



CONDÉNET

THE NEW YORKER

FROM THE ARCHIVE



IN THE
MAGAZINE

GOINGS ON
ABOUT TOWN

THE TALK
OF THE TOWN

FACT

FICTION

THE CRITICS

SHOUTS &
MURMURS

CARTOONS

ONLINE ONLY

THE HARD DRIVE

THE FILM FILE
FROM THE
ARCHIVE

SUBSCRIBE

CONTACT US

STORE

search: 

LETTER FROM LIBYA

Tripoli

by Joseph Wechsberg

Issue of 1951-11-10

Posted 2006-05-01



e-mail
this page
to a friend



printer-
friendly
page

This week in the magazine, Andrew Solomon reports on the ongoing struggle to reform Libya. In this article, from November 10, 1951, Joseph Wechsberg describes how the former Italian colony, then under the jurisdiction of the United Nations, was preparing for independence.

Libya, Mussolini's former colonial show place in Africa, and a country almost three times the size of Texas, may go down in history as the scene of the United Nations' first successful effort to set up a brand-new independent federal state. On the other hand, if things don't work out as planned, perhaps its greatest claim to fame will be that of having constituted one of the larger stumbling blocks in the uneven path of the United Nations. People here who foresee the latter outcome say that Libya is about to become just one more demonstration of the fact that in international affairs, as in everything else, good intentions aren't enough, and they profess to discern an uncomfortably close parallel between the situation here and the situations precipitated at Versailles thirty-some years ago and at Yalta and Potsdam more recently.

Libya consists of three territories—Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and the Fezzan. Wide deserts serve as boundaries between them. Cyrenaica's three hundred thousand citizens have a limited amount of self-government under their Emir, who is advised by a British Resident. Tripolitania, with eight hundred thousand inhabitants, is by far the most

populous part of Libya and is being administered by the British, who allow it, too, a degree of self-government. The Fezzan, a desert vastness nearly three-quarters the size of France and inhabited by an estimated fifty thousand people, is under French military administration.

Libya's postwar history serves as a striking example of the nature of the spoils that belong to the victors nowadays. After the fighting stopped, the question of what to do about Italy's former colonies was first put up to the Big Four's Council of Foreign Ministers. The efforts of these gentlemen to reach an agreement were stalled when the Soviet Union demanded the trusteeship of Tripolitania—possibly, it was said at the time, because it wants to use the territory as a base for propaganda operations inside the Moslem world. Further complications arose, and, as so often happens in an international stalemate of this sort, a commission was finally dispatched to “investigate local conditions.” The commission, in its turn, reached a stalemate, and on September 15, 1948, the Libyan question, along with the question of Italy's other former colonies, was dumped into the lap of the United Nations General Assembly. Count Sforza and the late Ernest Bevin then got together and suggested that a ten-year trusteeship be established for Libya, making Italy responsible for Tripolitania, Britain for Cyrenaica, and France for the Fezzan. The Soviets, characteristically, came up with a more drastic proposal: Why not withdraw all troops from the disputed territory and give Libya immediate independence—or, as many who were familiar with the problem read it, immediate chaos?

After countless proposals and counter-proposals by various United Nations committees, the General Assembly, at its two-hundred-and-fiftieth plenary meeting, on November 21, 1949, passed a resolution in which it declared that Libya should become “an independent and sovereign State . . . as soon as possible and not later than January 1, 1952, and that a constitution for Libya, including the form of the government, be determined by representatives of the inhabitants of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and the Fezzan, meeting and consulting together in a national assembly.” In accordance with another provision of the resolution, an interim

administration was set up, consisting of a provisional native Cabinet supervised by a United Nations Commissioner—he is Adrian Pelt, of Holland, formerly an Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations—who is “guided by the advice” of a United Nations Council for Libya. Sitting on this council are representatives of Egypt, France, Italy, Britain, Pakistan, and the United States, and four native members, representing, severally, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, the Fezzan, and Libyan minority groups. In Tripoli, I have heard critics of the General Assembly’s plan for granting Libya independence express the belief that, though noble in concept, it was formulated in such haste and with so little regard for the realities of the situation that it is potentially as dangerous as a delayed-action bomb, and they doubt whether many of the delegates who voted on this nation’s future had any precise idea of the issues involved. However that may be, Libya was singled out to be a test case. Of the two other former Italian colonies, Somaliland was placed under a ten-year Italian trusteeship, and in the case of Eritrea decision was deferred.

