

# Libya: The Dynamics of Fragmentation and the Circumvention of the (re-)Construction of the State

*Ali Bensaâd*

## Abstract:

A large part of the Arab world is characterized by the disruptions of the states, the structures of which are weakened and sometimes even deliberately jeopardized. The most palpable and prejudicial challenges to these states attack the exercise of sovereignty on their territories. Indeed, we can notice the apparition, or the return, and the affirmation of territorialities that are presented as inherently incompatible with the existence of nation-states and which are then undermining its primary foundation: its territorial base and its control over it. In this regard, Libya represents the most complex and paroxysmal case. Even if violence is significantly lower than in Syria or Yemen, fragmentation is at a far higher stage than anywhere else in the Arab world. This article aims to study the process of fragmentation in Libya at its different scales.

**Keywords:** Libya, territory, state, fragmentation, crisis.

## Introduction

The anxiety spanning through the Arab world and the representations the latter conveys are both nourished by the disruptions of the states, the structures of which are weakened and sometimes even deliberately jeopardized. The most palpable and prejudicial challenges to these states attack the exercise of sovereignty on their territories. Indeed, we can notice the apparition, or the return, and the affirmation of territorialities that are presented as inherently incompatible with the existence of nation-states and which are then undermining its primary foundation: its territorial base and its control over it.

In this regard, Libya represents the most complex and paroxysmal case. Even if violence is significantly lower than in Syria or Yemen, fragmentation is at a far higher stage than anywhere else in the Arab world.

This article follows several trips made to the Fezzan in 2016, 2017 and 2018. And the content of the article is based primarily on firsthand data harvested during the inquiry there, with interviews – most often cross-checked – and observations. We largely favored interviews on the field with low-ranked actors, even though we also met with officials – despite the difficulties in assessing the meaning of ranks in a country where even local observers are rare. Finally, to preserve the anonymity of our interlocutors (which has always been demanded), to avoid making the text even longer, and to make possible a synthetic restitution of the findings, interviews are not marked in the text.<sup>1</sup> Hence, Libya can be represented as an archipelago of autonomous local powers competing against each other, overlapping and sometimes folding up in a multiscale fragmentation with authorities rooted at different scales. These powers prevent the necessary nationalization of the political life while they prove themselves unable to assert their positions at the national level.

These localisms are intertwined with the assertion of centrifuge tendencies at the regional level in a vast country made of three large regions with divergent political and historical trajectories (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan). Furthermore, their differences have often been manipulated in the name of 'regionalism' through strategies deployed by the two political regimes that succeeded each other in power: the monarchy, and that of colonel Qaddafi. Additionally, they are intertwined with multiple ethnic-based identity claims (Berbers, Tuaregs, Toubous). Either denied, harshly repressed, or marginalized, ethno-cultural identities try to enhance their power by progressively adopting territorialized identity claims, even though the territories populated by these minorities are often discontinuous and overlapping at different scales. We can thus explain the heightened and more complex 'territorial wars'. Finally, they overlap with the assertion and resurgence of re-constructed tribal identities. Hence, a large number of actors have knowingly adopted the tribal idiom as an instrument of political identification, reunification, mobilization, and to support territorial claims. As the various names of tribes have become political banners, those tribes appear as the only (or at least, as the main) political actors. On the field, and almost everywhere in Libya, 'councils of wise men' have been set up with individuals often presenting themselves as tribal leaders and claiming a tribal attachment. To legitimize their claims, alliances and confederations between tribes are permanently created, broken up, and reconfigured, increasing the instability of the political field while, at the same time, more and more political entrepreneurs are trying to assert themselves as representatives of 'tribal' communities.

Besides, on this political scene fragmented by localisms and the multiplicity of autonomous and competing local actors a major divide was juxtaposed: an institutional

duality, with two governments and two parliaments each asserting its legitimacy without being able to win over the other, least to further its authority over the real country. In this reordering fight, the new elites fathered by the Revolution oppose the old elites, which did not always switch allegiances, produced by long-established notabilities (Lacher 2013). And for lack of a winner, the fight moved on to the territories. In practice, it led to the territorial division of the country, with each government rooted and in control in one of the two constitutive regions of the country: one in Tripolitania, another in the Cyrenaica, and the two competing for power over the Fezzan. If it were to become durable, this divide could end in the partition of the country.

