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**From Flying Carpets to No-Fly Zones:  
Libya's Elusive Revolutions, According to  
Ruth First, Hisham Matar - and the ICC**

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## Abstract

Libya's most recent uprising – following the largely peaceful popular overthrows of the repressive governments in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt in the first months of 2011 (and amid the continued violence in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Uganda too, as well) – is said to have begun on February 15, when “fourteen black-robed lawyers demanded the release of Fathi Turbil, a fellow lawyer hauled in for questioning by Abdullah Sanussi, Qaddafi's intelligence chief and brother-in-law” (Pelham). Two days later, on February 17, the judicial insurgency became a massive popular uprising against the more than 40-year dictatorship of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. Quickly as that uprising spread, however, from Benghazi in the eastern part of the country to al-Zawiya in the west and to the outskirts of Tripoli, Libya's notorious leader had marshaled his superior military resources to brutally quell the opposition forces. How would the “international community” and its institutions, especially at the United Nations, respond?

“From Flying Carpets to No-Fly Zones” proposes to examine the complex and contested situation of Qaddafi's Libya within a changing international order, from the 1969 revolution as narrated by South African historian and anti-apartheid activist Ruth First in *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* (1974) to its narrative reconstructions by exiled Libyan writer Hisham Matar in his semi-autobiographical novels *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), and finally in the terms of the investigation and eventual indictment of the Qaddafi revolution for “war crimes and crimes against humanity” brought by Luis Moreno-Ocampo, prosecutor for the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>1</sup>

Ruth First began her study of Libya's “elusive revolution” with a reading of the event as indeed a most “perverse revolution,” asking, for example, “What is it about Libya and Gaddafi in the seventies which explains their eccentricities – this blinding gap between Libyan interpretation and Arab and world reality?” Libya was, however, according to Hisham Matar, a “country of men,” the title of his 2006 novel, set in 1979 Libya, ten

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<sup>1</sup> Whether the ICC will issue warrants for the arrest of those individuals named in Moreno-Ocampo's request is still pending – and a decision expected in early June.

years after the ever more infamous Colonel had seized power from the monarchy of King Idris that had ruled the former colony since its grant of independence in 1951. It was also a “time of blood and tears,” recalls Suleiman, Matar’s narrator, telling his tale from exile in Egypt. It was moreover a time of betrayals, so desperately, despairingly, described in the two novels that allude to a father’s “disappearance” at the hands of Libya’s ruler and his secret forces and into (perhaps) the no less soiled hands of clandestine allies. Luis Moreno-Ocampo referred in turn, in his statement to the UN Security Council pursuant to UNSCR 1970 (2011), to “crimes against humanity” committed by Qaddafi’s forces, if only, for immediate prosecutorial purposes, in the more recent period dating from 15 February 2011.

By way of this documentary narrative (Ruth First, *Libya: The Elusive Revolution* [1974], Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men* [2006] and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* [2011], and the International Criminal Court’s deliberations in 2011), “From Flying Carpets to No-Fly Zones” proposes to examine a longer history of changed and still changing geopolitical relations, as exemplified here by the Libya case, between and among North/South, East/West national and regional affiliations. Special attention will be paid too to contextualizing this historiography within the current debates emanating from within international law – including international humanitarian and human rights law – regarding the disposition of multilateral forces, regional commitments, and the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) in responding to this latest of Libya’s “elusive revolutions.” What have been the contributions (and/or abstentions) of the Arab League, for example; or the African Union for that matter; the EU and the US especially; or the putative “international community”? Should Libya, that is, have been suspended from the United Nations Human Rights Council? Referred by the Security Council to the International Criminal Court for investigation? What are the stakes? And what to make of the eventual historical and precedent-setting outcomes, the global implications – and yes, even the inevitable “unintended consequences”....?

Works Cited:

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