THE GOOD GADDAFI

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi was the business-friendly face of Libya. But when the rebellion started he quickly reverted to type

Libya's 'Michael Corleone'



REUTERS/CHRIS HELGREN/FILES

BY MARIE-LOUISE GUMUCHIAN

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It was supposed to be an olive branch from the dictator's son, an apology for those who had died at the start of the Libyan uprising, a pledge to reform Muammar Gaddafi's four-decade old regime.

But when Saif al-Islam Gaddafi appeared on television on Feb. 20 last year, he sounded just like his defiant and rambling father.

Wagging a finger at the camera, Saif al-Islam blamed Libyan exiles for fomenting the violence and warned of more bloodshed. There was mention of reform to Libya's constitution, but it was hardly an offer of compromise.

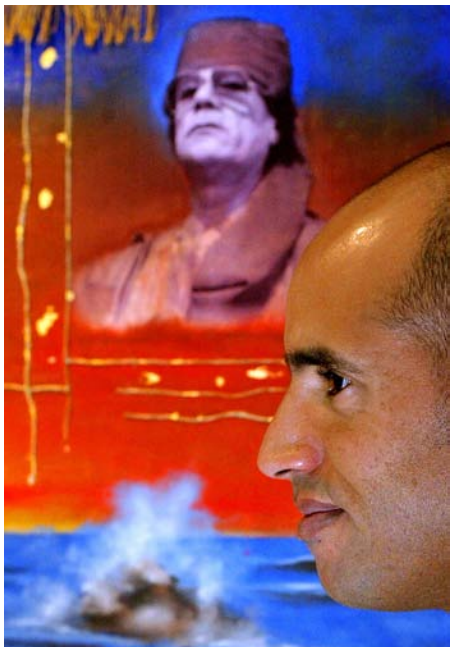
"We will keep fighting until the last man standing, even to the last woman standing," he said.

The speech, the first by a Gaddafi family member after Libya's uprising began on Feb. 17, 2011, was all the more confrontational because of who made it. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi had been hailed - at home and abroad - as the Western-educated, business-friendly face of Libya, a reformer who could bring the country back in from the cold. Here he was sounding like a belligerent hardliner.

His televised address three days into the rebellion, said a person who has spoken to its authors, was originally drafted with "conciliatory language … So when he came on TV, the people who helped draft the speech were flabbergasted. They realised, after all these years, he didn't mean anything. He completely reversed what he had portrayed himself to be."

The story of Saif al-Islam's reversion to type, his journey from great hope back to dictator's son, reveals a lot about the shifts inside Libya in the decade leading up to last year's rebellion. It is a story of would-be reforms, family feuds and dashed expectations. How it ends could be crucial to Libya's future.

Nine months on from the speech, just weeks after his father's gruesome death, Saif al-Islam, bearded, bedraggled and dressed as a Bedouin, was captured in the Sahara desert. Today the 39-year-old is Libya's most famous prisoner, the man at the centre of a struggle between the International Criminal Court, which has charged him as a co-perpetrator in crimes against humanity, and the Libyan government, which wants to try him for financial corruption, murder and rape.



FATHER'S SON: Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, here in 2002 in front of one of his own paintings, had a complex relationship with his father. **REUTERS/ KIERAN DOHERTY**

Pressure is mounting on Libya to hand Gaddafi's son to the ICC. Human rights organizations say the country is unable to give him a fair trial. Tripoli says he should be judged at home.

ON THE BEACH

Saif al-Islam - the name means "the sword of Islam" - is the second eldest of Muammar Gaddafi's seven sons. He was born in June 1972, three years after his father took power in a military coup at the age of 27.

For much of his life, and especially in the years after the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am airliner by Libyan agents over Lockerbie, Scotland, Saif al-Islam watched his father and country become more and more isolated.

Gaddafi senior called himself "Brother Leader of the Great Socialist Popular Libyan Arab Jamahiriyah" and described Libya's political system as a perfect democracy of the masses. But it was one which ruled by terror, hunted down opponents and televised executions.

Saif al-Islam enjoyed the advantages and protections of power, including an education that taught him a couple of the languages - English, German - of Libya's Western enemies.

Enass Ahmeda, a 38-year-old Libyan journalist who would later work at one of Saif al-Islam's newspapers, remembers meeting Saif al-Islam at the beach as a teenager.

"He was talking and laughing about the girls around, and he pointed at me and made fun of me in English. He didn't know I understood," she said.

