

Sandstorm: Libya in the Time of Revolution by Lindsey Hilsum

Reviewed by Emily Millard

"He seemed so small and I found myself thinking that he was just a man, nothing more," says Huda Abuzeid upon seeing the corpse of Muammar Gaddafi. But then she is reminded of the dead body of her father, a Gaddafi opponent brutally murdered in London possibly by Libyan agents, and she starts to cry.

Gaddafi was after all 'just a man' but reading Lindsey Hilsum's unflinching obituary for him and his regime that was despised by so many, it becomes clear once again that absolute power concentrated into a single leader unleashes the neuroses, hatreds and whims of a single personality with almost nothing to counterbalance it. In the case of Gaddafi, this power has left collective damage that will take many generations to rebuild.

The book's prologue details the death of Gaddafi at the hands of rebel fighters and sets the tone for a story which does not glorify those involved on either side of the conflict. Both the Gaddafi regime and the rebel NTC have attracted the attention of the International Criminal Court for suspected war crimes and it is refreshing to read an account of the war which does not let us forget that there are few who can escape the lure of revenge. And there is plenty for Gaddafi's enemies to wish to avenge.

For example, the spitefully-instigated destruction of an eastern Libyan football team by Gaddafi's son Saadi reads like the plot of a black comedy. According to fans, the dictator's son set about destroying Al Ahly Benghazi FC initially by buying up their best players and bribing referees "until it sank to the point where it was about to be relegated".

But then comes the bloody zinger which so often seems to arrive in many of the more absurd stories associated with the Gaddafi family. Eventually Al Ahly Benghazi's fans had enough and rebelled, a riot broke out and pictures of Colonel Gaddafi were burned. A donkey was paraded wearing a football shirt bearing football-mad Saadi's squad number, (something Hilsum notes wryly probably particularly angered the Gaddafis,) and the regime's response was "swift and severe". Saadi had 80 fans arrested; some were jailed and tortured in custody. Saadi finished off Al Ahly Benghazi by ordering soldiers to bulldoze their clubhouse.

All of this happened, it seems, because Saadi was annoyed that a team in the anti-Gaddafi stronghold shared the name of his team - Al Ahly Tripoli.

And that is just what became of football fans who happened to support the wrong team. If you supported the wrong side politically, or were even suspected of doing so, your fate was considerably worse. How could anyone linked to the notorious Abu Salim prison forgive the cynical massacre that left an estimated 1,270 of its inmates dead? That day, which Hilsum so brilliantly describes, is central to the Libyan revolution.

Most of the dead prisoners came from the anti-Gaddafi east, they had been incarcerated in Abu Salim as jihadists. On 28 June 1996 they took captive and then killed one of the guards as they protested about the appalling conditions. After a stand-off, it appeared their demands were going to be met. Instead, they were led into the prison yard. First, a grenade was thrown in and then for the next two hours snipers took pot shots at the remaining men until all were dead. Their sick comrades, who had been taken outside believing they were going to hospital, were also shot dead.

So hidden was the massacre that even a seasoned foreign correspondent like Hilsum had not heard of it until she went to Libya and spoke to the families of the victims. She speaks to one man, lawyer Fathi Terbil, who was one of the early drivers of the revolution. His campaign to win justice and recognition of the atrocity for the families of those killed in Abu Salim quickly coalesced with other factors, such as rising unemployment, intense dissatisfaction with Gaddafi and revolutions in neighbouring countries, to bring Libyans out onto the streets. "We, the Abu Salim families, ignited the revolution," Terbil tells her.

But Gaddafi's 40-year rule was not only about domestic crowd control. No-one could accuse him of having no international ambitions for Libya (read: himself). He came to power in a 1969 coup and consequently wanted to support almost any foreign terrorist group which was in pursuit of revolution. The IRA benefitted from Gaddafi's largesse; Libyan-supplied Semtex destroyed lives from Enniskillen to Canary Wharf. One staggering claim made by a lawyer representing IRA victims, is that every IRA bomb made since 1986 had Libyan Semtex in it.

Other states suffered due to Gaddafi's seemingly unslakeable thirst for generating instability. His bombastically-named 'World Centre for Resistance Against Imperialism, Zionism, Racism, Reaction and Fascism' (known as Mathaba) produced alumni which included some of the most notorious African troublemakers of recent times: Charles Taylor, Laurent Kabila, Foday Sankoh. Mali's Libyan-armed Tuareg have used Gaddafi's patronage to boost their bid for statehood.

But perhaps apart from one idea, the Great Man-Made River Project, (a daring scheme to bring fresh water from the south to the north through a network of giant pipes,) there is little to celebrate about the Gaddafi era. What this book does so well is to illustrate how tragic is this statement and to show how instead it has bequeathed a worrying potential future. Libya's oil riches were squandered on capriciously-conceived campaigns and enterprises. Its people were on the whole brutalised and repressed despite Gaddafi's insistence he was a first among equals "Brother Leader" rather than a despot. And its people are once more fighting one another.

This speedily-written yet assiduously researched account, (it is Hilsum's first book, her day job is Channel 4 News' International Editor,) of one of the bloodiest middle-east revolutions of recent times and the Gaddafi era is a must-read. Combining first rate on-the-spot reportage with wider historic context, it gives one of the first comprehensive accounts of a violent conflict in which the blood is still flowing and the wounds unhealed.