in their reception of the invaders. In Tripoli town, where a brief insurrection provoked harsh reprisals against civilians, the new colonists found a defeatist elite and submissive traditional heads. Such opposition as expressed itself was furtive; as in the efforts at persuading rich Tripolitanians to send their wealth to Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Some important families, notably the Muntassers, were pro-Italian from the start and throughout the occupation; and it was largely with the help of collaborator

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chiefs that Italy occupied much of Tripolitania during 1912. But in the interior, both east and west, resistance rose. Turkish commanders and their troops had retreated into the hinterland, where they were joined by commanders sent from Constantinople to help direct the war effort. But above all the tribes had ridden in to fight alongside the Turkish irregulars. Italy had expected Libyans to welcome her as relief from the clutches of a dying Ottoman empire; instead she faced combined Turkish-Libyan resistance. A year after the invasion there was military stalemate. The Italian forces were in command of the coastal enclaves and of the sea, but thousands of tribesmen were under arms.

In 1912 Italy and Turkey suddenly negotiated a peace. Libyans were stupefied. It was an ambiguous settlement, essentially enabling Turkey to disengage. It ostensibly granted independence to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and yet recognized Italian sovereignty. Overnight the war changed its character. It ceased to be one in which a foreign power was trying to seize a colony from a tired empire; and became an anti-colonial war by an indigenous people, battling to retain their lands and their independent way of life.

Once Turkey had deserted them, leaders from all parts of Tripolitania met at Azzizia to discuss their strategy.<sup>4</sup> Two positions were defined, and they were to recur and re-form in varying combinations throughout the struggle. On the one hand, a peace party was ready for conciliation and submission; on the other, a camp of irreconcilables pressed for armed resistance. The meeting was no sooner over than, led by Suleiman Baruni who had represented Tripolitania in the Turkish parliament and who had returned to Libya to fight the invasion, there began to rally a great cluster of tribes to demand an independent Berber province, administered by an elected assembly with headquarters at Jefren in the Jebel Nafusa, and with an outlet to the sea.

By August 1914, when the European war broke out, the first phase of the war in Libya was over. Italy still held only the towns of the coast; and in the interior, she had suffered the worst defeat since the Battle of Adowa against the Ethiopians. The struggle for the autonomy of the Jebel had been defeated, but

Baruni had slipped through the frontier into Tunisia and had got away to Constantinople, from where he was shortly to return to try once more to rally resistance. In Tripolitania Italian troops had been routed when Ramadan Esh Shitewi es Aweihli, chief of M. isurata, went into battle ostensibly on the Italian side but ordered his troops to turn and fire on them. In Cyrenaica and the Fezzan, despite heavy losses, the tribes had begun the guerrilla warfare so suited to their terrain and their traditions of turbulent independence. When parts of Cyrenaica were overrun, resistance flared in the Fezzan, led by Sanusi forces supported by Tuareg and Tebu from even the furthest corners of the desert. At one stage the Italians were forced to retreat into southern Algeria for French protection. It was apparent that as long as the bedouin were at large and unsubdued, there was bound to be resistance, and that the Sanusi Order was able to organize the united resistance that Tripolitania alone was unable to summon.

Italy entered the European war in 1915 on Britain's side, and with Turkey on Germany's, Turkish commanders re-entered Libya with some advisers and arms. It was under Turkish and German pressure that the Sanusi, under the leadership of Sayyid 'Ahmed al-Sharif, still trying to protect the Order's trade system, and desperately in need of Turkish arms, launched an abortive assault on British posts in western Egypt. His leadership did not survive this episode. After his defeat at Mersa Matruh by British forces, he handed over control to Sayyid Mohamed Idris (later King Idris I), who promptly entered into negotiations with Britain. British intelligence sources had early noted the 'difference of opinion in the Sanusi family on the war and other matters'.<sup>5</sup> If Italy had misjudged the Libyan reaction to its invasion, so did Britain; though she subsequently exercised pressure through both the Khedive in Egypt and the Amir of Arabia to advise the Sanusi to bring the hostilities to an end.<sup>6</sup> (The War Office in Cairo insisted that the proclamation under the Sanusi seal to fight had been fabricated by a Turkish official.) By the time that a truce was signed in 1916, Britain was convinced that the Sanusi head 'had been made to understand thoroughly that he was to be recognized only as the

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religious leader of his sect and not as chief of a political entity, and second, that he must make peace with both powers (Britain and Italy) or with neither'.<sup>8</sup> Under the truce, the Sanusi were to recognize *de facto* Italian order in the towns, while the Italian administration recognized the *de facto* rule of the Order in the country.

By the early twenties Italy was on the verge of social revolution at home and in no condition to pursue an aggressive war in Libya, although this was precisely the time when she might have taken advantage of the country's internal divisions. Tripolitania, sharing in the optimism that swept the Arab world immediately after the war, had taken advantage of a liberal regime in Rome to assert its independence in the declaration of an Arab Republic, al-Jumhuriya-al-Trabulsiya. Following the treaty with Italy managed by Britain, Cyrenaica also boasted a parliament, under what had become virtually a system of weak indirect-rule by Italy. Cyrenaica's rejection of the Italian presence – except as traders on the coast – was as unequivocal as that of the Tripolitanian Republic. Italy found herself paying regular subsidies to the army, police force, and the Sanusi tribal shaikhs and notables; while even Sanusi officials, scribes, chiefs of irregular bands, informers, and political counsellors were on the payroll. Idris was recognized as Amir, and had his own flag, along with a handsome monthly subsidy. In return the tribes were supposed to disband and disarm. Idris visited Rome to negotiate a sizable indemnity for the *zawiyas* destroyed in the war and even promised to remove those shaikhs who had embittered relations between the government and the people.<sup>9</sup>

Also in Rome a delegation from the Tripolitanian Republic lobbied left-wing deputies to reiterate their total rejection of Italian sovereignty of any kind. One of its members subsequently attended the Moslem Revolutionary Congress in Moscow. From spasmodic tribal rebellion to a dangerous pan-Islamic plot? British and other Western intelligence circles were duly alarmed.<sup>10</sup> But if some events in Tripolitania carried dangerous overtones of the feared Abd al Krim rebellion against the Spanish, which had overflowed into Morocco; if any rebellion or any profession of independence, let alone Arab nationalism,

sounded ominously like Bolshevik revolution, within the Libyan resistance there were also complex conflicting and enfeebling tendencies. This was inevitable within social movements and leaderships of such varying social bases and consciousness. Some sought to retain a foothold in urban trading communities under Italian commercial control by turning collaborator. Some saw the defeat of Italy as the return of Libya to the Turkish fold. Some were inspired by a messianic religious order when messianic resistance against Italian conquest had a close affinity to nationalism. Some fought to protect or re-assert regional and local interests and leadership claims. Some were inspired by republicanism and visions of national autonomy. The Tripolitanian Republic placed Arab nationalism on the agenda. In the end it was not these advanced ideas of anti-colonialism which were able to build a viable and united resistance, but the Bedouin stateless society, which managed to develop the rudiments of a state in the face of external attack, and which converted its physical means of primary resistance into a prolonged popular and guerrilla war against the colonizing enemy.

In Tripolitania, on the other hand, with Italy still in only paper control, discordant claims and internecine strife were prevalent. The Italian administration helped to play off Berber against Arab, and to exploit Berber conflicts in the traditional north-south feuds for the control of the Jebel. The uneasy alliance of forces that had founded the Tripolitanian Republic broke apart. In Misurata, one-time partners in the Republic, the Orfella and the forces of Ramadan Esh Shitewi es Aweihli, clashed, and the latter was killed. Earlier, in 1916, an attempt by the Sanusj to unite the country under their flag had failed because of the long-standing conflict between the Bedouin and interior groupings of Tripolitania, to which most of the Sanusi supporters belonged, and the urban and coastal forces. The two sides had met in battle and the Sanusi had withdrawn, to set the limit of Sanusi influence in the interior.

Even before the Fascist march on Rome, Italy was disillusioned with her attempt at rule by compromise in Libya, and her generals prepared to change their tactics and commence the reconquest of Tripolitania. It was as renewed offensives were

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imminent that Tripolitania, which had been unable to produce leader or political force capable of uniting the disparate strains in the region, turned to the Sanusi as a possible source of unity. In April 1922 Idris was offered recognition as the Amir of all Libya. His dilemma was acute: to accept would snap already strained relations with Italy; to refuse meant offending Tripolitania. He was already compromised among his followers for his treaties with Italy. Idris played for time and then left the country for Egypt; where he had long made financial preparations for this eventuality out of the Italian subsidies.<sup>11</sup> Idris did not return to Cyrenaica until almost the end of the Second World War in 1943. Though many of the Shaikhs and Brothers of the Sanusi Order played a leading part in the prolonged resistance that followed, the Sanusi family as such 'played an inconspicuous and inglorious part in the resistance'.<sup>12</sup> Idris was a quietist. He was 'temperamentally prone to vacillation and evasion', with an 'aversion for directness in thought or action'.<sup>13</sup> This and his long exiled isolation from the struggle of his people notwithstanding, Britain continued – as she had from 1914, when Idris had first made contact with British political authorities in Cairo on his way from Mecca – to favour and promote his pretensions to leadership of the Bedouin in Cyrenaica.

By 1923, with Idris in exile, with the Fascist take-over of Italy complete, with the hope of a solid anti-Italian front of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania foundering, and with Italian forces re-occupying all the coast from Tunisia to the Gulf of Sirte, the second Sanusi-Italian war of 1923-32 had started. The classic account – by a Westerner – of this guerrilla war is by Evans-Pritchard,<sup>14</sup> the eminent British anthropologist who had served as Political Officer to the British Military Administration of Cyrenaica. He describes it as a war of the Bedouin, asserting that the townsmen played little active part in the resistance, even where they sympathized with it. Some of the tribes remained passive and some collaborated, for they had a history of intercourse with the towns and the Turkish administration, and when the Italians took over from Turkey that intercourse was resumed. But the nomadic warlike and powerful looked not to the coast but southwards to the desert:

Beyond striking-distance by horse-patrols, these hardy wanderers of the steppe, whose history was nothing more than a long record of tribal wars, had paid scant attention to the Turks, had refused in the first Italian war to make terms, had disdainfully turned their backs on the intruders during the ensuing years of peace, and were now to offer a stubborn resistance to renewed aggression.

The interior, and not the towns, offered the terrain and other conditions for guerrilla war. But the stress on countryside rather than generalized resistance is probably overdone. For many who fought in the Jebel were from the towns; and in the end martyrs and collaborators were of fairly similar proportion among Bedouin and townsmen.

