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**The origins of the Libyan nation: colonial legacy, exile and the emergence of a new nation-state**, Anna Baldinetti, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, 224 pp., hardback, \$130.00

This is easily the best recent book on modern Libyan history and historiography in English (and probably in any other language as well).

The history and politics of modern Libya is not an overpopulated field, let it be said; since Evans-Pritchard's *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* came out in 1949, a new book has appeared every decade or so – Khalidi's *Constitutional development in Libya* (1956) Khadduri's *Modern Libya* (1963), Joffe and McLachlan's *Social and economic development of Libya* (1982), my own *State and social transformation in Libya and Tunisia* (1986), Simon's *Libya between Ottomanism and Nationalism* (1987), Ahmida, *The making of modern Libya* (1994), Vandewalle's *History of modern Libya* (2006). These reflect the changing styles of academic research – from the colonial fascination with tribalism, to modernisation theory's optimism about legal change to our various enthusiasms for economic development, state formation, nationalism, subaltern studies, the rentier state – sometimes seeming to reveal as much about scholarly fashion as about Libya. In fact, however, there is a discernable trend toward more serious work, better argued, more robustly supported, situated comparatively; we have been, in other words, accumulating knowledge about Libya, albeit frustratingly slowly.

This volume takes a great leap in that historical progression; if there is only one book anyone reads about the period between about 1850 and 1950 in Libyan history, this should probably be it. Baldinetti is an empiricist, more interested in what actually happened than in why, though she makes some very interesting interpretative observations along the way. The book is exceptionally thoroughly researched, however, comprehensive in its reach, and subtle and intelligent in its analysis. *The origins of the Libyan nation* is a remarkable accomplishment.

Baldinetti's principal contributions are three. First, she provides a very good and reliably straightforward narrative – more detailed than any other single treatment in English – of events in and around what is now Libya during the 100 years or so between the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century. The thoroughness with which she traces the careers of individuals whose appearance in the historical record is often confused and confusing is a contribution in its own right. This was a period in the Arab world, not to say Libya itself, of considerable intellectual and personal mobility as political figures disappear to reinvent themselves elsewhere – sometimes several times, as they stay ahead of European

authorities, nationalist rivals and ideological trends. From intra-Ottoman disputes to anti-colonial jockeying, from schemes to exploit European divisions after World War I to manoeuvring in the new United Nations after World War II, the political and intellectual elite in the Arab world often seems almost chameleon-like in the historical record, showing up in European consular reports, disappearing into pseudonyms as newspaper polemicists in different cities and countries, reappearing at the head of political parties in yet a third place. Baldinetti traces the careers of a number of those who started – and sometimes ended – their careers in Libya with remarkable tenaciousness and agility. From Sulayman Baruni to Bashir al-Sa'dawi – not to say better known figures like Idris al-Sanusi and Abd al-Rahman 'Azzam – local and regional political elites slip in and out of these pages with ease.

In following these careers, Baldinetti takes on a problem that has vexed Libyan historiography for some time: the relationship between 'Libyans' (very few of who would have recognised the name, of course) and the political and intellectual elite in the rest of the Ottoman successor states. We have known that vast numbers of the elite of Libya fled into exile between the Italian invasion in 1911 and the final 'pacification' of the country in 1932. Now we know a lot more about what they did. Many went, as might be expected, to Tunisia and Egypt, where some assimilated into local life and others retained sentimental, political and economic ties with their homeland. Baldinetti provides new documentation on the additional number who went to Damascus, where they encountered currents of pan-Arabism, fascism, anti-imperialism and other ideologies that resonated somewhat differently than they did in North Africa.

