Post-Qadhafi’s Libya in Regional Complexity

The wave of Arab uprising that began in Tunisia in December 2010 rapidly propagated to many countries and overcame more than one autocratic regime. The regime changes underway in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region originated from a widespread and shared situation of «poverty, social exclusion, and corruption» which outlines some transnational trends and dynamics\(^1\); the sudden and massive character of rebellions, the economic polarization of societies in transition, the great involvement of young people, the role of media in organizing and spreading the protest, and the circulation of ideas, claims and funds through the Arab diasporic networks abroad. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to analyze the Arab uprisings on the base of a universalizing «primacy of economic forces and center-periphery dynamics» which might fall into a (neo)orientalist approach\(^2\). Arab transitions show unavoidable specificities according to different national histories and colonial legacies, which reveal the endogenous process of regime change and contest the notion that Arab-Islamic societies are intrinsically conservative in nature. Indeed, Islam has proved to be a powerful force of social mobilization and political participation. The special institutional shape of Jamaahiriya, the redistributive logics of the Libyan Rentier State, the weakness of civil society, the security apparatus of Muammar Qadhafi’s regime, and the exceptional decolonization from above after the Italian defeat during the Second World War testify the uniqueness of the Libyan case among the Arab uprisings.

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings culminated peacefully because their respective national armies ensured as much as possible an orderly transition; on the contrary, in Libya the national army collapsed and the uprising rapidly turned itself into civil war among armed Libyan factions. While the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings challenged the regimes at their center stages, symbolically occupying the heart of respective capital cities, in Libya the rebellion was located in Benghazi far away from the center of Qadhafi’s power. The Cyrenaica uprising was intended in Tripoli as a revolt of eastern part of the country against the western region. The international military intervention was in actuality crucial to determine the final victory of rebels. The humanitarian intervention complicated rather than solved the Libyan crisis to the extent that it fueled not only the interregional confrontation between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, but also the factionalism inside both regions.


into civil war among armed Libyan factions. While rebels seized weaponry stored at an air base in Bayda and local police as well as some military units joined them in Benghazi and Derna, «Muammar Qadhafi’s regime… used parts of [the army] to reinstate a coercive apparatus» across the whole country\(^3\). The 32\(^{nd}\) motorized Brigade, leaded by Khamis, Qadhafi’s youngest son, was the most well-trained and well-equipped force in the Libyan Army and played a pivotal role in countering the rebellion together with the Islamic Legion, a pan-Arab paramilitary force composed of many sub-Saharan nationals who were frequently labeled as mercenaries during the Libyan war: in actuality most of them were sub-Saharan nationals who emigrated to Libya years before the revolt. The Libyan war promptly turned out to be «the military uprising of Eastern part of the country with a feeling of revenge and dissidence»\(^4\). While the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings challenged the regimes at their center stages, symbolically occupying the heart of respective capital cities, in Libya the rebellion was located in Benghazi, far away from the center of Qadhafi’s power. The rebellions in Cairo and Tunis were perceived and then proceeded as uprisings of the whole country against unfair and corrupt regimes, while the Cyrenaica uprising was intended in Tripoli as a revolt of the eastern part of the country against the western region. It is true that the Libyan rebellion erupted in Benghazi on 15 February 2011 and was echoed after a few hours in Tripoli, but in actuality only Cyrenaica was able to challenge the regime, even if the support from foreign players was decisive. International military intervention under the UN shield and NATO direction was undoubtedly a further element of complication and specificity in the Libyan crisis. Even before the final outcome of the Libyan conflict, the civil war showed the failure of more than 40 years of Qadhafi attempts to shape and amalgamate Libyan society into a single and unified country.

From uprising to civil war

According to Karim Mezran, regime change in Libya «could have been prepared by the French intelligence service thanks to the complicity of the man who for over forty years had been Qadhafi’s shadow, the Minister of Protocol Nouri Mesmari. […] The sudden outbreak of the Cyrenaica uprising would have forced the orchestrators of the plan to increase the momentum. […] If this version was true, it would explain the quick genesis of the National Transitional Council in Benghazi, the finding of so many weapons in rebels’ hands and the concentrated diplomatic efforts of France and Great Britain in favor of the rebels»\(^5\). In spite of any external force, the Libyan uprising would not have been possible without broad popular support, which was related to social and economic discontent. It is true that the redistributive logic of the rentier state and recent privatizations provided valuable wealth and living conditions to many Libyans who in fact continued to support Qadhafi’s regime, but it is equally true that reforms and growth led many other Libyans to considerable economic marginalization and social inequality, creating the premise of Libyan uprising. The significant issue is that the uprising did not prevail in the capital city and for this reason the international military intervention was so decisive in determining the final victory of the insurgents in comparison with other Arab uprisings.

