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Libya

The revolution seen from the inside

- IV Online magazine - 2011 - IV440 - September 2011 -

Publication date: Monday 5 September 2011

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Jamal Jaber visited Libya in June 2011 for *International Viewpoint*. As well as writing his own impressions of that visit [Impressions of the New Libya](#) he spoke to Azeldin El Sharif. El Sharif is an opponent of the Gaddafi regime who took refuge in London in 2001. He continued his activity there until the rising on 17 February 2011 when he returned to Benghazi. Today he is president of the "Network of National Solidarity".

Jamal Jaber: Azeldin, my brother, you have been in opposition to the Gaddafi regime for more than eleven years...

Azeldin El Sharif: Yes, I was a victim of the Gaddafi regime. I was arrested and tortured for having fought against the corruption of the administration, among other things. But the horizon was blocked, since oppositional political activity was not authorized. It was dangerous and the threat was ever-present. I decided to leave for Britain in 2001 to continue from abroad the fight against Gaddafi.

Jamal Jaber: You are at present in Libya, since the revolution of February 17. What changes which do you regard as most important in the new Libya?

Azeldin El Sharif: The first is the outbreak of the revolution in an organized way in the west of Libya, although Gaddafi was counting on an East-West partition of Libya. But Misrata, Jebel Gharbi, Zawiya, Zintan and other cities, and even the capital, Tripoli, rose up. That thwarted the hopes of Gaddafi who tried to crush the uprising, until the beginning of NATO air strikes, which was supported by the Libyan masses. There is something which has to be understood, namely that the Libyan people is not illiterate. People know what happened in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Libyan people knows about all that. That is why Libyans refused military intervention on their territory, the presence of a foreign army in Libya; the only intervention that was requested and that was acceptable was limited to the protection of civilians in Libya.

Jamal Jaber: It was a request for intervention to protect Benghazi, if I am not mistaken?

Azeldin El Sharif: Not only Benghazi... Actually when we were in Britain, the Libyan opposition abroad demanded from the United Nations an intervention as soon as possible. We put pressure on the British government by writing and demonstrating, with few results. That was before Gaddafi used planes and heavy weapons.

Then, the opposition started to demand a no-fly zone, i.e. a ban on Gaddafi using use military planes against the Libyan people. Thanks be to God, there was Resolution 1973 of the United Nations for the protection of civilians, following the use of military planes to kill civilians, initially in Tripoli and the neighbouring regions. Then Gaddafi used tanks and rocket launchers. That is why in the first stage the ban on Gaddafi using warplanes was a pressing need to protect civilians, just like the ban that was subsequently imposed on him using his terrifying military arsenal to destroy cities and kill civilians. Then we moved on to the stage of striking at the depots and bases where Gaddafi's missiles are kept. In this sense Resolution 1973 was in the service of the Libyan people and the protection of civilians. However, it met with opposition from many socialist and left currents abroad, who think that the Libyan people does not know what it needs and who on the other hand do not propose any alternative in terms of protection.

Jamal Jaber: Today, the National Transition Council of Transition does not ask, I believe, for a military presence on Libyan territory, but for the arming of Libyans so that they are capable of completing their

uprising against the Gaddafi regime. Did the council manage to obtain this aid from the Western countries?

Azeldin El Sharif: The revolutionaries obtained support because they organized their ranks and their military camps. Their organisational level is better than in the past. We know that young Libyans were not armed. They came out as civilians, demanding a peaceful change of government. Unfortunately, they had to face heavy weapons and found themselves bearing weapons to defend themselves, to defend their revolution and their country. In spite of their lack of military training, the armed organization of the revolutionaries has been developing.

Jamal Jaber: As regards Western support we are seeing air raids on the strategic points and centres of Gaddafi, aimed at neutralizing his forces. But are the Western countries also providing arms to the revolutionaries? Do you have accurate information on this subject?

Azeldin El Sharif: To date, I cannot say that a Western country has provided arms to the Libyan revolutionaries. I know that they have delivered some equipment, in particular means of communication, protective clothing, uniforms and supplies, but no arms up to now. On the other hand, Arabs have delivered sophisticated arms and France has given some arms. We are waiting for Britain and Italy to give the revolutionaries arms so that we can quickly finish with this situation. Stagnation gives the regime some respite and facilitates the counter-revolution.

Jamal Jaber: Germany has announced that it recognizes the National Transition Council as the representative of the Libyan people. Don't you think that this is actually a position of the European Union?