This territorial fragmentation and the multiplicity of scales have generated a profusion of territorial blind spots which turned into interstices fostering the territorial implantation of jihadist groups such as those in the Emirate of Derna, which preceded the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq, or in Sirte, which was once the only territorial implantation of Daesh outside of Iraq-Syria.

These territorial fragmentations and the multiform attacks on the state that we outlined are edifying. They show the extreme extent of the dismantling of the state's legitimacy, and the depth of the attacks on its main foundation: its territorial base. Ultimately, the situation here outlined could lead to none other than the disappearance or the near-collapse of the state.

That said, the attacks on the state's legitimacy and its subsequent breakdown cannot be seen as the key determinants behind the fragmentation of the country. Instead, it can be traced to weaknesses and ambiguities consubstantial to the creation of the state, and that have been revealed in the midst of the current challenges. Territorial disputes preexisted to, and weakened the Qaddafi regime before eventually paving the ground for its breakdown. Hence, the present territorial claims, emerging from fragmented and autonomous powers all over Libya, need to be understood in light of this reversed proposition. Their claims are not solely a threat to the state, they must be understood as the ingredients for a possible re-founding of the nation-state that would be more rooted in the socio-territorial realities of the land, and more deeply based on a contractual legitimization. In fact, local entities and powers are the only governing structures that are currently both legitimate and efficient in Libya (Bensaâd 2015). Due to local pressures, their deep roots in the local communities made them safeguards against the propagation of violence. And by containing violence, they often prevented the local communities from being directly embarked in the power fights at the national level, thus limiting the reach of the civil war. Additionally, the same local authorities have played an important part in the process of national reconciliation and reconstruction with the creation of the government of national unity. Indeed, the local communities, tired of the clashes, initially originated the process of reconciliation, which produced this government, both outside and against the reach of the two governments fighting for power: the one in Tripoli, and the one in Tobruk.<sup>2</sup>

There, and along with its deconstructing effects, the process of fragmentation reestablished local actors in their role as representatives and deciders – from which they were dismissed by the previous regime, even though, as of today, they are no longer regulated by a central authority (Achard 2013; Allal, Pierret 2013; Bozarslan 2011; 2015; Filiu 2011; Picard 2006).

### **The ambiguities of national constructions in the Arab World, and the difficult task of strengthening a territorial base**

There is no doubt that in Libya, such as in the whole Arab world, there exists a process of national and state construction, and that it has created social ties between state and society. Yet, this process, both in Libya and in the entire Arab world, can also be characterized by its incompleteness and its chaotic and violent paths since its origins. The nation-states that have emerged from it are often marked by a profound lack of legitimacy and social support. This deficiency was spatially translated as well, as large territories had troubles finding a role for themselves in these nation-states, and sometimes remained out of its effective reach. Facing difficulties in asserting a territorial foundation – which illustrates their difficulties in asserting a social and political base – the states in the region anchored their legitimacy in a refusal to recognize the existing territorial identities, and sometimes in further discriminations against them. In addition, the states were ruled by violence which easily shaped the political system and the social environment in the Arab World (Chaker, Ferkal 2012; Dawod 2004; Picard 2006). It wouldn't be necessary here to evoke the example of Iraq where the violent chaos that the country faces, and its territorial fragmentation, finds its roots in the marginalization and violence against some territories (especially where Shias and Kurds are residing), including the use of chemical weapons by the regime of Saddam Hussein (Dawod 2004). Likewise, it wouldn't be necessary to discuss the Syrian precedent, where the government provoked the fragmentation, through a strategy of violent communitization, to strengthen its grip on the state based on the imposed domination of the Alawi community – so much so that, thirty years ago, Michel Seurat described it as both a "State of Barbarism" (Seurat 2012) and as a "successful *Assabya*" (Seurat 1985).<sup>3</sup> The reality of this situation was clearly revealed recently, as the national, modern, and laic varnish cracked open. In fact, we can limit our discussion to the Tunisian example even though it has often been presented as a counter-example to Libya, and state construction in Tunisia has been considered the most stable, civil, and the closest to a Western nation-state. Against this prevailing idea, the Tunisian state emerged from a violent and territorialized fratricidal fight that revealed and increased the territorial fractures. This fratricidal fight opposed the *Bourguibistes* and the *Youssoufistes* and was settled in the blood of the former. The current president, Beji Caïd Sebti, then Minister of the interior, manufactured this repression. The *Bourguibistes* represented the urban elites from the Sahel region,