The Cyrenaica revolt was not an absolute novelty. The region repeatedly challenged the regime of Qadhafi who took power in 1969 after having deposed King Idris al-Senussi, the head of the Muslim brotherhood which was enthroned by the British at the moment of Libyan independence in 1951. During Qadhafi’s era, Cyrenaica was systematically marginalized in the complex redistribution of oil revenue, even though the most remunerative oilfields are located in Cyrenaica. Despite

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the egalitarian ideology outlined in the famous Green Book, Qadhafi’s power revolved around a complex balancing of alliances among three main qabila: the Warfalla in Tripolitania, the Magarha in Fezzan and in the Sirte region the Qadhafa from which Qadhafi’s family came. Taking for granted that the major Libyan tribes are now the outcome of a process of modernization which brought businessman, military officers or political leaders to the top of those multifaceted networks in place of the elders, the so-called Libyan tribes are non-homogeneous social realities where the head’s charisma and resources bind together the «group of za’ama», which can be composed of individuals from different social backgrounds.

The political subordination and economic impoverishment of Cyrenaica is evidently shown by the high level of unemployment in the region, which was up to 30 per cent in 2010, one of the higher rates among the Northern African countries. In addition, the Italian-Libyan Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation, signed in Benghazi on August 30, 2008, led to a significant reduction in the trafficking of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea and consequently to a strong reduction of an important sector of informal economy for the Cyrenaica region, so that we cannot exclude the possibility that «the local mafia had founded and supported the rebellion».

In connection with the jihadist international networks, Islamist movements such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) catalyzed over years the social protest in Cyrenaica. Some veterans who had fought in Afghanistan and Iraq played a key role in the attack of the Derna barracks at the beginning of the rebellion and then in the assassination of general Abd al-Fattah Yunis on July 28, 2011, who was one of the first of Qadhafi’s ministers to turn against the regime.

Within the space of a few days Qadhafi’s strong reaction was able to silence the protest in the capital city, to recover control of Misrata, the core of rebellion in Tripolitania, and then to directly threaten Benghazi when pro-Qadhafi forces «took up positions outside Ajdabiya, only 160 kilometers from the rebel stronghold» on March 16, 2011. At this point the international military intervention was in actuality crucial to tilting the war in favor of the Benghazi rebellion. The Resolution 1973 approved by the UN Security Council with the abstention of the BRICs on March 17, 2011, imposed the no-fly zone over Libya and authorized «all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Jamahiriya, including Benghazi». The NATO operation under French and British guidance and United States overwhelming military support stopped the advance of Qadhafi’s forces. Indeed, the humanitarian bombing went on well beyond the achievement of the declared objective in Resolution 1973, so that the toppling of Qadhafi became the true goal; in fact the mission officially ended on October 31, 2011, shortly after the capture and killing of Muammar Qadhafi on October 20. According to this trend, attempted mediation by the African Union (AU) was rejected when South African president Jacob Zuma said from Tripoli on April 10, 2011, that Qadhafi accepted the proposal for an «immediate ceasefire, unhindered delivery of foreign aid, and a halt of NATO airstrikes». The military intervention «was aided by Qadhafi’s behavior that made easy to sell it as another humanitarian war». The humanitarianism of international intervention can be theoretically explained according to the paradigm of “the responsibility to protect” which was officially adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2005. The basic idea behind it is that «the facade of territorial sovereignty should not be used to

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7 A. VARVELLI, Libia: vere riforme oltre la retorica?, Analysis no. 17, ISPI, luglio 2010, p. 3.
8 Libye: un avenir incertain… cit., p. 15.
9 K. MEZRAN, La rivolta… cit., p. 173.
12 AU Leaders in Benghazi to discuss Qadhafi-approved peace plan with rebels, RFI English, 11 April 2011.
justify ethnic cleansing and the UN should have an obligation to protect people from mass killing at the hands of their own governments» 14. The process of regime criminalization was then a preliminary step toward intervention, notwithstanding that the information was inaccurate, or even false. Alleged bombing of the capital city or mass graves along the shore of Tripoli made the Qatari news agency al-Jazeera an «improper weapon» in the hands of a country, Qatar, which committed itself in favor of the Arab League’s support for Resolution 1973 and then participated in the NATO operation15.

