

## Libya: a collapsed state

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### *Chaos, Fear and Uncertainty*

Few days after Mubarak's resignation, protests erupted in Benghazi, the second biggest Libyan city, and rapidly spread through the Cyrenaica, a region neighbouring Egypt. As early as February 18<sup>th</sup> the local Radio-TV building was burnt. Back in 1969, a previously unknown 27-years old captain Muammar Al-Gaddafi had announced from the very same station that the "heroic Libyan army" had toppled the "reactionary and corrupt" regime of King Idris I Senussi. Young officers had gathered around the captain, frustrated by the monarchy's indifference towards the Arab catastrophe in the war with Israel, proclaimed the establishment of the Libyan Arab Republic. There was no one to defend the kingdom, which fell like a ripe fruit.

This time, Gaddafi's Jamahiriya, the "state of the masses" as he renamed it in 1977, did not capitulate. Unverified news of hundreds of killed and wounded trickled out from the first days of the uprising, not only in the east where Gaddafi's power system collapsed, but in some cities of the west as well. The citizens that communicate with family and friends outside report on clashes, deaths, fears and food shortages. After the conflicts and the devastation left behind, the authorities in the capital ordered cleaning the streets.

While I write these lines, the situation in the field is unclear, and the objectives of the western intervention undefined and inconclusive. Contradictory news have reached us occasionally on "a circle round Tripoli closing on", on Gaddafi being "under siege" in his capital, on the "counter-offensive of pro-regime forces", on the "advancing of insurgents towards the west" and on a "status-quo in the war theatres". Disinformation is being spread, whatever the intention. Stories circulate about "foreign mercenaries" responsible of civilians' massacres. After the no-fly zone has been imposed and Gaddafi's air forces destroyed, foreign ground intervention in the name of defending the civilians is being invoked.

Hundred of thousands of foreigners and refugees sought salvation in neighbouring countries or have been evacuated by sea. Many Libyans are also fleeing, and together with other Arabs and Africans they try to cross the sea and find refuge in Europe. Italy, because of its geographical vicinity, is their first destination, but many afterwards try to cross into France, which provoked a crisis in Italo-French relations. The misery of these immigrants has been widely reported, but practically no attention was paid to the drama of the much larger mass of refugees who had crossed into Tunisia and Egypt.

Battles in Libya have indeed been fought and are recurrent along the coastline, now mostly around and in Misurata, which is half-way between Tripoli and Gaddafi's clan

stronghold of Sirte, and further east and north-east, where Gaddafi's loyalists are clashing with rebels for the control of port cities of Ras Lanuf, Brega and Ajdabiya.

In Benghazi rebels formed a Libyan National Transitional Council chaired by Mustafa Al-Jalil, the former and now defected Justice Minister of Gaddafi, which is set up in Benghazi. The Council was conceived as a coordinating body of disparate rebel centres that have sprouted throughout Cyrenaica and as a kind of provisional government. But it is not clear how representative it is and what its real authority in the territory it presumably controls is? Another defector, Gaddafi's former minister of interior General Abdel Fattah Younes, is formally the commander of rebel forces, but these operate in the field in separate groups, without common plan, coordination and logistic support. They are, according to eyewitnesses, poorly trained and lack heavy equipment; they are apparently left to operate autonomously. Two other rebel commanders, Omar Al-Harriri, who is presented as the Council's consultant for military affairs, and Colonel Khalifa Hefti, are supposed to play a role in the chain of command, adding to the confusion.

The distance between Tripoli, where most of Gaddafi's forces are concentrated, and Benghazi, is about a 1000 km. Before the no-fly zone over Libya had been imposed, Gaddafi's better organized loyalists, supported by his aviation, were on the offensive and on the verge of overtaking Benghazi. Since their air support was incapacitated and advancing tanks destroyed by western jets, the rebels succeeded to push back Tripoli's ground forces, but seem incapable of reaching Sirte. Gaddafi's troops, whose armoured units were easy air targets, have switched to light vehicles, and now move under the cover of night along the coastal highway to strike separate rebel groups. Recent sand storms, protecting them from NATO's air-strikes, allowed loyalist units to operate also in full daytime. Due to poor visibility or because it is difficult to distinguish to whom belong pick-up convoys, NATO's missiles had at least on two separate occasions hit advancing rebel groups.

