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Source: *Studia Diplomatica*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2017), pp. 95-104

Published by: Egmont Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26531669>

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Libya: a nation suspended between past and future

FEDERICA SAINI FASANOTTI¹

Libya has always been a country of sharp contrasts, whether at a regional level or tied to tribal, ethnic and religious identities. Today many tribal distinctions are gone but the other contrasts persist; and it is only by understanding and accepting them that the nation can be rebuilt successfully.

Never before has there been so much press about Libya, not even during the most tense moments between Gaddafi and the Reagan administration. Certainly, during the 1980s we saw the *rais*, Gaddafi, inflame public opinion with his rash behavior and peculiar lifestyle. But today the situation is considerably worse, with migrants fleeing Libyan shores; Salafi – and not only – terrorism; and a long-lasting civil war.

The “Arab Spring” and the end of Gaddafi

In late 2010, a series of violent protests inflamed North Africa and some Middle Eastern countries, from Tunisia to Egypt, from Morocco to Libya. The voices of people oppressed for decades by anti-democratic regimes were heard on the shores of the Arabian Peninsula to Syria, shaking the whole Islamic world. The so-called “Arab Spring” has certainly changed the face of the Maghreb and other countries, but how? After four years, it is clear that very

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little good has been accomplished. Analyzing the events that took place in each interested country, we realize that there has not been a broad-based “Spring” at all. The term is overly restrictive and misleading.

The widespread optimism of the early months of the “Spring” was soon confronted with bitter infighting, and Libya is, unfortunately, a glaring example. The anti-government protests began on 15 February 2011 in Benghazi, the most oppressed Libyan city, and in that occasion the security forces fired against the crowd which, at that point, rose up, led by heterogeneous rebel groups. The fight between the two sides spread so rapidly throughout the country that ten days later the United Nations condemned officially the violations of human rights². The international community decided to support the insurgents, forgetting apparently the institutional role of Africa Union³, through Resolution 1973 of the Security Council of the United Nations that justified military intervention: an intervention in some cases certainly much more substantial than what the media has portrayed. The assistance that some foreign nations provided to the rebel forces, gathered in the National Transitional Council (NTC), was far from insignificant: the NTC was not only heavily stocked with weapons, but also supported by the British and French air forces. Simultaneously, and made possible by the intervention of nations like Qatar, a large number of fighters was able to enter Libyan territory, some of them jihadis with previous experience in other theaters of war such as Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq⁴. The international community made many mistakes: first, the support in terms of means and weapons granted to the insurgents opposing the ever-present Mohammad Gaddafi was not accompanied by any kind of meaningful planning for a subsequent transition process which was bound to be difficult and complex. The lack of leadership among the Libyan rebels was evident immediately after the barbaric execu-

² UNSC Resolution 1970, 26 February 2011.

³ In this regard: MATTEWS, Kay. 2013. “The 2011 NATO Military Intervention in Libya: Implications for the African Union”. In Brooke A. SMITH-WINDSOR, *AU-NATO Collaboration: Implications and Prospects*. Rome: NATO Defence College, 113-121.

⁴ Qatar admitted “that it sent hundreds of troops to support the Libyan rebels”, and not only, therefore, taking part to the NATO-led air force attacks. Moreover it delivered money, “weapons and ammunition on a large scale – without any clear legal basis” as in “Qatar admits sending hundreds of troops to support Libya rebels”. 2011. *The Guardian*, 26 October. See also ROBERTS, David. 2011. “Behind Qatar’s Intervention in Libya”. *Foreign Affairs*, 28 September; BODUSZYNSKI, Mieczyslaw P. 2014. “Qatar and Libya: Diminishing Returns”. *Gulf State Analytics Monthly Monitor Report*, July; DAGHER, Sam-LEVINSON, Charles-COKER, Margaret. 2011. “Tiny’s Kingdom’s Huge Role in Libya Draws Concern”. *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 October; BASSIOUNI, M. Cherif, 2013. *Libya from Repression to Revolution. A Record of Armed Conflict and International Law Violations, 2011-2013*, Leiden-Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, 148-149.