Unfortunately, say the skeptics, regard for reality is just as important as nobility of concept. Libya has an Arab population of one million eighty-five thousand (all minority groups combined represent only an additional sixty-five thousand), and of that number, only sixteen—yes, sixteen—have had a college education. These sixteen are expected to rise high in the future administration; several, in fact, are already members of the interim government. Perhaps a quarter of a million Libyans can write their own names, but it is believed that not more than sixty thousand of those are sufficiently literate to go beyond that. More than three-quarters of a million Libyans, if faced with a document to sign, use their thumbprints. Of all the backward countries of North Africa, Libya is the most backward. There are no native doctors, nurses, engineers, surveyors, or technicians, and there are hardly a score of qualified native teachers. The top daily wage for skilled laborers is a dollar, for unskilled fifty cents. The national average per-capita income is thirty-five dollars a year. In all Libya, there are two hundred and forty-two miles of railroad tracks—just about enough for a single-track line between New

York and Washington. The country's rolling stock consists of one steam engine, two diesel engines, and a few dilapidated freight cars. There are no facilities for communicating by telephone, telegraph, or radio between Tripoli, Libya's largest city, and the whole of the Fezzan, to the southwest. To get from one to the other takes five days of hard driving by jeep, unless the traveller manages to get hold of a plane small enough to land on a short dirt airstrip. Not long ago, when the members of the provisional Libyan Cabinet, assembled in Tripoli, wanted to make an official visit to the Cyrenaican city of Bengasi, four hundred miles to the east, they had to burrow a C-47 from the United Nations to do it. Libya produces no oil, minerals, or coal, and has almost no industry. Last year, twenty-five thousand tons of esparto grass, used in making fine paper, represented ten per cent of the country's total exports. The government's revenue from taxes is insufficient to meet its expenses. There is a different currency in each of the territories: Egyptian pounds in Cyrenaica, Algerian francs in the Fezzan, and the military-authority lire, or MAL—currency issued by the British Army—in Tripolitania. No one seems to know precisely how the future State of Libya's currency is to be established, but there seems to be a likelihood that the British will back a substantial percentage of it with sterling.

Libya's lack of educational facilities is nothing new. Until 1912, the country was under the rule of the Sultan of Turkey, who had no interest in schools. Then came the Italians. Unlike the British, who might be said to have colonized for the benefit of their own rich traders, the Italians might be said to have colonized for the benefit of Italy's poor emigrants. Italy set up enough schools in Libya to accommodate the children of the Italians who moved there—even today the Italian government pays for all the Italian secondary schools in Tripolitania—but next to nothing was done for the Arabs, who account for over ninety per cent of the population.

Most of the Arabs, deprived of the opportunity of going to school, live in complete ignorance. They know little about political independence or what it means, and they care less. They have never heard the name of Truman or Stalin. As for the small number of half-educated Arabs, they are vague but

emotionally optimistic about the issue of independence. They have no idea how they are going to run their country, but claim they will manage by one means or another. They talk proudly of new hospitals, new irrigation systems, and new roads, but they don't know where the money for them will come from. They point out that the State of Israel got over the childhood diseases of independence in less than two years, ignoring the pertinent fact that Israel had an abundance of its own technicians and other educated citizens to help work out its future.

The United Nations decision to grant Libya its independence has already created violent repercussions throughout French North Africa—Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—where the French have for many years been assuring the Arabs that they are not yet ready for independence. The Tunisians, Algerians, and Moroccans retort, with accuracy, that they are far more advanced politically, economically, and intellectually than the Libyans. As a matter of fact, France didn't join in the United Nations' happy chorus of "Liberty for Libya." The French have consistently taken a more hardheaded view of this solution than have the Anglo-Saxons. They are convinced that it will be up to them to preserve law and order in the Fezzan even after they relinquish their authority over it.

As a preliminary step toward setting up a provisional National Assembly, the United Nations Commissioner, on July 25, 1950, invited twenty-one prominent Arabs—seven each from Cyrenaica and the Fezzan, six from Tripolitania, and one representing the nation's minorities, most of them concentrated in Tripolitania—to form a committee, which was to discuss the composition of the Assembly and methods of selecting its members. The committee decided that the Assembly should consist of twenty members from each of the three territories, to be appointed by the chiefs of the territories. Once duly established, the Assembly began drafting a constitution and making plans for a general election. Last December, the Assembly passed a resolution proposing that the future State of Libya be a federal monarchy, under the crown of Sayid Mohammed Idris el Mahdi el Senussi, Emir of Cyrenaica, the spiritual and political leader of

three million Senussi tribesmen, and the country's most powerful personality.

