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The Cairo Affair

Written by Olen Steinhauer

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THE CAIRO AFFAIR

OLEN STEINHAUER



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an imprint of St. Martin's Press.

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JN & EP,

whose friendship

helps keep us sane

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COLLECTION STRATEGIES

On February 19, 2011, two days after the Day of Revolt, the first kidnapping occurred in London, and over the following seventy-two hours similar scenes occurred in Brussels, Paris, and New York. In only three days, five politically active Libyan exiles vanished from the face of the earth: Yousef al-Juwali, Abdurrahim Zargoun, Waled Belhadj, Abdel Jalil, and Mohammed el-Keib.

Word of these abductions reached Langley along the usual paths—updates from the cousins, intercepted e-mails, news feeds, and worried reports from friends and colleagues—yet the computer algorithms somehow missed the possibility that they were part of a single event. It took a researcher in the Office of Collection Strategies and Analysis, Jibril Aziz, to see the connection. As a native Libyan who had been reared on the anxieties of his family's political exile, he was primed to find connections where others wouldn't be looking, and his enthusiasm sometimes meant that he found connections where they didn't actually exist.

Jibril worked in the Original Headquarters Building in an office the size of three, for in 1991 a contractor had altered the penitentiary-like 1950s design by bringing down two walls, finally connecting all the members of the North Africa section of Collection Strategies.

Jibril was one of fifteen analysts in that long room, each half-hidden behind cubicle walls, and occasionally they coalesced at one end to puzzle over the decade-old coffeemaker and joke about their view, which was largely obscured by sculpted rhododendron bushes, though if they stood on tiptoe they could catch sight of the busy parking lot. At thirty-three, Jibril was the youngest analyst in Collection Strategies.

Before coming across the disappearances on Tuesday, February 22, Jibril had spent his lunch break eating a meal packed by his wife, Inaya, and verifying the translation of a just-broadcast speech by Muammar Gadhafi, who had rambled for more than an hour in a diatribe against "rats and agents" and "rats and cats" and "those rats who've taken the tablets."

If they're not following Gadhafi, who would they follow? Somebody with a beard? Impossible. The people are with us, supporting us, these are our people. I've brought them up. Everywhere they are shouting slogans in support of Muammar Gadhafi.

After this despressing chore, he tried to divert himself with the Libya-related reports that had come in over the transom, searching for something—anything—to buoy his spirits. This was how he came across the disappearances, and when he read of them he felt as if a light had been turned on. Finally, something palpably real after the fantasy mutterings of a dictator. He was excited in the aesthetic way that all researchers are when they've discovered connections where previously nothing existed.

Yet there was more: There was Stumbler.

To reach his direct supervisor, Jibril had to walk down the corridor, steeling himself against the sharp aroma of disinfectant, and climb a set of noisy stairs, then wait in Jake Copeland's anteroom, often chatting with researchers from the Europe and South America sections as they all waited for a word with the boss. Because of the state of the world, the Asia section had recently begun reporting directly to Copeland's superior, so, beyond the weekly reports and biweekly meetings that brought the whole world together, no one really knew what was happening in that part of the globe.

"They're doing it," Jibril said once he'd gained access. He spread five pages across Copeland's desk, each with a photo, ten lines of bio, and the circumstances of the man's disappearance.

"It?"

"Stumbler, Jake. It's *on.*"

"Slow down. Take a breath."

Jibril finally took a chair, leaned forward, and used a long brown finger to point at each of the faces. "One, two, three, four, five. All gone, just as the plan says. That's step one, by the book."

Copeland frowned, rubbing an eye with the heel of his hand.

"Check your in-box," Jibril commanded. "I sent you the memo."

Copeland pulled up his e-mail. He scrolled through Jibril's report. "Wordy, isn't it?"

"I'll wait."

Copeland sighed and began to read.