The Libyan intervention represented the first war waged by Western forces since September Eleventh that was not fought against the threat of international terror and in fact demonstrated an unprecedented strategic articulation between the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Even though the United States were willing to furnish the main part of the weaponry, they did not position themselves at the forefront of the intervention because Libya was of only secondary foreign policy interest, and as long as the French and British interests in Libya did not hurt US security. The activism of France alongside the United Kingdom in promoting the humanitarian war can be explained by their attempt to regain a strategic importance in the Mediterranean Sea at the expense of the Italian interests in Libya, to counterbalance the US geopolitical concept of the Greater Middle East, and to offset their progressive loss of importance in Sub-Saharan Africa in favor of China. If Nicolas Sarkozy’s France was able to act with confidence in Libya because of the absence of a colonial connection with the country, on the contrary the Italian-Libyan Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation, the subsequent apologies of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi for colonial crimes, and the Italian commitment «to not allow the use of its territory in any hostile act against Libya» was not enough to restrain the Italian government from participating in the bombing of its former colony16. Such attitude demonstrated once more the significance but also the lack of power that the colonial legacy has in Italian society. It was properly the privileged relationship between Silvio Berlusconi and Muammar Qadhafi that brought about many hesitations and uncertainty in fixing the Italian position towards the Libyan crisis.

The AU was reticent to endorse the UN Resolution and stated on March 10, 2011, that it considered the Libyan situation a «serious threat to peace and security in the country and the region as a whole, as well as to the safety and dignity of Libyans and African migrant workers living in Libya»17. Contradictorily, South Africa as temporary member of the UN Security Council voted in favor of Resolution 1973, but soon after Zuma’s cabinet made an appeal to relevant international players «to respect the unity and territorial integrity of Libya as well as to reject any foreign military intervention»18. It is true that the new AU in comparison with the former Organization of African Unity (OAU) made sovereignty conditional and affirmed the right of intervention in the case of «grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity»19, but essentially the Western war in Libya watered down the AU commitment of an ‘African solution for African problems’. In addition, it should be considered that many African countries are ruled by autocratic regimes and the commitment to support the rebellion in Libya would have therefore been antithetical to them. Qadhafi then enjoyed, until the last minute, support and approval from many African autocrats who recognized his leading role in transiting the OAU to the new AU and in shaping the so-called “Libyan dinar” diplomacy, which was based on non-conditional cooperation in competition to rising Chinese aid and as an alternative to Western conditional democratic cooperation. The Arab

17 T. NEETHLING, Reflections on Norm Dynamics… cit., p. 29.
18 W. HARTELEY, SA backs no-fly zone, in «Business Day», 1 April 2011.
League reaction was similar to that of the AU, and after having supported the international effort to impose the no-fly zone over Libya, Secretary General Amr Moussa stated that the military intervention differed from the mandate of Resolution 1973. In the aggregate, the international intervention in Libya represented a setback, if not a real defeat, for the global South and recanted «the superiority of soft power that Europe for a long time boasted against the US’s hard power and unilater-ism», disavowing the European model based on consensus and partnership as stated in the 1995 Barcelona Conference.20

Unfinished Instability

The humanitarian intervention complicated rather than solving the Libyan crisis to the extent that it fueled not only the interregional confrontation between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, but also the factionalism inside both regions between different groups of za’ama and its armed extensions for the control of state resources. On March 6, 2012 «3,000 tribal figures and leaders from the eastern half of the country» convened in Benghazi to announce the creation of the federal region of Barqa (the Arabic name for Cyrenaica) and claimed for self-administration21. Even though anti-federalist demonstrations erupted in the main cities of the region and the NTC (National Transitional Council) firmly reaffirmed the unity of the country, centrifugal forces are at work in Libya. Further elements of destabilization are the armed clashes among various militias that are still occurring after Qadhafi’s fall and are seriously challenging NTC authority. Various groups have struggled against Qadhafi for different reasons and interests, but now all fighters claim similar positions of power into the new Libyan institutions. The final goal of Libyan transition is democracy, but the strategy of the NTC has been to firstly achieve stability and only later to strive for democracy.

