

Chapter 1

Libya: Year Zero

He had a plan: get to Niger, then fly to Mexico with a fake passport.

As the son of Libya's longtime leader, Saadi Qadhafi had the connections to make this happen. He *needed* to make it happen. It was August 2011, and Libya was collapsing around him. Since February, Libyan forces had struggled to contain an anti-government uprising backed by the might of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In March, the United Nations had authorized a no-fly zone over Libya, greenlighting the NATO bombing campaign that by August was laying waste to major infrastructure and disabling the government's ability to suppress the rebellion. Earlier that month, a NATO-backed rebel offensive had seized major towns on the coast including Zawiya, Zuwara, and Sabratha, and now anti-Qadhafi forces were besieging Tripoli, the nation's capital. The country was coming apart at the seams, and Saadi needed to escape. If he didn't, he might have ended up like his younger brother, Saif Al-Arab, killed by a NATO airstrike earlier in the war.

Saadi knew people who could save him. Many of them were Canadians. All were affiliated with SNC-Lavalin, the Quebec-based engineering giant which, over the past decade or so, had entwined itself with the Qadhafi family through well-placed bribes.

Only a few years before NATO's bombing campaign, relations between Libya and the West appeared, on the surface, to be mended. This rapprochement was not the most predictable development. After overthrowing a pro-West, oil-rich monarchy in 1969, Muammar Qadhafi had helmed the creation of a revolutionary, socialist-inspired state that nationalized Libyan oil,

closed a US airbase, and for three decades challenged Washington's geopolitical aims in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. Then in the 2000s, the North African country downgraded its weapons programs, agreed to pay compensation for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and threw open its doors in a grand economic liberalization that had major Western companies drooling. Qadhafi's Libya, once a strident champion of anti-imperialism and national liberation movements, no longer supported groups that Western governments considered "terrorists," such as Palestinian militant organizations. After years of sanctions and diplomatic isolation, Qadhafi was playing nice, and the West took notice. Stuart Cooper, then Petro-Canada's director of business development, raved that Libya in the 2000s had become "one of the hottest of hot spots" for oil and gas investment in the world.ⁱ

Now Saadi, Muammar's second oldest son, was fleeing Western bombs. What had gone wrong? During the thaw between Libya and the West, Saadi became more involved in government affairs, especially the promotion of foreign investment. Previously, he had been a professional soccer player, captain of Libya's national team, and commander of a military unit (he was also the main liaison between his father and SNC-Lavalin, for reasons that will be explored in later chapters). Amid Libya's economic opening, Saadi adopted a more ambitious goal: establishing a 100-kilometre free trade zone along Libya's Mediterranean coast. In line with the government's new pro-market orientation, the trade zone would boast "free movement of capital and goods, its own courts and a stock exchange, and...a 10-year tax holiday." The purpose of the free trade zone was to diversify the Libyan economy away from oil, as Saadi himself said: "...we still depend primarily on oil... We have to take care of industry, foreign investment, tourism and we also have to search for other sources [of income]."ⁱⁱ It was clear, by now, that the project would never come to fruition.

Saadi had the reputation of a spoiled prima-donna, and not for nothing. In 2008, he visited Canada, the home country of his friends at SNC-Lavalin, for advice on building the free trade zone. However, he spent most of his time there indulging in drugs, alcohol, and escorts, just like his earlier visits to Canada. And like those earlier visits, SNC-Lavalin footed the bill for Saadi's hedonistic parties, and the company hired security personnel, including Australian-born Gary Peters, to ensure the Qadhafi scion's safety. Saadi and Peters hit it off. Peters guarded Saadi on his subsequent trips to Canada, and in late August 2011, he journeyed to Libya with the goal of extracting Saadi from the tumult of NATO's war.

As Western bombs rained down on Libya, Peters assembled a "save Saadi" team consisting of a mining consultant from small-town Ontario, a former New Zealand special forces soldier, a Haitian American veteran of the US Air Force, and others. On August 28, Tripoli fell to rebel forces under the flag of the National Transitional Council. By this time, Saadi was in Niger, waiting for the fake passport that would ensure his safe flight to Mexico.