Later, Ahmeda and her sister joined Saif al-Islam and his friends in a discussion.

"I said something in English and he asked me whether I spoke English. When I said yes and told him I had understood his earlier comment (about my size) … he was ashamed," she said.

Saif al-Islam also swore at his companions. "He was saying bad words to his friends, swearing about their mothers, so my sister asked him why he was doing that and how would he feel if someone said the same thing to him," Ahmeda said. "He laughed and said, 'I am Saif, no one will swear about my mother.'"

After high school, Saif al-Islam studied architecture and engineering at Tripoli's Al-Fatah University, where he was nicknamed "Engineer Saif." He studied business in Vienna and in 2002 headed to Britain to do a PhD at the prestigious London School of Economics.

The LSE forced him to take masters classes to prove his abilities before he could start the doctoral programme. Robert Wade, professor of political economy at the

university, remembers receiving a call from a man who introduced himself as an education adviser for British defence firm BAE Systems. The man wanted to know what was covered in Wade's course, "The Global Political Economy of Development."

"Then it got a bit stranger," Wade said. "He began to ask about the physical layout of the lecture theatre and how many entrances and exits there were to the theatre. Then he said he was ringing on behalf of Saif Gaddafi and Saif wanted to know whether he could audit my course."

A BAE spokesman confirmed that an employee was seconded to work at Saif al-Islam's charitable foundation at that time "as part of the company's efforts to develop a market position in Libya." Those ties should be "seen in the context of the general effort of the British Government at the time to improve diplomatic relations with Libya and to encourage British business to identify local requirements which they could fulfil, subject to export control restrictions."

THE QUIET STUDENT

Saif al-Islam attended lectures with two bodyguards who stood at the lecture hall's exits. He was not marked for his work, as he took the course voluntarily.

"He sat on his own and he never brought a single notebook or recorder or computer or anything. He just came, he sat, listened."

The young Libyan would occasionally ask questions at the end of a lecture or come to see Wade in his office.

"I got the impression of somebody who was very ignorant of this whole area of political economy, about the functioning of the world economy on a large scale but also how the World Bank, the IMF, WTO, how they worked," Wade said. "But he was very curious and genuinely concerned to learn."

And Saif al-Islam's lack of expertise in economics and diplomacy was offset by savvy in military affairs. Wade organised a dinner at a restaurant for Saif al-Islam, the Libyan's girlfriend, a colleague and his colleague's wife, an expert in military defence who teaches at another university.

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>
> **Benjamin Barber**
> author and advisor to Saif al-Islam

"At dinner she sat next to him and they had a long conversation. She came out saying: 'This guy is really well informed.' He clearly impressed her as a very knowledgeable person about those matters," he said.

Saif al-Islam cemented his ties with the LSE through his foundation, the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation. On the day of Saif al-Islam's PhD graduation in 2009, a donation of 1.5 million pounds was agreed for the LSE's Centre for the Study of Global Governance. In the end, only the first installment of 300,000 pounds was paid.

When Libya's rebellion started last year, the university's ties to its former student prompted its director Howard Davies to resign. The University of London, of which the LSE is part, investigated the authenticity of his thesis, "The role of civil society in the democratisation of global governance institutions: from 'soft power' to collective decision-making?"

Davies declined to comment. In his resignation letter he said that while there was no link between Gaddafi's degree and foundation donations, accepting the money was a mistake.

University officials decided not to revoke the Phd. An LSE spokesman said that "whatever one thinks of him, he spent many years studying … but those were legitimate questions and it was right the University of London looked into the provenance of the PhD. What the panel found in essence was that there isn't the evidence to justify revoking the PhD."

Saif al-Islam, said Wade, "was no kind of playboy, no kind of dunce who got other people to do whatever he was meant to write himself. That's just not true."

While Saif al-Islam was abroad, Libya's relationship with the West began to thaw.

The young Gaddafi began working with academics, executives and consultants to plot a new future for his country. Though he occupied no formal political office, he wielded influence and soon came to be seen as a potential heir to his father.

"He really had a capacity to conduct a thoughtful conversation, a political conversation, a conversation about not just Libya but the future of civil society," said Benjamin Barber, an author and adviser to Saif al-Islam who also sat on the international board of his charitable Gaddafi Foundation.

"He really appreciated Western liberal democratic thought but he thought that it could never work in Libya without a major accommodation to the history of Libya, Libyan culture," said Barber.

