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CREATING THE SENSE OF A LIBYAN NATION

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After seven years, stability in Libya remains a chimera. The country's regions, the west, east and south are more and more divided, while different groups of militias fight each other for predominance. It is the law of the jungle. But in spite of the chaos on the ground and the complete disorganization of the Libyan State, the most recent dilemma is whether or not elections should be held.

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THE REAL ISSUE

In truth, among the people formally called Libyan, we're a very long way from elections being uppermost in their minds. We are very far from that target. Very few Libyans – and not only them - seem to be interested in the real issue that will, in the near term determine Libya's fate, which is creating the sense of Libyan nationhood; that sense the people of this war torn region can actually become a coherent nation that can move toward a national political identity. Only doing this, will it be possible to solve the other two burning problems that continue to rend the former Libya: the economic impasse produced by the rivalries between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and a serious disarmament and reintegration of the constellation of militias which have become the principal stumbling block on the path to stability and, in the last step, to democracy. Without any form of national government, possessing the necessary political credibility, the economic capacity, and the requisite monopoly of power, to take charge of the surrendered weapons and to establish and maintain a reintegration program for the militias, it's impossible even to think about a serious Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) project. In the absence of that omnipotent Libyan political entity, and before any action in that sense, the ground must be prepared by appealing to the civil society of all the regions to sow the seeds of a national identity upon which then some forward movement toward a political national unity can occur. No one should underestimate just how hard this will be, and how long this will take, but it's a blinding statement of the obvious to say nothing else is working.

Since 2011, much of the International community failed to grasp the Libyan complexity, where many foreign leaders did not realize that Gadhafi had actively, indeed intentionally, prevented the emergence of democratic institutions, and that the average Libyan was likewise unused to democracy and to the necessary political infrastructure to govern themselves, if they had had the chance.

With few functioning institutions of government, there was little resilience or shock absorbency in the Libyan government as Gadhafi clashed with elements of the Libyan population to retain his autocratic control of Libya. Thus, nothing really works in Libya, which includes the economy, the government apparatus, and especially the security sphere. In this anarchic environment, militias have proliferated and now are completely out of control. Sadly, international officials attempted superficial solutions to the Libya case, applying all too often a top-down approach and very little transparency. So, in recent years, we have seen high level meetings and conferences with politicians promising much but delivering little to their own citizens with the result that in the Libyan streets, across all the regional divisions, disappointment and distrust in the international



community were rapidly growing. There is a huge gap between the actions made by the International community and the ones made by the people in Libya, as there is a total dyscrasia between the Libyans' words and the facts: Every single Libyan keeps telling that there is only one Libya, with no divisions and that Libyans are united as never before. Unfortunately, nothing about the facts on the ground in Libya supports that contention, and indeed the reality is that the war torn country is quite the opposite. In this environment, where nothing is national, anarchy reigns supreme.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

When there are no institutions, no experience in a serious administration, not even a simple bureaucracy, it's difficult to claim that there is a State. But nationhood means "the people" and Libyans, now more than ever, really need to understand what they want to be. Do they want to be a coherent people, or three tribally based societies for the foreseeable future with perhaps ... perhaps ... a weak central federal arrangement? The choice is that stark. If indeed the "Libyan people" have concluded that a unified Libya is the only rational way ahead, then they need to be helped. In this sense the International community can do a lot, proposing a working, unifying narrative. Libyan people must be engaged as never before: from the family, through the tribe, to the town, through the mosque, and across all the principal territorial regions simultaneously.

Women, young leaders, activists and common citizens are an untapped source of focus and power: They can be the principal resource across the three regions of Libya in resolving its many misfortunes. Together, they can create the turning point in the process of stabilization and movement toward a coherent national Libyan narrative. But they need to become the real protagonists of their future, as the militias must be held accountable for their behavior in front of the society, and not as a safety net in the absence of a government. In this sense social media could have a key role in uniting the disparate parts of Libya and in making this process transparent. In 2007, two European scholars, Ludo van der Heyden and Thomas Limberg, wrote an interesting piece on the importance of fairness (*Why Fairness Matters*) in the business world that got my attention. Three points of their articulated study could be applied in the Libyan world.

It's not important what goal we achieve, but how we achieve it

Politically, the core problem is strictly connected to the fact that Libya still does not have a government recognized by its own citizens, and this obstacle makes every other step towards democratization, and coherent governance, impossible. The soil must be prepared in this sense, and this must emerge from



a population mobilized and inspired by a narrative of Libyan nationhood that can appeal broadly across the grassroots of the country. In Libya every single functioning step must be small but connected to the ground, and above all to the hearts of the people. If we analyze many of the most important revolutions of the human kind, we can see that they had their beginning from a single sparkle. Libya needs that emotional, heartfelt sparkle. The power of emotions is hugely recognized by the scientific society. So let's start telling the people that Libyans must believe in their own future and understand that rivalries are not part of it.

If you trust me, I will trust you

Rivalries among Libyans represent the deepest wounds in their history. Some are historical, some are new. And here is the second point: distrust must be transformed in trust, only then will it be possible to invert the classical process and impulses of revenge. Trust can only be established when “the people” can be convinced by a superior narrative to shed their tribal loyalties, and their sense of security within the tribe, for a confidence and trust in a higher authority or entity that will protect them and permit them to move beyond a tribal loyalty. Once “the people” have confidence their interests will be secured by that higher authority, only then will they embrace that higher authority and begin to come together as a people identified more with a nation than with a tribe. We must recognize this will not occur in the short term, and maybe not for decades.

HOW CAN LIBYANS OVERCOME SURVIVAL INSTINCTS?

Recent successful interventions on the ground in post-ISIS Iraq, have done just that: reduced, and in some cases, eliminated the impulse for revenge, creating in the wake, the possibility for real reconciliation. That's exactly what Libyans need to work as a tribal, regional and, finally, national team. Transparency is needed at every level, and that's why the social media have such a fundamental importance. They should monitor the process and work for clarity, as many already do connecting the municipalities with the citizens.

Engagement of all the parts

But they cannot work alone and here is the third point: every single Libyan should be engaged through a process of inclusivity, in order to frame a new country: No more marginalized communities in Libya, like the Tawergha, an entire community forced to leave its town in 2011 by the Misratan militias who accused them to be mercenaries of Gadhafi and still waiting to come back to a normal life. The top-down process did not work in the past, because the real



Libya - the people - were not sufficiently engaged through consultations that, instead, would have been extremely useful not only to understand the real issues on the ground, but also to solve them. The Libyan people are the solution of their own problems, but they must be engaged and become part of the decisions. Libyans need to believe that they are the only hope for their own future and to act as the heroes of their past: fighting for their own country. Economy, politics and security are the three fundamental issues to be solved here, but without the idea of being a nation, nothing will work. Tribal roots are primordial, and they are a safe haven in times of crisis and in the collapse of the social fabric. People can only move past identifying primarily with their tribal roots by being able identify overwhelmingly with a larger narrative. The unifying message of nationhood that can be more powerful than all the others we have seen until now is connected to the common ground shared with their ancestors and with the importance every single Libyan can play in this moment.

A sentence of the cited study really caught my attention: “if you are genuinely committed to fair processes you cannot commit yourself in advance to any particular outcome”, because if you do that, the fair process will be spoiled and in order to reach that outcome, you will forget the fairness. Now, let’s think of the elections programmed for the next December, without even an electoral law.

Did the International community and the actual Libyan leaders follow these three basic points? The answer is obvious for all to see.