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Libya's badlands

Borzou Darvazghi reports from southern Libya, a vast territory of oil, guns, trafficking and ethnic conflict

The militia commander with the dazzling smile leads us through the desert towards the oilfields, his Toyota pick-up truck chugging up a cloud of exhaust and dust. Looming on the horizon are the steeply sloping mountain ridges surrounding the Owbari valley. The midday sun is glaring down on the dunes, a sea of golden desert in what was once the ancient Roman province of Fezzan.

The remote oil outpost we are aiming for, the El Sahara fields, is part of the Murzuq basin and one of the most important in Libya, drawing out 350,000 or so barrels of oil daily from the parched earth. That's on a good day. On a bad one, when war or political chaos shuts down the pipeline, it can produce nothing. These have been particularly bad days. Ethnic Tuareg tribesmen recently staged a sit-in at the facility, forcing it to stop pumping completely for more than two months. It reopened again this month.

Yusuf Misa's ever-present smile had turned into a frown and he had squinted uncomfortably when he heard our plans to go to the facility on our own. For now, as acting commander of one of the militias in charge of securing the oilfields, he is responsible for us. There were bandits and smugglers and Islamic militants, he had explained, insisting that he



and a couple of jeep-loads of armed men join us for the 50km journey from the main local town of Owbari to the oil wells.

It's a diverse group of people here and that's the problem," says Misa. The 36-year-old is a former social studies teacher who used to work for an organisation protecting antiquities. He is now a sort of benign deputy warlord. "There are weapons in everyone's hand, remnants of al-Qaeda from the Mali war. Drugs come from Mali, Algeria and Niger."

At about the 25km point, the paved road comes to an end and the open desert beckons. Trucks, smugglers and ordinary travellers in Libya's south often find it easier on their vehicles and their lower backs to leave the rutted roads and drive across the sand, which has been smoothed by wind and time.

Save for the occasional blanched camel skeleton, the desert trek is uneventful. The complications began on arrival at the facility. Misa's Tebu comrades are vying for its control with a militia from Zintan, the small western mountain city that turned against Muammar Gaddafi at the outset of the 2011 uprising and which carries extraordinary weight in national affairs. There is considerable jostling about which facility we can access and by whose authority.