Saif al-Islam played a central role in Tripoli's 2003 decision to abandon its nuclear and chemical weapons programmes and the following year helped negotiate the end to U.S. and European sanctions on Libya over the Lockerbie bombing.

"He wanted a solution with the West," said Saad Djebbar, an Algerian lawyer based in London who advised the Libyan government on the Lockerbie negotiations and who met Saif al-Islam while he was in Britain. "He wanted to do everything to open up to the West."

With Libya's emergence from isolation, the country became fertile ground for foreign oil companies, which went on to spend billions of dollars for a share of Africa's biggest proven oil reserves. Other investors also poured in.

Saif al-Islam negotiated the 2007 release of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor, convicted - the six always main-



POWER BROKER: Saif al-Islam Gaddafi with French President Jacques Chirac in Paris in 2004. Saif al-Islam was a regular emissary for his father. **REUTERS/ © STR NEW**

tained their innocence - of deliberately infecting hundreds of Libyan children with HIV. His efforts helped lead to the eventual release of hundreds of imprisoned members of the now defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which once plotted against Muammar Gaddafi from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

He also played a role in negotiating the Lockerbie settlement, flying back with convicted bomber Abdelbaset al-Megrahi after his release from a Scottish jail in 2009.

The West didn't always cheer him on. Saif al-Islam was at Meghrahi's side in a stage-managed homecoming spectacle that angered foreign capitals which accused Tripoli of giving a hero's welcome to a convicted killer. But for the most part he was viewed as moderate and reforming.

He pushed for more media freedom, acknowledgement of past rights abuses and the adoption of a constitution. His foundation was the closest thing Libya had to an ombudsman and was used as a point of contact for groups such as Human Rights Watch.

"We also realised that Saif al-Islam was susceptible to international pressure, that he was a good target for us as a human rights organisation within the Libyan authorities because of his direct access to his father," said Human Rights Watch researcher Heba Morayef, who first met Saif al-Islam in 2008 in Washington.

"The general theme was, 'Libya has changed. It is open. I recognise that there are problems but we're working on them'. He was very clever at how he presented himself ... He knew how to speak the language and how to present things to his advantage."

"LIBYA IS NOW OPEN"

When HRW told Saif al-Islam that they wanted to hold a news conference in Libya after the release of a report on the country in 2009 - a first for a place that rarely allowed scrutiny of its rights record - he told them, 'Of course, Libya is open now. I will get you visas. Come and have a press conference,' Morayef said. "When he made that public, he said: 'I invited Human Rights Watch to come have a press conference in Libya, which we would never have done ... in response to an invitation from Saif. But it fit in really well in his whole image of Libya is open now.

Djebbar, the London-based former adviser to Libya, describes Saif al-Islam in those years as a "gateway to his father." Some officials grumbled that "he always rushed to claim success without recognizing the efforts of others in government."

His reformist moves inevitably sparked speculation that he would succeed his father, despite the fact he always refused any official post.

"He was the soft face of the regime. You have the good cop and bad cop. He was the good cop," Djebbar said. "The only alternative was Saif, and indeed he was acting as a head of state in waiting."

But the young man's skills did not always extend to the rough, street-wise political savvy needed to survive in Libya, a society riven by tribal and other rivalries. His ideas were often stymied by opposition from inside the ruling elite and even from members of his own family, who stood to lose from the liberalisation that Saif al-Islam backed.

These tensions surfaced in 2008, when he publicly announced that he was leaving politics. While he believed in a free market economy, press freedom and deeper democracy, his father insisted his own Jamahiriyah system of town hall meetings, which gave people a low-level voice but ensured Gaddafi's tight grip on power at the top, should never change.

Saif al-Islam's adviser Barber, who met Gaddafi senior on several occasions, described the relationship between father and son as "very prickly".

"He was without question the most talented and gifted of the sons and his father knew that and I think saw him as the bright one, the chosen one," he said. "I'm sure his father hoped that he would maybe succeed

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>
> **Saif al-Islam Gaddafi**

him, but at the same time, for the same reasons that Saif al-Islam was bold and smart, he was constantly challenging his father."

It was Saif al-Islam who brought into the government the U.S.-trained Libyan economist Mahmoud Jibril, who would later become Libya's wartime rebel prime minister. Jibril claims he was strong-armed into accepting a position when he was working as a consultant in Cairo.

"I think Saif was more like a window shopper," Jibril said. "He once formed a committee to write up a constitution and his discussion was: 'Well, the Australians did this, we take that, the Canadians did that, take that. Behind a constitution there is a political philosophy, a unified political system. You can't just pick."

