Adrian Pelt: The Viceroy of Libya

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Nobody seems able to put an end to the civil war in Libya. Since Qaddafi was expelled in 2011, peace initiatives from the United Nations (UN) have yielded little. Unable to reconcile, the Libyans saw their country slip into chaos and becoming a hotbed of human smuggling and terrorism. And yet, if you ask the Libyans if there is really no solution one may well receive a surprising answer: “Adrian Pelt”. Who is this Dutchman who died 36 years ago? Who is little known in his home country, the Netherlands, but who is considered a hero in Libya? Whom the corniche in the Libyan capital Tripoli was named after? Whose name googled in Arabic yields 11,000 hits?

At school, Libyan children learn that Dutch diplomat Adrian Pelt was appointed High Commissioner for Libya by the United Nations on 10 December 1949. His mission was to forge a state from the British-controlled provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripoli and the French-occupied Fezzan province in the South. These were the remnants of what had once been Mussolini's Libyan colony, but which Italy had to cede during the World War II. Pelt had to help the Libyan tribes to overcome their mutual distrust. A constitution for a united Libyan State had to be drafted and an administrative apparatus set up. The deadline was 1 January 1952.

Looking at the chaos in Libya today with its rival governments, wily tribes and unpredictable militias, a mission like this must seem completely unrealistic. As a matter of fact, Libya was not in much better shape in 1949. Italian colonisation had lasted a relatively short period, from 1911 to 1943, but Italy’s heavy-handed efforts to subdue the rebellious population had had devastating results. In

Cyrenaica, more than half of the population had fled or perished in concentration camps, while whole communities had been deliberately starved. During World War II, the German-Italian and Allied armies fought their battles along the Libyan coast, leaving behind fields of destruction and death.

Pelt did not consider himself suitable for his task. In his Libyan memoir, *Libyan Independence and the United Nations: A Case of Planned Decolonization (1970)*, he wrote: "For the nominee himself the news was rather disconcerting, as he had serious misgivings about his suitability for an assignment that was generally considered to be exceptionally difficult and delicate. His knowledge of Libya's history and geography was superficial, he was not a constitutional lawyer, he could neither read nor write - let alone speak – Arabic, and his notions of the Islamic world were limited to generalities." A British diplomat remarked to Pelt's wife over dinner:" Madam, I wish your husband the best of luck, but to be quite frank I am afraid he is going to break his neck. "

Adrian Pelt was born in 1892 in the Dutch town of Koog aan de Zaan. His father was a mechanical engineer. At school, he was not an exceptionally brilliant student. In 1956, Pelt confessed to the Dutch daily *Algemeen Dagblad* that he had never finished high school. "Mathematics was too powerful for me", he dryly declared. He chose journalism. During the World War I, he became the correspondent in Paris for several Dutch publications. It was there that he met his French wife Andrée Bernard. Pelt said in the same interview that his journalistic experience had given him a clear advantage in Libya: "For example, the search for facts and circumstances and the making of contacts. We also had to work very quickly."

In 1920, Pelt started his job as an information officer with the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. He visited the world's hotspots at the time, like Manchuria and India. The German invasion of the Netherlands on 10 May 1940 interrupted his diplomatic career. Pelt left for London where he offered his services to the Dutch government in exile. He became chief of the Government Press Service and set up "Radio Oranje" that broadcasted into the occupied homeland. Organizing and improvising, they were the same talents Pelt would later deploy in Libya. Dutch Queen Wilhelmina was less charmed by Pelt who she described as "a stubborn little man".

In January 1950, High Commissioner Pelt paid his first visit to Libya. The country turned out to be a political snake pit. Although UN resolution 289 (IV) instructed him sculpting one state out of three territories, Pelt was aware that the British and the French who governed the provinces had a hidden agenda. They did not want a strong central state but maximum local autonomy instead. In this way, they hoped to keep their influence in these territories even after Libya's independence. Pelt felt he had to show his impartiality at all costs and therefore did not want to be seen arriving in Tripoli by British or French aircraft. He opted for Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM). There was a slight problem however. KLM did not have landing rights in Libya at the time. KLM director Albert Plesman helped out. He had the flight to Johannesburg make an emergency stop in Tripoli because of "bad weather".

The British and French may have had their plans with Libya, the Libyans themselves had no clue which direction to take. Pelt boarded a DC-3 which carried him to all corners of this vast country. In Benghazi, the capital of Cyrenaica, he met with Sayyid Idris Al-Senussi, a religious leader who was widely respected throughout Libya. In 1951, Idris would become the first king of Libya, until 1969 when he was deposed by Qaddafi. Pelt was deeply impressed by Idris, who he described in his book

as wise, experienced and cautious. “Indeed, he never took a step forward unless he knew that he could and would be followed”, Pelt observed.

Idris preferred Cyrenaica to be an independent state. He was afraid that once caught in a union with Tripoli Benghazi would forever be dominated by its Western rival. He was supported in this by the British. Pelt dryly remarked: "It could never have been the intention of the United Nations that unity in Libya would be achieved by first dividing the country into three parts and then allowing these parts to merge into a single state." Pelt avoided defeat by a masterstroke. He “advised” Idris to agree with a federally united Libya of which he, Idris, would most probably become king. In the end, Idris reluctantly agreed. "This solution was far from ideal", Pelt admitted in his book. But he saw no alternative to save his mission.

Pelt was a skilled communicator. He talked to everyone. During long sessions with local leaders in Fezzan, he patiently explained to them what the United Nations actually represented. When asked what kind of constitution he had in store for Libya, he told them bluntly that it was not for him but for the Libyans to decide. He did not disregard unpolished leaders like Ahmed Bey, Fezzan's representative, whom he considered as being endowed with “the phenomenal memory of the intelligent illiterate”. Pelt was pragmatic. When it turned out that holding elections would take too long, he decided to bypass the ballot box by letting local leaders elect their own representatives. When the political process stalled, he wrote “Dutch uncle” letters to the Provisional Libyan Government, full of warnings, criticism and advice.

It worked. After 317 days of heated discussion between the Libyans, the constitution was there. It was full of compromises. For example, Libya would have two capitals, Tripoli and Benghazi. Pelt wrote about this: “The Commissioner has often been asked to give a rational – in the Western sense of the word - explanation or interpretation of the Libyan Constitution. He has always refrained from doing so because the Arab way of thinking does not lend itself to analysis by the standards of Western rationalism." On 24 December 24 1951, Libya became independent. Pelt had met his deadline and was since nicknamed “the Viceroy of Libya”. He died in Switzerland in 1981.

66 years after the drafting of Libya’s constitution, Adrian Pelt is still very much alive in Libya. Libyans, regardless of their political colour, eagerly showcase their knowledge of Pelt to visiting Dutch diplomats. They have not forgotten his lessons. A number of Fezzan tribal leaders recently asked a UN-delegation why they never visited the South. We do not have the required number of armoured vehicles, was the answer. Whereupon the Libyans disapprovingly growled: "Pelt never used an armoured car."