Current unrest in Libya has regional and global repercussions that warrant a revisiting of its past in order to provide a reliable basis for state-building processes in the present. This article presents a discussion of ongoing research; so instead of providing definitive answers, it seeks to pose questions related to unpacking and challenging the narrative of “statelessness” in the history of Libya within the period between 1911 and 1969. As Libya’s political landscape gets reshaped, it is important to view the current transition as part of a continuum of transitions, and to be cognizant of existing gaps in the literature on Libya which seem to be mirrored in decision-making; those gaps are premised on two assumptions which may be valid in the present but can be challenged historically: The first assumption is that Libya has no institutional history or memory and that Libya post-Qaddafi is a tabula rasa ready to be shaped in whichever form it chooses or is chosen for it. The second assumption is that Libya’s sociocultural identity, firmly embedded within its tribal and religious landscape, belongs to the past, and can only be viewed as an obstacle to its future. This article calls for putting together a local history of Libya during that period and of indigenous contributions to state formation.

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After 42 years of confinement, Libya is back on the map, spawning a rise in scholarly interest in present debates on state building in post-conflict societies. Post-Qaddafi Libya has witnessed the launching of two interdependent processes: state building and nation building with expectations fastened on the “democratic process” and a newly elected leadership as the main conduit through which both processes would be realized. Under the gaze of the international community, quick wins were made at the beginning; in July 2012, a General National Congress (GNC) was elected and was followed by the swearing in of PM Ali Zeidan who launched his term in office assuring that: “… this government will give its utmost best to the nation based on the rule of law, human rights, democracy, rights, and the belief in God, his Prophet and a state based on Islam”¹. After the ceremony, Zeidan was presented with a plaque in the shape of the map of Libya.

That emphasis on maps may be accidental; but within the context of Libya’s history, it is significant. Libya has been on and off the map a number of times across its history. The fact that Libya is a map-less land has been both its curse and blessing: without maps, it could be easily violated, but it also remained the land of infinite possibility². Qaddafi had taken Libya off the map for decades; now it is back with the opportunity to carve out its own space on the global map, geographically as well as economically and politically.

The process of getting back on the map has been problematic nevertheless. A lack of an institutional infrastructure; a history of fragmentation and the existence of a wide gamut actors that are unaffiliated with state apparatus and yet constitute a key determining factor in the path towards state and nation building, as recent events have demonstrated, continue to jeopardize any vision that does not include them. A state building strategy without including non-state actors does not seem feasible. Calls for federalism, such as those announced in Benghazi, are not the first³. The mushrooming of militias, now with over 200,000 members, each with its allegiance to a tribe or region further continues to complicate already existing fragmentation. Three interconnected non-state actors have stood out since 2011: tribal confederations, civil society organizations (formal and informal) and religious groups (Muslim Brotherhood)⁴. The centrality

⁴ For an analysis of the impact of sociopolitical transitions (2011-2013) on the mobilization of
of those actors has its root in Libya’s past and yet remains untrodden in analysis especially as related to efforts directed towards state formation. On the contrary, most existing literature on Libya seems to suggest that the existence of those actors is an impediment, a hurdle to state and nation building. 

Recent events have demonstrated that within those actors lies Libya’s salvation as well as challenge. Violence erupting in Tripoli in November 2013 is an example. Militias from Misrata opened fire at peaceful protestors in Tripoli who were calling for the departure of militias and restoration of peace. According to one account more than 40 were killed and 400 were wounded in the clashes. The GNC and government froze and it was only through the intervention of local councils and civil society that an end of violence was reached. As described by the reporter: “There was a tense calm in Tripoli on Sunday after more than 48 hours of bloodshed. Civil-society and community leaders abided by a general strike that coincided with a national mourning period for those slain. Shops were shut and normally busy commercial streets were devoid of traffic on the first day of the working week, witnesses reported.”

