

# The Islamists are open for business

Libya is meant to be burning, with two warring governments and ISIS gaining ground. Mark Micallef found a more mundane picture reporting from the country's Western region.

Walking under the Italian-styled arcades on Isteglal road it's easy to think you're in a European city, especially when passing by a store selling the Diesel men's collection. But this is downtown Tripoli, not Rome.

The shop is owned by 40-year-old entrepreneur Abu Sarweel, who opened the store three years ago, shortly after the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi.

"Business is OK, not good but the wheels are turning," one of his shopkeepers says.

Asked if the fighting was impacting him in any way, he shrugs: "what fighting?"

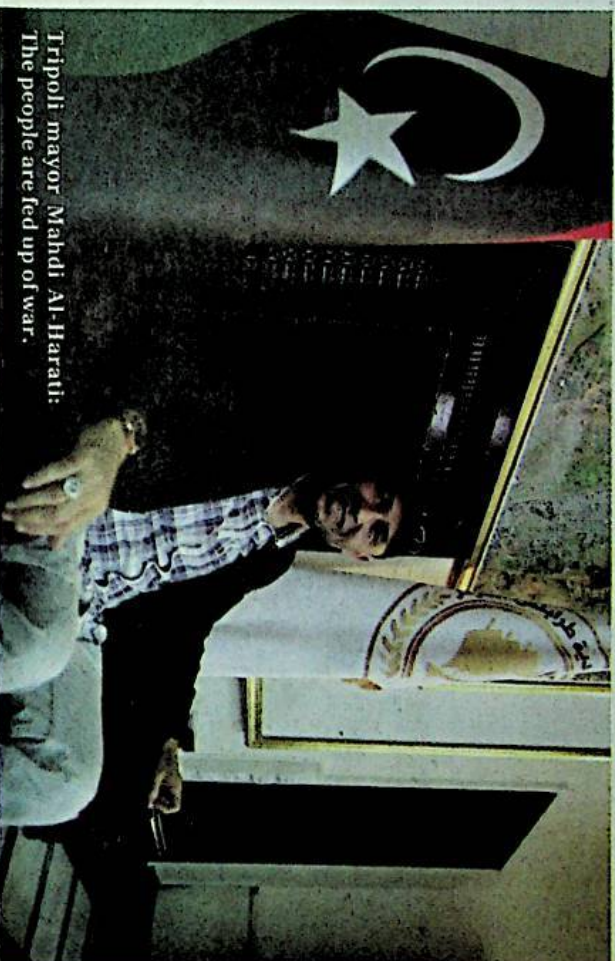
The Diesel store is not the only western clothes shop. Next door are Benetton and Replay stores and a few blocks away, workers were putting the finishing touches on a showroom for the Italian sofa brand, Natuzzi.

I was in Tripoli on an assignment to visit the Western part of Libya, currently under the control of a broad group of Islamist and Misuratan militias, who last July ousted the elected government forcing it to take refuge in the eastern city of Tobruk.

Since then, Libya Dawn set up its own rival Parliament and government but the international community refuses to recognise it. This means the EU will not talk to the politicians in Tripoli even about pressing issues like the migration crisis in the central Mediterranean route spawning from Libya.

It also means the Tripoli administration is finding it hard to make money and is presently running on fast-depleting reserves.

"The people are fed up of war and are fed up of the problems," according to Tripoli mayor Mahdi Al-Harati, who took us on a



Tripoli mayor Mahdi Al-Harati: The people are fed up of war.

walkabout of the city with his bodyguards. "You see, this is Libya, no fighting, no shooting. Yes, there's the risk of some terrorists infiltrating but we are vigilant and the good thing is that the majority of the people hate it," he explains.

Al-Harati led the brigade that liberated Tripoli during the revolution and for that he is viewed by many as somewhat of a folk hero.

However, a foray into Syria in 2012, shortly after he resigned his position from the Libyan brigade he led, earned him the militant label. Some even accuse him of being an Islamist terrorist sympathiser.

There are videos of him talking to a group of fighters from the black-flagged brigade he set up in Syria Liwa Al-Umma (Banner of the Nation), which look they could be straight from a video of the so-called Islamic State.

But he insists this was all a big misconception and the result of intended misinformation.

"Look at me," he says, "Do I look like an Islamist militant?" the 41-year-old asks, through a translator, arguing that he never actually killed anyone in battle but was focused on training and commanding people.

"If by Islamist you mean that I view women as inferior, for instance, or think they should not take part in public life, or they should do this or that, then that is not me. If you mean I am guided by Islam, then that is who I am," he argues, pointing out that many of the employees he had just introduced me to at the municipality were women.

One of the women was Dr Fatma Baghe, a councillor who like Al-Harati lived in Europe when Gaddafi

was in power. She vouched for the mayor, saying the work she does in the education sector is to a large extent, the result of his encouragement.

The Islamist label, he insists, is a distraction from the real issues that Libya needs to deal with.