a territory largely urbanized and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea whereas the *Yousoufistes* represented the elites of the marginalized, rural interior of the country, in the South especially, and which challenged the takeover operated by the Sahel elites. Sixty years later, the 2014 presidential elections neatly reaffirmed the same territorial fracture: without exception, the South voted for Marzouki in the first round, while the Sahel, and the North in general, voted almost unanimously for Beji Caïd Sebti.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, these territorial fractures played an important role in the genesis of the social explosion that provoked the fall of the Tunisian regime in 2010. As a matter of fact, it started in the marginalized regions from the interior, where levels of poverty contrast dramatically with the seaside Sahel, urbanized, rich and open to the rest of the world. It was the youth from the marginalized regions that initiated the protest movement, and the social protests first found a sounding board in the territorial fracture before federating the populations subjected to social and political exclusion and eventually spreading out to the rest of the country (Ayari, Geisser, Krefa 2011).

The territory-based violence that accompanied the national constructions everywhere in the Arab world led to ambiguous, fragile, and easily-challenged territorial constructions; their limits and incoherencies became evident even before the fall of the dictators, with clashes that provoked crisis in the states. The violent challenges in the territories, as well as the social challenges to the state were numerous in Libya, as in the Arab world at large, and even when the regime was at its strongest and most stable. Here again, the Tunisian case is full of examples of territorial protests, and brutal outbreaks of tribal solidarities. Among others, the most emblematic revolts occurred at the time of the dictatorship: the revolt in the city of Ben Guerdane in 2010, or the outbreak in the mining region of Gafsa two years earlier, where demands centered around a unique issue hid community-based claims for an access to resources and jobs by local groups (Chouikha, Geisser 2010). In practice, on the one hand, the Tunisian state presented itself as modern, centralizer, and integrator yet maintained huge swaths of territory in the margins, and on the other hand, the state made sure to keep spaces for the communities in these territories and to keep tribal practices alive as well, using tribal quotas in official representation and in the distribution of resources, for example (Bison 2012).

Thus, territorial fragmentations preceded, weakened, and paved the ground for the fall of the regimes, even though they might have gotten more traction afterwards.

### **The manipulation of segmentarity and territorial fractures, and the resulting effects on the destabilization of the Libyan regime**

Long before the fall of the regime, the violent expressions of the territorial fragmentation proliferated in Libya outside the reach of its authorities and it threatened political stability. Armed standoffs between various interest groups, disguised as communitarian or regional clashes, did not wait for the downfall of the regime to proliferate, but

flourished under it. The so-called tribal clashes that are emerging nowadays are not new, either in their expression or in the fault lines that they stimulate. To a great extent, previous confrontations had the same matrix, the same motives, and the same fault lines than the current militia-led clashes. Several years before the fall of the regime, clashes were common in the same regions and they opposed the same actors. Indeed, we covered elsewhere the far deadlier clashes that opposed in 2008, three years before the fall of Qaddafi, the same actors that are fighting today in Kufra: the Toubous and the Zway tribe. At that time, a three-day military intervention was required to pull them apart. The major part of the clashes is localized in the border regions, stressing the importance of controlling cross-border trade, which has always been the subject of tough competition manipulated by the government.

