

# Tripoli's Arab souk comes alive

By Philip Shehadi

TRIPOLI (R) — Only a year ago the narrow whitewashed alleys of Tripoli's Souk Al-Turak were a moribund, dusty maze of shuttered shops and forlorn craftsmen.

Now it is once again the noisy, bustling Arab market so typical of the Middle East from Fez to Baghdad and is riding high on a wave of new political and economic freedom and cross-border trade with neighboring Tunisia.

A Madonna song blasts from a Japanese cassette player. Among the traditional jewelry, brass pots and carpets, Tunisian and Libyan hawkers ply sunglasses, batteries, hair curlers, Japanese televisions, electric train sets and party masks — items once hard to find.

The souk boom is a symptom of sweeping reforms brought in by Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in recent months.

Now a champion of free trade with Libya's neighbors, he has hacked away at the state monopoly he proclaimed on imports and exports in 1979.

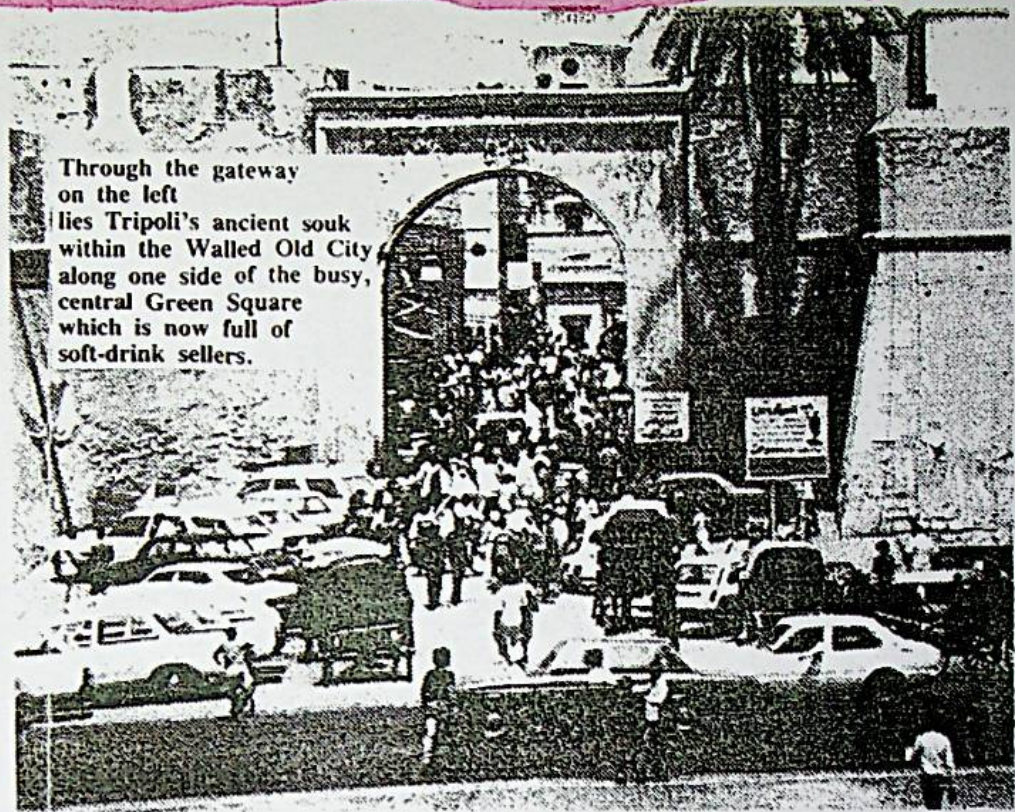
In May he ordered the border post between Libya and Tunisia destroyed, five months after the two states ended a two-year rift and restored diplomatic relations.

Entrepreneurs poured overland from Tunisia as Libya opened its borders, streets and purses to foreign goods of every kind.

"None of this was available before," said Mohammed, a vendor.

He offered Tunisian shampoo, canned fish and biscuits on the pavement of Al-Rasheed Street, choked from morning until well past sunset with Tunisian cars and pick-up trucks.

Libya introduced tough austerity measures in 1985 and 1986 as falling oil revenues brought a foreign currency crunch. It expelled Tunisian and other foreign workers in



Through the gateway on the left lies Tripoli's ancient souk within the Walled Old City along one side of the busy, central Green Square which is now full of soft-drink sellers.

1985 and a de facto ban settled on most consumer imports.

But as oil revenues picked up again, Qaddafi mended fences with Tunisia and has given his blessing to the booming private border trade that was a furtive and high-priced black market only a year ago.

"It was thought that popular initiatives to sue black markets were something negative," Qaddafi told a meeting of his powerful revolutionary committees last week.

"But for us as revolutionaries, on the contrary. The masses have done this of their own volition and without government," he said, in one of several key policy speeches he made to mark the 19th anniversary of his Socialist revolution.

Private traders previously maligned as price gougers and exploiters are now hailed for meeting the people's needs. Trucks and estate cars stuffed with goods roll back and forth across the frontier every week.

From Tunisia come its local industrial products and Japanese electronic goods.

Out of Libya flow clothes and cheap, state-subsidized tea, sugar and pasta.

Libyan and Tunisian dinars are exchanged at the going black market rate but sometimes the goods are simply bartered, a practice Qaddafi has praised.

"Barter is what will kill the American dollar which plays around with everything and makes everything lose its value," he said in a speech last week.

Private initiative within Libya has also come with the freewheeling cross-border trade.

Tripoli's Green Square is full of soft-drink sellers. They buy from state producers and keep a percentage of the proceeds.

Photographers take two-dinar (seven-dollar) instant snapshots of visitors in front of an Italian-era palace, which is now the headquarters of the secretary general of the General People's Committee (prime minister).

No such activities were to be seen two years ago.

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