The elected government is developing ways to join forces with the local councils because the only way forward seems to combine both; local as well as newly developed structures of governance. The history of those local structures needs to be addressed: an understanding of the present requires a step into the past. As Libya’s political landscape gets reshaped, it is important to view the current transition as part of a continuum of transitions, and to be cognizant of existing gaps in the literature on Libya which seem to be mirrored in decision-making; those gaps are premised on two assumptions which may be valid in the present but can be challenged historically: The first assumption is that Libya has no institutional history


or memory and that Libya post-Qaddafi is a tabula rasa ready to be shaped in whichever form it chooses or is chosen for it. This assumption sees institution building as the solution to Libya’s problems. Proponents of this viewpoint make a comparison to other countries of the Arab Awakening, such as Egypt and Tunisia; unlike those countries, Libya does not have the institutional baggage, and, in turn, constraints that it would need to disaggregate: the structure of domination, it is understood, fell with the fall of Qaddafi. Libya would thus need to develop institutions for a democratic political life and for stability. Exchanges between Egypt, Italy and England as related to Libya, especially in the period of the Second World War, challenge that assumption. They underscore the existence of active civil society institutions that had a system of governance and that was actively calling for its rights under the allied occupation of Libya. Correspondence from 1959 includes information on movements by trade unions in Libya and the existence of federations that called for instituting a new labour law. In a letter to A.G. Wallis, Minister of Labour, a preliminary survey of trade unions in Libya was conducted. To which the Foreign Office inquired regarding “measures that may be desirable to increase Western influences in Libyan trade union circle”.

The second assumption is that Libya’s sociocultural identity, firmly embedded within its tribal and religious landscape, belongs to the past, and is further compounded by the fact that Libya is a rentier country, relying heavily on oil revenues as the lifeblood of its national income. Arturo Varvelli describes this as a “trilemma” and suggests the impossibility of a “democratic order in a rentier country where Islam is the dominant religion, and at the same time, the main source of popular identity”. He holds that the persistence of those identities in the present is a major impediment to state and nation building processes. While this may be true at present, the closest Libya got to constructing a state and a national imaginary seems to have been as a Sanusi monarchy which essentially emerged out of a socioreligious order. George Joffe, in his article titled: “Reflections on the Role of the Sanusi in the Central Sahara”, argues that in terms of the historical record and of Islamic constitutional law- the Sanusi Order really did act as a government in control of a vast desert region and that something approximating to a ‘Sanusi state’ did exist there” (26). While the Sanusi Order would not have satisfied the criteria provided by the Montevideo agreement, it did fulfill

the requirements of “Islamic constitutional theory in order to determine whether or not it satisfied the definition of a government and a state” (27). He relates how they mobilized resources to build an infrastructure for state building, gaining “effective political and economic control of the whole eastern half of the Sahara” (33). By the start of the twentieth century, the zawiyas were becoming more independent and acquired political status as a result of Italian occupation and especially when “the Italians treated its then head, Sayyid Idris, as the Libyan political representative” (34). His conclusion is as follows: “As a focus of power, however, it is not possible to argue that the eastern Sahara was a region that was terra nullius before the French conquest. The Sanusi Order was the power in the land and, as such, provided the government to the rudimentary state it had created.” (40).

That same narrative seems to emerge in analysis that tackles the Italian colonial period in Libya. In his seminal book, A History of Modern Libya, Dirk Vandewalle describes its rulers as pursuing “statelessness” (1) and goes on to explore the history and environment within which this statelessness continued to exist under the Ottomans, the Italian occupation, the Sanusi kingdom and Qaddafi. This argument, however, needs to be placed in context. When Italy invaded Libya in 1911, it had only been “unified” for fifty years (24) and this is significant because while colonialism generally benefits from and often seeks to divide and rule; Italy could not provide a model of statehood to which the Libyans might have aspired to after liberation; it did not have much experience in state building itself so it had little to contribute to an existing non-state.

