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City of Gamblers

Libya's Future to Be Decided on the Streets of Tripoli

By *Clemens Höges* in Tripoli, Libya

At night, NATO bombs strike strategic targets in Tripoli. During the day, pro-Gadhafi loyalists battle it out against pro-democracy insurgents. Amid the turmoil, a Frenchman is trying to save his business, and to get the two sides to the negotiating table in Paris.

The oil executive leans back in the rear seat of the white government limousine as it travels along the corniche, headed for downtown Tripoli. For once, his iPhone is silent, and his other mobile phone isn't buzzing either. Waves crash onto the beach, sending plumes of spray into the air.

Pierre Bonnard, a French national, has had a lot of experience in this city. He has sealed deals worth millions, witnessed his friend being mowed down by a contract killer, and once even met Moammar Gadhafi in his tent.

That was seven years ago. Bonnard had just helped clean up an ugly mess. A group headed by Gadhafi's brother-in-law had blown up a French passenger jet in 1989, killing 170 people. Bonnard arranged a deal so that Gadhafi could talk with the French again: The victims' families received more than \$200 million (€136 million) in compensation from Tripoli, and relations with Paris improved again.

Now Bonnard is back in Tripoli. He heads the Paris-based French Chamber of Commerce for the Near and Middle East, which also has an office in Malta. At the moment, however, he has two of the most difficult jobs in the world. While French jets are bombing Libyan bunkers and tanks, Bonnard, representing French oil companies, is preserving contacts for the post-war period. At the same time, he and his Tunisian business partner, Ghazi Mellouli, are trying to secretly bring Libyan rebels and regime loyalists to Paris for peace negotiations.

The Risk of Another Somalia

War is bad for business, especially for the oil business in the region. Bonnard fears that blood will soon be flowing in the streets of Tripoli, and he believes that he and Mellouli have a window of only a few weeks before it will probably be too late.

Everything is possible in Gadhafi's capital at the moment, and everyone is waiting for something to happen. The secret police are keeping things quiet, and Gadhafi's opponents are whispering in the side streets, while his supporters are singing in the squares. Buildings shake at night when NATO bombs blow up the regime's bunkers.

Controlling this city is the key to governing Libya. But more is at stake than just Tripoli. The conflict revolves around the question of whether Libya could turn into another Somalia, with the West becoming embroiled in a war that it might not be able to win.

"In this situation, I can't just stand on the sidelines," says Bonnard. "I couldn't afford to do that." While he and Mellouli negotiate with Gadhafi's representatives in Tripoli, one of his employees is setting up contacts in Benghazi, the rebels' stronghold in eastern Libya.

A Gambler with Laugh Lines

Bonnard has a sharply defined face, with bright eyes surrounded by laugh lines. He is wearing a

wedding ring on his right hand, even though, as he says, he isn't made for marriage. The ring belonged to his father, a banker with good connections in politics and the world of intelligence agencies. Even as a boy, Bonnard heard stories of the behind-the-scenes battles in world politics at his family's dinner table.

Now he has managed to turn his knowledge of the Arab world and its most powerful players into a lucrative business. Most of the time, he trades in futures contracts and agreements related to oil shipments. It's a business in which 20-percent profits are made just as quickly as entire fortunes are lost. One has to be a gambler to acquire laugh lines in this industry.

Bonnard says he has respect for the German government because it is trying to keep itself out of the war. France, on the other hand, sided with the rebels much too quickly, in Bonnard's view. French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a pact with Bengerhazi, says Bonnard, without so much as informing his foreign minister. "It's ridiculous," he says.

Of course, the West had to step in to avert a massacre in Bengerhazi, but it should also have had a plan for what was to happen after the initial attacks. "Just look around in Tripoli," he says. "There are Gadhafi opponents and Gadhafi supporters. His people will not disappear. They will take their chances. Those supporters, as well as the government machinery, the administration, must be part of a future arrangement. Life must go on. We need a plan."