As everywhere else in the region, Qaddafi manipulated the tribal ethos to strengthen his grip on the country. Yet, he went even further: he enlisted and reconstructed the tribal bound as an alternative to the state itself. Indeed, Qaddafi did not solely rely on tribal networks to govern, he brought them to the forefront of politics through a voluntarist process of 're-tribalization' which ran against all social changes inside the society (the country was largely urban by then, and the demographic transition prevented the reproduction of a tribal order and of the traditional kinship system). As a way to legitimize and bolster his populist authoritarianism and the personification of the governing structures, Qaddafi promoted the tribal system – albeit restructured and bribed with the oil rent – as the only intermediary between the government and the population, thus marginalizing any other institutional framework or any civil structure that might have grown autonomous over time. Hence, on the social level this 're-tribalization' made up for, and excused, the deconstruction of state institutions which, paradoxically, brought along the multiplication and the hypertrophy of state organs turned into personal property. The marginalization of the standing army is a telling example: it was replaced over time by a multiplicity of praetorian units based on tribal affiliation and controlled according to family relations. At the same time, this manipulation of tribal and regional rivalries fostered heightened enmities, a rise of aggressiveness, a deeper fragmentation and eventually the larger dissemination of violence inside the society.

This atomization of the society, the rise of particularisms and their violent competition were fostered by the regime: these developments occurred in its shadow and while the government's strength was at its highest. Yet, this proliferation of the violent manifestations of fragmentations, either manipulated or arbitrated by the state through alliances permanently reshuffled, eventually overwhelmed and eluded the government. The everlasting competition and fight for power produced a growing discontent that became difficult to canalize. Eventually, these skirmishes had a destabilizing effect on the regime, threatening its capacity to control the territory, and forced Qaddafi to an understanding with the Senussi brotherhood, its historic enemy whom Qaddafi

persecuted throughout his decades in power. In fact, Seif al-Islam, one of Qaddafi's sons, multiplied gestures of good will toward the brotherhood to prepare the succession. The heir apparently understood the unifying possibilities and the trans-tribal and trans-ethnic character of the brotherhood as it remained deeply powerful, in Cyrenaica especially, at a time when the violent manifestations of fragmentation proliferated in the country, outside of the reach of the state. Simply told, and despite the possibilities offered by the oil rent, the fragmentation showed the limits attained by the strategy of authoritarian regeneration based on the segmentation of the society. The orchestrated and imposed competition between the communities, as well as the permanent remodeling of alliances to bolster the state's domination and secure the allegiances, made discontent both stronger and more difficult to contain. This discontent, which grew alongside social contestation, was an important factor in the cracking of the authoritarian structure. The process of imposing identities from the top-down became an operation of destabilization at the top, opening a new window of opportunity for the rise and amplification of contestation in the country.

### **The various scales of territorial fragmentation in Libya**

#### *The regional fracture*

Regional conflicts were a key element in the birth of the Libyan state, as the latter constructed itself on an ambiguous relationship between its center and the regions, and this frayed relationship has always remained a weakness of this nation-state. The vastness of the country and its situation as a crossroad have favored the enduring existence of a plurality of tropisms which have long molded, since the Antiquity, regions that asserted different identities based on different political and historical trajectories. Hence, Tripolitania emerged under Punic influence in the Mediterranean civilization, whereas Cyrenaica emerged in an area of Greek influence. This distinction continued under Roman, Arab, and later Ottoman domination. In modern times, Cyrenaica was often governed from Egypt (by either the Ottomans or the British), Tripolitania was long under a strong Tunisian influence, and Fezzan's tropism looked toward the Sahel, which had France wondering about attaching it to Algeria when it was under its control (Martel 1991; Bisson 1999). For these reasons, a variety of distinctive regional traits forged themselves over time, and they continue to perpetuate themselves to this day, making each region a distinct entity in itself; and it weighted heavily for the adoption of a federal structure when Libya gained its independence. In fact, these identities strongly impacted the construction of the state, and the regional problematic has emerged periodically since the independence, notably because the governing authorities have manipulated the regional specificities in their attempt to maintain their grip on the state (Bensaâd 2016).