Italian tactics were to exploit old feuds, to run furrows of blood (*solei di sangue*) between tribe and tribe and one section and another, and to seek out collaborationists to be used against the patriots, or the *rebelli*. But even among those guilty of the worst complicity, the Bedouin who joined the Italian forces as irregulars, police, labourers, and camelmen, there was assistance to the patriots when the opportunity presented itself. Battalions drawn from the submissive elements of the population constituted a sort of supply depot of men, arms, and ammunition for the Sanusi formations. Omar Mukhtar, the indomitable and best-known soldier-patriot of the resistance, was said to have agents in every Italian post. Some supposedly submissive populations allowed their horses to graze far from their campso that the patriots could borrow them for operational purposes. 'So useful was a submitted population to the patriots that the tribal shaikhs sometimes arranged among themselves who should submit and who take the field.' Even the tribal shaikhs on government subsidy paid a tithe to Omar Mukhtar. There were said to be two governments of Cyrenaica, Italian and Sanusi, and they were the government of the day and the government of the night. Each Bedouin tribe maintained its own guerrilla band; and though by the end of the war the guerrillas did not total more than 600 to 700, since only a certain number of men could maintain themselves on the country and move through it with speed and secrecy, the resistance flourished on the support of the population. 'All Cyrenaica was hard hostile rock beneath the



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shallowest covering of local collaboration.'The Italians found themselves fighting not an army but a people.

There were, according to Evans-Pritchard, roughly three military phases in the war. In the first the Italians attempted to subdue the Bedouin through the use of regular army units. In the second they made greater use of aeroplanes and small motorized units. In the final stage they employed the strategy of massive concentration camps and the pacification methods of modern counter-insurgency campaigns.

In the later phase of the resistance, when Graziani was determined to wrest the initiative from the guerrillas, he re-organized his forces in the *guerra senza quartiere* into small mobile patrols, to keep the whole of the forest country under surveillance and to attack the enemy wherever they met him giving him no rest. To prevent the guerrillas from obtaining supplies and reinforcements from the civilian population, he disarmed the tribesmen, confiscating from them thousands of rifles and millions of rounds of ammunition, and made possession of arms a capital offence. He instituted the *tribunale volante*, a military court flown from point to point : to try, and execute, all who had dealings of any kind with the guerrillas. He reduced the Libyan Uj}its by more than two thirds with the intention of eventually disbanding them altogether.. In the meanwhile he distributed among the 750 Libyans retained in service rifles of a different calibre from the rifles in patriot hands to prevent leakage of ammunition. At the same time he closed the Sanusiya lodges, confiscated their estates, and exiled their shaikhs.

For years a considerable part of the guerrilla supplies had come from Egypt, paid for by Bedouin produce, by money raised by customs charges, and by funds collected throughout the Arab and Moslem world. The guerrillas steadily found themselves cut off from local sources of supply and forced more and more to rely on Egypt for the bare necessities of life and of war. When the patrolling of the frontier by armoured cars and planes, with instructions to destroy any caravans they spotted, did not prevent supplies from coming in or refugees from going out, Graziani ran a line of barbed wire entanglements from the sea to the sand

dunes in the south, a distance of over 300 kilometres.<sup>15</sup> Thus was the country scourged into submission.<sup>16</sup>

By the close of the struggle the Bedouin population of Cyrenaica was reduced by a half to two thirds through death and emigration; while the Sanusi Order was disrupted, and its lands confiscated and, when suitable, handed out to Italian colonists. Italian administrative policy was directed at compelling the Bedouin to settle – but away from the fertile plateau. By 1935 these lands had been reserved for metropolitan colonization. The aim was to abolish the traditional Bedouin way of life altogether and to make the Bedouin themselves peasant-tenants of the State, and wage labourers. This required the destruction of their tribal and kinship institutions – tribal shaikhs were displaced by direct military rule – and an end to patriarchal agriculture. It was hoped to avoid the growth of a metropolitan proletariat, by making the Bedouin a cheap reserve of labour for general unskilled work and/or seasonal labour on the farms of the colonists. For political reasons the Italian administration also created Arab colonization centres similar to those built for Italian immigrants. Like the Italian, the Arab colonist was first to be salaried labour, then partner with the State, then mortgagee and finally owner. The administration found difficulty in creating Arab colonists, however, for the Bedouin showed no inclination to work as serfs.<sup>17</sup> In the administration Arabs were employed in only minor posts, so that almost no elite was formed. By 1940 there were only fourteen Arabs employed in the civil service other than in menial jobs. And these Arab bureaucrats were mostly townsmen from Derna and Benghazi; some of them were members of respectable families from the Turkish days, but most had a record of close and active collaboration with the Italian system as spies, guides, interpreters, and overseers of concentration camps. Towards the end of Italian rule these were being replaced by a new class of officials brought up in the towns under Italian rule and educated in Italian-Arab schools. Evans-Pritchard describes them as markedly preoccupied with their own affairs, uninterested in the benefit of the people as a whole, and hostile to the Bedouin. They were easily susceptible to disaffection nonetheless, and very ready to cooperate with the

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British when the war brought them into Cyrenaica.<sup>18</sup> With the onset of independence, these same officials were absorbed into that government administration.

Italian land acquisition had totalled less than 10,000 hectares by the end of 1923, but it rose to twenty times that area in the next five years.<sup>19</sup> By 1940 Italian colonizing efforts were making possible the intensive use of irrigated land by Italian colonists. There were orchards in the coastal plain and northern hill lands in the west, and crops were being grown from Zwara to Misurata. In Cyrenaica settlement estates were still in the early stages of reclamation when the Second World War broke out; but again the land was producing more than it had done probably since Roman cultivation times<sup>20</sup> - for Italian settlers.

Mussolini had declared in 1934: 'Civilization, in fact, is what Italy is creating on the Fourth Shore of our sea (Libya-R.F.); Western civilization in general and Fascist civilization in particular.' But it was less for Fascist ideals than in expectation of a worthwhile return on their investments, a commentator writes,<sup>21</sup> that Italian capitalists, led by the colony's most energetic governor, started large-scale agricultural development in Tripolitania. The governor, Guiseppi Volpi, himself acquired a big estate near Misurata, and encouraged others to follow his example. Land was sold, mortgaged, or rented in large concessions by the State and was worked, under Italian supervision and with Italian capital, by hired Libyan labour and by some Italian peasant families. The colonial government acquired land either by confiscating it from 'rebels', or, following a decree of 1922, by taking over uncultivated land for 'public use'. The government invoked Turkish and Moslem land-tenure laws which, broadly speaking, recognized as its owner anyone who settled on and cultivated previously untilled and ownerless ground.<sup>22</sup> But the big concession system was not part of official Fascist colonial policy. Mussolini wanted Italy's landless peasants and unemployed to settle in Libya with their families and establish their own farms; he did not approve of scarce Italian capital being used to pay Libyans to work rich men's estates.<sup>23</sup> In later years the concessionaires were obliged to employ and settle Italian families on the land under long-term

contracts. When 'demographic colonization' really got going in the thirties, state-aided peasant colonists were recruited in thousands at a time. Methods used in the Pontine Marshes and other Fascist land-settlement and reclamation schemes in Italy were applied. This involved generous state aid to make colonial farming a success. 'Demographic colonization' was costly, and the state was estimated to have spent over £4 million (pre-war) on the 1938 migration alone, even before the colonists arrived on Libyan soil. Had the war not broken out there would have been 100,000 settlers in the country by 1942, and the settlement of half a million was planned by the early sixties.

Fascist Libya, it has been said,<sup>24</sup> was not an African colony, but a colony of Europeans in Africa, where 'immigrants were encouraged and helped by the state to acquire and farm land, and where rule by the mother country was first and foremost in the interests of these settlers'. Colonialism in Libya was practised according to the theories of Fascism. Libyans were enrolled in the army and fought in the Abyssinian campaign; they gave the Fascist salute, wore black shirts, and cheered Mussolini. Libyan youth had its own Fascist organization. But above all Libyans provided a core of manual labourers. In 1939 Libyans were given their first opportunity to apply for Special Italian Citizenship (*Cittadinanza italiana speciale*). 'The small Libyan intellectual class,' Wright observes:

was either *in* exile or voiceless and all opposition had been too recently and ruthlessly stamped out for embryo independence movements to cause trouble. The traditional structure of tribal authority was deliberately weakened by the appointment of one 'leader' to as few as twelve tribesmen. In Fezzan the Italians abolished the Jemaa, or councils of family heads, which were genuine popular assemblies, and instead exercised authority through suitable Mudirs. Fascism taught Libyans, as well as Italians, to do as they were told.<sup>25</sup>

By 1938 the colony had a population of just over 880,000 of which 10 per cent (89,000) were Italians and about 86 per cent (763,000) Libyan Moslems.

Freya Stark paid a visit to Bengazi just before the war. She described

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colonial Italians strolling in family phalanxes at leisure after the working hours of the day . . . in the squares . . . and here I gradually began to be puzzled. Something was missing and I noticed that it was the raucous Arab voice of the Levant. The crowds moved in a silence that sounded European to anyone familiar with the East . . . I discovered a boot-black . . . when he had done polishing my shoes I thanked him in Arabic; he looked at me, startled and fled without being paid. I began to feel a quagmire beneath this gay little town, a deadening substratum of fear. 'There must be Arabs somewhere,' I thought and spent what remained of the daylight trying to find them; and did eventually, in a little ghetto of squalid streets far back from the sea. A throttled horror made me wish never to visit Benghazi again.<sup>26</sup>

Only months after Italy entered the Second World War, she used her Libyan bases to push deep into Egypt. The prize was Cairo and control of the Suez Canal.

Britain and France raced one another for possession of Libya's parts. Free French forces under General Leclerc staged a forced march over forgotten caravan routes and surprised the Italian post at Murzuq. Then General Leclerc began to advance his forces northwards. British officers, sent to him at Fort Lamy, carried a letter signed by General Alexander asserting the desirability of a British military **a stration**. But General Leclerc had received instructions from General de Gaulle that the British officers posted to him should be returned to Cairo, and that any territory occupied by the Fighting Free French was to be administered under General Leclerc's authority.<sup>27</sup>

Since General Leclerc was an independent commander and was not under the immediate orders of either General Alexander or General Montgomery, it was not possible on legal grounds to dispute the attitude adopted by General de Gaulle and it only remained for us to press the War Office to endeavour to come to some amicable arrangement with the Free French authorities in London.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the war, uncertainty remained about who was to be responsible for the administration of the conquered territory; North Africa was still under discussion within the British and American High Command.<sup>29</sup> In 1944 a query to Britain's Foreign Office from the Treasury about the future of Libya brought the response: 'All we can possibly say is that we simply

do not know.<sup>30</sup> Its forecast was that none of the Libyan areas would return to *direct* Italian rule, although there was a possibility of the Italians being admitted to a share at least in the rule of Tripolitania. Major Evans-Pritchard, then of the British Military Administration of Cyrenaica, wrote a memorandum at the beginning of 1944 maintaining that Cyrenaica was closely bound to Egypt and suggesting that it be placed under Egyptian sovereignty as a semi-autonomous state. His memorandum was forwarded to Anthony Eden by the British Ambassador in Cairo. It prompted a Chiefs of Staff memorandum shortly afterwards which urged that Cyrenaica become an autonomous principality under Egyptian suzerainty but with international supervision and adequate safeguards which would include 'naval and air base facilities in the Benghazi area'. Tripolitania, it was suggested, should be restored to Italy, subject to Britain's retaining an airfield at Castel Benito as a staging point. As for the French in the Fezzan, 'any reasonable frontier adjustment should be agreed to'.<sup>31</sup>