'We Need Nothing but Gadhafi'

Supporters of the dictator have tied down tents with thick ropes and wooden pegs on the sand on a traffic island across the street from Gadhafi's Bab Al-Aziziya command center, a large military base in the city. Music blares from loudspeakers, and portraits of the man his supporters call the "Leader" are leaning against plane trees. At night, when the bombers start falling, there are sometimes hundreds of people here to serve Gadhafi as human shields.

Abd al-Daim Said, 21, a short and athletic man whose black eyes flash whenever he removes his sunglasses, has been studying medicine for the last three years. "Gadhafi tells us what is right and what is wrong," he says, adding that he will happily die for Gadhafi the next time the jets approach Bab Al-Aziziya, as they often do.

When Said entered school at age six, he began learning stories about Gadhafi, like all Libyan schoolchildren. The teachers said that Gadhafi was a rebel and a freedom fighter. Throughout his later school years, Said read passages in Gadhafi's Green Book, a thin volume full of ideological platitudes, and he was constantly hearing about the Libyans' persecuted brothers in the Palestinian territories.

"We need nothing but Gadhafi," says Said. "The university is free, and I'm treated for free at the hospital. There are lights at night. When I open the tap, water comes out. We drive expensive cars. We are brothers. Where else in Africa is it like this?"

Loyal Sub-Saharan Supporters

Mohammed Abdulkareem from Niger is standing next to Said. Aside from young men like Said, Gadhafi's most loyal supporters are the thousands of sub-Saharan Africans he has brought to the country.

Abdulkareem is slim, quiet and tall. They used to call him "Obama," because he looks a little like the American president in his younger years. But he doesn't like the nickname anymore. Now that Tripoli is being bombed, it sounds derogatory.

Abdulkareem, 26, came to Libya three years ago, fleeing poverty at home. Gadhafi's officials welcomed him with open arms, and he found work and a place to stay. "The Libyans treat us well," he claims. He also says that men from all countries in Africa would be happy to sacrifice themselves for the Leader here in front of the Bab Al-Aziziya base.

Normal Daily Life

Tripoli still doesn't look like a city involved in a civil war. The shop windows are full, and street vendors sell food, shoes, toys, gold jewelry and fake Rolex watches. Families trudge through the narrow alleys of the bazaar, while young men on Green Square outside the city walls run after girls wearing headscarves and tight jeans.

Sweet smoke from water pipes billows from a café at the Roman triumphal arch. Goldfish swim in circles around the fountain beneath the arcades, and a portrait of Gadhafi hangs on the wall.

At the port, a worker glances around and then quickly flashes the rebels' "V for Victory" sign and mutters "Gadhafi out." He was married shortly before the Arab Spring began. He and his wife had planned to go to Tunisia for their honeymoon, but then the Tunisians took the streets and ousted their dictator.

Then the worker and his wife decided to rebook their trip, this time to Egypt. When that didn't work out, because of the Egyptian revolution, the couple decided to travel to Benghazi instead. But then, on Feb. 17, the rebellion against Gadhafi began in the eastern city, and the young couple stayed at home. Now bombs are falling on Tripoli, and yet, he says, he is pleased about every bomb that's dropped. After all, he adds, NATO isn't hitting any civilians.

Official News from the Gadhafi Regime

Last Wednesday, the Gadhafi regime announced its casualty figures, claiming that NATO had murdered 718 civilians and wounded more than 4,000 since March 19. The figures cannot be verified, but when pressed on the issue a government spokesman said that armed volunteers are also defined as civilians and are therefore counted as civilian casualties.

But where could these people have been killed? Tripoli looks undamaged, even though bombs and missiles explode almost every night. With frightening precision, they have struck bunkers and, again and again, Bab Al-Aziziya, ripping open the walls and turning buildings to rubble.