In the 2000s, the honeymoon period of Canada-Libya relations, Saadi Qadhafi had given an interview to *La Presse* in which he described Canadians as "very friendly." He added: "I found that most of the businesspeople I met really wanted to do business with Libya. The projects between Canada and our country will succeed. There is great potential for the future."ⁱⁱⁱ

Exiled in Niger, Saadi likely regretted those words. For a start, Canadian officials were among the most eager to impose a no-fly zone over Libya following the anti-Qadhafi uprising of February 2011. Canadian surveillance planes "intercepted Libyan communications and waged

psychological war, dropping anti-Gaddafi leaflets and broadcasting critical radio transmissions, which the Libyan government tried to jam.”^{iv} A Canadian lieutenant general, Charles Bouchard, commanded NATO forces during the operation to destroy the Libyan state, and according to the *Globe and Mail*, he “personally signed off on every strike target during the seven-month war.”^v Furthermore, Canadian forces provided air cover for the rebel defense of Misrata, trading fire with government ships. Those Misratan forces would later lay waste to Qadhafi’s hometown of Sirte, ethnically cleanse the area of black Libyans, before torturing and killing Muammar and displaying his body in an industrial freezer alongside the corpse of his son, Mutassim. In 2009, Saadi’s father had been planning a trip to St. John’s, Newfoundland. Just two years later, he was killed by rebels who had successfully defended Misrata with help from the Canadian Armed Forces.

As anti-Qadhafi forces assaulted the city of Sirte, Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird flew to rebel-held Tripoli on October 11. Baird was a lifelong Conservative, having joined the party when he was sixteen years old. He had served in the cabinet of Mike Harris, Ontario premier from 1995 to 2002, whose platform of the “Common Sense Revolution” resembled the neoliberal ideology, promoted by US president Ronald Reagan, that had consolidated across much of the world in recent years. In the 2000s, Baird occupied numerous positions in the federal Stephen Harper government, including Environment Minister, a position in which he acquired a reputation for defending the interests of the fossil fuel industry and undermining progressive climate change legislation. In May 2011, he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, and one

month later he was in Benghazi, urging the Libyan rebels to increase their attacks on government forces. “When in Benghazi,” he stated, “I impressed upon the National Transitional Council the importance of pushing forward militarily.”^{vi}

Four months later, Baird was back in Libya, this time joined by representatives from multinational companies with investments in the North African country: the Calgary-based oil producer Suncor, pipeline manufacturer Pure Technologies, and SNC-Lavalin. The week before Baird’s visit, Austrian foreign minister Michael Spindelegger had come to Tripoli with executives from oil firm OMV, while shortly after Baird’s trip, Germany’s economy minister Philipp Roesler arrived with representatives from German companies. After Tripoli’s fall, Libya swarmed with government officials and businesspeople hoping to take advantage of the chaos. “The establishment of a new government is exciting,” said John Baird. “We look forward to the day of liberation, which we hope is soon upon us.”^{vii} He added, “Obviously, we’re fighting for Canadian companies to be able to begin their operations as soon as possible. That’ll be good for the Canadian economy and good for the future of Libya.”^{viii} In an apparent attempt to generate goodwill with Libya’s new rulers (or remind them who they owed), Baird emphasized to Mustafa Abdeljalil, chairman of the rebel-led National Transitional Council, that Canadian fighters had conducted 10 percent of NATO bombing runs against Qadhafi.

On October 20, shortly after Baird’s visit to Tripoli, Muammar Qadhafi fled Sirte to escape the rebel siege. His convoy was struck by a NATO missile. Misratan rebels pulled an injured Qadhafi from the wreckage and, on video, tortured and killed the man who had led Libya

since the al-Fatah Revolution of 1969. It was a savage, ignominious end to a man who had been one of the world's most recognizable and polarizing heads of state.

The videotaped killing provoked outraged responses from governments around the world, but not Canada. In the House of Commons, Canadian parliamentarians across party lines celebrated Qadhafi's death. The day after his killing, Liberal MP Massimo Pacetti stated in the House, "[Y]esterday the entire world saw that, after 42 years of dictatorship, Libyans can now turn the page on a dark period in their history marked by repression and terror. Today, they have the opportunity to lay the foundation for a state where the rule of law will prevail over the whims of a dictator." Canada's outsized role in the bombing of Libya, and the civilian casualties resulting from this military assault, were not criticized. And Canada's economic interest in Libya was glossed over completely.