And this is the second contribution, the core of Baldinetti's argument: while there were clearly deep divisions within what Italy called Libya – between (and within) Tripolitania and Cyrenaica – the exile experience was also an important factor in the ultimate failure to create a common Libyan national identity, even in the face of a common Italian enemy. The elites who left Libya in the interwar period encountered so many different views of the scope of the nation, the character of imperialism and the nature of identity in their various interlocutors around the region, they were unable to converge around a definition of the purpose of Libya as such. Little in their experience outside the country could have contributed to developing loyalty to a political unit at once larger than the locality and smaller than the Arab nation – and by the time they confronted independence, there was little support for it beyond a wish to be left alone.

This is an important caution, a reminder that Libya, like many of the polities constructed by European colonialism in the region, did not make a great deal of sense to the inhabitants. The Libyan cause, like its Palestinian counterpart – both of which confronted a settler colonisation that had become fairly unusual in the twentieth century – was often taken up for local purposes in places like Cairo, Damascus and Tunis to the detriment of the development of a clear and coherent political programme for the place itself.

Finally, Baldinetti not only deepens and expands our knowledge of Libyan history – both what happened during the interwar period and what resulted from what happened – but also she provides the best discussion of modern Libyan historiography to date. Even those do not care about Libyan history as such will profit from her chapter on 'writing modern Libyan history' as a discussion of the opportunities and constraints that confront scholars writing about contested histories. By now, the fact that history is used for political purposes is a truism but the consequence of that instrumental approach to the past for the project of scholarship is by no means always the same from place to place or even time to time. Baldinetti's treatment is knowledgeable, sympathetic and wise.

Thirty years ago a small group of young social scientists and historians thought we were on the verge of creating a field, a small one, no doubt, but a genuine community of scholars devoted to serious study of Libya. We never dreamt at the time that our labours would take so long to bear fruit; it has taken nearly two generations to see those hopes realised. It is an enormous pleasure to report, however, that our successors are now beginning to appear. Let us hope that the pace at which we accumulate knowledge about Libya accelerates as this new generation of scholars expands and matures. This book is certainly a very, very good start.

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**L'Italia e l'Ascesa di Gheddafi**, by Arturo Varvelli, Milano, Baldini Castaldi Dalai editore, 2009, 346 pp., €17,50 (paperback)

Arturo Varvelli, a young researcher at the Milan-based Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), has devoted most of his work in recent years to the systematic study of Libyan-Italian relations, in particular to the years following the 1969 coup d'état in the North African country.

He enjoyed unprecedented access to unpublished documents in the archives of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and to documents in similar English and American archives. From this privileged vantage point, Varvelli has written an extremely interesting book, important for the understanding not only of Italian relations with Libya, but of the perceptions of the elite classes of both countries regarding the international situation of the period and of their own domestic politics. Varvelli is, thus able to offer a complete and nuanced analysis of the period.

Eleven months after the coup d'état, Gheddafi issued a tough law against Italians living and working in Libya. Goods and possessions were confiscated and all members of the resident Italian community were expelled. This came as a shock not only to the Italian community in Libya but to the Italian government as well. Varvelli details with extreme precision Italian attempts to deal with the new Gheddafi government. In particular, the author describes how the Italians initially relied heavily on the mediation of the charismatic Egyptian leader Nasser, but did not understand that the Egyptians had different interests and therefore, in the end, did not play the role hoped for by Italy. Egypt had its own agenda: it was directly interested in occupying all strategic sectors in Libya. Nasser had reason to keep its neighbour under Egyptian influence, not only for obvious political motives, but for economic ones as well. Access to the large Libyan reserves of oil and the vast job opportunities for Egyptian workers were the most obvious. This ambition was on a collision course with Italy's request for Egyptian assistance in protecting the interests of the Italians in Libya, many of whom were holding the same privileged positions in the Libyan economy that the Egyptians aspired to.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Libya since 1969: Qadhafi's revolution revisited\***, edited by Dirk Vandewalle, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 288 pp., US\$79.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-230-60765-1 and ISBN10 0-230-60765-9