Cyrenaica constituted the territorial base of the monarchy for 18 years (1951-1969) at the expense of Tripolitania, which has since taken its revenge and monopolized the

national power since 1969. From the start, the monarchy, the first national authority after the independence, and which originated in the Senussi order, decided to establish itself in rural Cyrenaica, and not in the urban and economically dynamic Tripolitania. And in Cyrenaica, they chose a little urban center, al-Beida, where the first Senussi community had settled. The monarchy always maintained this double objective: promoting its territorial base and marginalizing the dynamic and rebellious Tripolitania (Martel 1991; Bisson 1999). In return, Qaddafi built its power as a counter-point to the previous strategy, against a Cyrenaica he would never trust and which symbolized the former authorities. Yet, this obsession wasn't solely limited to the region: he tried to eradicate the Senussi order even though its religious, historical, and symbolic legitimacy went far beyond the monarchy it embodied. Tellingly, Qaddafi orchestrated the destruction of the order's mausoleums, prefiguring here a strategy later deployed by Daesh (Triaud 2005).

The relationship between the regions was made even more acute by the dichotomy between centers of population and political power (Tripolitania), and centers of resources (oil and water, in Cyrenaica and Fezzan). Thus, it appears as evident that when the Qaddafi regime was brought down, the question of the regional equilibrium was raised. With that in mind, it is not surprising then that, in Libya, the Arab Spring started in Cyrenaica, the region that symbolized territorial injustice. But the protests were neither regionalist nor localized regionally. On the contrary, they dealt with the nation from the start, and questioned the citizenry as they found a symbol in the human rights lawyer Fethi Terbil, himself from Tripolitania. There again, as in Tunisia and elsewhere, the territorial fracture at the regional level simply worked as the interstice where the social and political contestation took its roots. In Tunisia, the fracture between the Sahel and the interior of the country triggered the protests. Furthermore, in Libya, not only were the regionalist claims absent from the protests, but the regionalist movement, which has worked for the creation of a federal state modeled on the one that existed before 1963, has, until today, consistently failed despite its virulent demonstrations and a veritable ability to be a nuisance. In fact, even before the fall of the Qaddafi regime, some regionalist demands emerged from the ranks of the descendants of the monarchy, such as when Zubair Ahmed Senussi unilaterally proclaimed the autonomy of Cyrenaica to impose the idea of a federal state. Eventually, the militias took over regionalist demands. We can mention the militia headed by Ibrahim al-Jadran which finds support among frustrated officers of the regular army who have been marginalized in regional security structures dominated by the revolutionary brigades. Yet, even though regionalist demands are important in Cyrenaica, and despite strong support for the federalist movement from its most important tribes (the Obeidats, the Awaghirs, and especially the Magharbas whom which al-Jadran is from), this source of support is limited to a portion of the leaders. The federalists remain isolated in the region. Hence, the Barqa Council often presented as a sort of government, remains a hollow shell. This



project of a regional government and the boycott of the general elections were rejected by the majority of local councils and by the powerful regional revolutionary brigades. Additionally, the political rivalries in the ranks of the federalists and the violent actions they undertook to prevent several votes largely altered and fractured the movement. Eventually, the decision to block the oil terminals was unanimously opposed, even by the Magharba tribe, and the decision to sell oil on the black market ended up discrediting the federalists as it made them appear as venal and adventurous.