tion of Gaddafi⁵: the *modus agendi* connected to his capture and killing without trial, were the first sign that things were not headed in the right direction. Since then, differences among the key groups in the country have become increasingly obvious. In more than four decades of absolute rule, Gaddafi had successfully diluted the power of the ancient Libyan clans that the monarchy, instead, had to some extent accommodated. Moreover, as mentioned above, he concentrated all power in his very person without creating an administrative network and a government structure able to survive him. Under the guise of “government of the masses” (*Jamahiria*) the entire opposition had been canceled, every democratic breath strangled. And so, in 2011, the first to take up arms against Gaddafi were those clans he had persecuted: the most motivated among them appeared to be precisely those of Cyrenaica, the region always “second” in the eyes of the Tripolitanian dictator.

Events moved quickly, and within a few months the army loyal to the Libyan leader was wiped out, and he was captured and executed on October 20, 2011. Weapons crates were distributed to the population, in order to accelerate the rebel advance towards Tripoli, violating one of the fundamental principles of counterinsurgency: the disarmament of the population must be systematic, as an armed civilian is equivalent to an armed rebel. The damage caused by NATO’s reckless decision is now visible to everybody.

The multi-factional war

The death of Mohammar Gaddafi did not bring any relief to the country. On the contrary: Libya has descended into uncontrolled violence, a civil war that can rightly be called *multi-factional*. This is an apocalyptic scenario in which the remaining, unarmed civilians suffer most. The events from July 7, 2012 (the moment of the first free parliamentary elections), to August 25, 2014 (when the Islamists, after having defined as lawful their own parliament instead of the House of Representatives recently voted, occupied Tripoli) followed one another frenetically. In this sense, a spiral of violence shook Benghazi and Tripoli: terrorist attacks hit military leaders and civilians,

⁵ Mohammar Gaddafi was found, after a NATO raid, in a culvert two miles west of Sirte by the militia of the National Transition Council (NTC), while he was trying to escape with some of his men, and killed after a while. Reports on his death are still contradictory, although there are several videos on the web showing him, wounded but still alive, in the hands of the rebels, and then after his death.

tribal⁶ and religious⁷ clashes, then, inflamed the whole territory and on September 11, 2012, a consistent group of heavily armed Islamists from Ansar al-Sharia Libya and other extremist cells attacked the US consulate in Benghazi, killing the American ambassador, J. Christopher Stevens⁸. Violence did not stop and frictions among tribes⁹ continued throughout the period under consideration. In the meantime, on October 14, 2012, the General National Congress of Tripoli (GNC) elected Ali Zeidan as Prime Minister, who stepped down on March 11, 2014, replaced by Abdullah Al-Thani. In those days a new legislative body, the Council of Deputies, on June, 2014, organized new elections in order to substitute the GNC. The result favored the more secular and moderate wing at the expense of Islamists who did not accept it, declaring a sort of continuing mandate for GNC, and occupying the capital, Tripoli. At that point, the regularly elected new parliament, called House of Representatives (HoR), was substantially forced to move to Tobruk¹⁰. The Libyan leadership, after an initial hint of cooperation, resulted to be split in two governments: one, based on a secular matrix, headquartered in Tobruk, supported by the House of Representatives (HoR) and recognized internationally, abetted by General Khalifa Haftar¹¹ and by the Zintan brigades, the militias coming from the ethnic minorities of Tebu and Fezzan and, externally, assisted by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates in name of an anti-islamist ideology¹²; the other, Islamic, headquartered in Tripoli, supported instead by the New General National Congress (GNC) and by the more Islamist militias¹³ coming from Misrata, Amazigh and the Tuareg, as its armed wing, as well as benefitting from the international support of Qatar, Sudan and Turkey, based on different interests, as such as earning a prominent place in the global political scene or supporting the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁴.