22 February 2011

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Unexpected Developments in Exile Behavior, Libyan

LONDON:

On the afternoon of 19 February, after a lunch with other members of the Association of the Democratic Libyan Front (ADLF) at Momo (Heddon Street), Yousef al-Juwali took the Picadilly Line south, presumably toward his home in Clapham. According to intelligence shared by MI-5, cameras recorded that al-Juwali was approached on the train by a man in a heavy padded coat, appx 6 feet tall. Arabic features, nationality undetermined. After a brief conversation, both men disembarked at Waterloo Station and proceeded on foot to York Road, where a black Ford Explorer pulled up. Aboveground cameras noted al-Juwali's hesitation—the Explorer, it is assumed, was unexpected—but after another moment's conversation both men

got into the car. Yousef al-Juwali has not been heard from since. Inquiries showed that the Explorer had been stolen the previous evening. It was recovered two days later in South Croydon, abandoned and wiped clean.

BRUSSELS:

In a similar scene, Abdurrahim Zargoun of Libyans United (LU) boarded a bus in Place du Petit Sablon with a smaller, dark-skinned man on 20 February. Zargoun, too, is now missing.

PARIS:

Waled Belhadj, an ex-founding member of the ADLF who was rumored to be building an as-yet-unnamed exile network, simply vanished on 20 February. There is no record of the circumstances leading to his disappearance.

MANHATTAN:

Yesterday (21 February), two men—Abdel Jalil and Mohammed el-Keib of the Free Libya Organization (FLO)—were seen at a wedding party on Long Island. Together, they returned by train to Manhattan, where they continued to el-Keib's apartment on the corner of Lexington and 89th. When they left an hour later they were in the company of a man whose size suggests he is the same one who approached Yousef al-Juwali in London. Appx 6 feet with North African features, dressed in an overcoat. Together, they took the subway north to the Bronx, then boarded the BX32 bus to Kingsbridge Heights. They presumably got off at one of four unobserved stops before the bus reached its terminus. They have been missing for sixteen hours.

ASSESSMENT:

To place these items in perspective, one should note that the uprising in Libya is at one of its (presumably) many peaks. Forty-eight hours before the first disappearance, in Benghazi, Libyans stepped into the streets for a "day of revolt" to voice contempt for Muammar Gadhafi's regime. The Libyan government's reaction has been to

strike back in a violent crackdown. The Libyan exile community (of which I am a member) lives in a state of anxiety as the news trickles out of North Africa.

The men listed above comprise the backbone of the international anti-Gadhafi movement. Indeed, they are each named in the 2009 draft proposal for regime change composed by myself (AE/STUMBLER). If these five men are on the move, then something large is in the works.

Given the sparse evidence above, there are two possibilities:

a. Agreements. An under-the-table agreement has been reached between the various exile groups (FLO, ADLF, LU), and they are either mobilizing for a united public relations front or are preparing to enter Libya itself.

b. Agency Presence. While Stumbler was officially rejected in 2009, there remains the possibility that our own agency, or a section working independently, has decided that with the emergence of a viable active opposition within Libya the time is right to put the plan into action, beginning with the covert assembly of these primary exile figures.

Given the historic animosity between the groups mentioned above, "Agreements" is unlikely. While all three organizations share a desire for the end of Gadhafi's rule, their visions of a post-Gadhafi Libya keep them at odds, split apart by ideological rifts. Yet this would be the preferred scenario.

"Agency Presence," while potentially more likely, would be disastrous in this analyst's opinion. Stumbler began life in this office, but it was a product of a particular time, and with the emergence of an Arab Spring that time has passed. The practical objections brought up to the original plan remain, and now, with reports of Libyans dying in Benghazi in order to oust their dictator, any incursion by the United States (either by American soldiers or leaders handpicked by the U.S. from the exile population) would be rightly viewed as a hijacking of Libya's revolution, giving increased credibility to the Gadhafi regime and delegitimizing any pro-West government that would follow.

Jibril Aziz
OCSA

Jake Copeland leaned back, hoping to relieve a backache that had been troubling him for nearly a week. Backaches and hemorrhoids—that was how he described his job at parties when his friends asked with arched brows what life in intelligence was like. He'd sat at this desk for two years, riding in with the new administration, and had during that time watched many researchers run into his office with wild, unsubstantiated theories. Jibril was no more levelheaded than any of them, but he was smart and committed, and unlike most OCSA researchers he had Agency field experience. Yet as the child of Libyan exiles Jibril also had a personal stake in the region and sometimes couldn't see past his emotions. And now this. "Stumbler, huh?"