Tripoli has in the meantime succeeded in re-establishing military control over the western part of the country. Although it had been said that some Berber tribes around the city of Sabha had rebelled, 1 300 km south of Tripoli in the region of Fezzan, the southwest of the country is also under Gaddafi's control. His main problem is Misurata, the isolated rebel outpost between Tripoli and Sirte, which still resists a 7-week siege. Without being able to get any support from Benghazi, and when NATO's bombs and missiles cannot distinguish who they are supposed to hit in this densely populated urban agglomeration, the rebels there are in a precarious position. If the city is overrun by Gaddafi's troops, Tripoli will re-establish full control of the coastal communication corridor up to Sirte, and the condition will be created for the *de facto* division of the country into two parts – the western part up to Sirte, with the addition of the Fezzan, under central control; and the east, essentially the Cyrenaica, under the authority of Benghazi. If a ceasefire is negotiated, the line of separation would be drawn somewhere east of Sirte. But if the rebels succeed to get foreign ground troop's support, which some of them are asking for, the whole civil war and conflict between two Libyan rival camps would acquire an international dimension, without predictable outcome.

The question is how will it all end and get back to some kind of "normalcy". What and whose "normalcy" might it be? The rebels are mostly acting under the flag of the former kingdom. They argue, not because they want to restore the monarchy, but because they reject the banner of Gaddafi's Jamahiriya. However, two nephews of the late King Idris, who had no direct descendants, offer from their London-based refuge, their own "services."

## **Oil, Gas, Benediction and Damnation**

While the previous months the world's media dealt with riots, first by the Tunisians, then by the Egyptians, against Ben Ali's and Mubarak's dictatorships, now their main focus is Libya and its leader Gaddafi. Yes, the Libyan revolt was inspired by the Tunisian one, and even more by the Egyptian events, and is part of the current libertarian wave that violently splashes the Arab world. If Gaddafi too is deposed, like his fallen colleagues, the predictions on the so-called domino effect will be confirmed. However, while citizens' "revolutions" in Tunisia and Egypt have much in common, the Libyan one is a revolt *sui generis*, because the Libyan society is still tribally fragmented. Closest in terms of the social, i.e. the tribal background of the turmoil, are the Yemeni protests. But in contrast to Yemen and to the direct neighbours, Libya is rich in oil and natural gas, which is why the outcome of the current political conflict in that country is important, not only to the direct importers of these resources, but also to consumers around the world.

After only two weeks of the Libyan conflict, the price of crude oil on world markets passed the threshold of \$ 100, and for the time-being is oscillating slightly above. In an attempt to suppress further growth, Saudi Arabia, the leading force of the OPEC cartel jumped in, its spare production capacity compensating for a reduced Libyan export quota. Libya's oil output barely covers 3 percent of the world's consumers' needs. One can only imagine what kind of a crisis would be caused by an attack on Iran as repeatedly threatened by Israel.

With oil reserves estimated at 46.4 billion barrels, Libya occupies the first place in Africa. Until these events Libya exported around 1.8 million barrels a day, while local consumption was only 270 000 barrels. It was, after Nigeria and Algeria, the third largest African exporter and the tenth in the world ranking. In addition, its gas reserves are estimated at 55 trillion cubic feet (TCF). Their cumulative exports in 2010 filled 95 percent of the Libyan budget. According to the estimate of the Centre for Studies and Research of the Arab and Mediterranean World, Geneva, this provided Libya over the past 30 years with an income of some \$ 450 billion, noting that exports have increased tremendously after the lifting of the UN international sanctions in 2003 (sanctions had been introduced in 1992 - 1993).