Azeldin El Sharif: Indeed, we know that the countries of the European Union are moving towards recognition of the National Council as the sole representative of the Libyan people. This is an important step in helping the Libyan revolution. The recognition by Germany of the Transition Council represents an important point of support for the Libyan people, all the more so as we had believed up until now that it had adopted a hostile position, because it was bound by agreements made with Gaddafi. Germany took a long time to establish links with the Transition Council, but we regard this new standpoint as positive.

Jamal Jaber: Do you believe that the position of the United States is aligned on that of the European Union?

Azeldin El Sharif: Indeed, the United States was the second country, after Britain, to demand that Gaddafi goes. However it is well-known that France, China and Russia refused the solutions put forward by Britain and the United States. Subsequently, the French position evolved positively, since it proposed to the European Union - and took the initiative on it – air strikes to prevent Gaddafi from advancing towards Benghazi.

Jamal Jaber: And with regard to Russia and China?

Azeldin El Sharif: They are currently moving towards recognition of the National Council because there is no more hope for Gaddafi and his regime.

Jamal Jaber: In the last few days, Russia has talked about a roadmap aimed at removing Gaddafi and then organizing a kind of national meeting. Do you have information on this subject?

Azeldin El Sharif: In fact, these are Russian scenarios. From the beginning, Russia abstained in the Security Council on Resolution 1973. Russia, like China, was openly opposed to this resolution but international pressure and the continuation of the killing of civilians by Gaddafi led the two countries to abstain. Russia and China are now leaning towards support for the Libyan popular revolution, while Libyan society is maintaining relations with

these two states.

Jamal Jaber: Up to what point can we hope for effective support by the Arab countries for the pursuit of a real Libyan democratic revolution? Is it not rather a question of a conjunction of conjunctural interests?

Azeldin El Sharif: The part played by the states of the Arab League for the adoption of Resolution 1973 at the Security Council shows a high sense of responsibility towards Libya. It is necessary to emphasize the positive role played by Qatar. The revolutions which took place in Tunisia and Egypt, by bringing down the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak, gave us a strong impulse, but these events contributed to delaying the support and the assistance which reached us from these countries, a little later. We give thanks to God for the revolutions in Tunisia and in Egypt before the beginning of the Libyan uprising, because they prevented the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak from intervening against the Libyan people. Actually, the Libyan people had risen up before the revolutions but it had been overcome quickly because Gaddafi was supported by Ben Ali and by Mubarak. We are grateful to the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and we hope for a revolution in Algeria, so that the Algerian people can get rid of this repressive military regime.

Jamal Jaber: That means that for you the Libyan revolution is part of the Arab movement for change and that it is the prolongation of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions ...

Azeldin El Sharif: Of course, Bouazizi, may his soul rest in peace, set fire to himself for the revolution, and after him came the revolutionaries in Egypt and Libya. This extension will continue. These are popular revolutions in which Arabs, Africans, Amazighs and Toubous are taking part. They all say no to oppression, no to dictatorship and arbitrary rule and yes to freedom.

Jamal Jaber: Do you mean by that that there is also a social factor in the uprisings that are taking place, over and above the factor of democracy? What is the social reality behind the Libyan uprising?

Azeldin El Sharif: Social reality in Libya is related to the acuity of the mechanisms established by Gaddafi to impose his rule over society. In Libya, the Arabs, Amazighs, Toubous and Africans live together, with Turks and Kurds as well. There is a mixture of nationalities. They live in a beautiful harmony and maintain social and family links. When the revolution broke out, Gaddafi tried to use the tribal factor to create a tribal civil war, but the Libyan people shattered Gaddafi's hopes, demonstrating that it was a united people which aspired to live in a just state, built on the principles of freedom, democracy and participation in governing the country, far from any marginalisation or relegation.

Jamal Jaber: Did the National Council deny having any relations with Israel yesterday, since accusations on the subject have been relayed by the press?

Azeldin El Sharif: Libya has behind it a history of resistance to Zionism in Palestine... My father was in the Resistance in Palestine in 1948: he took part with other Libyans in the campaign which saw the participation of forces coming from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and Egypt as well as from countries of the Arab Machrek. So it is impossible for anyone to abandon these fundamentals in order to establish links with Israel. I was very happy with the declarations of brother Mustapha Abdeljalil, president of the National Transition Council, when he clearly indicated that there were no relations with the State of Israel, affirmed that Libya does not recognize this State and called for the victory of the rights of the Palestinians, for international justice through support for the rights of the Palestinians and the building of their independent state in complete freedom.