After the division of the country between the two governments, the federalists found themselves on the same side as of two actors opposing the federalist option and with a profound Tripolitanian tropism: the Zintan militias and the Tobruk Parliament, which emerged from the 2014 elections and thus endowed with institutional legitimacy. In fact, this alignment can be explained first by their competition with the Islamists over the territorial control of the region, but even more by the fact that the revolutionary brigades in Benghazi are made of fighters coming from the city of Misrata, which is both the main supporter of the rival government based in Tripoli, and a dominant economic actor in Cyrenaica – which creates frustrations among the local populations. The current disproportionate political weight of the federalists is not so much the consequence of their own power than the product of the ambitions of their current allies which directly or indirectly bolster their own strength. At the military level for example, General Haftar needs them: he has nothing to gain from a reinforcement of the legitimacy of the government in Tripoli, which would threaten the military preeminence he claimed for himself there. This is the case also of the Tobruk Parliament. Its President and vice-President both supported the Skhirat process of national reconciliation and the emergence of a Government of National Accord. But they thought they would control it. As they did not obtain key positions in it, including the prime ministership, they are trying to prevent it from working properly, even though it reinforces the federalists. Furthermore, the federalists profit from social resentment against natives of Misrata. Because Cyrenaica has been strongly impacted by pastoral traditions, its elites were not prepared to take advantage of the oil-induced economic boom even though oil reserves are close to Cyrenaica. Very often, the urban and merchant elites of Misrata best benefited from the economic boom there, and they now dominate the economy of the region, controlling everything from the land to the banks, and from groceries stores to the trade of jewelry. The importance of the Misrata elites in the process of reconstruction is double-edged. On the one hand, they provide the process with its powerful militias, its economic power, and the pragmatism of a city deeply influenced by urban and entrepreneurial traditions. On the other hand, the same advantages are the Achilles heel of the reconstruction process: the increased power of these elites sharpens concerns and tensions among the elites of Cyrenaica.

Even though the risks of partition in Cyrenaica are manipulated, by its own elites and by the federalists among others, the latter still struggle to establish themselves beyond

pure political maneuvering. Their failure shows that even weakened and contested, the nation-state keeps solid foundations, anchored both in the history of the country, in decades of bureaucratic governance, of development-oriented investments, and in the redistribution of the oil-rent. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, behind the crystallization of the regional conflict, we can notice social, political, and cultural tensions using the territory as a vector to strengthen their demands.

This dynamic is evident in Fezzan where federalism had traditionally been absent but tends to emerge nowadays. Fezzan was a bastion of the former regime, and it became the last region to join the Revolution, yet only partially and timidly as it remains a stronghold of supporters of the former regime. It now appears as a refuge for the 'vanquished' tribes against the persecutions of the revolutionaries. In this outcast region of Libya, the crackdown on revolutionaries has often been unrestrained.

Here, the regionalist demands became a source of defense and affirmation against a revanchist marginalization, and yet this bias also brings a source of legitimatization to them that is different from the one the Revolution endowed its supporters with. Hence, territorial claims are never set in terms that are only territorial in nature. The political questions either associated to their claims, or brought along, make it possible to transcend the territorial *imbroglio*.

Eventually, the expression of the reality of the territorial fracture, conflictual whatever form it takes, is impacting the construction of the state and brings to the forefront of the debate a question long discarded: the rationale at the basis of the equilibrium between the regions. Incidentally, it questions the division of the oil rent between the national and the regional levels; but the question of decentralizing the decision-making process towards the regions emerges as well. These questions were eclipsed, and unthinkable, in the then-authoritarian context in Qaddafi's Libya, which rendered demands for a transfer of authority a contradiction in terms.

### *Ethno-cultural minorities and territorial fractures*

The question of ethno-cultural minorities had long been eclipsed, but it has surprisingly erupted in the aftermath of the insurrection and revealed the unexpected significance of these communities. At the same time, it became clear that, below the surface, the stability claimed by the Qaddafi regime was artificial and the latter violently repressed these communities without being able to crush them once and for all.

Emerging from marginalized territories, the Berber (Chaker, Ferkal 2012) and Toubou tribes played a key role in the fall of the Qaddafi regime before being sent back to the margins of the country (Tubiana, Gramizzi 2017). The Berber militias in the North-West (who provoked the fall of Tripoli), and the Toubou militias, who hold an important experience in warfare (from the Chadian conflict, and through their control of cross-border traffics), had an important role in provoking the fall of a regime that constantly discriminated them. These ethnic groups are still discriminated today, as they are