During the early British military occupation of Cyrenaica, there had been consternation among the Sanusi at the continuance of the Italian administrative structure, and it was at this time that Idris made representations to the British government for a commitment that it would not countenance the return of Cyrenaica to Italy.<sup>32</sup> Not long afterwards, the British administration received a petition from a 'clique of Tripolitanian refugees' who had always been opposed to the Sanusi and had refused to take part in the formation of Britain's Libyan-Arab force, based on the Sanusi army and which subsequently developed into Libya's army. The Tripolitanians had requested permission to recruit their own force; this was refused on the grounds that Britain could not have two rival Libyan forces operating. One of the petitioners was a younger brother of Ramadan Esh Shitewi es Aweilih. The petitioners proposed the formation of a committee of leading Tripolitanians to maintain relations with the British administration; the suggestion had a cold reception.<sup>33</sup> The wartime reserve of Tripolitanians about taking part in British military operations – expressed in 1940 at a meeting of emigres in Cairo – arose from their insistence on a

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firm prior commitment from Britain for the future independence of their country. They objected, further, to the application by Idris of the term 'Sanusi' to all who desired to cooperate. They were prepared to come forward but without acknowledging Sanusi leadership, for they objected to Sanusi leadership over Tripolitania.<sup>34</sup> But Britain had decided which forces within Libya to support, and all others were irrelevant.

## 4 Independence through Cold-War Diplomacy

War has been called the midwife not only of revolutions, but of nations. While the World War of 1914-18 was a turning-point in the formation of the older-established Arab states, and it was the Second World War of 1939-45 which transformed the political face of Asia, it was the Cold War which gave Libya formal independence. This is not to say that the state of Libya must be seen entirely as a diplomatic creation of the West.<sup>1</sup> The political association of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and the Fezzan antedated the Italian conquest by hundreds of years, as in the establishment of an Ottoman administration for the region; and, above all, common cause, if not unified structures, had grown against the Italian invader. But once the Italian occupation had been replaced by British and French, it was committees of the United Nations which brought about the formation of a Libyan government and played overseer to the transfer of power from the administrations of the occupying powers.

With Italy defeated in war and Britain and France in occupation of Libya, the colonial powers with which the United Nations had to deal, whatever their interests in the region, had not been the country's original colonial masters; this made the task of formalizing Libya's independence far easier. The story of that accession to independence is nonetheless bewildering. It winds through the tortuous diplomacy of the major powers as they adjusted to the power balances of the post-war world, for the creation of the independent state of Libya was directly determined by their shifting interests and changing perceptions. Unlike Europe's experience of the growth of nation-states, Libya was created a state from without, and only then did she begin to try to assemble a nation from the parts which over centuries had



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been separated from one another by successive foreign occupations as well as her hostile geography.

In the post-war North African region, Libya's independence was something of an anomaly. It was 1955 and 1956, and in the case of Algeria 1962, before the Maghreb countries attained sovereign government. The independence they struggled for, a prostrate and ruined Libya suddenly had thrust upon her by a diplomatic pact of the Big Powers and the small. It was a measure of the confidence of the powers which traditionally controlled the Mediterranean that nothing present or promised in Libyan post-Independence politics was likely to disturb the balance in the region.

Perhaps it was an inevitable culmination of a past in which a succession of alien powers had arbitrarily disposed of Libya that the fiercest controversies over the form of her independence took place not inside the country but in the corridors and cabinet rooms of the big powers. There the focus was not on the needs and problems of Libya but on the state interests of the power-brokers in an area that had been a central battleground of the war and was a strategic prize in any future conflict. But while initially the competitive purposes of the powers worked against the chances of a united Libya, for they pulled her several parts to their own centres of strategic gravity, ultimately the agreement between the governments of the West that at all costs the Soviet Union had to be kept out of the Mediterranean served to subdue their contesting claims and permitted an at least nominally independent Libya to break out of the diplomatic impasse. In its protracted passage through interminable international proceedings, the Libyan issue showed all the signs of being an instrument of outside purposes. Among the powers there were eccentric switches of policy and inexplicable changes of pace. In 1948 a four-power commission visited the country and unanimously agreed that Libya was neither economically self-supporting, nor politically ready for independence. A year later a United Nations resolution decided her independence.

After the war, as much as during it, the Italian colonies of Somaliland, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Libya were strategic outposts for the control of north-east Africa and the eastern basin of the

Mediterranean. But though the other three controlled the land bridge between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, it is Libya's coastline that runs for 1,200 miles opposite the belly of Europe, from Sicily to Cyprus. During the critical war years of 1941 and 1942, the Axis had demonstrated that possession of the Tripoli–Benghazi–Sicily triangle, together with control of the Aegean islands, could effectively nullify sea-power in the eastern Mediterranean. After the war it was the requirements of strategic air warfare – lands spacious and desolate enough for the long-range land-based bomber – which placed a premium on Libya's shores and vast spaces, which were ideal for reconnoitring and controlling sea routes, and for asserting and protecting further-flung operations.

At the Potsdam conference, the Big Four had agreed that under the peace treaty, Italy would renounce all right and tide to these territories, and their disposal would be the joint decision of the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Between them Britain and France now held *de facto* control, and they were anxious to keep it. After her reverses in Egypt and Palestine, Britain's Middle East defence system was in danger of collapse, and she needed a compensatory balance in the Mediterranean, as close as possible to the Suez Canal. Her military administration in Cyrenaica could not have been better placed. In the big-power negotiations which ensued, Britain's purpose was a British-sponsored Sanusi amirate over Cyrenaica; which made her the principal protagonist for a divided Libya. France was anxious to hold on to the Fezzan, already securely garrisoned by her troops; for her colonial empire in North Africa was in jeopardy, and the Fezzan not only linked French possessions in the Maghreb with those in Central Africa but was also a buffer territory protecting the exposed flank of her empire in Algeria. France thus laid claim to Fezzan and all Libya south of the Tropic of Cancer; while arguing for the return of Tripolitania to Italy, since this would placate the defeated power in Europe and would at the same time provide another controlled area adjoining the French-run Maghreb.

But if Britain and France were the powers on the ground in Libya, determined to remain there in one form or another, the

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balance of power in the Mediterranean, as in the Middle East, the Pacific, and the Far East, was coming essentially to be controlled by the United States.<sup>2</sup> The war had transformed the world's industrial power structure. Three quarters of the world's invested capital and two thirds of industrial capacity were concentrated inside the United States. United States-troops were stationed on every continent and in scores of countries, among them Libya. By the end of the war the United States had spent 100 million dollars on developing Wheelus airfield, on the outskirts of Tripoli. It was the first American air base in Africa. Yet as late as 1947, though the United States had given notice of her intention to maintain the Wheelus base, there seemed to be no serious disposition on her part to expand it. The Middle East was considered, as it had been for more than a century, an area in which Britain's interests and responsibilities were paramount. In the immediate post-war years America saw herself acting as a mediator between Britain and the Soviet Union in the Mediterranean. Her policy was one of 'limited diplomacy' in the Middle East; and until 1951, when Greece and Turkey were enrolled in NATO and the United States became a direct contestant in the Mediterranean, she seemed to be fumbling for a policy on Libya. The State Department's Office of European Affairs was obsessed with the role of the Soviet Union in the Mediterranean and was in favour of the return of Libya to Italy. But the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs saw the newly devised system of international trusteeship as a way of taking the territory 'out of European politics'; for, it was argued, the war had already amply demonstrated the security interests of the United States in North and West Africa, not to mention the oil areas of the 'not so distant Middle East'.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, the United States proposed a ten-year period of collective trusteeship under United Nations auspices, after which Libya would become independent. This, argued Secretary of State Byrnes, would ensure that Libya would not be developed for the military advantage of any one power; though the United States indicated that she was interested, with Britain's agreement, in a permanent air base.<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union argued that as

Britain was already in military occupation of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and France of the Fezzan, the country should be divided into four instead of three parts; with each to be administered by one of the Big Four, and with herself in Tripolitania. Thus, wrote an appreciative American government commentator, were Britain and France 'rescued from the thankless task' of leading the opposition to the United States proposal for trusteeship; now all three of the Western powers could unite against the fourth party to the talks, and against any 'intrusion of the Soviet camel's nose into the Libyan tent'.<sup>5</sup>

The issue was thus deadlocked between the Big Four, and as time went by it became steadily more intractable. Relations between the powers deteriorated sharply over issues like German reparations, the Balkans, and Iran. On Libya, three of the Big Four changed their positions. Washington and Whitehall differed over details; but on the whole there was a convergence of American, British, French, and Italian policies, and a sharpening cleavage between these and the Soviet Union's. The United States tried not to veer too far from Britain's position, but at the same time she needed to find a suitable compromise with France and Italy so as not to rupture the *entente* that was shaping round the Marshall Plan.

Italian claims that the blatant imperialism of the recent past had vanished with Mussolini began to find sympathetic ears among those who calculated that Italy could be useful in the balancing of Mediterranean power. The powers that had forced Italy to surrender all claim to her colonies were the same ones now lending support to her claims for their restoration. There had also been second thoughts in Washington about the principle of international trusteeship. For if the principle was good enough for Libya, might it not be extended to the handling of all enemy colonies? The United States was not prepared to have any 'trusteeship principle applied to the Pacific Islands. It seemed best to drop this proposal and search for some compromise between the British and French positions. Britain, however, also changed her policy at this point, finding it difficult to discount the pressures of the Arab League and the Sanusi, who harped

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constantly on Eden's House of Commons pledge of 1942, that under no circumstances would the Sanusi of Cyrenaica fall at the end of the war under Italian domination.<sup>6</sup>

Ernest Bevin, then Britain's Foreign Secretary, decided to seize the initiative with a proposal for independence of Libya. The United States agreed on independence *within* a specified time, but after a period of trusteeship under Italy. Foreign Minister Molotov, for the Soviet Union, argued that Britain's independence proposal was predicated on British domination of the country through its ties with Cyrenaica and was thus unacceptable. Instead he proposed a plan for four individual trusteeships, each under one of the Big Four. It was almost identical to the American proposal of six months earlier, and would have left Cyrenaica to Britain and the Fezzan to France. But it was by now too late. Under the pretext of a programme designed ostensibly to contain expansion by Communist powers, but in fact to contain social revolution wherever it might break out, the United States was launched *into* the Cold War; this power now precipitately abandoned its original trusteeship position. Next the Soviet Union changed the plan for Big Four trusteeships and supported the return of Libya to Italy, under trusteeship supervision; for *in* Italy the 1948 election offered the prospect of a strong swing to the Left. The proposal was calculated to thwart British control over Cyrenaica and to lose her Benghazi and Tobruk, the two important coastal positions *in* British strategy in the eastern Mediterranean.

