

THE COLONEL AND I

My Life With Gaddafi

Daad Sharab

Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2021, £25, h/b

Robin Ramsay

The publisher offered me this and I thought, 'Why not? There might be something interesting in it about Gaddafi and Lockerbie, for example.' Sadly, there isn't. Ms Sharab had considerable contact with the Libyan regime's international politics and she tells us that in 20 years with Gaddafi she never heard him waver from the stance that Libya was entirely blameless.

Sharab is a Palestinian born in Jordan. University educated, she went into banking – an unusual woman among the Arab patriarchies. She was chosen by Gaddafi to be his 'eyes' on business deals which Libya, as an oil producer, was involved. Gaddafi had the standard problem of all dictators: whom could he believe and trust? Sharab was one set of outsider eyes on all the hanky-panky which was inevitably generated by great wealth and inadequate systems of control of it. She notes:

'Around him [Gaddafi] there was a constant jockeying for power and favour, like a medieval court. At the centre of all this, as I increasingly found to my cost, was Abdullah Senussi's intelligence service.' (p. 50)

She was also an interpreter of the world outside Libya – and outside the Middle East – to Gaddafi. Like most of those around him, he projected onto the West the conspiratorial view of politics endemic in corrupt Arab societies. Sharab tried to show him that the West was different, that sometimes it was what it looked like. When Gaddafi decided to try and change political opinion in the West about Lockerbie, she writes:

'From the outset I was astounded by the naivety of Gaddafi and some of the so-called expert advisors around him. They wanted to change opinions in the US and Britain but they seemed to have no grasp that it was possible to hire lobbying firms to do this . . . Gaddafi just assumed that everything had to be done underhand, through subterfuge or by paying illegal bribes to corrupt officials and politicians.' (p. 69)

She began as someone who conducted and oversaw commercial deals. As she demonstrated her competence and reliability, her role expanded and the deals got bigger – tens of millions of dollars became hundreds of millions. (And she

was earning a 5% commission on some of these and getting rich.) Among the people she describes doing deals with were 'Tiny' Rowlands of Lonrho and Adnan Khashoggi, the arms dealer. She was an acceptable face abroad for the Gaddafi regime: educated, intelligent, sophisticated. She became a personal envoy for Gaddafi, trying to fix political problems.

There is a portrait of Gaddafi in this: she thinks he was a decent man, with an intelligible vision, who did well by Libya (and in particular by Libyan women). But he went off the rails in his later years as he succumbed to delusions of grandeur and megalomania after western sanctions against Libya were lifted.

'Gaddafi had grand designs on southern Africa, scattering Libyan oil revenue across the continent in an attempt to buy favour . . . He was frequently absent at African Union meetings, but the crowning glory of his delusions of grandeur was when he accepted the ludicrous title "King of Kings" . . .

It was bestowed by 200 traditional African leaders at a ceremony in Benghazi. A preening Gaddafi sat on a throne while they danced around him. It was a ridiculous spectacle, but convinced the Colonel he was right to pursue his dream of creating a new superpower – a sort of United States of Africa, with its own currency, army and passport.' (p. 153)

Even so she was still flying round the world for him.

'By the end of 2009 I had three bulky dossiers in my briefcase – on my arduous visit to India; my productive dinner with Hilary Clinton; and the clandestine trip to Tel Aviv to meet Shimon Peres – to present to the Colonel.' (p. 164)

She never met the Colonel again. Ten days later she was put under house arrest and detained for nearly a year. No charges were ever brought and she never learned what Gaddafi thought she had done. She was in the house when the regime fell, survived it being bombed, and eventually escaped back to Jordan.

It's all mildly interesting but there's no analysis here worth mentioning of Libya and its political and social system, let alone the wider issues of the country's relationship with the other Arab countries and the American and Russian blocs. The author could have told us a great deal more than she has.