The fact is, however, that although the provisional Libyan government is set up more or less along federal lines and has gone on record as favoring the federal idea for a permanent government, the question of whether Libya should become a federal or a unitary state is far from settled. The decision rests, as specified by the United Nations, with the Libyan National Assembly, but outside pressures must be reckoned with. Within the United Nations Council for Libya, which has its offices in the austere Grand Hotel in Tripoli, there is a serious difference of opinion over this issue. The Egyptian and Pakistan members of the Council favor a unitary state. They claim that the creation of a federal State of Libya would cut the country, "like a cake," into three slices for the benefit of "the big colonial powers," and they want to know why the sparsely settled Fezzan should have the same representation in a Libyan government as populous Tripolitania. The American, British, and French members contend that a unitary Libyan state is a hopeless concept because, they believe, the Fezzan and Cyrenaica would refuse to join it. They favor a federal state that would first be given "semi-independence" and would then move gradually toward complete independence as more and more natives become experienced enough to take over administrative tasks. As might be expected, the Libyans themselves—those few, that is, who worry about such matters at all—are divided as to what form their future government should take. Cyrenaica and the Fezzan, afraid that under a unitary setup the Tripolitarians might be able to meddle in their local affairs, are for a federal structure; in Tripolitania the majority of politically minded Arabs are opposed to the federal idea.

The designated future King of Libya is a dignified, wise old man whose only ambition seems to be to help his people along the difficult road to independence, and the Americans and British here hope he will be able to rally his subjects around him and instill in them a sense of national responsibility. The Emir has a wide religious following but also many political foes, who criticize him for sitting out the last war in Egypt and for advocating that the French and British troops in Libya stay on. Those troops today consist of

a few Foreign Legion detachments, in the Fezzan, and of the 1st British Infantry Division, in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The Emir's relations with the neighboring Egyptians are not particularly cordial, and the fact that he is in his sixties and has no male heirs may also lead to dissension sooner or later.

Mahmoud Bey Muntasser, who was elected Prime Minister of the provisional Libyan government by the National Assembly last March, is a suave, Italian-educated businessman who is pro-Italian (which now helps him) and during the war was pro-German (which doesn't). He belongs to no political party and claims to know nothing about party lines. When I saw him in his office, preparations were being made there for a Cabinet meeting. Attendants brought in carafes of water and ranged glasses around them, and bureaucrats bustled in and out with heaps of documents. The bureaucrats seemed more at ease than the Prime Minister, who evidently doesn't fool himself about the magnitude of his task. He has no doubts that the country's future administration will have to depend for some time—people speak of five years—upon the assistance of Western “advisers.” The present expectation is that a nucleus of the British administrators now in Libya will stay on after January 1st, probably on a five-year contract. (The hope is that while some of the British may prefer to go back home rather than take orders from Libyans of superior rank but with little or no administrative experience, others will feel that this drawback is more than compensated for both by the interesting nature of the work and by the comforts of official cars, big houses, servants, and eight-cent shots of Scotch, in contrast to the bleakness they would return to at home.) Instead of getting their salaries from the British Exchequer, the British advisers would get them from the Libyan Finance Minister, who would get part of his funds from the British Exchequer. It is also expected that the United Nations will provide not only technical assistance but financial aid for its adopted child.

Tripoli is a beautiful city, with its white minarets, mosques, villas, promenades, and arcades, and a fine harbor that was a shambles

at the end of the war but has been pretty much rebuilt by the British. Tripoli's history goes back to the days of the Phoenicians, who called the place Oca. Later, the Numidians, Romans, Vandals, and Arabs all moved in at one time or another. In 1530, Tripoli came under a twenty-one-year rule by the Knights of Saint John. In the next few centuries, it was a pirate stronghold. In the harbor of Tripoli, on August 3, 1804, Stephen Decatur commanded American gunboats in an attack on a Tripolitan pirate flotilla, and took two vessels after some furious hand-to-hand fighting. During the Second World War, Montgomery captured the city, and thereafter it served as his main supply base.