The current political division of Libya, where the regime mainly controls the west of the country and the rebellion its eastern part, may further widen through the fact that the major oil deposits too are located in these two geographically separate areas. Oil fields are located near the Tunisian border at the southwest of Tripoli, where the black gold is

pumped from to the terminal in Al-Zawiyah. In the hinterland of the Cyrenaica, closer to the Egyptian border, is located a second group with more modest sites, wherefrom oil and gas used to be drawn through pipelines to five marine terminals. These are now controlled by rebels, they have stopped operating after the civil war erupted, but apparently none of them has been materially damaged or technically incapacitated. No pipelines have suffered.

Both sides are clearly aware that oil and gas, no matter what the outcome of their conflict, are precious and should be safeguarded. Exports from the west are now blocked due to sanctions imposed on Tripoli, while the Benghazi Council has accepted the offer of the Qatari Oil Corporation to export and commercialize oil from the east. A Qatari tanker took the first oil delivery at the Tobruk terminal. If the country is divided temporarily or on the long run into two parts – each of its components will have its own oil/gas rent. This is now more important for the cash-stripped Benghazi than to Tripoli, which seems to have enough money in its coffers.

## **The Libyan Tribal-Clannish Mosaic**

The borders of today's Libya have been drawn by the colonial powers at the outcome of World War I, when the League of Nations entrusted the mandate to administer that territory to Italy. Up to 1911-1912 the coastal area was under the nominal rule of the collapsing Ottoman Empire, but in fact it was left to the control of local beys of Turkish origin. The resistance to Italian occupation, which was lead by the sufi fraternity of the Senussis, was brutally crushed by force, a true genocide - the Italian soldiery killed some 200.000 Libyans. They displaced about a million of them in order to make way for the Italian settlers. These are daunting figures, given that Libya did not have then more than two million inhabitants. Finally, in the thirties of the last century, Omar Mukhtar, the last Senussi resistance leader, wounded in the previous encounter, and five of his fellow combatants, were publicly hanged in the main square of Benghazi.

Mussolini's Italy had signed agreements on the borders of Italian Libya with the French, then established in Tunisia, Algeria, Niger and the Chad, and with the British, who had since turned their protectorate over Egypt into a nominally independent kingdom. Thus, three historically and physically separate regions – the Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the west and Fezzan in the south – found themselves within that colony. At the beginning of World War II, the Italians from Cyrenaica went on the offensive against the British in Egypt. When they were repelled, Hitler sent, to help them, his Panzer Division, *Afrika Korps*. It was led by Field Marshal Rommel and marched towards the Suez Canal, but was stopped in 1942 in front of Alexandria at Al-Alamein. Haunting and exterminating the remnants of German and Italian troops, the Allied forces divided Libya into three occupation zones - the British took over the Cyrenaica, the Americans the Tripolitania and the French got Fezzan. During the war, the Senussis activated themselves and mobilized members of their fraternity in the east of the country on the British side. Thereafter, the United Nations entrusted the crown of the newly established kingdom to Idris, the descendant of the first Senussi in 1951. The new state was established as a federation of the three above-mentioned regions, but Idris imposed a centralist system after a few years.

Omar Mukhtar was considered a Libyan national hero already at the time of the kingdom, and his cult was reinforced with the creation of the Jamahiriya. His grandson has recently supported the rebellion against Gaddafi.

The kingdom had scarcely begun to build some rudiments of a modern state - the administration, the military and education. Libya had no staff, no middle class that had just only started to emerge under the aegis of the new state. The kingdom had no economic policy, not even when first oil deposits were discovered; foreign companies, American and British, were granted the first concessions. Only foreigners were employed in these fields, as well as in the U.S. and British military bases. The Libyan society itself had remained as tribally fragmented as it had been before. Each of those communities, and it is estimated that there were some 120 of them, remained confined to its small and separate subsistence economy.