"If Europe wants stability, it should push for development because only with development do you get peace. Malta should play a more active role as a peacemaker and bridge to the rest of the world."

Malta and the Maltese are in a privileged position but they should seize this position, he insists, when questioned whether Libyans really need an interlocutor to deal with other European states.

I put it to him that many businessmen fear the political uncertainty and random violence in Libya right now, as does the govern-

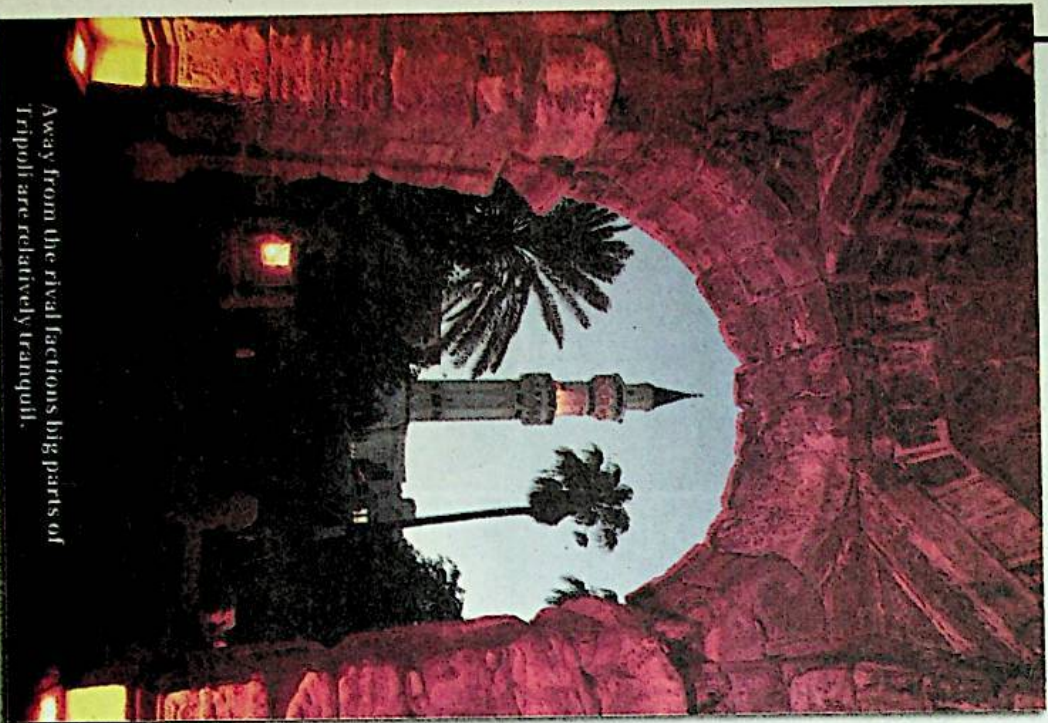
**Malta should play a more active role as a peacemaker**

ment. But he turns the tables on that, arguing that the Maltese can only regain that special relationship if they are there for Libyans when it matters, as they were during the 2011 revolution.

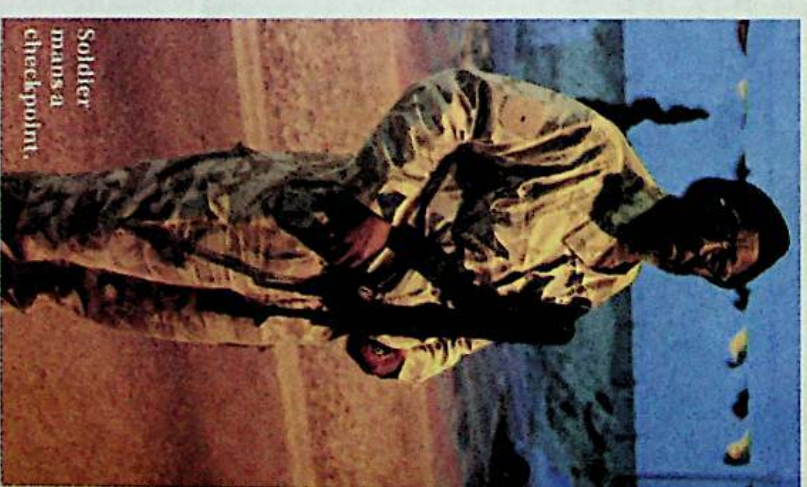
In the six days spent in Libya, we hardly witnessed any real trouble. Militias are not out in big numbers anymore and people do not carry guns in full view as they did right after the revolution.

We travelled widely, from Misurata on the east side, to Zuwara, almost near the border with Tunisia.

Tripoli's famous Green Square looked lively as it did before the revolution. Parents were



Away from the rival factions big parts of Tripoli are relatively tranquil.



Soldier mans a checkpoint.

Tuesday's edition of *Times Talk* will feature exclusive footage from Libya. TVM 6-45pm

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