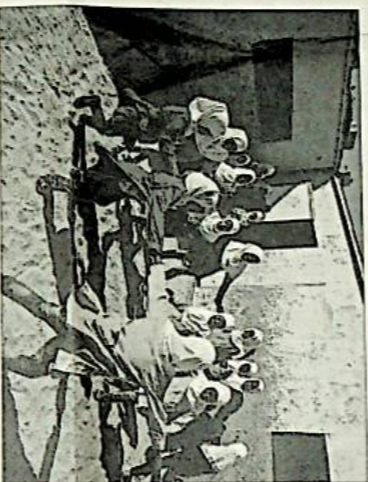
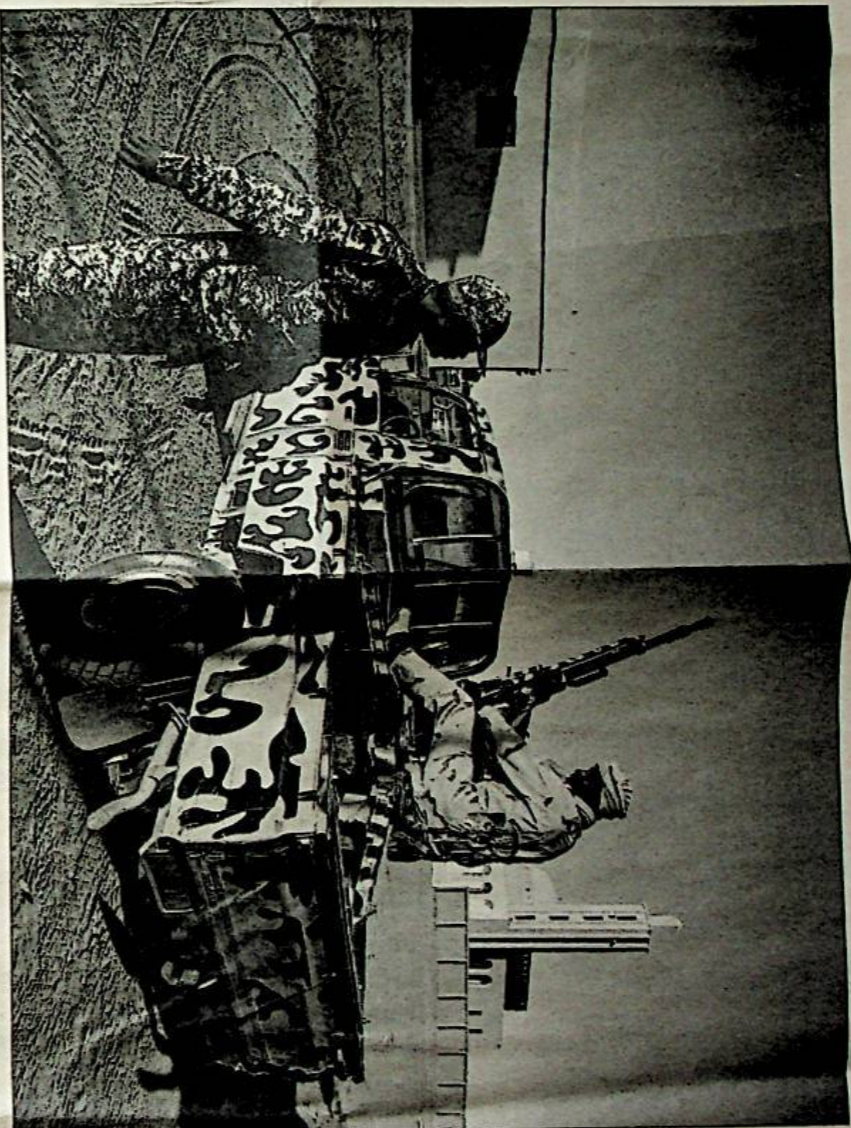
The Zintani militia, the main group guarding the facility, insist on feeding us lunch and try to put on their best faces for the camera. But like a dysfunctional family trying to keep up appearances, the different groups prove unable to contain themselves. The man in charge in our area of the oilfields refuses to allow us to pass because he doesn't trust the militia men accompanying us. The protesters at the tent encampment will not allow us to speak to or photograph anyone and begin arguing among themselves over who exactly is their authorised spokesman. The divisions cause chaos, explains the manager.

"Most of our problems are young people coming here with guns," says Hassan Saïd, co-manager of the El Sahara field, jointly operated by Libya and Spanish oil company Repsol. He is an English speaker from one of the Fezzan peoples – darker-skinned Arabs who occupied positions of relative privilege under Gaddafi. "If they belong to one militia or another they they don't get along. Sometimes they are shooting, mostly in the air. The problem is we have a dangerous oil facility with explosive gases."

The oil facility serves as a lull for Fezzan, as well as for the rest of Libya. The goose that lays the golden eggs has been trampled nearly to death by the squabbling armed men protecting it. A land rich in culture, natural beauty and economic resources, Fezzan today is a powder keg, an impoverished and treacherous region riven by ethnic and tribal animosities ancient and new, with the added risks posed by arms smuggling and the presence of a uranium stockpile.

Stirred up for decades by Gaddafi's manipulations, exacerbated by the bigotry and racism of the country's post-revolutionary elite, Fezzan's tensions reached crisis point in March 2012. During the events surrounding what is called "Black Saturday", an all-out tribal and ethnic war between Arabs and Tebu and Tuareg left scores dead in the slums of the regional capital, Sabha, and stirred up separatist sentiment across southern Libya.

"If we don't get our rights and they keep mistreating us, from this checkpoint on, all the way down to the border, we will declare it's not part of Libya," says Mohammed Warduqa, a 25-year-old Tebu militia commander who oversees a key checkpoint south of Sabha. He gestures towards the mountains. "This is our territory here."