The descendants of the first Bedouin groups that came long before from Arabia to this area are called Saadi. The two tribal groups - the Bani Hilal and Bani Salim are still differentiated according to the groups to which their ancestors belonged and are considered "true Arabs". Originally they were nomads and livestock breeders. Although their descendants have long settled in the coastal area of Libya's Cyrenaica all the way to Tripolitania, they are still today hardly deft at tilling. Descendants of these first Bedouin tribes were eventually divided into smaller sub-tribal groups. One of them is the Gadadfa clan that inhabits the area of Sirte, and to which the leader Muammar Gaddafi belongs.

The descendants of the indigenous islamised and arabised population understand agriculture somewhat better. They are called Marabit and they nowadays mainly inhabit the interior of the Cyrenaica and poor areas of central Libya. Among these, the Warfala are the largest tribal group, whose number is estimated at approximately one million. But they never had tribal organization. They too are divided into many sub-tribal clans, which are commonly referred to according to the places where they settled. Far back in the 1969, when Gaddafi launched his revolt against the monarchy, officers from that tribe stood at his side. However, in the nineties of the last century, when some younger ones among them tried to rebel, he operated a radical purge of the Warfalas from the army ranks.

Further south are islamised Berbers, who had gathered in and around the fertile oasis, where they engage in farming and in breeding small stock. They are also split along tribal-clan lines. In the far south are the Tuaregs, the Berber language cousins, who inhabit the border area of Libya, Chad, Niger and Algeria. They were traditionally nomads, masters of trans-Saharan caravan routes, and sometimes robbers. The boundaries of modern states could not prevent their seasonal migratory movements. Many people that I had met when I was travelling in the southern regions of Libya came from the neighbouring African states. With them, I could communicate in French. Gaddafi managed to pacify their educated elites through various government sinecures and by recruiting the unskilled into the militias of his people's committees. Of these Tuareg and other African recruits he assembled the elite battalion of *Al-Asmar*, which was occasionally sent in military expeditions to the neighbouring African countries. When the riots began in the Cyrenaica and when it was necessary to boost the local pro-government power position, they were airlifted to the battlefield, and they performed a

massacre in Al-Bayda, the former headquarters of Senussi. They turned all the people of Libya not only against the "black mercenaries," but also against all with black skin, including against the Marabit arabised black tribes. It is estimated that there are moreover some half a million African (im)migrants on the Libyan soil. Fleeing vengeance, many of them recently sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

## **The Delegates' System of the Jamahiriya**

From the Arab revolutionary that he appeared to be to many in 1969, Gaddafi the desert ascetic who was satisfied with the rank of colonel, eventually got into the role of the great leader, "King of the kings", thinker and prophet of the "third universal theory between capitalism and communism", which he promoted in 1979 with his *Green Book*. He formulated in it the guidelines for the future of the revolutionary development of the country. The Great People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya was established, conceived as a direct democracy where the citizens govern through a network of people's committees. The *Green Book*, in a resolution of the General People's Congress, is declared the basic document of the state of the masses, while, in a second resolution, "brother" Gaddafi is proclaimed the Leader. Practically, all the powers of the head of state were conferred upon him, but no responsibility. People's committees are organized according to two principles - territory and work. There are a total of about 600 of them, and they all have their militias, or security groups. Some of the people's committees in the field are larger and cover an entire tribe or clan.

Members of the committees are elected for a year by adult male and female inhabitants of the relevant territorial unit. They are officers of local authorities and are paid for their work. So are the members of their security groups. This created within the tribe or clan a parallel structure loyal to the regime, by which the authority of traditional clan chiefs and sheiks was *de facto* undermined. But these were usually co-opted into the people's committees, in which younger and more educated members, either listen with respect to their advice, or outvote them.