⁶ Awlad Al-Shaik against Zlitenis and Al-Hali against Al-Fawatra in the area of Zliten, during summer 2012. See "At least 12 killed in tribal clash in Libya". 2012. *Reuters*. 23 August.

⁷ Substantially groups of Salafists against Sufi scholars and imam. See AL-SHALCHI, Haadel. 2012. "Libya Islamists Destroy Sufi Shrines". *Reuters*. 25 August.

⁸ COKER, Margaret. 2012. "U.S. Ambassador to Libya is Killed", *The Wall Street Journal*. 11 September; HARDING, Luke – STEPHEN, Chris. 2012. "Chris Stevens, US Ambassador to Libya, killed in Benghazi Attack". *The Guardian*. 12 September.

⁹ For example, in October between Warfalla tribes and Misratan fighters, see GAULTIER, Mathew. 2012. "Curfew enforced in Sirte after clashes over Bani Walid Siege". *Libyan Herald*. 13 October.

¹⁰ See STEPHEN, Chris. 2014. "Libyan Parliament takes Refuge in Greek Car Ferry". *The Guardian*. 9 September.

¹¹ They led *Operation Dignity*, one of the two major armed coalitions in the country.

¹² ST JOHN, Ronald Bruce. 2015. *Libya. Continuity and change*. London-New York: Routledge, II edition, 167.

¹³ They led the other armed coalition, called *Operation Libyan Dawn*.

¹⁴ TASTEKIN, Fehim. 2014. "Turkey's War in Libya". *Al-Monitor*. 4 December; COLLING, Andre. 2015. "Can UN-led Talks Bring Together a Fractured Libya?". *IPI-Global Observatory*. 28 January.

The rapid rise of political parties characterized by Islamic extremism is having other consequences in terms of undermining the deep civilization achieved by the moderate Muslim world. In Libya, in addition to the Tobruk and Tripoli based governments described above, other forces are simultaneously at work, trying to fill the power vacuum caused by the fall of Gaddafi. These forces include Salafist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia Libya (between Benghazi and Derna), Muhammad Jamal Network (between Benghazi and Derna), Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun (in the area of the South-East, around Ghat, Ubari, Tasawah and Murzuq), AQIM¹⁵ (South-West and North-East of Libya) and AST¹⁶ (between Derna and Ajdabiya).

Moreover, a cell of ISIS has also begun to take hold in the strategically important city of Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown. Sirte is part of a desert area that was, during the Fascist period of the Italian occupation, termed the Sirtic "corridor" or "channel." It has tremendous strategic value if we consider that it is not only the line between the two regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica¹⁷, but also one of the richest point of oil fields across the nation: it is not a case, in fact, that ISIS manifested itself right there. The self-proclaimed Islamic State has a strong interest in filling the current power vacuum, given Libya's overall strategic importance: first, in terms of control of the entire North-African area; second, for the possibility of criminal trafficking in the Mediterranean; third, for potential exploitation of huge energy resources. If we analyze the management of the resources made by ISIS in Iraq over the last twelve months, it is easy to understand its interest in Libya and especially in the Sirtica area.

The current situation

Yet, not even the appearance of actors linked to Salafi terrorism seems to have boosted the peace process begun by the Envoy of the United Nations Bernardino Leon more than a year ago, under the aegis of UNSMIL¹⁸. A serious agreement between the two parties, calling for a coalition government, seems out of reach. Meanwhile Libya is increasingly on the brink. Few of the

¹⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

¹⁶ Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia.

¹⁷ Even in 1928, it was the scene of some of the most significant *joint operations* between the two (at the time still separate), Italian military commands of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica engaged in colonization of the Libyan territories.