Even in the metropolis of Tripoli, the extent of public ignorance is appalling. The city has a population of a hundred and forty thousand, but fewer than seven thousand of them read a daily newspaper—four and a half thousand read the Italian-language *Corriere di Tripoli* and something over two thousand the Arab-language *Tarabulus el Ghard*. (Both papers are owned and operated by a British publishing firm, which uses the profits from the Italian paper to make up for its losses on the Arab one.) It seems almost impossible to educate the people to act in their own best interests. Since the war, a good many Arabs have been killed or maimed because, in spite of repeated warnings, printed and oral, they have persisted in collecting live shells left lying around all over the countryside by Rommel's Afrika Korps and Montgomery's Eighth Army. The natives build fires under the shells to make them explode, and after the explosion, if they are still alive, they sell the casings in the scrap-iron market.

Few of the Arabs appear to have any understanding of the meaning of responsibility or of coöperative effort. An educated native told me that there could never be such a thing as a successful industrial corporation run by Arabs, because everybody would want to be its president and no one would accept even the title of vice-president. The Arabs take little interest in economic progress—Libya's or their own. By and large, they aren't interested in the fact that if they worked longer hours, they would earn more money and thus raise their standard of living. The typical shop stays open just long enough for the shopkeeper to make what he considers sufficient to get by on.

Then he closes up, and goes to sit under a tree and sip a glass of tea. If it is suggested that he keep his shop open longer, he says, "Allah doesn't want me to work too much." Allah, it seems, also doesn't want Libyan farmers to improve the breed of their sheep, although they could make a much better living if they did. All of which—from one point of view, at least—makes the Arab's life in Libya idyllic.

There are only forty-five thousand Italians in Libya (all, or nearly all, of them in Tripolitania), which, of course, means that they are a minority group, but they operate almost all the better farms in the country, as well as much of its business. Most of these Italians have been here since the twenties and, despite all the changes since the war, haven't quite got used to the idea that they are no longer running the country. They act much as if they still were. The Fascist salute is given and returned with disarming candor, perhaps more out of habit than conviction. In the Italian schools, the children are still confronted with maps of the Italian Empire, showing "Mare Nostrum," and in the middle of the city one can still find a plaque that reads, "TO BENITO MUSSOLINI, PACIFIER OF LIBYA, WITH THE DEVOTION AND LOYALTY OF HIS PEOPLE." At the once famous automobile race track in Tripoli, three fasces and the notation "ANNO XII" still decorate what was once the private box of the Duce. It is only a short walk from the race track to the luxurious villa Mussolini maintained for Clara Petacci. The villa is now owned by a brewer, a refugee from Central Europe. The Emir has promised that come Independence Day the rights of the Italians in Libya (and of all other minority groups) will be protected, but what their political status will be has not been made clear.

Some twenty-five hundred Americans are living in Libya today—engineers and construction workers, Air Force personnel, State Department people, and a few businessmen. Their number does not come near representing the weight of American interests in this part of the world. The Second World War dramatically pointed up the strategic importance of North Africa in the defense of Western and Southern Europe. Libya, a United Nations trouble spot, is situated halfway between Morocco, a French

trouble spot, and Egypt, a British trouble spot. It is perhaps not altogether an accident that Wheelus Field, near Tripoli, which was declared surplus by the United States Army Air Forces in May, 1947, was reactivated by the Americans early in 1948. Day and night, big transport planes operated by M.A.T.S. (Military Air Transport Service) come in from and take off for the United States, Germany, Greece, and Saudi Arabia. Wheelus Field has been leased by the United States government—part of it from the Libyan government and the rest from individual landholders—for a sum that, though undisclosed, is known to be very modest. It will undoubtedly cost us much more after Libya gets her independence, but people who should know feel it is worth whatever we will have to pay for it. Libya has become another of those strange, faraway places where Americans will probably have to stay on for a long, long time, whether they like it or not. ♦

[▲ top](#)



**Sign up for a subscription to
The New Yorker magazine.
Just \$1 an issue.**

[Click here for INTERNATIONAL ORDERS >>](#)

[Click here to GIVE A GIFT >>](#)

E-mail address

State

Name

Mailing address 1

Zip

Mailing address 2

City

[home](#) | [subscribe](#) | [store](#) | [events](#) | [contact us](#) | [forums](#) | [press releases](#)

CONDÉNET

Visit a site:

Subscribe to:

Copyright © CondéNet 2006. All rights reserved.
Use of this Site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

This Site looks and works best when viewed using browsers enabled with JavaScript 1.2 and CSS, such as Netscape 7+ and Internet Explorer 6+.