I attended a hearing at the assembly of a work unit, actually an assembly of all employees of a university in Tripoli. It reminded me of our former meetings of the Socialist Alliance or Workers' self-management in the former Yugoslavia. Gaddafi's project of dismissing the surplus of employees was discussed, a total of half a million of them, to whom cash compensation would be paid, a sum of money to start a business or buy land with. Those who thought they would get on the hit list were vehemently opposed. A few months later, when the General People's Congress was held at the national level, attended by delegates of all territorial and working committees, the implementation of Gaddafi's proposal was "deferred" and returned "for revision". The (General People's) Congress normally meets regularly once a year and sometimes sits for a month or two; except on the instructions of the Leader, it also discusses the operating of the government and its ministries, which are the executive organs of the Congress. It is a great chat room. Gaddafi usually appears when the state budget is discussed. Then the prime minister and ministers explain to him, sometimes writing on the blackboard, what last year's income had been and how it should be spent. He then

gives them suggestions on what should be done and what the priorities of the next budget year should be. Usually, the delegates of the Congress agree with his suggestions, sometimes with minor adjustments. But, again, his motion to dismiss the surplus of civil servants was "postponed" and has not been realised.

With this story about the Libyan delegates' system which, I believe, is boring to many readers, I intend to explain two things - first, how Gaddafi managed to marginalise the traditional tribal and clan authorities; secondly, how he obtained support to his personalised system of rule from those to whom that system had been useful. His big mistake was his plan to lay off 500 000 civil servants.

But the regime antagonised also those that had been wronged or got less than the neighbours of other clans / tribes in the distribution of benefits from state sinecures. Everyone knew that the clan Gadadfa was largely favoured. I listened to such stories. Its members received scholarships for training at home and abroad, were later placed in prestigious and lucrative positions in the civilian administration, in special military units, in state-owned companies, in healthcare or education. They were dominant in state institutions. They filled people's committees even in regions where they were not born. Members of "allied" clans advanced alongside them. The city of Sirte, where the Gaddafis came from, was converted from a neglected and backward coastal village into a modern urban entity. It may seem paradoxical, but Muammar, in undermining the traditional tribal / clan authorities, created what I would call "new tribes" and "neo clans".

In addition to the former, he also degraded some important state institutions. First of all, the army from which he himself sprang. He feared a military rebellion. He reduced the regular army to some 40 000 troops and deployed them in unconnected garrisons scattered over an enormous territory. Their role was defensive and static. He left them with, old Eastern European weaponry, it is said. On the other hand, he enabled mobile special forces equipped with modern weapons under the command of his own clan members or such that he trusted, individuals answerable only to him. By the same model he established a network of intelligence agencies that were spying on each other, whose coordinator was Mutasim, one of his sons. One of my Libyan friends claimed that at least seven mutually unrelated centres engaged in diplomacy and business contacts with foreign countries. Libyan embassies abroad were also managed by committees of employees, while ambassadors were only figures for official contacts with the locals.

When the Leader had proposed to release those extra half a million civil servants, he also came out with the idea that the affairs of the state be reduced to national defence, internal security, foreign policy and finance. Everything else, i.e. education, health, transport and economy, would be left to individual initiative. This was Gaddafi's version of the utopia on the "withering away of the state." Perhaps the Leader would have continued dismantling the state, had these events not prevented him.

Since the eruption of the revolt, the regime has suffered numerous defections - of its ministers of justice, interior and foreign affairs, of the general prosecutor of the Jamahiriya, and of dozens of high army officials and top diplomats, and even of members

of Gaddafi's own clan – but the inner circle around the Leader, his sons and daughter, and many of his loyalists, have closed ranks, fighting for their survival. Dr. Seif Al-Islam, Gaddafi's son, who has no official state function or duty, became the public representative of this informal power centre, speaking in the name of his father as his *de facto* deputy. The still existing prime minister, the central government, and the chairman of the General People's Congress who used to formally represent the state, are kept on the sidelines. In the emergency situation the clan is actually facing they are probably considered as useless.