The government spokespeople, however, are most interested in showing outsiders a destroyed private house. According to their account, Gadhafi's son Saif al-Arab lived in the villa, in an exclusive neighborhood. Saif al-Arab and three of his children were killed when bombs hit the house on May 1. The hands of a Junghans kitchen clock hanging in the ruins point to 8:09 p.m., the precise time when Saif al-Arab died. An ordinary telephone hangs from a nearby wall, but the rest of the house was reduced to black and gray rubble.

But there is another version of the same story: The ceiling of the house consisted of a one meter-thick layer of heavily sheathed reinforced concrete, which is unusual for a private luxury home. And why is the door to the basement as thick as the doors in Fort Knox? Why is the clock hanging so neatly on an iron girder, which was probably hardly protruding at all from the wall before the bombing?

And how is that neither the clock, nor the plastic telephone burned? Could this have been a bunker hidden in a residential neighborhood? It just so happens that Libyans like to build houses with massive walls, says one of the press spokesmen.

'About More Than Good and Evil'

Oil man Bonnard admits that the Gadhafi family presents a problem for any peace plan. After driving through the city, he sinks into an armchair in the lobby of the Hotel Rixos. The government is housing all foreign journalists in the hotel, which is near Gadhafi's fortress. NATO is hardly likely to bomb journalists, which makes the Rixos one of the safest places in Tripoli.

Gadhafi is a gambler, says Bonnard, and he will fight to the end because the West leaves him no choice. And the rebels are only willing to negotiate once Gadhafi is dead or gone. "Should he allow

himself to be driven out of the country, only to be locked up by the International Criminal Court?" Bonnard says. "We have to give him a way out, or he won't step aside."

This conflict, says Bonnard, is about more than good and evil. Some of the leaders of the rebels in Benghazi are old friends of Gadhafi. In fact, Bonnard adds, the conflict is really about power and money. In the end, good and evil are just categories for children. The real goal should be to find a solution that could work.

Arabs can go to war with each other and then come to terms with each other, he says, which is what he likes about them. But if the West only supports one side, that side will no longer be forced to talk to the other in the end. Bonnard wants to see Benghazi, Tripoli and France at the negotiating table, which would require two Libyan delegations to fly to Paris.

'Allah Can Turn Me into a Martyr'

The rebels and a few reformers in the Gadhafi reform are, in fact, not that far apart, says Yussif Shakir. The portly man, with his salt-and-pepper beard, looks easygoing, but he is one of Gadhafi's sharpest propagandists. Some believe he is the Leader's spiritual advisor, because he usually carries a chain of prayer beads in his hand. But politics is Shakir's religion. He hosts a daily, two-hour program on state-owned television.

Shakir, one of the most colorful figures in government circles, rose to prominence during turbulent political times. He opposed Gadhafi in the early 1980s and spent a long time in exile, both in Cairo and the United States.

Shakir returned to Libya in the late 1980s, when Gadhafi liberalized his country somewhat and released prisoners. After the uprising in Benghazi began, he went on TV to explain his theory. Shakir claims that the American "democracy makers," which is what he calls the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, infiltrated Tunisia and Egypt, and now it's Libya's turn.

He says that it's a proven fact that there are former al-Qaida members among the rebels in Benghazi. According to Shakir, the Gadhafi regime can try to approach the rebel committee, but Gadhafi will never step down. Shakir expects that when the end comes, he will probably be shot dead in the hallways of the Rixos hotel, where these days he prepares for his broadcasts and plays with his children.

"I have told Allah that he can turn me into a martyr," he says.

Late-Night Optimism

Meanwhile, last Thursday night, Bonnard's plan moved a step closer to becoming a reality. His mobile phone rang, and he was told that his proposal had landed with the right people at the top in Paris. In Tripoli, people with ties to Gadhafi have started making lists of potential diplomats. Their negotiators in Paris? Bonnard doesn't want to say for sure, but he smiles. It's one in the morning.

Almost an hour later the NATO bombs hiss through the sky over the city. At the Rixos, the walls start to shake.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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