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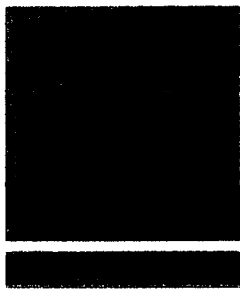
CONFIDENTIAL

April 3, 2011

For: Hillary
From: Sid
Re: Sarko of Arabia

Hilarious story about Sarkozy, BHL (Zelig as Lawrence of Arabia), and Libya, from Carla Bruni detail down to disinformation at end about France providing trainers and arms. Only Moliere could do this justice.

Undoubtedly, you saw Wash Post piece today on hostility between Haftari and Younis. Sources say long-time Qaddafi resister Haftari has contempt for Younis (French client), who is devoting more energy to cutting him out than organizing a military force. (See Moliere or is this part Evelyn Waugh?)



BLOGS & STORIES

PRINT

Sarkozy: Statesman or Madman?
by Christopher Dickey
April 2, 2011 | 8:39pm

An intimate look at the French president and his ties to the incestuous world of French intellectuals who helped launch the war in Libya.

In their favored haunts all across the city, at the bar of the Hotel Raphael near the Arc de Triomphe, in the tearrooms of the Lutetia on the Left Bank and the Bristol on the Right Bank—a long way, in short, from the carnage in the Libyan desert—the Paris literati banter non-stop about the nuances of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's somewhat puzzling decision to lead their country and the Western world to war. Not a few have been amused, or chagrined, or both, to learn that one of their own, the ever-so-flamboyant (some would say insufferable) philosopher

Bernard-Henri Lévy had a pivotal role in prompting the allies' intervention. "I might write a book about it myself," says the man commonly known as BHL—by far the most controversial public intellectual in France—as he settles into the Raphael's dark red-velvet upholstery.

Any such account will, inevitably, lay out the moral case for protecting civilians from a tyrant. But the more one learns of the inside story of the war's inception, as told by people close to Sarkozy, the clearer it is why U.S. President Barack Obama seemed wary of this alliance from the first. Intervention in Libya might well serve American "interests and values," as Obama said, but from the start White House aides shied away from what they called "Sarkozy's war" and were glad to let France have the glory—or blame. Later, under the NATO command structure agreed last week, they spread responsibility around so widely it was hard to know who the White House thought was in charge. Press Secretary Jay Carney spoke of a "group effort," saying, "It's not a question of, you know, who gets credit."

Day to day, sometimes hour to hour, the battle lines have lurched back and forth along Libya's coastal highway, and the action behind the scenes has been just as chaotic. And again and again the story comes back to the French president. Aside from mad Muammar Gaddafi, no character in this drama is so enigmatic or so compelling. "He's everything people say about him—unpredictable, impulsive—and at the same time he's the contrary," suggests playwright Yasmina Reza (*Art, The God of Carnage*) who spent a year following Sarkozy on the campaign trail for her book-length sketch of him, *Dawn Dusk or Night*. Although his moods change for all the world to see, she says, he can't be reduced to any simple formula. During the effort to build a coalition for the action in Libya, as Sarkozy struggled to keep the Arabs on board, fend off German opposition, and rein in his own cabinet, his moods shifted from dark and silent to excited and on the top of his game "like he was 14," in the words of a close friend.

Sarkozy has at least one painfully obvious reason to want this war: his recent polls have been down in the 20s, the lowest ever for a French head of state. He's up for reelection next year with no support on the left and a potent challenger, Marine Le Pen, on the far right. But Reza doesn't believe it's about that. "He is smart, but not a cynic," she says. "For me he has something that is perhaps more dangerous than cynicism—what might be called serial attachments." He embraces a cause passionately, but then his attention moves on. It's a quality that Reza's book describes as "childlike." Author and literary critic Pierre Assouline, who knew Sarkozy as a teenager and has watched him ever since says "he has not changed."

Yet for all that, few who are familiar with the French president—whether friend or foe—question Sarkozy's concern for the Libyan people. "Even among the Socialists, everybody recognized that he did what should be done," says a leading party operative on the left, ordinarily no fan of Sarkozy's. But outside the bars and lounges of the five-star hotels in Paris, the French on the street are not so kind. Even though two thirds of the public approve of what Sarkozy has done in Libya, his personal numbers remain abysmal. "The French people do not like him," says a veteran of the presidential press corps. "They just do not like him."

Last week, as the Libyan rebels he's embraced veered between exaltation and near annihilation, Sarkozy made himself scarce, setting off on a long-scheduled Asia trip to preside at a meeting of the G-20. Allied foreign ministers gathered in London to discuss Libya, but France's role seemed

suddenly and weirdly minor in his absence. NATO took command from the Americans; the British were holding the floor, and allied airstrikes on Gaddafi's forces suddenly slowed down. U.S. officials blamed the weather. A NATO spokeswoman insisted the pace had not diminished. But that wasn't how it looked on the ground. After the dictator's heavy weaponry once again reversed rebel gains near the strategic town of Brega, routed insurgents shouted to a BBC correspondent: "Where is Sarkozy? Where is Sarkozy?"

From the uprising's outset, the French president's objective was to take down Gaddafi, says an intelligence source close him. "We almost decided to do it ourselves," he adds. The French have a long history of unilateral interventions in Africa, including against Gaddafi in Chad in the 1980s. This time, however, they quickly found partners. The British under Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron were very much on board. So were the leading members of the Arab League, who had their own grudges against Gaddafi. But Sarkozy seemed practically obsessed.