Although the last decade has witnessed Libya's re-orientation towards the West and internal market-based economic reforms, surprisingly few scholars have written about the drivers of these transformations and the authenticity of Libyan reform. Dirk Vandewalle's edited volume, *Libya since 1969: Qadhafi's revolution revisited*, is a collection of meticulously-researched essays that explore Libya's economy, governance structure and foreign policy. In this engaging work, the most prominent scholars of contemporary Libya examine whether Libya's post-2003 improved ties with the United States and reintegration into the international community will ineluctably lead to internal Libyan reforms. The book's main aim is examining how the 'shadow of the past' can become the 'shadow of the future (p. 2).' Or worded differently, how exactly do past policies and existing Jamahiriya structures limit current and future reforms? Attacking these questions from various angles, Vandewalle's compendium should remain the go-to-reference work on Libya for years to come (In the view of the reviewers this remains true even in light of the dramatic changes in 2011.). It is required reading for North Africa specialists, as well as those interested in a case study of the impact of US 'engagement' on the internal politics of former 'rogue' states.

The myriad obstacles to real reform posed by Libya's unique history are laid out in Vandewalle's first chapter. Tremendous oil wealth had relieved the pressure on Libya's rulers to seek the consent of the governed. This fact combined with Qadhafian ideology facilitated weak institutionalisation and a bifurcation between revolutionary and popular authority. The latter serves as the formal political structure, in harmony with Green Book rhetoric, while the former is a loose grouping of the informal power holders in the state – including the Leader, his military associates, family and tribal allies. The formal structures of popular authority came into being throughout the 1970s, but paradoxically these structures allow the informal ruling elites to hijack the formal committee-based decision making process. After the 1975 failed coup-attempt against Qadhafi, power became increasingly personalised. Until the late 1980s, this system culminated in Qadhafi's pursuit of radical 'liberationist' and anti-Western policies. With Reagan's attack on Libya in 1986 and the United Nations (UN) sanctions of the 1990s as catalysts, Qadhafi progressively distanced himself from terrorism and foreign adventurism in an attempt to achieve détente with the West and ensure regime survival.

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\*This book review was written in April 2010 and therefore does not analyse the relevance of the book in light of developments in Libya in 2011.

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In separate chapters, Amal Obeidi and Hanspeter Mattes trace the roots of the overwhelming importance of informal power centres and provide detailed accounts of their structure. They clarify how informal power holders manipulate the popular committee system to make it serve their needs. Both chapters highlight the regime's increasing reliance on tribal factionalism since the 1990s in response to increased domestic threats. Obeidi asserts that Qadhafi has created 'temporary elites' to push forward his policies. Conversely, Hanspetter showcases the resilience and permanence of informal power blocks such as the revolutionary committees, the tribes, the security services, etc. As such, he presents the multiple obstacles that block the path to both effective reforms and the neat ascension of Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam (or another son for that matter) to the Libyan throne. Until the publication of *Libya since 1969*, much ink had been spilled dissecting the theory of Jamahiriya rather than its practice. Mattes and Obeidi correct this bias in the literature by treating the *real world implementation* of Libya's unique Jamahiriya form of governance.

Alison Pargeter's chapter fills another important lacunae in existing scholarship; explaining why Libya – despite its economic crisis in the late 1980s and 1990s – did not experience the Islamist upheavals of neighbouring countries. She highlights factors such as the anti-Wahhabi and anti-literalist nature of Libyan/Sanussi Islam, the dearth of an educated lower-middle class and the ideological pervasiveness of the Green Book.

Ethan Chorin's contribution showcases the role of the Libyan private sector and the psychology of the small Libyan entrepreneurial class, both of which are favourably disposed towards businesses and products. In so doing, Chorin provides a model for US business to trail blaze ahead of the US government and non-government organisations (NGOs) in fostering Libyan civil society and progress in education. Both this chapter and Pargeter's make novel contributions to the existing literature by examining Libyan civil society and its interplay with the Libyan government.