Clockwise from far left: Muzzar Akkar, a Tuareg, in the slum quarter of Owbari; armed militia from the Tebu tribe; a Tuareg holds both Libyan and Amazigh (Berber) national flags at a protest outside the El Sahara oil facility near Owbari; Tebu schoolgirls near Murzuq

The ancient land

Fezzan was one of three ancient Roman provinces, along with Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, that make up contemporary Libya. Among the foreign rulers who have controlled the country, only the Ottoman sultans seriously bothered to try to bring Fezzan under control, establishing a series of ominous fortresses along the edge of the Sahara. Others tended to claim this part of Libya only to leave it to the elements.

Even compared to the leisurely paced cities of Libya's coast, life moves slowly in the Sahara. It takes Mohammed Ahmed two months to drive his camel train from the heart of his native Niger, up through the Sahara to the markets near Sabha, spending his nights beneath a sheet of stars. "We don't have much of a life," he says, seated barefoot upon cushions arranged on his camel's hump. His worn, sun-chiselled face makes him look more like a man in his fifties than thirties, and save for his multiple phone and black bundle he could be from a previous millennium.

Like Ahmed, up until a few decades ago the various peoples of the Sahara lived nomadic lives by necessity, ignoring arbitrary national borders imposed mostly by European colonial masters. When Gaddafi came to power in 1969, he imposed an Arab nationalist identity on Libya that helped empower the country's majority against the European overseers and their surrogates. But he excluded Libya's minority Amazigh (Berber) and the darker-skinned Tuareg and Tebu, with their separate languages, elaborate clothes and customs that include more relaxed attitudes to women's honour, dress and sexuality. He denied many of the nomadic peoples their citizenship rights, indirectly delaying their applications for passports even if they had birth certificates proving that they were born in the country on the premise that their origins were in Chad or Niger. The Arab-dominated post-revolutionary government continues this practice, a source of great trauma for the minority. Indeed, the one-time charismatic Misa's cool demeanour cracks is when he discusses his protracted attempts to get Libyan citizenship.

The bureaucracy runs deep. An Arab tribal leader spends 15 minutes registering us with racist jokes about black men, including Barack Obama. Another of them, Hassan Baiti, spokesman for Sabha Jeter-Tribal Council of Elders, claims Gaddafi brought 750,000 black people from Niger, Chad and Mali into the country during the civil war, only about 150,000 of whom returned home – an absurd claim in a country of just 6m.

"We definitely experience discrimination and not just from the state," says Amna Ebrahima, an eloquent 29-year-old ethnic Tuareg woman who has been denied Libyan citizenship despite being born in the country's mountain city of Misrata. Her inability to register as a national makes it

impossible for her to finish her university degree though she has studied for years. She now helps run Tamteet Assout, a Tuareg charity in Sabha that helps poor women make traditional handicrafts.

Unlike Arabs, Tuaregs are matrilineal. Though Muslim, the women dress in bright and flowery clothing in contrast to the dark colours favoured by Arabs. Ebrahima, talking to me in the courtyard of the Tamteet Assout building, wears a flimsy yellow thobe.

"When you come to a meeting dressed the way we are, they question whether you are Libyan," she says. "They say, 'You are Mauritanian. You are Niger.' Of course, it is hurtful."

Trafficking

With little recourse, the young of the region turn to smuggling across Libya's porous borders. In the most benign form of the trade, they transport subsidised Libyan food and fuel to sell at a mark-up in Chad and Niger and return with cattle or camels. Far more commonly, however, they come back with sub-Saharan Africans escaping war and seeking a better life. Local officials concede that 70 per cent of Fezzan's economy is smuggling. Transporting migrants within Libya is fairly safe but cross-border smuggling of people attracts a higher margin.

"First they trade with food because it is very cheap and sell it in Niger and Chad," says Abouzouma Ali, an economist professor at Sabha University. "They bring migrants of two types, those who want to live in Europe and those who want to live in Libya. They also smuggle drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and some here or to distribute in Algeria and Egypt." The business has raged on over the decades. "We have relations over the border," says Mohammed Ali Hali, a 37-year-old resident and community leader in the city of Murzuq. "The trade routes have been established for 100 years."