¹⁸ United Nations Support Mission in Libya.

fundamental elements required for the development of a modern country are in place. Libya has so far invested little in terms of childhood education. Corruption is growing exponentially, as well as unemployment. Despite immense energy resources, the economy is contracting. Oil production has declined from a half-million barrels per day in 2013 to 300,000 in January 2015, and not because of any depletion of deposits. In addition, the war has completely frozen one of the most important alternative sources of revenue: tourism. Instead there have been thousands of deaths and refugees. Regardless of the commendable efforts of Bernardino Leon, the international community should seriously consider how to intervene in Libya, according to the possible options that, at the moment, seem to be two: an intervention based on a structured plan (highly preferable) or, vice versa, an emergency plan, determined by any possible dramatic event in the next future. Essentially we should decide whether to think a real and articulated strategy or act to implement a simple operational tactics, not forgetting that, even a year ago, acting in a structured way within the Libyan theater would be much simpler. Today, the situation has seriously deteriorated and it seems impossible to hypothesize a non-armed intervention, even in defense of the soldiers called to a simple mission of protection of the new coalition of government.

In this regard, the international pressure on the CNG – every day more and more fragmented and unwilling to sign – is certainly important, but more than a *Peacekeeping* advocated in many occasions, primarily by Italian ministers¹⁹, it is as necessary as ever a real operation of *State Building* that could ensure peace but, more important, could allow the construction of the administrative and infrastructural network which, at the moment, is totally lacking in the country. Libya needs an operation which can also act as a shield against crime and corruption; providing a systematic control of the territory and disarming militias. Without that, a lasting peace is inconceivable. In this sense, an agreement would be desirable, above all to allow the institutions responsible to act for the reconstruction of the country, albeit slow and difficult. On September 13, 2015, after several meetings, Libyan leaders came together under the aegis of the United Nations in Morocco, where they had already worked during the summer, reaching a *consensus* on the main points of the draft that instead, on July 11, was not successful. From the point of view of Bernardino Leon, the

¹⁹ GAIANI, Gianandrea. 2014. “Gli italiani in Libia? Solo col casco blu e se ce lo chiede l’ONU”. *AnalisiDifesa*. 4 December.

two opposing parties seemed to have overcome the majority of the points of conflict, but the final signature, expected on September 20, did not arrive.

On October 8, he proposed six names for a Presidential Council in order to form a Government of National Accord (GNA), but many are the doubts in this regards, concerns raised by the Libyan themselves who believe that this process is not actually legitimate, because some of the desired names were, instead, not chosen by the Envoy²⁰. Grand Mufti Sheikh Sadik al-Gharyani said that the UNSMIL deal was “just ink on paper” and the Leon’s action was a “complete farce”²¹, writing on a local newspaper that Libyan have to start to think seriously to a process of pacification out of any foreign influence²². Even if these words were pronounced by a controversial figure as al-Gharyani, that was a clear indication of loss of trust in the UN mediation, aggravated by some major political movements, as, for example, the announcement that the Central Shield Force of Libya, the biggest military force in Misrata operating under the General Command of Libyan Army connected to the GNC, rejected Leon’s draft²³. In addition, as soon as Leon left his role, a British newspaper revealed that he had spent the summer negotiating a £35.000-a-month job with the United Arab Emirates – one of the supporters of the HoR – as general director of its “Diplomatic Academy”²⁴, creating a real turmoil in the Libyan public opinion, and not only. In the meantime, a German diplomat, Martin Kobler, has been appointed his successor at the UN, but his mandate, built on this controversial background, now appears to be really uphill, although on December 17th has been signed an agreement for a government of national unity, with Faiez Serraj as Prime Minister. Many, in Libya are the voices against it, because it was inked without a real consensus from both parliaments and that could plunge the country into more chaos and divisions, allowing ISIS to gain more control over territory.

²⁰ SEN, Ashish Kumar. 2015. “For Libya, The First Step in a Long Journey” – an interview to Karim Mezran. *Atlantic Council*. 9 October.

²¹ AYYUB, Saber. 2015. “UNSMIL deal ‘just ink on paper’”. *Libya Herald*. 14 October.