Ronald Bruce St. John presents a big picture overview of the Libyan economy. He points to historic factors that have led to paralysis in the Libyan state sector and speculates that Libya's successes against the international oil companies in the struggles of the early 1970s spawned an interventionist state with a distributive role. Fast forwarding to the late 1990s, economic reform was spurred by Qadhafi's need to address the threat to regime security posed by an ailing economy and aging oil infrastructure, as opposed to any real ideological shift towards capitalism. Furthermore, the Leader's hesitation to surrender state control over the economy is reinforced by certain vested interests. Interestingly, St. John argues that the hydrocarbon sector has remained immune to the Leader's anti-reform hesitations – however, he authored his article in 2008 and the intervening years have witnessed the rise of resource nationalism, the Supreme Council for Energy Affairs and peculiar diplomatic obstacles confronting Western energy companies.

In his chapter, John Entelis succinctly documents Libya's historic shift away from the aggressive pan-Arab unity schemes of the 1970s and 1980s. His chapter provides a case study in how Libyan 'attempts to unite divide' (p. 188). Taking us through the meanderings of Libya's post-1969 foreign policy, Entelis demonstrates two constants 'personality and petroleum'.

George Joffé builds upon this theme of Qadhafi's personalisation of authority to establish a theoretical framework for Libyan policy formation. An insight of Joffé's is that unburdened by institutions, Qadhafi's ideological fervour has occasionally trumped Libyan interests, such as border and energy security.

Seeking to place the developments in Libya since 2003 in a broader perspective, the book ends with a chapter by Jon Alterman, sombrely illustrating that the Libyan model of détente with the

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West was only possible because of many coincidences and is unlikely to be applicable to other 'rogue' states, such as Syria or North Korea.

That the contributors to *Libya since 1969* include not only academics, but also foreign-service professionals and think tank staff provides many contrasting perspectives. That said, the fault lines that divide the US policy community, Western academics of Libya, Libyan exiles and the international energy companies are not explicitly treated in the volume. This obscures the dynamic role of these aforementioned interested parties in shaping Libya's future trajectory. Moreover, another missing piece of the puzzle is Libya's potential bridge building with the EU – a structure it previously resisted for various reasons, including the ideological standpoint of the Leader.

Although *Libya since 1969: Qadhafi's revolution revisited* marshals historical evidence about Libya to illuminate the country's possible future trajectory, the book wisely avoids definitive pronouncements. Additionally, the book breaks new ground, pointing to many fruitful avenues for future scholarship. One such avenue is Saif's stalled reform process – especially his efforts towards establishing a constitutional framework and promoting media freedom. *In Summation, Libya since 1969: Qadhafi's revolution revisited* is a highly readable volume because its chapters form an integrated whole addressing a singular thesis: that the structural legacies of the past will inevitably impede progress towards a better Libyan future – increased international investment and oil wealth notwithstanding.

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**Beautiful modern nomads: bordercrossing Tuareg between Niger, Algeria and Libya**, by Ines Kohl, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH, 2009, 142 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-496-02821-5

Ines Kohl's new book is an anthropological analysis of the *Ishumar*, a group of 'new modern nomads' within the central-eastern Sahara desert. Using the framework of *Ishumar* aesthetics of beauty, music and money, the author's rich fieldwork analysis primarily sets out to examine how 'modern nomads' cross the Sahara today. Based on her observations, she demonstrates how this *Ishumar* phenomenon is a key indicator of contemporary socio-cultural changes in the Sahara.<sup>1</sup> A key strength of the book is Kohl's visual ethnographic approach using over 100 vivid photographs and the nomad's own narratives to deliver a refreshingly creative examination of the *Imajeŕen*'s Saharan heartland, and the deserts of Niger, Mali, Algeria and Libya. Her contribution is invaluable to all scholars interested in the North African, Saharan and Sahelian regions, as well as to a wider general readership that academic publications rarely attract.