unable to carve a space for their own cultures in Libya, are seldom represented in the institutional organs of the political transition, and are challenged in their attempts to have their territorial claims and traditional institutional arrangements recognized and accepted by the other actors of the conflict. Indeed, the territorial dimension of minority groups and their recognition in a national territory under reconstruction is one of the fractures that increase the instability of the whole territory, and it causes violent clashes. Each minority disposes of its own militias and, as a consequence, so-called ethnic clashes have proliferated. If the Toubous are a coherent group, with tight links between their military and political structures, the Berber militias are divided as dissident groups are emerging. Both the Berbers and the Toubous boycotted the general elections for the Constituent Assembly in 2013, and the Berbers the parliamentary elections in 2014, all of which question the representativeness of these institutions and open another front in the conflict. On their part, the Tuaregs were deprived of representation as the elections to fill their reserved seats in parliament were annulled in 2012 due to the previous support of their militias for Qaddafi. Besides, the minority question is further complicated by the territorial discontinuities of their populations and their imbrications at different scales, with other populations, on their territories. It prevents them from posing as local centers of power through a territorializing of their demands, and it creates a plurality of micro 'territorial wars'. Furthermore, these conflicts are exacerbated by their superposition to other conflicts over the control of transnational exchanges and the inscription of a fraction of the minority elites in cross-border networks of exchanges which fund them and assert their local legitimacy. Thus, the Berbers live in the border zone with Tunisia and are competing with the 'Arab' Zintan community, while the Toubous, living near the border of the Sahel region, are competing with the 'Arab' communities of Beni Slimane in Fezzan and with the Zuway in Kufra.

The increasing territorial and ethnic dimensions of these conflicts often hide a fight to reshuffle the cards of the access to resources. Hence, an unending armed conflict has been opposing two minorities, two irreconcilable nomadic irredentisms, for the past three years: the Tuaregs and the Toubous. Yet, it is attested that these two minorities had cohabited for more than a century without the slightest conflict, and with a contractual understanding regulating their relations. Yet, the instability that arose after the fall of the regime questioned this equilibrium and reopened the competition for domination of trans-Saharan traffics. The two governments fighting for power in the North have gotten involved as well, and bought the actors in the conflict, making it impossible to rely on the customary channels of regulation between the two communities to find a new equilibrium between them.

In fact, territorial competition at the local level is often the determining factor in the pursuit of alliances, sometimes unnatural ones, at the national level. For example, the Berbers are fighting alongside Islamists among those supporting the Tripoli

government, not only because they want to eradicate the remnants of the old regime which had harshly repressed them, but also because they are fighting locally against the Zintan over control of a territory. Conversely, the Toubous are in the opposite camp, supporting the Tobruk government, due to the challenge represented by the Beni Slimanes which have lain competing claims asserting their revolutionary, ethnic, and statutory preeminence at their expense.

### **Revival and reconstruction of the 'tribal territoriality'**

The emergence and affirmation of local authorities often went along with the reappearance or affirmation of reconstructed segmentarities. Committees of 'wise men' were set up almost everywhere in Libya, yet their power had a lesser impact in the cities of the North-West. Many of their members claimed to be tribal leaders or to belong to the urban notability. Some of them already acted as local intermediaries under Qaddafi before finding a new role with the Revolution. The results of the first post-Qaddafi elections generally showed the victory of local actors from communities, tribes, and important families. Most of the representatives, especially among independents, were elected on the basis of their attachment to a community or tribe. Outside North-Western cities, the tribal factor was decisive, especially in the cities in Fezzan, and to a lesser extent in Benghazi. In the latter and in Misrata, the representatives of the important 'dynastic' families, which were already influential before the coup headed by Qaddafi, were elected.

Much less than a return of the tribes, we can notice a return to the tribes. Practically, the current insecurity encourages individuals, sometimes long-established immigrants, to leave the cities and reconstruct a social and political trajectory for themselves in the socially fertile ground of tribal communities, simultaneously trying to establish themselves as spokesmen and intermediaries for these communities. Here, 'tribalism' is far from being an archaic awakening: it has been reconstructed on a preexisting cultural substrate as a modern form of solidarity and cronyism. Additionally, the rapid and intense urbanization completely destroyed the territorial attachment of the tribes: 86% of the population lived in the cities in 2004, and a large majority of Libyans has been urban for at least two generations (United Nations Development Programme 2004). As the demographic transition is coming to an end in Libya – the fertility rate fell from 7.57 children per woman in 1970, when Qaddafi came to power, to 2.5 in 2011, when he was forced out –<sup>5</sup> the demographic and matrimonial strategies reduced the probability of a male descendant, thus abandoning the foundation of the parental logic and of the order of the tribes (Bensaâd 2012).