The powers were still deadlocked. When the Four-Power Commission of Foreign Ministers sent fact-finding missions to Libya itself, to ascertain the views of the local population, the facts adduced by the contesting powers differed almost as widely as their policies. The British-French-United States version laid emphasis on the difference and separateness of the three zones. (A French annotation to this report read conveniently: 'In the Fezzan the inhabitants appear to be content with the present administration and to have given little thought to a change of regime.') The Soviet text stressed not diversity but the essential unity of Libya:

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Local differences accentuated in the post-war period, owing to the artificial political division of this integral territory, recede into the background before its natural and social unity . . . The post-war differentiating factors connected mainly with foreign interests are an obstacle to the normal economic and social development of Libya and are largely counter-balanced by the integrating factors connected with the national interests of the Libyans themselves.

The upshot of both texts was nonetheless that the territory was too dependent on foreign aid to *be* ready for immediate independence.

The Peace Treaty had provided that if the Big Four could not agree on Libya, the issue was to *be* taken to the General Assembly of the United Nations. A rather different *set* of rules applied there. A unanimous decision was no longer necessary, and no power exercised a veto. There was more room for compromise, though also more opportunity for an almost unlimited range and number of proposals (as was shown by the rush of disparate solutions). Libyan parties and organizations could *be* heard. Debates were conducted in public.

This did not keep Britain and Italy from a final fling of secret diplomacy in the shape of the Bevin-Sforza agreement. The two foreign secretaries, Ernest Bevin and Count Carlo Sforza, arranged between themselves a package *deal* which gave Britain trusteeship over Cyrenaica; Italy, trusteeship over Tripolitania, and France, trusteeship over the Fezzan. It was now four years after the end of the war, and Britain was more anxious than ever to consolidate her position in the Mediterranean and the Near East, while Italy was still hoping to regain at least part of her lost empire. The agreement was a blatant infringement of the terms of the Peace Treaty, which both Britain and Italy had signed. It was supported by the United States and by the Latin American countries which had *been* mobilized by Italian diplomacy. It was repudiated by the Soviet Union, and by the Arab and Asian states. It provoked heated protests in Libya. But it *seemed* that Britain might succeed in steamrolling the plan through the General Assembly. When a count was taken, it was found that a single vote might tip the balance either way. A Libyan

canvasser in the lobbies, who worked at the time as an official of the Arab League, found the decisive vote in the shape of the Haitian delegate, M. Emile Saint Lot. M. Saint Lot did not return to Haiti. In Tripoli, however, there is a street named after him.

With the defeat of the Bevin-Sforza deal, a solution seemed more elusive than ever. But suddenly and unexpectedly independence for Libya was in the air. Two weeks after the defeat of the Bevin-Sforza plan, Britain announced that she had granted partial self-government to Cyrenaica and that in time this was to be followed by independence. Britain was to retain control of foreign relations and defence; and all airfields and military installations would continue to be occupied by British troops. But the Sanusi government would handle internal affairs. Britain was to build on a presence she already had, and the implication was that France could proceed to do the same.

Britain made the decision unilaterally, behind the back of the United Nations but after due consultation with the United States and France (and South Africa, Canada, and New Zealand, her dominions). The Italian government had been informed before the public announcement,<sup>7</sup> and Italy promptly dropped her own claims.

Why the switch in Anglo-American policy? It was apparently in the summer of 1949 that the United States and Britain had set to work and had succeeded in convincing Italy that the solution would be to grant all of Libya independence as soon as possible.<sup>8</sup> The reasons that these two powers decided to push for independence are not as yet explicitly stated in any public official document.<sup>9</sup> But it had dawned on them that, first, they would not achieve the required measure of international agreement for British control over Libya, whether in whole or in part, unless this was linked with the promise of independence; and, secondly, that any trusteeship agreement, whether collective or single-nation, would involve the surrender of their bases. Villard, who had chaired the State Department's sub-committee on the future of the Italian colonies and who was to be his country's first ambassador to independent Libya, subsequently set out the case with some **fr** **ess**:

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It may be worth noting that **if** Libya had passed under any form of United Nations trusteeship, it would have been impossible for the Territory to play a part in the defence arrangements of the free world. Under the U.N. trusteeship system the administrator of a trust territory cannot establish military bases; only in the case of a strategic trusteeship as in the former Japanese islands of the Pacific are fortifications allowed; and a 'strategic trusteeship' is subject to veto in the Security Council.

But, he added:

As an independent entity Libya could freely enter into treaties or arrangements with the Western powers looking towards the defence of the Mediterranean and North Africa. This is exactly what the Soviet Union feared and what Libya did. The strategic sector of African seacoast which had proved so important in the mechanized war of the desert was coming into *its* own as a place of equal importance in the air age.<sup>10</sup>

It was only at a late stage in the long drawn-out diplomatic deadlock over Libya that Western policy makers came to this recognition. But once the Cold War had begun to grow hot – the Korean War broke out in 1950 – United States military planners resolved that the bases in Libya were not only useful but indispensable. Suitably handled, the grant of independence would make Libya safe for American and British bases and would keep the Soviet Union out of the Mediterranean. (It also, to Britain's satisfaction, got France out of the Fezzan, after many decades of Anglo-French rivalry in Central Africa.) Italy was mollified by being given the trusteeship of Somalia in return for the withdrawal of all claims over Libya. And in the Arab world the bestowal of independence upon Libya helped Anglo-American exertions to woo the Arab League and Arab states in the Cold War and, especially after the defeat of Arab forces in Palestine in 1948, to conciliate Arab opinion.

Thus it was recognized, admittedly late in the day, that far from independence being an obstacle, it could prove indispensable to the full utilization of Libya's strategic position, as long as there was the certainty that Libya could be depended upon to join the strategic alliance of the Western powers. This was where



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Britain's carefully laid designs for Cyrenaica fitted. The United Nations resolution for Libyan independence was adopted in November 1949 and provided that independence for Libya was to become effective by the beginning of 1952 at the latest.<sup>11</sup> Ten weeks before the resolution went through the General Assembly, Britain anticipated it by granting internal autonomy to Cyrenaica. His Majesty's Government, Britain's *delegae* told the United Nations:

could not continue to refuse the people of Cyrenaica its indisputable right to the greatest possible measure of self-government consistent with the international obligations of the United Kingdom Government . . . The Government has therefore given the Emir of Cyrenaica absolute powers in the internal affairs of that territory . . . Faced with a demand from representatives of the people of Cyrenaica for independence . . . the Government . . . had decided . . . it could do no less than grant Cyrenaica that full measure of self-government . . .<sup>12</sup>

Britain's domination of the Arab world had been characterized by its reliance on existing political structures built into a relationship of patronage with the imperial power, and this functioned most smoothly in the areas where traditionalism held strongest sway. The Sanusi monarchy was an ideal basis for the application of this pattern to Libya. Britain would introduce legal and constitutional changes to transform a patriarchal emirate into a constitutional monarchy leaning heavily on British tutelage; simultaneously Britain's control over the Sanusi-run part of Libya would determine the pattern of control in the rest of the country. By the time that the independence resolution was passed and the United Nations was beginning to assemble the machinery for the preparation of independence, the former British military administration had already gone over to the services of the Cyrenaican government. The former Chief Administrator had become British Resident controlling foreign affairs and defence. A draft of Cyrenaican laws to replace the Italian legal code was in the press. Plans were afoot to build a Cyrenaican army on the model of Jordan's Arab Legion. And a treaty was being prepared to give Cyrenaica nominal independence with continuing British control of defence facilities. When United Nations teams arrived in the country, negotiations for the signing of a defence

treaty were already completed. Britain had begun to pre-empt the decisions that the new state had yet to take.

The United Nations Commissioner in Libya, Adrian Pelt,<sup>13</sup> the former UN Assistant Secretary-General from the Netherlands, saw his mission as a race against time; for if the timetable for independence was not adhered to, the future of Libya would once again have become a pawn in the game played by the powers, and there might have been a reversion to the Bevin-Sforza agreement or something similar, which would have defeated any prospect of a unified state. So he stuck rigorously to the letter of the UN Resolution and its time-limit, and succeeded in steering Libya to independence within the prescribed period even if he could not steer past the obstacles erected by the occupying powers and the political forces they patronized.

The emphasis of the UN Resolution was on the creation of an independent and unified state. France dragged her feet to the end by suggesting, even when the resolution had been adopted, that the three separate governments of the three zones should be granted independence in the near future but not at any fixed time. She was still fearful of the chain reaction in North Africa to the establishment of a new independent state, and there was a smell of oil in the Saharan air, if French and other geologists were right.<sup>14</sup> M. Couve de Murville's statement, Pelt commented, sounded like a forecast of the policies which the United Kingdom and France were to follow in Libya in 1950 and the first part of 1951, when the powers in occupation devised plans not aimed at unity but at autonomy for their separate spheres of influence.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Pelt added, 'the already semi-independent status conferred on Cyrenaica created a disquieting precedent that was in utter conflict with the General Assembly resolution'.

On the eve of his departure for Libya, the UN Commissioner received a confidential memorandum from the British Foreign Office setting out a plan not for any steps towards a unified state but for Tripolitanian regional self-government and autonomy on the Cyrenaican model. One of the effects on Tripolitania was to divide older traditional leaders, whose political ambitions had been stifled under the Italian occupation and who were strongly

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tempted by the opportunities they saw in the British plan, from the younger nationalist generation, which understood that local government according to Britain's specifications would jeopardize the goal of Libyan unity.

Once the UN Resolution was adopted, France introduced into the Fezzan administrative measures similar to those enacted by Britain in Cyrenaica and proposed for Tripolitania. She installed a transitional regime with powers confined to internal policy which were vested in the Fezzan's traditional head Saif Ahmed Seif al-Nasr, a prominent member of the Sanusi Order whose property had been confiscated under the Italian administration, and who had returned from Chad with the Free French forces. Seif al-Nasr, it was announced, had been elected *chef du territoire* by an assembly of representatives. But in fact this area of scattered oasis villages remained under the control of the French military administration which, like the British, used the period of transition to make suitable dispositions for the shape of independence.

Pelt has described the identity of purpose between British and French policy and yet the difference between the way these two colonial administrations went about it:

In Tripolitania the British authorities used indirect tactics, carefully supponing certain political parties and opposing others, in an endeavour to promote controlled emancipation . . . In the economic and social fields British policy had been considerably more constructive, particularly in the educational factor, though its implementation was hampered by the 'care and maintenance' mentality born of the knowledge that British rule in the territory 'was not intended to endure . . . In Cyrenaica, where the United Kingdom had more immediate and more lasting interests both its constitutional and economic and social policies had been taken considerably further . . . In the Fezzan by contrast the French administration, while ostensibly trying to match British policy in Cyrenaica, went about matters in its own way; in practice it held up constitutional development by repressive measures, the intensity of which varied from oasis to oasis and village to village. At the same time it introduced economic measures which considerably improved living conditions in the territory.<sup>16</sup>

French policy thus showed a dual aspect: 'conservative in the political field but progressive in the economic and social sectors'.