### **Foreign intervention and internationalization of the civil war**

The brutality of Gaddafi's crackdown on protesters provoked an international outcry. Condemnation came not only from western capitals, with France and Britain at the forefront, and the United States in the background, but also from Arab Gulf monarchies, and from Iran and Al-Qaeda. Paris and London were the first to advocate the imposition of a no-fly zone to prevent Tripoli's aviation to bombard civilians. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the regional grouping of Gulf Arab autocratic regimes, pushed the no-fly project through the Arab League (AL). Of its 22 full member states 11 were present when the League voted its no-fly resolution to be submitted to the United Nations, which was supported by eight member states, six of them belonging to the GCC, while Syria and Algeria voted against. That means that only 9 out of the 22 Arab states supported the project. Previously, the African Union, which includes North African Arab countries, was more reserved. It set up a committee for the investigation of the situation in "brotherly" Libya, which demanded the "immediate cessation of all hostilities". Nevertheless, it is the AL formal proposal to the United Nation Security Council that was taken into account, and Resolution No. 1973 was adopted, after intense lobbying by the United States, France and Britain, with 10 votes for the no-fly zone and 5 abstentions. China, Brazil, Germany, India and Russia abstained. The resolution authorized UN member states to "take all necessary measures" to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under the threat of attack". UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated the "the international community is speaking with one voice" (!)

And the fireworks started almost immediately. American *tomahawk* cruise missiles launched from warships deployed ahead along the Libyan coast, soon joined by French *mirages* and British *tornadoes*, pondered Tripoli's military facilities and soon annihilated the Libyan air-forces. From Cairo, the AL Secretary General Amr Moussa, criticized the "excessive use of force" saying that the intention of the no-fly zone was "to protect the civilians, not to bomb them". But the Allies went further when they destroyed the central government's tank unit which has pushed until Benghazi's suburbs, saving in practice the rebel capital from a takeover by loyalist troops, and bombarding Gaddafi's headquarters in Tripoli. That was followed by the systematic targeting of Gaddafi's armored convoys and artillery positions, which allowed the insurgent groups to retake the initiative. These attacks were coordinated by the US Africa command center (USAFRICOM) located in Stuttgart, Germany.

Meanwhile the initial "coalition of the three willing" sought to involve the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This was not an easy task, because Turkey refused to be part of any military intervention, and Germany as well as some other members had



reservations. Nevertheless a sufficient number of members offered a token support, and few others dispatched some jets. NATO headquarters in Brussels took over from Stuttgart the conduct of military operations, which permitted to the Americans to withdraw from the forefront. The Obama administration, already embattled in wars on the Afghan-Pakistani front and in Iraq, is trying to avoid the blame for a war in another Muslim country. This arrangement was also convenient to the French and British. Their common problem is that in spite of heavy casualties inflicted on Tripoli's forces and the continuous destruction of their military infrastructure, the conflict between the two Libyan rivals seems to be inconclusive. Western official and unofficial strategists describe the situation on the ground as "very difficult", "confused" or as a "stalemate". The rebels seem incapable of overpowering central government troops. The covert shipment of arms they are receiving did not help. They cannot offer support to the resistance of their peers in isolated Misurata. The short-term aim that the interventionists are seeking to achieve – the ousting of Gaddafi – is for the time being wishful thinking only.

Another problem is that the UNSC resolution 1973 excludes "a foreign occupation force in any form on any part of Libyan territory". Thus foreign "boots on the ground" would directly contradict UN's prohibition. Well, first Britain, followed by France and Italy have decided, and surely it was not without a nod from Washington, to send to the rebels "military advisors", who are supposed, as it was said, to help them in organizing their ranks and in the distribution of humanitarian aid. Apparently old colonial reflexes have been revived. Is anybody remembering how the dispatch of American "advisors" to Vietnam has been the first step towards a US full-blown military intervention? And it is not sure how the Libyans, who have still a bitter memory of Italian occupation, are going to react to the presence of these "advisors", who could be followed by foreign "volunteers", i.e. mercenary soldiers of some international contracting companies. This could work in Gaddafi's favor. He has already started distributing weapons to loyalist clans and groups. Foreign interventionists have altogether forgotten the UN mandate to protect the civilian population.

The Libyan civil war risks growing into an international war with an unpredictable outcome. Is another failed state, similar to Somalia, Afghanistan or Iraq likely to emerge, or is a two-states formula in the making?

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**Notes**

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