During the last few months, local councils have been elected in Libyan cities such as Misrata, Zu- wara, and finally Benghazi on 19 May 201222. Council competences are limited to minor matters and are not well-defined in respect to the competences of the national assembly, which will be elected at the end of June 2012. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood will possibly play an important role, the winning candidates in local elections are individuals without clear political party affiliations and «only one woman out of 22 female candidates was elected»23. The day after the announcement of the electoral results unknown persons launched two attacks in Benghazi which were variously attributed to «Islamists, supporters of federalism, and counter-revolutionaries»24. In the absence of a new constitution and in consideration that Qadhafi’s Libya was an experiment of deconstruction of a colonial state rather than reform along the lines of the European State model, the resumption of the redistributive oil revenue mechanism is now an attempt to stabilize the political situation and minimize autonomous regional tendencies, but it represents at the same time an obstacle for a broad and deep political change.

The consequences of Libyan instability can affect, politically and economically, the whole Sahel region. According to the report of the UN finding-fact mission, the total number of Sub-Saharan returnees, including unregistered cases, in countries neighboring Libya was 420,000 (200,000 in Niger, 150,000 in Chad, 30,000 in Mali and 40,000 in Mauritania); they «have placed an additional strain on impoverished host communities», in addition to increasing the trafficking and smuggling of

20 G.P. CALCHI NOVATI, Storia di una realtà e della sua rappresentazione, in Idem (ed), L’alternativa Sud-Sud… cit., p. 28.
22 Libyan Voters Head to the Polls in Benghazi Local Elections, BBC News, 19 May 2012.
23 G. GRANT, Benghazi local election results announced, in «Libyan Herald», 21 May 2012. Najat El-Kikhia was resoundingly backed possibly because she belongs to El-Kikhia “political dynasty”. Mansour Omar El-Kikhia was one of the most prominent politician after Libyan independence, his cousin, Mansour Rashid El-Kikhia, was the first foreign minister under Qadhafi regime, and Ambassador to the United Nations. Another El-Kihia, Mansour Mohamed, is now representative for Benghazi at the NTC.
24 Rocket Attacks in Benghazi Follow Election Results, in «Libyan Herald», 22 May 2012.
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arms across the borders\(^{25}\). The AU Commission Chairperson Jean Ping stressed the point at the January 2012 opening session of the Assembly and said «the unjustified and unjustifiable attacks carried out by armed groups in Northern Mali confirmed the fear for [...] weapons proliferation» as a consequence of the Libyan crisis\(^{26}\). In fact, the Malian Tuareg Iyad Ag Ghaly, the head of Ansar al-Din, a Wahhabi-oriented Islamist movement active in Northern Mali since the 1990s, recently operated in Libya where NTC «encouraged him to lead a large-scale defection of Tuareg fighters from Qaddafi’s security forces»\(^{27}\). Once returned in Mali, Iyad Ag Ghaly played a key role in revitalizing the rebellion across the northern region of the country and led the coup d’état on March 22, 2012, in competition with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad.

The New Libyan leadership had the problem in mind when it convened the 1\(^{st}\) Regional Ministerial Conference on Borders Security in Tripoli on March 11, 2012, in order to strengthen the mutual cooperation and address the problem of the worsening living conditions of Sub-Saharan nationals resident in Libya as well as returnees in neighboring countries. Nevertheless, the implementation of concrete actions could be limited by the reversal of the relationship between Libya and the AU after Qaddafi’s fall. New Libya will probably be more responsive to the security issue across the Mediterranean Sea rather than the Sahara desert as consequence of its increasing pro-Western orientation.


\(^{26}\) African Union Official Records, Draft Speech of the Chairperson of the Commission Dr. Jean Ping at the Opening of 18\(^{th}\) Ordinary session of the AU Assembly, Addis Ababa, 29 January 2012.