Trying to convince the British Foreign Office that the premature establishment of an independent Cyrenaica would endanger the creation of a united Libya and that any bilateral British-Cyrenaican agreement would run counter to the UN decision, the UN Commissioner sought a prolonged audience with the Sanusi Amir. And during this discussion it emerged that the Amir was already fully engaged in long-term treaty negotiations with Britain which would allow British forces to remain on Cyrenaican soil in return for badly needed financial aid. Idris did not feel free to show his copy of the draft treaty to the UN Commissioner but he suggested that the latter ask Britain for a copy. The British Resident replied that it was a confidential document which could not be divulged without authority from the Foreign Office. By the time a copy of the draft treaty was handed to the Commissioner, 'every Tom, Dick and Harry in Benghazi knew that a treaty was being negotiated between the Amir and the United Kingdom and that its signing was expected in the near future'.<sup>11</sup>

Pelt bent his energies to persuading Britain that no agreement committing the as yet unborn state to a military pact should be signed until a provisional Libyan government had been constituted. It was evidently not so much the principle of the military treaty but the inexpediency of its timing that would be damaging to the UN mission. In the course of a long session at the Foreign Office 'gradually it became clear that an understanding might be reached subject to Cabinet approval'.<sup>18</sup> This 'understanding deferred the *quid pro quo* pact between Britain and Cyrenaica till after the declaration of independence'. But it also recorded the opinion not only of the British government but also of the UN Commissioner that a 'federal structure for the future Libyan state seemed to be in conformity with its physical conditions and political tendencies, and that the Amir appeared to be indicated as the probable head of such a state'.<sup>19</sup> Britain thus agreed to defer her plans for the Treaty; but in return the UN Commissioner had virtually agreed to underwrite them. Most of Britain's plans for Libya were falling well into place.

It was by now no secret that immediately after the declaration of independence, the agreements whose conclusion the UN

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Commissioner's intervention had postponed would be signed by the new Libyan government with Britain, and also with France, to regularize the presence of foreign troops on Libyan soil. Libyan beggars could not be choosers, Pelt commented, but he was anxious that the United Nations should not be implicated in the financial-military bargain for fear of Arab nationalist reaction and its consequences in the United Nations. He therefore advised Libya's provisional government on the financial terms of the treaties. But he covered himself in his report to the General Assembly by arguing that the government he had advised had ceased to exist as soon as foreign relations and defence powers accrued to it; that any agreement concerning foreign troops and military installations on Libyan soil was the responsibility of the new sovereign independent government; and that his function had in fact ceased momentarily before it had come into being.<sup>20</sup> Not that Pelt found much room to manoeuvre. Britain was underwriting the budget deficit under a set of temporary arrangements which were to make way for the formal treaty. And at the time Pelt tried to prevent the conclusion of the treaty, the treasury was empty and there were no monies to finance the first budget. Britain argued that only a formal agreement would justify further outlays by the British taxpayer. Pelt attempted to negotiate an interim loan, but his approach to Egypt's Wafd government failed; as Idris, well briefed by Britain, had warned that it would. It was a blatant case of a treaty in exchange for support.<sup>21</sup>

Though Britain had already decided the issue, the shape of the coming government was the subject of protracted argument among Libyans. The National Congress Party of Tripolitania, representing a large part of the coastal population, advocated a unitary form of state and proportional territorial representation in the National Assembly. Cyrenaica, supported by Fezzan, and by parts of the Tripolitanian interior, insisted, as a precondition of her participation, on a federal state and parity representation which would outweigh Tripolitania. Essentially because a federation was the only form of Libyan state that Idris – backed by Britain and the United States – was prepared to rule, this was the inevitable outcome. For by then it had come to be accepted

by all sides – by some for religious and traditional reasons, but by others for reasons of political expediency in the interests of a single state – that the recognition of the Amir as monarch was the imperative, in fact the only, basis of any unified state. The throne was offered him in December 1951. All effective decisions were taken before the first Libyan National Assembly met to draw up the Constitution. On the UN Committee of twenty-one which paved the way, Egypt and Pakistan backed the unitary aspirations of Tripolitaian nationalists. But in the end Cyrenaica gar its way. The National Assembly was not elected but selected, with the Mufti of Tripolitania composing the list of members from those in the province likely to agree with Cyrenaica and the Fezzan on the federal principle. The Tripolitaian Congress Party had originally advocated the selection principle; now it found itself, through this tactical error, largely excluded from significant decision, while the National Assembly reinforced itself by rejecting any referendum on the constitution that it had prepared. The UN Commissioner felt that the appointment rather than the election of the National Assembly left 'grave doubts in my mind as to whether **it** will have the necessary moral and political authority to elaborate a final and definite Constitution for Libya'.<sup>11</sup> In the months before independence there were angry demonstrations in Tripoli by crowds calling for a united Libya. Over 800 people were arrested on one occasion. Bur federation was the only form of state Idris would accept and in transferring power to Idris in Cyrenaica, Britain had decreed that if there was to be an independent Libyan state, it would be under the Sanusi crown. Nationalist groupings and independent individuals were completely outmanoeuvred. They found themselves powerless to reject the terms of the Constitution. Time was the ransom: if time ran our for the United Nations mandate, the future of Libya would once again become a bargaining point between the powers.

Towards the end of the transition period, when the Cyrenaican and Fezzan conditions bad prevailed on all the principal issues, Britain and France, once reluctant about imminent independence, and the United States, were suddenly eager to achieve it. The UN Commissioner bad to wam that this would cause

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speculation on 'hidden motives' and 'Machiavellian designs', one of which was the 'premature urging of independence upon a still inadequate Libyan government in order to enable the three more highly organized territorial governments to continue to function quasi-independently under an illusory federation'.<sup>23</sup> The UN Commissioner commented that it would be an exaggeration to pretend that all Libyans were happy on Independence Day. The protagonists of a unitary state found the new state insufficiently centralized; too dominated by the country's traditional forces; and providing excessive autonomy for the three provinces, so that foreign or local influence could undermine the authority of the central government. There was also grave doubt that a country as poor as Libya could support the financial burden of a federal structure.<sup>24</sup>

Britain and France had taken considerable care in shaping the political character of the new state and in ensuring the hegemony of patriarchal and tribal structures over such urban nationalist forces as had emerged. If Libya had to be insulated from the currents of Arab nationalism, imperial rule and patriarchal government had much in common. The original colonial power having been displaced by the war, the transition to independence appeared to have been amicably enough negotiated. The price, however, was a state heavily committed to the West. This was to be the fundamental cause of the coup d'etat which overturned the monarchy eighteen years later.

## 5 Palace Power

Libya found herself a federated state under a Sanusi monarch. Though resistance against Italian conquest had generated the rudiments of a state among the Bedouin, the war had in turn worked its destruction. By the end of the war the Sanusi Order had been destroyed as an organization, political, economic, and religious; and it persisted only as a sentiment 'with the Head of the Order in exile in Egypt retaining the allegiance of the Bedouin who saw in his freedom the hope of their own'.<sup>1</sup> Whereas during the Italian period Britain was prepared to recognize Idris only as head of a religious order, during the war-time mobilization he was recognized as Amir, put on stipend and authorized to recruit troops. For the needs of war propaganda, Sanusi, Cyrenaica, and Libya had been used as interchangeable concepts. Ultimately Tripolitania was forced to recognize that if she did not accept the Sanusi crown, Cyrenaica would go her own way, and hope for a unified state would be lost.

Yet even Cyrenaica, the stronghold of the Sanusi, was by no means monolithic. There were tribes and important urban centres that were opposed to Idris' installation as their monarch and Britain's instrument of control. The city of Derna in particular, the east's intellectual and political centre, was opposed to the shaping of the new state on religious lines. The Omar Mukhtar Society, formed by Libyan exiles in Egypt, came home to become the centre in Benghazi for young nationalists who were critics of the British military administration and its sponsorship of Cyrenaica separatism, and who demanded union with Tripolitania. It pressed for democratic structures and was even mildly republican. Like the Tripolitarians, the Society eventually accepted the Sanusi monarchy in the interests of a unified state;



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though by independence it had been suppressed, and its leaders were in prison for a civil disobedience campaign against the pre-independence Cyrenaican administration.

Idris's amirate was supported by Sanusi sentiment but also by the symbiosis nurtured over years between himself and Britain. The bolstering of traditional monarchies, even the creation of client rulers, was a well-tested device in the Middle East for offsetting nationalism, pan-Arabism, the pressure of the masses, and a host of related evils. Client monarchies with an impeccable record of loyalty to the British were relied upon in Iraq under Feisal, in Transjordan under his brother Abdullah, and in the Trucial States along the Arab Gulf. The House of Sanusi was comfortingly reminiscent of the Hashemite kingdom in its muster of the forces of religion behind those of a tribal principality, with Bedouin tribesmen readily available for recruitment into an internal security force. The first British Ambassador who arrived at the moment of independence came fresh from service in Jordan and was representative of the Foreign Office generation that had nurtured the Amirates as "the mainstay of British influence in the Middle East during the 'safe' years. The policy of shoring up dynastic and tribal authority was in full swing from the outset, to the consternation not only of Libyans but also of the younger generation of Arabists in the Foreign Office which had begun to perceive new social forces stirring in the Middle East and North Africa. It was not that the supervision was unwelcome; the King could conceive of nothing else, and if some of his ministers sought some other source of patronage, they envisaged the United States. The first American Ambassador chaperoned his men in the first Cabinet; they included the Minister of War 'whose undisguised ambition is to be sent to the United States', and the Finance Minister.<sup>2</sup> The economic aid dispensations under the Wheelus base agreement involved the United States in as many policy decisions as any Libyan ministry. In their day, the oil companies helped steer decisions. The story is told of the oil company executive who closed his interview *with* the Minister of Petroleum by saying 'I'm on my way to see the King; is there anything you want me to tell him?' By 1967 United States private investment in Libya stood at

\$456 million, the second highest United States investment stake on the continent after that in South Africa.

The constitution of the new state<sup>3</sup> had been drawn before the state was yet in existence, on expert advice and allegedly from several celebrated models. It claimed affinity with the American constitution; but if it was an Aplerican-type federal instrument, it was one grafted on to a traditional tribal society. It provided for a federal representative government of two chambers, together with a hereditary monarchy. Laws could be initiated by the elected House of Representatives, or by the nominated Senate, or by the King. The King himself had the power to veto legislation and to dissolve the elected parliament at his sole discretion. It was the King's absolute privilege to appoint the provincial governors or *wali*; they were answerable to neither an executive nor a legislative body. Seen from outside, Libya was one nation; experienced within, the provinces could act almost autonomously, for the federal government was dependent on the provincial governments for the implementation of its legislation. The Parliament offered only the semblance of democratic government. In theory the Cabinet was responsible to Parliament; but in practice it was an instrument of the King.