It's worth remembering that Sarkozy once made a mission of bringing Gaddafi into the world's good graces. Just weeks after his election in 2007, the new French president outbid his European partners to ransom five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who had been imprisoned in Libya for eight years and threatened with execution. And late that year, clearly hoping for huge contracts from a supposedly rehabilitated Gaddafi, Sarkozy spent almost a week playing host to him, only to be humiliated daily by the Libyan leader's outlandish demands. Gaddafi pitched his famous tent next to the presidential palace, at the 19th-century Hôtel de Marigny, and when Gaddafi decided to visit the Louvre on the spur of the moment, Sarkozy ordered the museum cleared. Still, the really big contracts did not materialize. Helping Libyans to get rid of their dictator might help wipe that memory clean.

But you can't just support an amorphous "uprising." You need somebody to call. Who could speak for the New Libya? Sarkozy had no idea.

At just that moment, BHL rang the Elysée Palace switchboard to tell the president he'd decided to go to the rebel capital of Benghazi. Sarkozy told BHL to let him know if he found any leaders among the fighters, and the self-styled intellectual swashbuckler needed no further encouragement. From Bosnia to Afghanistan, Iraq to Pakistan, BHL has always taken the side of those he saw as oppressed—and never failed to promote himself in the process. "BHL did the usual," says a close friend of Sarkozy. "You know, 'Save this! Save that!' But he did manage to push the system to do something that cannot now be undone."

Sarkozy and BHL used to be good friends. They went skiing together in Alpe d'Huez and vacationed on the Riviera. When BHL was pushing for intervention in Bosnia in the early 1990s, Sarkozy (a relatively junior minister in the cabinet of then prime minister Jacques Chirac) took BHL's side against formidable opponents like Alain Juppé, who was then, and is again, France's minister of foreign affairs.

The BHL-Sarkozy friendship turned icy during Sarkozy's 2007 presidential run. BHL backed the Socialist candidate and, adding ink to injury, published the story of Sarkozy's failed efforts to recruit him. "Now I hear the clannish, feudal, possibly brutal Sarkozy that his opponents have denounced, and which I never wanted to believe in," BHL wrote: "a man with a warrior vision of

politics, who hystericizes relations, believes that those who aren't with him are against him, who doesn't care about ideas, who thinks interpersonal relations and friendship are the only things that matter."

Then Sarkozy's wife ditched him and Sarkozy hooked up with Carla Bruni, who had previously stolen the husband of BHL's daughter. To describe relations among the French elite as incestuous is almost literally true.

Even as BHL took off for Libya at the beginning of last month with Sarkozy's blessing, the relationship between the two remained uneasy. It was a mission on a wing and a prayer. Inveterate networker BHL knew no one in the country, in fact. He had to hitch a ride in a vegetable vendor's panel truck to get to Benghazi. And once he was there the protestors seemed to be losing the revolutionary fervor that had enabled them to seize half the populated areas of the country with scarcely a shot fired in the previous weeks. "What I smelled was the democratic revolution cooling down," BHL recalls. His cause was slipping away from beneath him. And at the same time, Gaddafi's forces had begun to regroup for a counteroffensive. So BHL grew bolder. With a lot of name-dropping, he got himself invited to a meeting of the newly named Interim National Transitional Council.

On a sketchy old satellite phone that shut off every few minutes, BHL repeatedly called Sarkozy—who put up with the interruptions—and brokered a deal for a Libyan delegation to be received in Paris at the presidential palace. Two days later, on Monday, March 7, BHL was back in Paris, meeting with the president. Sarkozy said he'd take the extraordinary step of recognizing the rebels' government the following Thursday. Then BHL took an extraordinary step of his own. He asked Sarkozy to keep the whole thing a secret from the Germans, who were already expressing reservations about supporting the Libyan uprising—and also from French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, who would, BHL insisted, "throw a wrench in the works."

Sarkozy was riding high just then. He bragged to the Libyans that he'd have no problem persuading the European Union to back his play. But at a summit in Brussels the day after he recognized their government, he found "the door slammed in his face," says a friend. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel tried to distance herself from French bellicosity, and, following her lead, the German press branded Sarkozy and BHL "a pair of egomaniacs." The French president also took a pounding from one of the news magazines owned by Gaddafi's best friend in Europe, Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi. The cover of *Panorama* showed Sarkozy dressed as a demented Napoleon. Meanwhile Juppé was left to soldier on in the diplomatic trenches, working with several disgruntled allies to get the all-important imprimatur of the U.N. Security Council.

As the rebels at Brega demanded: Where is Sarkozy? Certainly his profile (if not BHL's) has been lowered. But apparently he's still on the case. Last week as U.S. officials and members of Congress debated who the rebels are and whether to train and arm them, Defense Secretary Robert Gates told Congress that the Obama administration doesn't want those jobs. "As far as I'm concerned, somebody else can do that." And that somebody is France. According to sources close to the Élysée, the French now have covert military trainers on the ground in Libya and are sending in munitions by sea as well as attacking Gaddafi's military from the air. It's still very much Sarkozy's war—until something else, or someone else, attracts his attention.

Christopher Dickey is a columnist for The Daily Beast and Newsweek magazine's Paris bureau chief and Middle East editor. He is the author of six books, including Summer of Deliverance, and most recently Securing the City: Inside America's Best Counterterror Force—the NYPD.

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