"What have I been saying? They're putting Stumbler into motion."

"And when you say *they*—"

"I mean *we*. And it's morally abhorrent."

"It was your plan, Jibril."

"And two years ago it would have been the right thing to do. Not now. Not anymore."

Copeland liked Jibril. The man was obsessed; he was shortsighted. Yet his plans and schemes usually contained a nugget of glory, and it was Copeland's job to dig it out. Working with Jibril Aziz was seldom boring.

"If, as you suggest, we *are* behind this, then why are you bringing it to me?"

"So you can stop them. Stop us."

"You really think I have that kind of pull?"

The younger man hesitated. "Then send me in."

"Into Libya? No way. No war zones for you."

Jibril was rash, but he wasn't stupid. "You're right, Jake. I don't have anything here. Nothing solid. But there's *something.* You agree?"

"Certainly there's something. I'm not saying there isn't. But if—"

"So I need to look into it."

Copeland chewed his lower lip, shifting to relieve his back of a sudden shooting pain. "Go on."

"I'll need authorization to travel."

"You're not flying into Tripoli."

"Budapest."

"Budapest?"

Jibril nodded. "Just an interview. A quick talk, and then I'll tell you one way or the other."

"Can I ask who you're interviewing?"

"Our deputy consul, Emmett Kohl."

"I'm afraid to ask how he connects to this."

"Don't you trust me, Jake?"

Copeland trusted Jibril, but he also knew when his employees were trying to manipulate him. So he listened with a wary ear as Jibril stepped back into time, bringing them back to Stumbler and the route it had taken through embassies and government offices before being returned to them, rejected. Jibril was stretching to find connections, but he was doing it for Copeland's benefit, to make his acquiescence more bureaucratically defensible. It was, as Jibril put it more than once, just another research trip. Jake approved those on a daily basis. Finally, Copeland said, "Okay. I'll write out an authorization and ask Travel for a ticket."

"I'd rather take care of that myself."

"Don't trust Travel?"

Jibril scratched at the side of his nose. "Travel will put it in my file. There's no reason for that, not at this point. I'd like a week off. Maybe more, depending on what I find."

"You're paying for this out of your own pocket?"

"I'll save my receipts. Research can reimburse me later."

"If you're lucky," Copeland said as it occurred to him that this wasn't merely a way to keep his trip secret; it was yet another way to make his deal entirely acceptable. If Jibril caused trouble, he was just a wayward employee on vacation. Copeland remained blameless.

So he agreed to the time off, beginning in two days, and wrote out a memo to this effect for Jibril to pass on to his secretary. "Thank you, sir," Jibril said, and Copeland wondered when he'd last heard "sir" from this man's lips. Ever?

He saw Jibril again that afternoon, the young man's coat folded over a forearm as he headed out to the parking lot. They nodded at

each other, just a nod, but he could see that Jibril was walking on air. He was on the move again. Not all researchers felt this way, but Jibril had once known the dirt and grime of fieldwork; unlike many of his colleagues, he'd cut his teeth by seducing foreign nationals into betraying their own countries. Once you've learned how to do that to people, you develop a taste for deception, and drab office walls, carpeted cubicle dividers, and pulsing computer monitors feel like a poor substitute for living. So does honesty.

PART I

A DISLOYAL WIFE

Sophie

1

Twenty years ago, before their trips became political, Sophie and Emmett honeymooned in Eastern Europe. Their parents questioned this choice, but Harvard had taught them to care about what happened on the other side of the planet, and from the TV rooms in their dorms they'd watched the crumbling of the USSR with the kind of excitement that hadn't really been their due. They had watched with the erroneous feeling that they, along with Ronald Reagan, had chipped away at the foundations of the corrupt Soviet monolith. By the time they married in 1991, both only twenty-two, it felt like time for a victory lap.

Unlike Emmett, Sophie had never been to Europe, and she'd longed to see those Left Bank Paris cafés she'd read so much about. "But *this* is where history's happening," Emmett told her. "It's the less traveled road." From early on in their relationship, Sophie had learned that life was more interesting when she took on Emmett's enthusiasms, so she didn't bother resisting.