So deeply ingrained is the smuggling business that it has bred its own subculture. The smugglers scold at Hyundai – their vehicle of choice is the Toyota Hilux, which they insist handles the desert better than any other vehicle. However, the illicit trade is "not just about money," according to Lamun Taber, a local official in the village of Hamira, a desert backwater of cinder block huts just south of Sabha, which is a linchpin of the trafficking business. "Say you're taking 20 people in your truck and four don't have money. We'll take them. It's a religious duty to help someone in trouble."

After the revolution

Gaddafi's manipulations didn't just stoke racism and justify neglect. It also won the loyalty of many in the south by holding out the promise of citizenship to those with nomadic roots in the Sahara. In exchange they would have to serve as his praetorian

guard, fighting his wars in Chad and joining his regular armed forces against the rebellion when he began. Abuzouma Ebrahima says her father, for example, was killed fighting for Gaddafi in 2011.

Once the rebels took control of Libya, the long-brewing racism towards the darker-skinned Libyans of the south took on an institutional character. They were broadly derided as African mercenaries who fought for Gaddafi even though some did the opposite. The famously warrior-like Tebu, for example, proudly boast that they took the arms Gaddafi gave them to fight the rebels and turned them on the regime, wresting control of what they consider their homeland before the rebels took Tripoli – and without the help of Nato firepower.

"We were liberated August 17 2011," says Ali Sid Abou Bakr, a 27-year-old Tebu activist in the city of Murzuq just south of Sabha. He pulls out a hefty book called *Memory of Fire*, a history of the 2011 uprising by a scholar from the eastern city of Derna. "There's not one word about the Tebu or Murzuq, even though the Tebu revolutionaries were the first to turn their weapons against the regime in the south."

The uprising also added a dagger of new element to the mix of contradictions swirling back and forth across the Sahara: guns, and lots of them. Gaddafi's vast weapons storehouses – expansive bunkers spread out across the desert – were thrown open and became even more untidy as state security forces melted away. Shiny teens in flip-flops began slinging guns over their shoulders and plopping checkpoints down along desert roads. As in the rest of Libya, holding an AK-47 and calling oneself a "revolutionary" has become a ticket to respect for ambitious, angry young men. One western diplomat in the capital, Tripoli, sums up the growing international concerns about Libya's south. "The absolute issue for the south is that the economy is almost entirely dependent on the trafficking of humans, arms, drugs and tobacco, by which it's not clear that there's any economic plan to allow people to move out of these businesses. You've got 10, 100 times the weapons that were in Iraq. Much of the area is controlled by armed groups and there are open borders. The quantity of weapons and the scale of the problem is so large you need an international effort."

For now it's left to tribal leaders and a new class of warlords. Among the most benign are figures such as Misa, the Tebu commander in Owbari. The former schoolteacher boasts rare administrative skills and maintains a spreadsheet detailing how many men are under his unit's command down to a single digit. At the other end are men like the Arab militia commander who last year boasted about his control over

yellowcake uranium and shoulder-held anti-aircraft rocket launchers. Described by some as a former criminal in and out of Gaddafi's jails, many associate him and his Arab tribesmen with the worst violence in the south in decades: an incident in March 2012 that left more people dead in the south than the 2011 rebellion, including scores of Arabs.

'Black Saturday'

It started out as a deadly armed robbery. A member of an Arab tribe was killed when his pick-up truck was car-jacked in Sabha in late March 2012. Many Arabs blamed the Tebu, though without evidence, and a meeting of militia leaders was convened the next day. Tempers flared and a Tebu man was killed at the meeting. Fighting erupted shortly after. Arabs began using the weapons they had seized during the uprising against the inhabitants of the Tebu neighbourhood, a hillside slum near the airport.