It was a Palace system of power.<sup>4</sup> The strength of the Palace system derived from two principal sources: the claim to religious legitimacy on which the Arab monarchies were founded and the religious orders they led (thus the Alawite monarchy in Morocco and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as descendants of the Prophet's family, and the Wahhibiyya and Sanusi movements of Saudi Arabia and Libya); and a tribal, regional, and even class constituency (as in Egypt where the strength of the monarchy derived from the landowning pasha class) whose fortune was indissolubly linked with the monarchical regime.

In Cyrenaica the authority of the King as Sanusi head had derived from the coincidence of the Sanusi lodges or *zawiyah* with the main points in the distribution of power in Bedouin society and economy; the shaikhs, and especially those whose authority spanned several groups, were the links between the head of the system and the corporate property-owning tribal clans, where land was owned by the *tribe* as a whole, in the

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sense that the tribe had the exclusive right to graze and use the water resources within a traditionally defined area. The political authority of the monarchy was exercised through tribal notables, who made up the Diwan or royal household. The Diwan was reinforced by the Sanusi hierarchy which controlled virtually a parallel administration through its *zawryas* and religious schools, its system of patron-client tribal relationships, and the traditional functions of the tribal shaikhs on government stipend. The inner conclave of the King and its parallel system of authority was unwritten in the constitution, but it was this court government of trusted advisers and confidants among the tribal nobility, together with a judicious selection of townsmen picked for their loyalty to the monarchy and their complicity with this system of patronage, that ran the political system. Premiers were selected for their regional origins and loyalties, and Cabinet appointments followed a rough and ready principle of tribal balance. There were ministries over which the King customarily reserved his sole right of choice, and these were the senior portfolios of Finance, Petroleum, Defence, and Interior, to which were appointed the notables of the tribes that constituted the foundations of Sanusi power in the Jebel Akhdar: principally the Barassa, but also the Ebedat, the al Hassa, the al Derisa, and al Awagir. Appointments of Tripolitarians were made in consultation with prominent families, some of whom had maintained a foothold in government from the Karamanlis through to the Turkish period and to the Italian.<sup>5</sup> Here it was not the web of social and religious groupings that was the basis of the political system but the use of government office and appointments to the administration.

The King controlled the Cabinet through his control of the Prime Minister. Cabinets were shuffled and ministers shifted frequently; this promoted ministerial instability but effectively prevented individuals from consolidating their influence. The King governed often by default rather than initiative. His technique of dealing with disputes was increasingly one of withdrawal—his retirement to Tobruk effectively removed him from the centre of government intrigue—but this entrenched authority not in the Cabinet but in the Royal Diwan. Here the pillar of the

regime were notables of the Barassa tribe and their family connections which linked together, for instance, Premier Hussein Maziq, Mahmoud Qwalatein, Commander of the Cyrenaica Defence Force (CYDEF), the King's praetorian guard in the east, and- through marriage- the Shalhi family, grandsons of the King's former retainer, who had inherited his influence in the Royal Diwan but had also become the byword for the regime's corruption.

By the end of the first year of independence, Libya had become a non-party state. A constitution intended to accommodate the monarchy had worked the other way, so that the monarchy and its traditional support had constrained the constitution. February 1952 was the first and the last occasion when elections were fought between political parties. By then the argument over the shape of independence had resolved itself into a contest for political power between two principal tendencies. The one was Cyrenaican traditional society, joined in the west by the Istiqlal party under the leadership of Salim al-Muntasser. This party represented the interests of well-established Tripolitanian business families, which had contemplated rebuilding links with Italian interests after the war but which thereafter formed associations with the British military administration and, through it, with the Sanusi. The other political tendency had formed round Bashir Bey Sa'dawi during the protests against the Bevin-Sforza Plan, when several political groupings had merged to form the National Congress Party. Rejecting the leadership of traditional society and its British associations, this tendency leaned instead to the Middle East and the Arab League.

The National Congress Party had been confident that it would sweep the board in Tripolitania and thus win an overall majority in the country which would clear the way to a revision of the constitution and an abandonment of the federal system. The party won all the seats in Tripoli City, but in the rest of the country, including Tripolitania's countryside, p):'o-government candidates scored a sweeping victory. The Congress Party concluded that government officials had tampered with the poll and rigged the counting; the results were no sooner announced than the party's supporters invaded government buildings, cut tele-

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phone wires, and interrupted transport and communications. The government ordered widespread arrests, banned the Congress Party, and expelled Sa'dawi to Egypt. The political system had crumbled even as it was still being erected.

Like the measures taken before independence against the Omar Mukhtar Society, the outlawing of the National Congress Party had serious consequences for the subsequent shape, or shapelessness, of Libyan politics. Neither of these two groupings had anything like a popular base or a coherent programme except on immediate issues; they were compacts of politically like-minded individuals and elitist intellectuals rather than mass-based campaigning movements. But they were advances on tribal and patriarchal politics, with their factional and personality intrigues. Had they survived, they might have inaugurated a style of politics that Libya had never known. After this, the party system never reappeared. When nationalist and radical groupings developed they had to function in semi-clandestine fashion.

The monarchy had rid itself of a troublesome opposition in the part of the country where it had always been insecure; but it had also rid the country of any productive political life. Libya, unlike its Maghreb neighbours, had achieved independence not because of but despite the absence of any strong nationalist movement; under independence this movement, always internally divided along regional as well as policy lines, far from reorganizing and gaining in impetus, shrivelled and died altogether. Individual opposition members abandoned politics or crossed the floor to join their one-time antagonists. Politics became the assertion of family, factional, tribal, and parochial interests and the Cabinet remained the instrument of the Palace. In subsequent elections most of the candidates were government nominees. Voting criteria were tribal and family ties and the personal influence of the candidate. Since political parties and programmes were suppressed, and government was immune to public pressure from within its own ranks or those of an opposition, governments fell essentially through conflict between them and the Palace system.<sup>6</sup> A recurring source of crisis lay in the respective powers of King and Cabinet over the provinces.

Several prime ministers resigned as a result of the interference by the Palace, direct or indirect. In seventeen years of the monarchy, there were eleven governments in all, and over 200 ministers. When the days of penury were over and the government became the major distributor of the spoils from the oil economy, the groups that had always been the dominant political constituents of the system became in turn its economic beneficiaries. Ministries seemed to change hands even faster, for men feathered their nests quickly while the chance was there.

It was oil – struck in 1955, and coursing richly through the economy by the sixties – that worked changes on the nature of government. For the British-supported monarchical structures were inadequate to the new economy, and the entry of United States capital introduced the United States policy preoccupations with North Africa. In 1963, scarcely two years after the first oil shipment, a royal decree abolished the federal system; it had proved impossible to cope with the exigencies of oil exploitation and manage the funds it generated without a centralized state.<sup>7</sup> From this time Libya also took a more Arab stance on foreign affairs as a counter to the influence of Nasser's Egypt and Algeria. The press was liberalized. But attempts to curtail the influence of tribal shaikhs in government provoked them: one instance was the CYDEF security force onslaught on the 1964 student demonstrations which brought down the government of the day and installed one that better represented the old Palace order.

The oil decade opened with a grand financial scandal that set the tone for the *enrichissez-vous* activities of the ruling group. It prompted a letter from the King to government heads which quoted the Koran on the evil of taking bribes and practising nepotism and squandering the country's wealth in secret and in public. Central figure in the Fezzan road scandal<sup>8</sup> was Sayyid Abd-Allah 'Abid, a seniormemberoftheSanusi family, who had formed a politics-for-business triumvirate with a former premier, Ben Halim, and the King's adviser, Shalhi. Favouritism had landed the contract, and government profligacy funded it. The affair was a prototype for the style of corruption that was setting in. Whereas tribes had formerly used their patrons at court to

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augment their prestige and influence, now the *tribal* notable became a political and a financial manipulator, for a larger share of government resource allocation and jobs and appointments to the favoured tribe and area. Old feuds and the regional competition between Tripolita and Cyrenaica are said to have cost millions in rivalry over allocations.

Tribal links remained strong but the beginnings of class differentiation began to cut across tribal links as a class of new rich grew under the oil economy. Palace power politics were the prerogative of a few score; now wealth came to be concentrated in much the same hands. When foreign firms needed go-betweens for contract negotiations, ministers and members of Parliament had ready access to government departments and tender boards. There were such tales as the truck driver translated into the director of a transport firm from one day to the next; but the outstanding instances of the emerging bourgeoisie were among the; men at the heart of government and close to the monarchy who manipulated high offices for business. Omar Shalhi was the most notorious example. Almost no capital went into industry. The Libyan private sector established itself in real estate and property speculation; in transport, catering, and other services auxiliary to the oil industry; in import and export and foreign trade.

After 1967 and the shaken summer of the Six Day war; an attempt was made to modernize government once again and to accommodate the rising elite of technicians and professionals. In engineer Ben Halim's Cabinet some years earlier, he had been the sole technocrat among traditionalists. Under Abdul Hamid Bakkush, a battery of young educated men gave government a new aspect; Bakkush himself, a former legal adviser to an oil company, was a protege of the Muntassers, and a technocrat used by the traditional families. Into his Cabinet he took several of his contemporaries who were proving their ability in planning and administrative capacities. Under Bakkush, French interests also established themselves; not least a French oil company. It was also Bakkush who finalized the missiles contract with the British Aircraft Corporation, and began the building of an enlarged army. The old traditional oli-

garchy was being joined by an embryonic local bourgeoisie: still scattered and without cohesion; restricted to non-productive commercial and speculative economic activity, and with the prospect of commanding only a tiny share of an economy dominated by foreign monopoly capital; but beginning to play the dominant role once held by tribal notables.

Ideological politics, as distinct from the politics of the tribe and the Palace, began slowly and tentatively as the nationalist stirrings of the Arab world began to impinge upon Libya. Egypt had always been a dominant influence. Not only the Sanusi head but many thousands of Libyans had lived there in exile. When the British military administrators reorganized the education system in the forties, they based it upon the Egyptian. Libyan schools continued for many years to be staffed by more Egyptian than Libyan teachers. The law was administered and interpreted by Egyptian judges. When independence began to produce the first generations of university students, the majority attended Egyptian universities, and Libyan students became involved in Egyptian and Middle East politics. Libya's first army officers were trained in the Baghdad academy, but also in Cairo. Egyptian intelligence recruited its usual quota of agents and used them over the years to pursue not only Egypt's intelligence purposes in Libya but also her political purposes, with the usual blurring of the two roles. Until there were Libyan Arabic newspapers, the reading public relied on imports from Cairo and *Beirut*; and if Gadafi's consciousness of the world outside Libya was formed by Cairo Radio, he was representative of the generations for whom the transistor radio was Libya's most continuous link with the rest of the Arab world.

