



Café conversations

Nick Redmayne reports from Benghazi

At Benghazi's Café Tikka bearded baristas serve a steady stream of clients, eager for their morning dose of industrial strength Turkish coffee. On the nicotine-stained walls a gallery of black and white photographs record an unfamiliar city of well-kept squares, neatly trimmed hedges and ordered streets sparsely filled by traffic of curvy 1950s saloons. Idris, first and last king of Libya, deposed by the 'Free Officers' of Gaddafi's 1969 coup, has equal billing with a stylised image of elderly anti-colonialist fighter Omar Mukhtar, from whom the well-worn Italianate boulevard outside takes its name. I order a coffee 'mazboot' – medium sugar, it's pointless asking for decaf here, grab a small bottle of water and take a seat. Compared with the heady days of the 2011 revolution the café's atmosphere carries an understandably lower charge, people no longer sustained by nervous energy, overcome by an almost clinical predisposition to unload, but they are still happy to talk.

"At the BBC, I used to listen on summer evenings. It was very clear. Here Gaddafi controlled information, and everything else. The daily news was maybe two hours, just about him, who he was meeting, what he was doing, telling us nothing." Fwouzi Ariby worked for Libyan Arab Airlines as a dispatcher and was not sorry



Omar, a professor from the city's university, leans over to join the conversation. "The government is very weak. To move from Benghazi to Tripoli, it was really stupid. It was the lure of the capital," he rolls his eyes, "They were building strong relationships here and then they cut them. They have forces to deal with these militias but don't use them. They need to demonstrate their authority and earn the respect of the people. Before the people knew only fear of authority not respect."

I mention that I'd travelled some 200km from Benghazi to the extensive Greco-Roman site at Cyrene, only a small part of Libya's remarkable archaeological wealth. However, further east towards Derna, checkpoints manned by hard-line Ansar Al Sharia militia had made continued progress unwise. "Yes, I have friends in Derna," says Omar. "They tell me militia graffiti says 'Mali – we are coming'. If that's the case we are happy. We will pay for their tickets. These extremists are illiterate but well armed and well trained. They suffered a lot under Gaddafi, the Internal Security used to tie them to chairs and set their beards alight. You can understand why they don't want central authority – police, army or government, just militia commanders as in Kandahar."

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to see the back of the old regime. "Before, security was everywhere, pictures of Gaddafi everywhere. It was oppressive. I was locked up for four months just because I supported Benghazi's Al Ahly football team," Fwouzi sits back in his chair incredulous at his own recollection.

There is a tap on my shoulder and someone offers me a cigarette, despite having given up years ago, for a moment I consider taking it - already there's so much smoke in Café Tikka it would make little difference. "This man," says Fwouzi indicating his neighbour, "has a boat and used to take guns to Misrata when it was under siege. Everybody in this café has a story."

Fwouzi picks up a small bottle of water, "42 years like this," he says, shaking the bottle and pointing to the top, "and now like this," taking the top off and pouring the contents into his glass. "It's not perfect. The French Revolution took more than 10 years. Look at the traffic, it's crazy. Some people who drive they cross a red signal saying 'Libya is free'... but we will get there, step by step."

I ask about the continued presence of militias, and

HIGH UP IN ONE BUILDING CURTAINS BILLOW FROM GLASSLESS WINDOWS AND GUSTS OF WIND SLAM DOORS AT IRREGULAR INTERVALS. IT SEEMS LIKE THE PARTY IS OVER



While the government remains in disarray Libyan society will be in disarray. The majority of Libyans want and need direction

But I don't think they will succeed, we're all Sunni here, no divisions like Syria or Iraq, and whatever happens next it can't be worse than Gaddafi."

It's time to take some fresh air. Together with a headache, the accumulated assault of caffeine and second-hand smoke has destroyed my ability to string a sentence together. I make my apologies to Fwouzi and Omar and leave without being able to pay my bill – Libyan hospitality is genuine and second to none. Outside I wave my right hand as though bouncing a basketball, the recognised signal to the variously beaten up vehicles characterising Benghazi traffic, that I intend crossing the road.

At a kiosk set amidst a grassy, litter-strewn square I sit down on a dubious white plastic chair in the shade of an insubstantial wooden gazebo and order a shawarma, Benghazi's ubiquitous street food. Leaning back and looking around, I can see upper storey windows still scorched by fire. High up in one building curtains billow from glassless windows and gusts of wind slam doors at irregular intervals. Across the street, once bedecked by giant banners, the NTC's former media centre where I'd been part of an international press pack mingling with techno-savvy revolutionary Libyan youth, is locked and silent. It seems like the party is over.

Despite the fumes of sclerotic traffic, fresh air rolling in from the nearby Mediterranean soon clears my head. Beyond the square's dry and dusty fountains, a former government building seems surprisingly open. I'm curious and walk over, poking my head uninvited through a door and interrupting a meeting of 20 or so men of differing ages seated around a long table. Anwar Abdul Salam, Director of the Libyan Political Prisoners Society kindly invites me in, taking me to a side room where we chat without disturbing the others. "I wasn't even in an anti-government organisation, I only knew some people involved. A friend told me about a dream where he'd seen Gaddafi dead, and that was enough to put me in Abu Salim jail for 12 years." Gaddafi's notorious prison witnessed a massacre of an estimated 1,270 inmates over two days in 1996, precise details are still being established. "We heard the gun shots and asked the guards what had happened. They said 'Shut up and keep quiet!' We heard whispers... but what could we do? I still don't know why we survived. Our families knew we were there, perhaps this is why. And, Al Hamdulillah, we lived to the revolution and we saw Gaddafi killed."

How many people do you represent I ask? "Oh, around 1,600 here in Benghazi, men, women even children – Gaddafi didn't differentiate, and maybe 3,000 across Libya. We had two or three meetings with the Transitional Council and they said they wanted to help, but since they transferred to Tripoli it's more difficult. These prisoners, they faced Gaddafi, they dared to say 'No' and the Libyan people know what it meant to say 'No'. It's a must for us now to help them." What about the future I ask? He looks thoughtful, "Some bad things happen now. 42 years will not change just like that," he clicks his fingers, finally defining Libya's revolution and others past and present: "But at least now we have freedom. We can talk. In the end we won our country back. It was lost." ■