Jamal Jaber: For about four days, Clinton, the American Minister for Foreign Affairs, has declared that

Gaddafi had to go, but she said that she had on the other hand addressed a series of requests to the Libyan National Transition Council , without however explaining what they were. Do you have an idea of what she is demanding from the Transition Council?

Azeldin El Sharif: They are questions of law, in particular when it concerns the recognition of the new Libyan state, because many European countries recognize the legitimacy of states - and not that of transitory governments – therefore of states which have institutions and enjoy majority popular support. The Transition Council and the revolution must constitute a government which can be recognized and represent the Libyan state at the United Nations. That will take time. The Transition Council is endeavouring to unify Libya by driving out Gaddafi. However there are regions which are fighting against the Gaddafi regime and are not yet liberated. The Transition Council does not proclaim the Libyan state so that the Gaddafi regime does not use that as a pretext to say that there is a new state in the east of Libya, which would justify his maintenance in power in the west.

Jamal Jaber: Don't you think that the concerns of the West (the United States and the European Union) are concentrated on Libyan oil and gas much more than on the aspirations of the Libyan people?

Azeldin El Sharif: Let us be frank... presidents express the interests of their states. European governments can close their eyes to morality, practise hypocrisy and put it at the service of their interests, and that was the case before the revolution of Libyan youth. Gaddafi sold oil and gas to the European governments. There were contracts signed and there was investment. We know that the relationship between the European governments and Gaddafi was very close. They are ready to collaborate with any regime in the world, therefore with any dictator, in order to have profits and markets.

But the crimes committed by Gaddafi towards his people rebounded on those states and those governments which covered these actions and did not protect civilians. So I say that the European states found themselves obliged to take a position. They are conducting a policy that is guided by their interests. The war started by the West will have a cost. Who will pay the price? It is the Libyan people that will pay, whether we want it or not, obviously. The countries which have supported the Libyan people during the war will see their future guaranteed by this people, which will not be ungrateful. And the countries which will be able to invest in oil and gas will be those which have helped the Libyan people.

Jamal Jaber: But aren't you afraid that the West will maintain a position aimed at prolonging the crisis locally and militarily, and thus maintain the partition between the east and the west of Libya?

Azeldin El Sharif: No, I do not believe that. Several things should be taken into consideration: the first being the way the conflict ends, the role of the United Nations in the west of the country. Nor can we ignore the need to make sure that the masses in the west do not want partition. All these elements are extremely important.

We know that the majority of the Libyan people in the west want the departure of Gaddafi, and for him to be tried along with his criminal accomplices. The inhabitants of the west were not spared by Gaddafi, who used his war machine against them. Many of them are among those who are on the different fronts with the revolutionaries. I met a lot of them here in Benghazi. They came there to organize and fight Gaddafi.

Furthermore, I have heard it said that NATO has fixed a new three-month deadline to finish the war. We hope for the end of the war as quickly as possible. The revolutionaries are today in better position from the point of view of organization, preparation and armament.

Jamal Jaber: And if he stayed in power, on what could Gaddafi base himself? What are the forces in Libya

that still support his regime?

Azeldin El Sharif: Gaddafi built up his military arsenal in preparation for this possibility, namely the defence of his regime. We have heard that during the last two years, Gaddafi bought four billion dollars' worth of armaments in Russia, Britain and other countries. And he bought even more when the situation of the neighbouring Arab regimes deteriorated before February 17.

The infrastructure of the Libyan army was destroyed decades ago by Gaddafi. There was not a regular army in the full sense of the term, capable of coming out of its barracks and interposing itself between the people and the regime. On the other hand, Gaddafi established militias and security camps which depend on the enormous funds that he has. So he could follow the policy of the carrot and the stick, and govern Libya by iron and fire.

Jamal Jaber: Do you have an idea of what Gaddafi's forces represent?

Azeldin El Sharif: It is a heteroclitite mixture. I saw young Libyans training in military camps named after his children and his supporters. The sons of Gaddafi command these military camps and these units. All those who are in them are under the command of the sons of Gaddafi, Khamis, Saadi, and the others.

Jamal Jaber: Does Gaddafi enjoy popular support?