Libyan political groupings were influenced by the two tendencies of Nasserism and Baathism. Nasser was the charismatic cult figure of the Arab world, leader of a triumphant army-led revolution and a state of 'inter-class' politics, and spearhead of an aggressive diplomacy against the West. The Baathists accepted secularism, saw economic development as the essential condition for social change, and relied on a political party, but, like the Nasserites, they used the army to take power, and though they



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had a certain view of social classes, were aggressively anti-Marxist. The two enjoyed a honeymoon period in the late fifties and then celebrated a marriage with the proclamation of the United Arab Republic of Nasserite Egypt and Baathist Syria. But the attempt failed three years later when Syria seceded; and with the break-up of the union, Libyan ideological politics inherited the divisions between them. During 1961 and 1962 the Baathists were at their peak strength, among them officers graduated from the Baghdad Academy; and an important trial took place on charges of forming cells of the Baath Party. The court ordered the dissolution of Baathist cells, the confiscation of funds and the deportation of the non-Libyans among those accused. After the break-up of the Union with Syria there was a strong anti-Baathist reaction in Libya exploited by Cairo Radio. The Baathist groups went into decline, and Nasserism became the ascendant tendency. After the Nasser-Kassem clash, Nasserites and Baathists grouped together against a Marxist tendency, but the Nasserite-Baathist dispute of the mid-1960s separated the strands once again. New alliances formed loosely of Marxists and Baathists on the one hand and Nasserites on the other, but all the groups were weak and shaky, and strained by Middle East political vacillations.

Mass politics, though on a limited scale, were initiated within the student movement when students demonstrated in defiance of the police in 1964, schools went on strike, and the authorities had to close the university. Libyan students in Britain and West Germany staged sympathy occupations of their embassies; and government mediators agreed to demands for the reopening of the university, the release of the arrested students, and recognition of a students' union. The first conference of the Libyan Students' Union was held in 1966, and it opted for the Leftist tendency within the Arab Nationalist Movement; pledging support of the Vietnam revolution; demanding a more radical approach to the Palestine problem; criticizing the government's oil policy; and demanding the liquidation of the bases. During the Six Day War the students carried their fury off the campus and into the towns. The student movement forged links with the trade union movement. At the height of the crisis, petroleum

and dock workers struck and refused to permit the pumping of *oil* and the loading of tankers.

Apart from these militant political strikes, trade union organization was spasmodic and permeated both by the patronage system of the regime and that of American-style labour boss methods that had percolated through contact with CIO-AFL leadership and the ICFTU. Salem Shiteh became president of the first general labour union, but he was inspired by United States notions of a 'federation of unions from the Maghreb to Egypt, as counter to the Arab Labour Federation; and though he controlled ten company-style trade unions, the most important of all, that of petroleum, dock, and tobacco workers, broke away and formed a second federation, with more radical orientation. This last was under the leadership, among others, of Rajab Neihum, who had tried to organize workers under the Italian occupation; and of Stileiman Magbrabi, a US-trained lawyer, who organized the 1967 oil workers' strike and was to become the first prime minister after the **Gacoup**. By the middle sixties Shiteh had become a member of parliament: it subsequently emerged in court evidence that his election campaign had been funded by the Minister of the Interior. By then his unions were suitably docile; and militant worker action, like the radical political groupings, rose and declined with the general fortunes of Middle East Arab politics.

The government resorted to a mass trial in 1967 to bring even these activities to a stop. Though the Arab Nationalist Movement had virtually ceased to exist in Libya after internal convulsions between the nationalist tendency on the right and the Marxist tendency on the left, the police had infiltrated a splinter group and professed to have discovered a conspiracy. The trial was used to remove the militant leadership of the unions, to discredit the student movement as politically inspired and to defeat its struggle for the recognition of a student union.

The regime worked at disarming its critics in several ways. It made public concessions to Arab nationalism which muted internal opposition and saved Libya the embarrassment of being attacked on Cairo Radio. When there was a furore against the bases, the government started negotiations for their withdrawal

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which lasted till the fuss had died down. The patriarchal regime sought to avoid confrontation and to ignore criticism rather than contend with it. Acts of opposition tended to be isolated from public response by being casually handled by the regime. Prison sentences were not excessively severe. The traditional leader tended to treat critics as errant rather than rebellious, and more than once the pressure for arrests and prosecutions came not from him but from the professionals and lawyers in government.

The critics of the regime were isolated from the mass of the people, and a certain tolerance towards the outspoken sons of the petit-bourgeoisie did no harm. Critics were disarmed by concessions to pan-Arabism, and once oil began to flow the regime had ample resources to make material as well as rhetorical concessions. Employment and housing opportunities multiplied; students were indulged and civil servants pampered. Prosperity helped to fund assent. At the same time Libyan attempts at ideological and political mobilization had been so dependent upon inspiration from outside that when this faltered it had profoundly demoralizing effects on Libyans.

## 6 A Base for Imperialism

Anglo-American policy saw Libya as less a country or a state than a strategic position for a series of military bases. One day before independence was proclaimed the British Ambassador arrived to present his credentials and, formally and this time publicly, to open negotiations for a long-term treaty of alliance between Britain and Libya. Its broad outline had by now been agreed with the United States and with France.<sup>1</sup> The treaty was finally sealed in 1953, for in between it had been considered expedient for Libya to apply for Arab League membership. When this gesture to Arab solidarity was sealed, Libya gave Britain alternative bases to those she evacuated in the Suez Canal zone. The Twenty-Year Treaty consisted of two separate agreements, signed on the same day, which granted Britain 'facilities within the territory of Libya for military purposes' and in exchange undertook to pay annual subsidies to the Libyan budget. The treaty's 'military purposes' included exclusive and uninterrupted use for military purposes of specified land and buildings and the right of British aircraft to fly over, and in an emergency, to land and take off from any of Libya's territory. Britain's Tenth Armoured Division was based in Libya, and there was a large air base at Al Adem, fifteen miles south of Tobruk, and a detachment of RAF personnel at Idris airport near Tripoli which provided staging posts on the strategic air corridors to East Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Far East.

Wheeler base, eight miles out of Tripoli, had been captured by British forces from the Italian air force. The US air force began operations there in 1944, and abandoned its use in 1947; but at the time of the Korean crisis, the field was reactivated, and the base integrated into the United States Strategic Air Command. The negotiations formalizing the United States

presence in Libya were prolonged 'but there was never any doubt in the mind of either party that a mutually satisfactory arrangement would eventually be placed on the books'.<sup>2</sup> When American foreign policy failed to enfold the whole of the Middle East into its embrace, King Idris went personally as the emissary of the Baghdad Pact to Turkey and Lebanon. Wheelus was duly inspected by John Foster Dulles. 'For its part,' said the American Ambassador, 'Libya has acquired a powerful new protector in addition to its British ally. As a stakeholder in Libya's future, the United States, it stands to reason, will have a natural interest in the defence of that none too strongly unified country.'<sup>3</sup>

France was eager to conclude an agreement like those with Britain and the United States, but Algeria was the stumbling block. Until 1954 France had the right to keep three companies in the Fezzan in return for a subsidy to the province's budgetary deficit; but Libya's Parliament then insisted that the garrisons be withdrawn, and France was granted limited air and surface transit rights only, at Sebha, Ghat, and Ghadames. Franco-Libyan relations were not improved by border incidents, which led to the setting up of a Franco-Libyan commission to investigate frontier claims.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas the Wheelus base had functioned originally as an air transport centre, with the signing of the treaty it became a primary training base for NATO forces. It could be used by strategic nuclear bombers and provided direct access to southern Russia across Turkey; and in 1956 the headquarters of the US Seventeenth Air Force was transferred from Morocco to Wheelus. But its major function was to provide target practice for tactical fighter pilots rotating from stations in Britain, West Germany, and France. Wheelus was also the headquarters of the Mediterranean Communications region and was used for certain combined operations in Africa; one of these was the 1960 airborne United Nations intervention in the Congo.<sup>5</sup> The American subsidy for the base, under the seventeen-year agreement, was at least double that paid by Britain. In 1958 the Libyan government pressed for substantial increases in US aid and complained about the uncertain annual dispensations. The amount was increased and channelled through the Libyan

Ministry of Finarice. In the late fifties the United States undertook a military aid programme to train and equip an army unit in the handling of modern transport, and to help the infant air force get off the ground. By 1964 about a quarter of the officer personnel in the Libyan army had been trained in the United States.

Like the Saudi ruling house, King Idris distrusted a regular army. Each time an army overthrew or threatened to overthrow a Middle East monarchy, the surviving dynasties took a close look at their own forces and tightened procedures for screening officer loyalty. Libya, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, saw tribally-based levies as the mainstay of internal security and an essential counter-balance to any army attempt to seize power. By the end of the war in 1945 the Libyan-Arab Force, recruited from Sanusi forces in exile, consisted of five infantry battalions. The British military administration demobilized three and transformed the remaining two into a para-military force. CYDEF began as a force commanded by British officers. The Tripolitanian Defence Force (TRIDEF) equivalent was built to similar strength, and a smaller gendarmerie force was built in the Fezzan.

After independence the story got about, at least into the British press, that Glubb Pasha was about to relinquish his Jordan command to train a crack Arab Legion for Libya. But the army was eventually placed under a Libyan-born commander-in-chief who had served in the Turkish army, and then an army chief of staff from royalist Iraq. Army training was undertaken by a British military mission, but also by the Iraqi military academy in Baghdad, before the Kassem revolution there in 1958. As part of a five-year agreement signed in London in 1958, Britain agreed to provide free of cost the small arms and equipment for the expansion of the army to 5,000 men by 1963, and to train advisers for all units.<sup>6</sup> In 1957 a military academy was opened in Benghazi, and the first officers graduated in 1960. This self-reliance in officer training was unusual for so small a country and army, but it was another of the King's safeguards against the infection of his army from contact with coup-making or coup-thinking officers from other countries.

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By 1965, after eight years of organizing and recruiting a regular force, the army did not exceed 6,500 men organized in infantry battalions together with two small artillery battalions, an armoured car squadron, and a company of engineers. The para-military security force mustered almost twice as many men.<sup>7</sup> The garrisons of the regular army were about equally divided between the two capitals, separated on land by more than 700 miles without a railway connection. The formula for controlling the armed forces remained one of keeping the regular army and the tribal security forces divided and posting the latter in or near the urban centres. From 1965 to 1969 the United States sold increasing amounts of military equipment to Libya. Such aid was given, by official report, not only to enable the Libyans to refuse Soviet offers of military assistance, but also because of the 'vulnerability of Libya's internal situation as demonstrated during the 1956 Suez expedition'.<sup>8</sup>

That Suez invasion had precisely the opposite effect to that intended in Libya as well as in Egypt. Far from being toppled, Nasser had achieved the status of an Arab national hero, even in countries like Libya where nationalism had stirred late. Each time tension rose in the Middle East, the crisis was reflected in Libya by a commotion over the military bases. During the 1956 Suez crisis, Libya had formally rejected a British approach for facilities in Libya; and this had a direct bearing on the Defence White Paper the year after, which reduced the number of British troops in the country; though after the Iraqi revolution of 1958 Libya asked for the return of troops previously withdrawn.<sup>9</sup> But the high point in the agitation over the bases occurred in 1964, and again in 1967 during the Six Day War.