They waited until September to avoid the August tourist crush, gingerly beginning their trip with four days in Vienna, that arid city of wedding-cake buildings and museums. Cool but polite Austrians filled the streets, heading down broad avenues and cobblestone walkways, all preoccupied by things more important than gawking American tourists. Dutifully, Sophie lugged her *Lonely Planet* as they

visited the Stephansdom and Hofburg, the Kunsthalle, and the cafés Central and Sacher, Emmett talking of Graham Greene and the filming of *The Third Man,* which he'd apparently researched just before their trip. "Can you imagine how this place looked just after the war?" he asked at the Sacher on their final Viennese afternoon. He was clutching a foot-tall beer, gazing out the café window. "They were decimated. Living like rats. Disease and starvation."

As she looked out at shining BMWs and Mercedeses crawling past the imposing rear of the State Opera House, she couldn't imagine this at all, and she wondered—not for the first time—if she was lacking in the kind of imagination that her husband took for granted. Enthusiasm and imagination. She measured him with a long look. Boyish face and round, hazel eyes. A lock of hair splashed across his forehead. *Beautiful,* she thought as she fingered her still unfamiliar wedding band. This was the man she was going to spend the rest of her life with.

He turned from the window, shaking his head, then caught sight of her face. "Hey. What's wrong?"

She wiped away tears, smiling, then gripped his fingers so tightly that her wedding ring pinched the soft skin of her finger. She pulled him closer and whispered, "Let's go back to the room."

He paid the bill, fumbling with Austrian marks. *Enthusiasm, imagination, and commitment*—these were the qualities she most loved in Emmett Kohl, because they were the very things she felt she lacked. Harvard had taught her to question everything, and she had taken up that challenge, growing aptly disillusioned by both left and right, so uncommitted to either that when Emmett began his mini-lectures on history or foreign relations, she just sat and listened, less in awe of his facts than in awe of his belief. It struck her that this was what adulthood was about—belief. What did Sophie believe in? She wasn't sure. Compared to him, she was only half an adult. With him, she hoped, she might grow into something better.

While among historical artifacts and exotic languages she always felt inferior to her new husband, in bed their roles were reversed, so whenever the insecurity overcame her she would draw him there. Emmett, delighted to be used this way, never thought to wonder at

the timing of her sexual urges. He was beautiful and smart but woefully inexperienced, whereas she had learned the etiquette of the sheets from a drummer in a punk band, a French history teacher's assistant, and, over the space of a single experimental weekend, a girlfriend from Virginia who had come to visit her in Boston.

So when they returned to their hotel room, hand in hand, and she helped him out of his clothes and let him watch, fingertips rattling against the bedspread, as she stripped, she felt whole again. She was the girl who believed in nothing, giving a little show for the boy who believed in everything. Yet by the time they were tangled together beneath the sheets, flesh against flesh, she realized that she was wrong. She did believe in something. She believed in Emmett Kohl.

The next morning they boarded the train to Prague, and not even the filthy car with the broken, stinking toilet deterred her. Instead, it filled her with the illusion that they were engaged in *real* travel, cutting-edge travel. "This is what the rest of the world looks like," Emmett said with a smile as he surveyed the morose, nervous Czechs clutching bags stuffed with contraband cigarettes, alcohol, and other luxuries marked for resale back home. When, at the border, the guards removed an old woman and two young men who quietly watched the train leave them behind, Sophie was filled with feelings of authenticity.

She told herself to keep her eyes and ears open. She told herself to absorb it all.

The dilapidated fairy-tale architecture of Prague buoyed them, and they drank fifty-cent beers in underground taverns lit with candles. Sophie tried to put words to her excitement, the magnitude of a small-town girl ending up here, of all places. She was the child of a Virginia lumber merchant, her travels limited to the height and breadth of the East Coast, and now she was an educated woman, married, wandering the Eastern Bloc. This dislocation stunned her when she thought about it, yet when she tried to explain it to her husband her words felt inadequate. Emmett had always been the verbal one, and when he smiled and held her hand and told her he understood she wondered if he was patronizing her. "Stick with me, kid," he said in his best Bogart.