Azeldin El Sharif: Gaddafi has lost the confidence of all the large tribes. He used the sons of the tribes against the people. In the same way, he instrumentalised tribalism as a weapon to frighten, marginalize and liquidate all those who refused to carry out its orders. There are many large tribes: Warfalla, Atrak, Fitouri, Zliten, Jebel Gharbi, Abidat, Awakir, but the tribe in Libya is not the base of the political regime. The tribes have gone through a process of integration in the cities and the villages, through intermarriage and living together. But Gaddafi has cunningly put soldiers from the east in his service in the west, so that they are ruthless, and conversely put soldiers from the west in the east. And he has also played on that in the south. He has played on that to stir up resentment between Libyans.

Jamal Jaber: So who still supports him?

Azeldin El Sharif: Various types of individuals. There are people who have been educated in the heart of Gaddafi's regime, who have lived on his hand-outs and absorbed his thoughts. They are indebted to him personally. They come from different regions (including Benghazi and the Jebel). Today, they lie by saying that they represent the Warfalla tribe or other tribes in their support for Gaddafi. Actually the tribe of Warfalla has not intervened in this conflict. It is said that the chiefs of the Bani Walid area - where there are many Warfalla clans - were put in prison, and that the sheikhs would be killed if their clans demonstrated against Gaddafi. And yet the Warfalla tribe which fraternizes with the Kadhafa tribe and proclaimed its allegiance to Gaddafi in the past, is not taking part today in the war, nor in the internal conflicts. That shows wisdom.

Jamal Jaber: Let us come back to the Libyan uprising. Why do you believe that the uprising and its victory occurred in Benghazi and in the Eastern region in general? What are specificities of this region?

Azeldin El Sharif: The coup d'état and the hegemony of Gaddafi over state power go back to 1969. There have since been many attempts to put an end to his rule, whether in Benghazi, in the east, or Tripoli, in the west and in the region of Warfalla-Bani Walid. However, the city of Benghazi sums up all of Libya. All the Libyan tribes are integrated there, and you can see Arabs, Amazighs, Toubous, Africans and other tribes living in the same city. Benghazi has

the reputation of being a city where there are no foreigners, in the sense that the foreigner is treated there like a native of the region. He is warmly welcomed and integrated among the inhabitants.

Jamal Jaber: Is there in Benghazi or in the Eastern region a particular history of political opposition?

Azeldin El Sharif: Yes, various oppositions arose there, but unfortunately Gaddafi crushed them all. That is why the opposition continued abroad from fear of being killed: in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Syria, in Iraq and in Europe. But because of the security agreements concluded between Gaddafi and many of these countries – by the application of the principle of reciprocity - Libyan opponents were handed over. That was the case of Umar Mihayshi, one of the members of the council of the revolution which carried out the coup d'état of 1969, who was handed over by Morocco. The opposition maintained itself abroad, but it suffered from its divisions.

We can distinguish two kinds of opposition: on the one hand, a radical opposition which wanted the fall of Gaddafi by any means, political and military; on the other, a reformist opposition which worked for change, even if it were to take place under Gaddafi. The Muslim Brothers belong to this second opposition. A National Front of Libyan Salvation was created abroad in the 1980s, while at the end of the same decade there emerged inside the country The Islamist Fighting Movement, which died out in the 1990s. There were also other parties, like the Democratic National Rally, of which one of the representatives is Nuri El-Kikhia, or the National Socialist Party, which is Ba'athist. The most recent gathering of the opposition brought together various tendencies and personalities abroad, and was held in London in June 2005 under the name of the National Congress of the Libyan Opposition.

These oppositionists held a second congress in 2008 and set up organisational structures, including a follow-up committee and an executive committee. But today, after the revolution of February 17, the majority of the oppositionists in exile have returned and are trying to organize in Libya itself. All of them support the National Transition Council as an authority for the transition towards a free and democratic Libya.

Jamal Jaber: Azeldin my brother, you chair today the Network of National Solidarity which carries out a series of social activities and which emerged after the revolution of February 17, especially in Benghazi. What are the reasons that drove armed individuals to destroy one of the buildings of the network?

Azeldin El Sharif: That is what happens when you are successful where others fail. Some people do not want to see you succeeding in your action. We face many tasks. Change is not easy and Libyan society needs a major reorganization, on both the political and administrative levels. It is well-known that many elements which worked in the institutions of the regime have joined the various institutions which currently work in the name of the revolution. We need a reorganization of all that on the basis of the general interest, and not of private interests.

This interview took place in Benghazi, on June 15, 2011.