²² Grand Mufti AL-GHARIANI, Sadiq. 2015. “A political Agreement or Imposing a Trusteeship? What is the Solution?”. *The Libya Observer*. 15 October.

²³ “Misrata’s biggest force refuses Leon government”. 2015. *The Libya Herald*. 18 October.

²⁴ RAMESH, Randeep. 2015. “UN Libya Envoy accepts £1,000-a-day job from backer of one side in civil war”. *The Guardian*. 4 November.

Scenarios and perspectives

In the dreamland, it is obvious that a real agreement among the political parties would be desirable, above all to overcome the atavistic divisions that have always, and certainly not only since 2011, profoundly separated the two parts of Libya, to which should be added the universe of Fezzan. It would be a coalition government, similar in many respects to the Afghan one of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, a coalition capable of leading the country towards a better future; a government elected democratically with the full *consensus* of the people, able, in a very short time, to wipe out any dangerous extremist claim. This in a dreamland. The reality, unfortunately, is much more complex and presents a Libyan political class not mature enough to put aside its own interests; a society divided and inflamed at this point not only by old conflicts, but also by new grudges generated in years of civil war; a population exhausted, severely impoverished and unable to respond alone to an extremist threat ready to destroy all the good things that the moderate Islamic community has built over the last centuries. Faced with this reality, one should wonder if it would not be a desirable setting undermining the colonial one given to Libyan territories, in favor of a new state, absolutely federal, divided into three large regions: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan, or even more if the Libyan citizens deem it appropriate. One wonders whether it is really high time that the *provinces*, as the Fascism called them, begin to walk alone, following different paths, based on their ethnic, social, religious and political. As told at the beginning of this article, Gaddafi left the country without an administrative structure and government able to survive him, and after four years of civil war, the situation can be said even worse: the GNC and the HoR are infinitely more fragmented into various fractions, which means a further difficulty in making decisions. In the last months, besides, many are the voices, inside Libya, raised against any kind of foreign intervention for a independent process of reconciliation.

That said, there have been, on the other side, many appeals by the Libyans themselves towards the Western world, the requests for help so insistent to force us to stop on the sentence of the former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Lady Ashton, who in 2011 affirmed Europe's willingness to "listen without imposing", representing the firm determination of the Western world not to intervene in the delicate process of democratization of those Muslim countries touched by the wind of the "Spring". There is no doubt that democracy is a precious asset that every

state must achieve independently: if we look, in fact, at the history of Europe and United States, we realize how painful, long-term and complex is to become democratic nations and how much, however, is difficult to maintain the status. In 1938 the Duke Amedeo d'Aosta, Viceroy of Ethiopia, claimed – about the Italian occupation of the Horn of Africa – that democracy in some countries may do more harm than good. Democracy is not, in fact, an exportable asset like many others, but a value that must germinate in a political-economic-social fabric able, not only to develop, but also to protect it. But we also have to remember that in the past many nations, already democratic, contributed to the birth of other democracies by sending their men and means to the common cause, and serving as a shining example for countries still in chaos. In this sense, it is perhaps time, four years later the words of Lady Ashton, to be less idealistic and more pragmatic, not only listening, but also helping Libya in every possible way to build a new government and, above all, a new nation. The support to the GNA – *if it will work* – must be complete in political, economic, administrative and even military terms. Libya has to be rebuilt from the ground: from the infrastructures to the legitimacy of the state itself. And this huge effort cannot be completed successfully leaving the Libyans alone. A big rule will be played by the regional actors and by all those who, in one way or another, have continued to support one of the two sides. It can be helpful, in this regard, using once again the recent history of Afghanistan and the importance that the neighboring (and not only) countries had in the process of stability. It is time to put aside all selfish influence and acting for the sake of Libya, helping – as it has been, and still is, for Afghanistan – to become an independent state. This is not demagogy. The natural and human resources are there, it is just to have the will, both on the part of the Libyans and the international community, keeping in mind one thing: there is no time to lose.

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