Related to the state building inquiry is the question of Libyan nationhood and/or nationalism. Old political wisdom holds that “the territorial boundaries of a state must coincide with the perceived cultural boundaries of a nation” (Stepan 50)11. According to this logic, “every state must contain within itself one and not more than one culturally homogenous nation, that every state should be a nation and every nation should be a state” (Stepan 50). The wide expanse of lands with little communication in-between its sprawling spaces granted Libya much fluidity, making it difficult to grasp such boundaries, and this was reflected within the political and cultural space. Libya became what Homi Bhabha calls “a space of translation” in which both mapping and erasure of identities and boundaries became one of its definitive features (Piper 113)12. The Libyan nation-state was both produced and destroyed during the colonial period;

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the name “Libya” was, in fact, revived by the Italian colonialists in 1911 (Ahmida 76)13. What is referred to as “Libya” in the nineteenth century is not the Libya of today but is, instead, the Ottoman regency of Tarabulus al-Gharb. Interestingly enough, the ancient Egyptians applied the term “Libya” to a Berber tribe inhabiting the area, and the Greeks used the word to refer to the land west of the Nile River.

In 1911, Italian rule of Libya began, inheriting a rather problematic state structure. Lisa Anderson relates how in the middle of World War I, it became clear that the Ottoman Empire could no longer “provide a genuine alternative to the Italian regime in Libya” and as a result, the Libyan elite attempted to establish local governments. This, according to Anderson, “constituted the only genuine attempts to forge national sentiment on a local level before independence after World War II, and both the efforts themselves and their ultimate failure illustrated the ambiguities of local Libyan nationalism” (Anderson 66)14.

After 80 years of Ottoman rule and the rise of European capitalism that resulted from trade, the old tributary social structure gave way to the rise of new class configurations that differed from one region to another. Ahmida identifies three different sets of configurations: “Tripolitania had an urban notable class, peasantry and tribal confederations, while Fezzan was dominated by tribal confederations, land-owning clans, and sharecropping peasants. Cyrenaica had no peasantry and the formation of the Sanusi state integrated tribal factions into one cohesive social force.” (20) He contends that to the Italians, those distinctions and class configurations were ignored and that the Libyans were perceived as one monolithic whole composed of “an agglomeration of tribes or tribal states that were isolated from the larger social and economic structures of the region” (20).

The trials and tribulations of Italian rule did not allow any space for Libyans to reflect on their identity: in 1922, the Fascists launched what they called the riconquista of Libya and for a decade sought to actively consolidate their power, “over half the entire population and virtually all the educated elite of the province died or fled into exile” (Anderson 67). During the interwar period and while the Egyptian, Tunisian and Palestinian nationalist movements were active on the ground, “the Libyans were fighting for their lives, less concerned with their definition of identity than with their survival” (Anderson 67). Libyan independence in 1951 established the beginnings of a Libyan state without a Libyan

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nation; dominated “by tribal shaykhs and urban notables, the monarchy faced the heavy task of building nationhood and interacting with the international system” (Ahmida 77).

Italian rule left Libya with “an infrastructure of roads, agricultural villages, and other public works” but without an “informed and politically active citizenry” (St. John 19). The Libyan people were not given the tools to understand or practice political participation or citizenship. While the non-existence of citizenship does not preclude the existence of nationalism, it did not help provide a sense of political unity or solidarity necessary to nationalism. A divided land simply by virtue of its geography, lack of political participation further fed the fragmentation. Left to their own resources, they resorted to the institutions they knew best and that seemed to be more cohesive: the city, the tribe and the family.

Using “divide and rule” policies, Italian fascism also hit hard at the beginnings of developing state structures in Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan. In Cyrenaica, it attempted to destroy the Sanusi order, “abolishing traditional tribal assemblies and weakening the authorities of established leaders”. And in other places they sought to dissolve local authorities, “replacing the precolonial administration with an exclusively Italian one in which the local population was not allowed to participate” (St. John 19). The exclusion of the indigenous inhabitants prevented them from opening up to the world and forced them to look inwardly, too inwardly, in fact; their understanding of the nation suffered giving way to regionalism.

That said, it can be argued that it is not that Libyan leaders pursued and thus consigned Libya to statelessness but that Libya is and has always been a state in purgatory: there is a need to revisit its past without presupposing statelessness as a point of departure but to unearth and understand local attempts to establish a state that were thwarted leaving behind the debris of a would-be state, a state and a nation in becoming. Every state that was mapped was effaced and so follows the rhythm of subsequent periods in Libya’s history.

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