

Witnessing the Transition to Fear in Tripoli

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Global Research, September 05, 2011

[Axis of Logic](#) [Axis of Logic](#) 5 September
2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US](#)
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Axis of Logic Editor's Comment: Lizzie Phelan is one of the few independent journalists who weathered the storm of the US/NATO bombing of Tripoli and their mercenaries' invasion of the city. She was reporting from inside the Rixos Hotel and then moved nearby to the Hotel Corinthia, still amidst raging gun battles between government forces and the NATO mercenaries. She escaped Libya in a fishing boat which took her and others to Malta earlier this week. Today, she gives her first report since leaving Libya. We are indebted to Lizzie and other independent journalists whose work removed the mask of the corporate media and their paymasters. We look forward to more of her reports based on the months that she covered the war from inside Libya. – Les Blough, Editor

Amidst all the media furor about the fall of Tripoli from the grasp of the Libyan government, it's not easy to get a clear picture of what things look like under their new rulers. Upon being released from five days of entrapment in the Rixos hotel with 35 other foreign journalists, it was hard to believe that the streets I was driving through were the same ones I had become familiar with during the month I had spent in the capital.

The previously bustling roads with families rushing around toing and froing from the beach and getting ready for the meal to break the fast were empty, the green flags replaced by rebel ones, and the sparse checkpoints previously run by male and female volunteers, ie residents with Kalashnikovs, had been replaced by checkpoints every 100 or so meters, manned by tanks and exclusively male fighters holding sophisticated weapons supplied by the world's most powerful military force, NATO.

The proud young black Libyans protecting their neighbourhoods were gone. Later we would see the images of them being rounded up and put on pickup trucks, a sight that in the previous months had been confined to places like Benghazi and Misrata. These are the victims of the claim that Gaddafi had hired mercenaries from the African continent, a claim which has been profusely rejected by human rights organisations as lacking any evidence. But in the new Libya they are some of the first – along with those from the largest tribes, Wafalla, Washafana, Zlitan and Tarhouna – suspected to be supporting the Muammar Gaddafi, a crime punishable by death and much worse.

The Red Cross convoy transporting us pulled into the Corinthia hotel. When I had stayed there on a previous trip just a month before, just two or three armed guards manned the entrance. This time it was overrun with men wielding weapons sent from NATO and Qatar and just a handful of swamped and exhausted staff remained.

Later, I saw some Libyan faces I recognised, their eyes looked filled with trauma. "How are you?" I asked one, "he is still in our hearts" she responded. Later when we had more time to

talk in privacy she broke down, apologising as she cried. She said it was impossible to talk to anyone, "Libya is like our mother, but we can't talk to our mother anymore". A Wafalla woman from the tribe's area of Beni Walid – she knew that she and her family could be rounded up at any second, simply because of the Wafalla's steadfast backing of what they call their "guide" – Muammar Gaddafi. She told me,

"Beni Walid people have always been very proud, generous, humble and dignified people. Under that [the rebel] flag of King Idris, we had to kiss the feet of the king before we could say a word to him, we have gone back to those times."

She was one of the many who warned me to keep my head down and get out as soon as possible. I had been one of the few reporters that focused on the effects of NATO's bombing campaign in the country and had tried to highlight the million marches and mass tribal conferences in favour of the Libyan government that indicated it was not quite as unpopular within Libya as it had been portrayed to be.

I had also tried to expose the links of the rebels to Al Qaeda, which NATO was on the other hand fighting in places like Afghanistan. Since the admission by the rebels that the assassination of former rebel commander Abd al Fatah Younis was carried out by Al Qaeda-linked groups within their ranks, the presence of the extremists threatened to become clearer as the then Libyan government prepared to release files and phone recordings exposing Al Qaeda's involvement in the crisis and how the west had worked with them.

But following the fall of Tripoli only unflinching acceptance of the new Libya would guarantee your safety, my Wafalla friend urged me to get home and speak about what was happening.

With fighting still raging on the roads out of the country, and them being particularly unsafe for anyone without rebel protection my only prospect of getting home was via the Mediterranean.

For days this was a very slim prospect – the commotion between the rebels that would frequently break out in the Corinthia hotel over who was the real authority, extended not just to the harbor via which I needed to escape, but to much of the city. For four days other foreigners and I would be told every few hours we would be leaving, only for the person who had given the go ahead in the harbor to disappear and be replaced.

With so many different groups, like the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya and those loyal to the defectors from Gaddafi's government, the western forces now openly on the ground seemed out of their depth.

On my second day in the Corinthia, three butch British guys strutted around insisting they were now in charge of the security of the hotel. One of them told me he had come over from Kabul, which was "getting a lot worse". "Do you think this is going to become like Kabul?" I asked, "It's very likely, with so many different groups fighting for power", he replied.

Meanwhile the cost in lives lost in the fall of Tripoli has received little investigation. The last concrete figures came from the then existing Ministry of Health on the second day of fighting in Tripoli which put the death toll in 12 hours in the capital alone at 1,300 with 900 injured. The Ministry reported that in the previous day over 300 had been murdered and 500

injured. This surpasses the 1,400 massacred during the two week onslaught by Israel's Operation Cast Lead on Gaza which sparked outrage worldwide.

After heavy bombing and attacks by Apaches in Tripoli's poorest neighborhood and one of the last areas to fall, Abu Saleem, eye witnesses reported seeing masses of bodies covering the streets. A relative of one of those feared to be amongst the carnage visited the local hospital where he said just one doctor and two nurses were left. Like masses of the capital's workers, many hospital staff had fled, were in hiding or perhaps dead. When he asked to see the bodies, the guards told him there were none – his family fears they have been dumped in mass graves in locations that may for a long time be unknown.

This bloodbath does not fit into the narrative of a “free Libya” in which civilians are “protected”, but in such an atmosphere charged with the hunger for control at any cost, it is near impossible for those on the ground to be honest about the images before their eyes, while they remain in rebel held territory.

One young armed rebel donning the French flag on his fatigues crept up behind me and asked me where I was from. “London” I replied, “Ah Cameron, we love Cameron,” he beamed. I forced a smile; to even criticize my own prime minister would betray disloyalty to Libya's new rulers.

In the harbor as we looked at the ship that had been waiting to be relieved of its supplies and replaced with passengers, an Italian commented that it was like “a kid running a university” as the new people in charge worked out how to operate the cranes and other machinery necessary to keep the ships coming and going.

We were told that ship may not be able to leave for another five to ten days and the only option for exit by sea was a 20 yard long fishing boat for 12 people lacking most safety equipment, like diving gear.

43 of us prepared to board. The rebel then in charge of monitoring our boat checked our identification repeatedly over four hours insisting that no Russians, Serbians or Ukrainians would be allowed to leave. Neither would a Cuban and Ecuadorian citizen. Their countries relations had been too good with Muammar Gaddafi during the crisis.

Finally at about midnight, we were all allowed on, except for one Russian man.

As the sounds of tanks and firefights and the smell of death that filled the air grew more and more distant, I remembered the peaceful, welcoming and safe city I had driven into.

Lizzie Phelan is an independent journalist and commentator who reported from Tripoli during NATO's bombing campaign and takeover of the capital. She can be contacted at phelanlizzie@gmail.com

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