During 1963 there had been rumblings in the Libyan Parliament about Libya's departure from the prevalent African policy of non-alignment. The politicians who raised the question were persuaded to remain away when the answer was due, thus technically saving the government the embarrassment of a reply. The question thus remained unofficially unanswered. As 1964 opened Nasser convened a conference of Arab states in Cairo to plan action against Israel's diversion of the Golan Heights. King Idris broadcast his support of the meeting but he did not

attend. When school and university students demonstrated in Benghazi in favour of the conference, they were dispersed by the Cyrenaica Defence Force; two students were killed and several injured in the clashes. Tripoli staged a mock funeral as a protest. The Prime Minister resigned. He had asked the King for the resignation of the CYDEF commander, who was the brother-in-law of the King's adviser Omar Shalhi; but the King preferred to do without his Prime Minister at a time when several alleged plots against the regime had been uncovered. The CYDEF commander was less dispensable than the Prime Minister. The following month Egypt asked Libya for assurances that the bases would not be used against Arab states in the event of a war against Israel. The Prime Minister, under pressure from Parliament, informed Britain and the United States that the Libyan government would not be prepared to renew or extend the base agreements. The King announced his abdication. After staged demonstrations for days outside his Palace in Tobruk, he was prevailed upon to change his mind.<sup>10</sup> The Cabinet was reshuffled. Britain and the United States took their cue and offered to run down their military strength over a period of time. The *Daily Telegraph* was more than usually alarmist: 'Britain to Quit Libya in a Fortnight'.<sup>11</sup> Six months later the talks about the bases were still in progress, though it was announced that both powers had accepted evacuation in principle. The same month King Idris personally led the Libyan delegation to the Arab Summit Conference at Alexandria, and Libya joined the Arab Joint Defence Council. In the following year Britain carefully timed an announcement of the withdrawal of men from the garrisons in Tripoli, Benghazi, and Tobruk, to coincide with the assembling of the new Parliament. The United States official record of the episode reads: 'The United States Government affirmed its adherence to the principle of withdrawal which enabled formulas to be found which permitted the King Idris and the Libyan government to allow us to continue our use of Wheelus Airfield Base.'<sup>12</sup> The bases were to go, but they remained.

During the Six Day War the United States discovered 'another restive Arab nation'.<sup>13</sup> Libya seemed to explode in an emotional



frenzy of Arab nationalism. The Libyan government threatened to expel the Americans from Wheelus. Together with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states, Libya shut off oil production, though briefly. The Oasis consortium office was seized by workers and held for five hours. The United States information library in Benghazi was sacked. The demands for the removal of the bases were renewed. In Washington officials put out the statement that the base would be wound up before the scheduled date of 1971. The Pentagon was said to be seeking another location for gunnery training; but, like London, Washington was hoping that the Libyan request would be withdrawn 'in a calmer moment'.<sup>14</sup> Once again a prime minister resigned, and his successor instituted a fresh set of talks about the future of the bases. The government that came to office in the autumn of 1967 was a new breed for Libya. The Palace and traditional elements were still there but beside them sat young technicians and 'modernists', who, while they did not represent any popular masses, were beginning to perceive Libya and the Arab world in a new light. When in 1968 Libya embarked on a spectacular defence programme, it was under pressure inside of Libya from these new elements, not least the army officers and their civil service support, and outside from changing Western defence and strategic perspectives.

NATO purposes remained constant, and the geography ostensibly unchanging. But geography is affected by the state of technology and weaponry – not least the increased range of aircraft – and new modes of warfare were beginning to diminish the importance of staging bases. By the mid 1960s Wheelus was still useful, but it was no longer indispensable. The instruments for the defence of American interests had moved largely outside Arab borders to adjacent areas where the Sixth Fleet was stationed, and to American defence installations in other parts of the world. The United States was also asking itself political questions: 'Was the British air base in Libya, or the naval base at Aden, so essential to the defence of the free world that the United States could risk a rupture of its Arab relations to defend them?'<sup>15</sup>

Yet Libya remained important. Apart from her strategic position in the Mediterranean, there was her role in countering radical Arab nationalism in the Maghreb and the Middle East. And there was oil. By 1968 Libya was already the largest supplier of oil to Britain, and to Italy, and the third largest to France. Libyan oil flows could not have been more timely for Britain. Britain's oil imports from the Persian Gulf area made sound strategic sense as long as Britain could maintain an influence over the political situation in the Gulf by a permanent military presence there, which could be rapidly reinforced by a naval presence from the Mediterranean. The Six Day War closed the Canal and rapid access from the Mediterranean. In January 1968 Britain's Labour government announced the withdrawal of British armed forces from both the Gulf and the Far East by the end of 1971. The development of new and substantial sources of oil west of Suez under the control of a friendly government became an urgent strategic need. Libya met Britain's requirements exactly.<sup>16</sup> But Libya's oil resources also meant that she could pay for her 'own' defence, and thus foot the bill for the West. There was a significant pattern to Britain's withdrawals from her spheres of interest. The handsome arms deal with Saudi Arabia was negotiated as Britain was withdrawing from Aden; it left Saudi Arabia, which unlike Britain could well afford it, with the burden of protecting British interests in the region. The treaty with Kuwait under which Britain had undertaken the military protection of that country expired in 1968, when Britain concluded a deal with Kuwait for the sale of Vickers tanks. Britain announced her withdrawal east of Suez when she had begun to meet the demand for equipment from the Persian Gulf states, many of which were establishing armies for the first time. By the time Britain was ready to withdraw or shrink her military presence in Libya, the British Aircraft Corporation weapons system was being readied to take over.

In 1966 Britain had created a Defence Sales Organization in the Ministry of Defence which soon more than earned its keep in foreign exchange. Britain's lagging arms exports had been stung by a series of American sales coups. The United States Government arms sales office (The International Security Affairs

Division of the Department of Defence) had edged Britain out of an important Saudi Arabian aircraft deal, but was reputed to have a stand-off agreement with Britain on the supply of arms to Libya: that if British forces stayed in Aden for two years longer, then the United States would allow Britain to sell certain planes to Libya. Whatever arrangement existed was broken by the Whitehall announcement in May 1968 that it had won an order to install a complete missile air defence system in Libya. The package was not made public in all its detail but was believed to have been worth at least £145 million in its initial stages, rising to £500 million over the next five years. Britain was to supply Rapier and Thunderbird ground-to-air missiles and attendant radar installations. BAC also won a large contract to instruct the Libyan army in the operation of the missiles system; and the next stage was expected to be the purchase of British military aircraft. Yet another deal involved Chieftain tanks and a new tank with a 120 mm. gun 'which had proved hard to sell abroad despite its high reputation with the British Army of Occupation of the Rhine'.<sup>17</sup> The Libyan commitment was to develop and reorganize its armed forces on modern lines.

Even the £102 million package for Saudi Arabia was outstripped by the Libyan deal. It was the largest missile system order ever won by a British firm and the most valuable export deal of any kind. It was also an example of the new hard-sell partnership evolved between Whitehall and the aircraft industry. But, said a critic, 'no one in Britain had ever asked why Libya needs these weapons, who its enemies are, or from what quarter the country is being threatened. Nor was Britain really interested in selling Libya weapons until it became rich through oil revenues. Then all of a sudden the country needed extremely sophisticated weapons.'<sup>18</sup> Who was the likely enemy? *Flight Internationalist*<sup>9</sup> had a rry:

Libya's new oil wealth resulted in her eastern neighbour Egypt making expansionist noises in Libya's direction, and Nasserite sympathisers in Libya, encouraged by Cairo, were taking maximum advantage of the sociological strain which has resulted from the sudden wealth and western know-how coming to a poor and federal desert Kingdom.

The fact was that the Libyan defence deal had less to do with war than with business. Journalists trying to unravel the story of super-arms salesmen described the 'hard sell' behind the Libyan deal:

How is an arms deal made? ... Several factors worked together to push the Libyan Government ... First was the discovery of oil six years ago which both gave the country revenues ... with which to buy arms, and something more than millions of acres of desert and a tiny population ... to defend from predatory aggression ... At the same time the neighbouring governments of Algeria and the United Arab Republic began to display considerable political hostility towards Libya for the friendly attitude its government under King Idris was continuing to show towards Britain and the U.S. ....

But what sort of defence should Libya provide for herself? Large ground forces were clearly out of the question, and in any case a ruler anxious to stay in power in a new country does not act in his own interest if he creates a real military elite. At this point the announcement of Saudi Arabia's fighter and missile deal with Britain provided a catalyst. Here was an entirely defensive force capable of deterring an invader but hardly able to be turned against the country's own government ... The final touch was given by the Six Day War. This showed that there was little point in going for a defence system that was susceptible to a surprise raid because of its immobility. Libya's requirements could therefore be met by a highly mobile combination of radar, communications, missiles and aircraft that would be capable of detecting and intercepting an attack of the kind Israel launched against the Arab world last June ... And as it happened most of the elements of such a package were becoming available in Britain.

As for Britain's interests:

There could be no objection. First there was the ever-pressing problem of exports; any windfall here was, as always, welcome. And second, from a strategic-commercial point of view, Libya stands as the only source of mid-eastern oil that would remain unaffected by the long-term closure of the Suez Canal.<sup>20</sup>

Inside Libya the King's resistance to a large and powerful army was being countered by the rise of a small but vociferous group of younger technical and professional men, both in and out of uniform, who saw in the absence of an impressive army one

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more proof that Libya was cut off from the mainstream of Arab nationalism. The King was not receptive to the arguments of this group but he lent a ready ear to the proposals of his British defence advisers. They produced the ideal solution to his anxiety: an army based on a sophisticated missile system could defend Libya and the West, but could not be turned into a coup-making instrument. But the defence package served to feed other conflicts in the army: between sections of the Defence Ministry divided by connections with both British and United States defence commitments in Libya; and inside the officer corps, where senior officer opposition took the form of objections to aspects of the army retraining support contract, and middle-level and junior officers were preoccupied with the currents of political as well as army opposition to the regime.

By 1969 there was a growing belief that the enfeebled King was losing his judgement and that his authority was evaporating. The Shalhi family was amassing ever greater power. Omar Shalhi achieved nomination as the King's special adviser; and this, together with the control of the army by his brother Colonel Abdul Aziz Shalhi following the retirement of the former chief-of-staff, convinced many that the balance of power was moving rapidly into the hands of the Shalhi group, which might well decide it was strong enough to rule without the King or the Crown Prince.

In August clandestine leaflets appeared. For the first time they attacked the King by name, as well as the Shalhi brothers, and the arms deals that Libya was concluding with Britain. The King pressed for the discovery and rounding up of the culprits. He also threatened once again to abdicate. The army promised that the pamphleteers would be found.