For a time, establishment conservatives were content to let Saif al-Islam advocate abroad, figuring that this would lead to the end of sanctions. But once that happened, Saif al-Islam's usefulness began to wane even as the influence of his younger brother, national security adviser Mo'Tassim, viewed by some observers as a rival for power, grew.

In one sign of Saif al-Islam's decline, Oea, an independent newspaper he helped found, saw its print version suspended in November 2010 soon after it published an article calling for a "final assault" on the government, which it alleged had failed to tackle corruption. It reappeared on newsstands a week later with a new name, editor and a pledge of loyalty to Muammar Gaddafi.

Journalist Ahmeda, who had met Saif al-Islam decades earlier on the beach, was an Oea editor and remembers being summoned to his home after she refused to print an article by an exiled Libyan critical of the government, for fear that it would get her arrested.

"He told me, 'You have the right not to publish it but I just want to know. The man is Libyan and he has the right to publish an article. Muammar Gaddafi is just a human and everyone has the right to criticise him.'

'MICHAEL CORLEONE'

But criticism had its limits, even for a reformer. According to the minutes of a December 2010 meeting of his foundation, Saif al-Islam took the unusual step of publicly denying he was feuding with his brothers. Two months later, when the rebellion began, he was the first to speak out in support of the government.

"He made what I call the Michael Corleone choice," adviser Barber said. "When the family, his brothers and long-term regime were under threat, he had a choice of going either with Benghazi or defending the family.

"He made a not very surprising decision. In the Arab world it's family and clan first, and everything else comes after."

Barber continued to interact with Saif al-Islam after the insurgency began and said the younger Gaddafi talked to South Africa and Turkey to try find a solution.

At the same time, Saif al-Islam held court to the world's media. "We fight here in Libya; we die here in Libya," he told Reuters shortly after the rebellion broke out. He later called the protesters "rats."

When Tripoli fell last August, rebels said he had been captured. But he popped up at a Tripoli hotel used by foreign journalists to prove he remained a free man.

He later disappeared, and his Moroccan-like villa, enclosed in what was once a heavily-guarded estate with its own grape vines, orchard and a personal zoo that housed tigers, was hit in a NATO airstrike. A pile of rubble now stands in what was an entrance hall, decorated with Islamic tiles, and sprayed with the names of militias that marched into Tripoli.

The International Criminal Court said Saif al-Islam offered to surrender, but officials there feared this could be a bluff and warned mercenaries with him that if they sought to escape by aircraft they could be shot down. Gaddafi denies that such an exchange took place. "It's all lies. I've never



THE NEGOTIATOR: Saif al-Islam with former Abu Sayyaf hostage Marc Wallert, a German national, in 2000, just before a ceremony to welcome Wallert home. **REUTERS/© WOLFGANG RATTAY**

been in touch with them," he told Reuters in November.

In his final days on the run, witnesses said he was nervous, confused and frightened, at first calling his father by satellite phone, swearing aides to secrecy about his whereabouts and, after his father was killed, seeking to avoid a similarly gruesome fate.

He was captured in the desert by fighters from the town of Zintan on Nov. 19 without a fight and with only a handful of supporters, apparently about to flee to Niger.

On the old Libyan air force transport plane that took him to the town of Zintan, he wore a robe and at first hid his face and dodged questions from a Reuters reporter on board. He later confirmed he was okay and said his hand, with three of his right fingers bandaged, had been injured in a NATO air raid.

Many Libyans believe Saif al-Islam knows the location of the Gaddafi riches; his captors said they found him with only a few thousand dollars and a cache of rifles in seized vehicles.

The International Criminal Court and Libya have locked horns over who will try him. Among other things at stake, the venue could determine how fully the trial exposes secrets about the Gaddafi regime's dealings with the West.

Saif al-Islam's supporters, including surviving siblings who found refuge abroad, say they doubt he will be given a fair trial in Libya. He faces a prison term if convicted by the ICC, and the death penalty if found guilty by a Libyan court.

"To me it's a great modern tragedy," adviser Barber said. "And if there was a modern Sophocles or Aeschylus around, they would write it."

With additional reporting by Ali Shuaib in Tripoli and Ethan Bilby in London; Edited by Simon Robinson

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TAKEN: Saif al-Islam after his capture by Libyan rebel fighters last November.The group which captured him has yet to hand him over to the central government. **REUTERS/AMMAR EL-DARWISH**

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