For days, Libyan media in Tripoli and Benghazi took the Arab line, that the south was under attack by Gaddafi loyalists and mercenaries from Chad and Niger. Militias from Misrata, Zintan and Benghazi began dispatching fighters to come to the aid of their brethren (though most declined to participate when they got an inkling of what had really happened).

On the morning of March 31, Tebu from Sabha and outlying areas marched on the Arab militias and fought back, retaking positions used to attack Tebu. Well-armed and determined, they sent the Arabs into retreat and brought an end to the fighting. "We crept up behind them and took back our people's rights," says Yahya Adam Mousa, a 36-year-old Tebu fighter.

A council of tribal elders was convened. Predictably, competition over lucrative trade routes had fuelled much of the ethnic rivalry. There was one consolation, however: in a move to cool tempers, Tebus such as Misa finally got an audience with the government and had their citizenship approved.

In the end, 54 Tebu – mostly civilians, women and children – were killed and perhaps twice as many Arabs – almost all fighters. The killings only reinforced the Tebu's martial tendencies and determination to keep their guns. "Even the people who we elected are not accountable to us," says Yousef Chaba, head of a community group, settling with anger. "Even the media when they come down here don't show the conditions we are living in. This is why we want federalism or even separation from Libya."

Epilogue

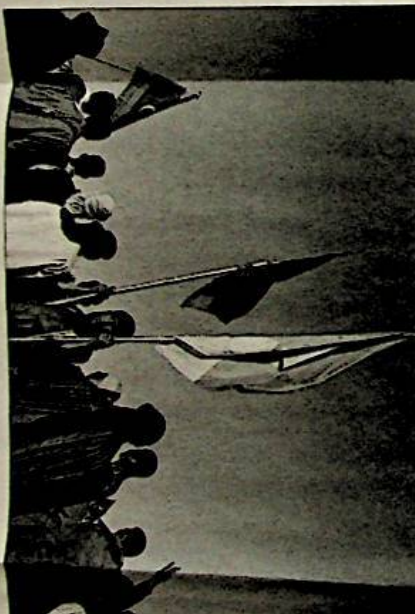
Hardworking people strive to make a difference in Fezzan. Asha Jouma Yousef, a 26-year-old Tebu school-teacher in Hamira, has devoted her life to a primary school, near Murzuq, that now consists of half-a-dozen teachers arranged in a rectangle on the desert sand. "They're well behaved and want to learn. She says of her students: "We have textbooks but no equipment or tools. I would like to build this school up to a level where it has very high standards."

But for now at least, the future of Fezzan belongs not to understanding community pillars but to Misa, the charismatic militia leader who is our guide in Owbari. Explaining that the same armed Islamic extremists who flooded out of the country to join the 2012 Mali uprising flowed back in afterwards in the face of the French-led counter-offensive, he persuades us to let him and his men provide protection on a visit into the town's slum quarter. However, he agrees to leave his truck-mounted large-calibre guns back at his headquarters.

Perhaps 3,000 families are crowded into the vast slum, a densely packed network of multi-track houses, criss-crossing electrical wires and open sewers. The men swarm around Misa, treating him like a celebrity. Though mostly on opposite sides during the revolution, centuries-old divisions between Libya's Tebu and Tuareg peoples remain strong. He encourages them to speak their minds even as his armed men nervously patrol.

Though it lies along one of the biggest oil reserves in north Africa, there are no schools here, the locals complain. There is not a single health clinic. People die of scorpion stings. Few, if any of the those, living here hold citizenship, their applications held up just as they were under Gaddafi. Many concede that they fought alongside the former leader's forces but insist that they had no choice. All say that they have made sacrifices for Libya. "My father fought for Libya in Chad and in Lebanon," says Hassan Muhammad, a 37-year-old Tuareg.

"The way we're treated by the old regime is the way we're treated by the new regime," says Harou Muthal, a 32-year-old former soldier. "We are ready to die for our rights and for our country," says Mohammed Lamini, a 21-year-old student. His elders try to persuade him to calm down and retreat his threat. He refuses. "I'm ready to fight," he cries out in English, so there is no mistaking it. "I'm ready to do anything because I have been wronged."



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