Another Liberal MP, John McKay, raised a mild concern about the manner of Qadhafi's death. "[W]hile some might celebrate the death of Mr. Gadhafi," he said, "the means of his death is deeply troubling. It is equally troubling to those of us who support the rule of law and the legitimate aspirations of the people of Libya for freedom. To ensure that the efforts of our brave men and women are not wasted, will the Government of Canada immediately offer assistance to the NTC for decommissioning and democratic institution building –"

McKay's words were shouted down by other parliamentarians. Speaker Andrew Scheer called for order. When the parliamentarians quieted, John Baird responded: "Mr. Speaker, my first thoughts are with the Libyan people, not with their former dictator."^{ix}

This book traces, in broad strokes, the history of Canada and Libya from the end of the Second World War to the present. Its central concern is the 2011 NATO attack on Libya, which destroyed the country's state, shredded its social fabric, and contributed to the wider destabilization of North and West Africa.

Interwoven through the story of this seven-month war are a number of historical threads that must be unravelled to create a clearer image of the conflict's participants, from Qadhafi himself to the Canadian state to SNC-Lavalin and other Canadian multinationals. As such, this book is about many things. It is a story about the role of transnational corporations in Canadian foreign policy. It is about oil, the brutal pursuit of markets, the end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism, the so-called "War on Terror" and the violence and instability it created. It is about colonialism and anti-colonialism, imperialism and anti-imperialism, capitalism and anti-capitalism. It is about people: Muammar Qadhafi and his children, including Saadi; SNC-Lavalin employees and associates like Gary Peters, Riadh Ben Aïssa, and Jacques Lamarre; Canadian politicians from the time of Louis St. Laurent to Justin Trudeau; and the Libyan people themselves who, in 1969, decided to build a new, sovereign form of politics and economics, and have continually paid the price for that leap into the unknown.

On a much simpler level, the book attempts to answer a single question: why was the Canadian government so committed to destroying Libya, especially after the two countries seemingly repaired relations in the 2000s? While this question may seem simple enough, it opens many historical and political questions that this book will tease out, thread by thread. The answer, readers will find, is much more cynical than Canada supporting "the rule of law" and the "democratic aspirations" of an oppressed people. In fact, that justification is so flatly untrue that

I suspect readers, upon finishing the book, will feel insulted that such a lie was ever peddled to them

ⁱ Quoted in Jeannie Stell, "Oil executives cite exploration hot spots," *Oil and Gas Investor This Week*, vol. 2008, no. 3, Mar 2008.

ⁱⁱ "Libyan lawmakers approve free trade zone," *Times of Malta*, February 1, 2010, <https://timesofmalta.com/article/libyan-lawmakers-approve-free-trade-zone.292215>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Vincent Larouche, *La Saga SNC-Lavalin: Un Thriller Géopolitique* (Montreal: Editions La Presse, 2021).

^{iv} Engler, *Stand on Guard for Whom?: A People's History of the Canadian Military* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2021), 100.

^v Paul Koring, "Avoiding civilian casualties was main Libya objective, Canadian general says," *The Globe and Mail*, October 23, 2011.

^{vi} Quoted in Lee Berthiaume, "Baird urged Libyan rebels to keep fighting," *Calgary Herald*, April 28, 2012, https://www.pressreader.com/canada/calgary-herald/20120428/281621007342495?srsId=AfmBOopuwGSR8SwT-gLxQqSeS9LICax4vQBvb_mWR4JzLnjGYRacx9Ag.

^{vii} Quoted in Campbell Clark, "Baird brings big business on trip to Libya," *The Globe and Mail*, October 11, 2011, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/baird-brings-big-business-on-trip-to-libya/article1356075/>.

^{viii} Quoted in Clark, "Baird brings big business," *The Globe and Mail*.

^{ix} "Debates of Oct. 21st, 2011," *Open Parliament*, <https://openparliament.ca/debates/2011/10/21/>.