The uncertainty which pushes the populations to fall back on primary and familial attachments contributed to strengthening tribal representations, either exhumed or reinvented, at a time when the difficult emergence of a central authority that would nationalize political life reinforces the desire of different communities to assert their

influence over it by differentiating themselves (Bensaâd 2014). That said, a large majority of the actors does not contest the unity of the country, or the need for a powerful central authority. In fact, the latter is as desired as it is blocked by actors trying to influence it. The historical asymmetrical relations with the central authority, and the manipulation of competition and enmities, still deeply influence the relation of individuals and communities with the public sphere. Simply speaking, this attitude of retreating within the community is no less than a demand to be reintegrated within the larger framework of the nation and recognized by the other actors. Also, the committees of 'wise men' remain an important space for discussion and decision-making at the local level, and a way to transmit local demands to the government. In many situations, those committees were able to settle the conflicts that emerged from within the community or between the communities; they acted as regulators and lowered the level of violence through their use of the traditional channels of negotiation, through the dissuasive presence of the military power that these communities own, and through the custom of mandatory solidarity with victims within a community. In fact, that 'equilibrium of mutual dissuasion' explains the refusal of local and tribal institutions to respond to the national demands and enter the larger military fights; they eventually appear as safeguards against an extension of the civil war. Marked by the ambiguities of tradition, these local entities function as a counter-poison against extremism; beyond all abstractions, they link religious beliefs to the social realities of the communities, preventing the emergence of an environment favorable to authoritarian leanings. Indeed, Islamist extremists received the most votes in the very urban districts such as Tripoli, where the Salafists of the movement al-Assala (related to the Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani) won their best results and gained a majority of the independent seats.

### **The local level: a tool to reconstruct the national level**

Local powers have gained traction in the decision-making process at the local level, but also in elected institutions; despite the potential for tension and fragmentation that they carry, they are essential elements in the exercise of power, in its legitimization, and eventually in its stabilization. They now appear as the keystone on which to erect a durable central authority; thus, vital actors in the reconstruction of the state. Yet, they cannot embody a state by their simple juxtaposition, as the precedent of the Afghan Jirga proved it. In fact, the Libyan territory already showed how unfeasible it would be. Hence, the will to bring together and structure nationally the tribal notabilities produced two competing initiatives from two competing associations (Libyan Wise Men Council and Union of the Wise Men Councils and of the Shura). Every attempt to unify them failed, confirming here the 'fission/fusion' syndrome inherent to tribalism. If the crisis of the state in Libya led to a territorial fragmentation, it has also led to the strengthening of local governance in the territories. Paradoxically, the crisis stimulated the emergence of legitimate and functional local powers such as municipal councils.

As the insurrection and the fall of the regime were initiated by autonomous local protests, the crisis incidentally promoted local entities as the only source of efficient management and protection (Quesnay 2013), and the sole service provider directly linked to the local populations, and eventually legitimized by them. The subsequent emergence of viable and legitimate local powers differed from the previous institutional experiences in the country, even when the authoritarian power of Qaddafi was strong and stable. But beyond that, these centers of local governance *de facto* promote the possibility of decentralization in a country which has long been averse to this idea. And the proliferation of political demands, the fragmentation and empowerment of actors and communities need to be understood under that light. If on the one hand they weaken central authorities, hinder their development, and perhaps even their emergence, on the other hand they anchor the construction of the state in the socio-territorial realities of the country and brings a necessary contractual legitimization to the process. Hence, we need to reconsider the localism that characterizes the current Libyan political life: it can bring necessary tools to the reconstruction of the state. To do so, we need to stop seeing the state as a unique actor dealing with the rest of society, but as the main instance where competition occurs between all the actors of the country (Picard 2006).

Ali Bensaâd is a university professor at the French Institute of Geopolitics in Paris at the Paris 8 University.

## NOTES:

1 - I interviewed dozens of people on the field: local researchers, journalists, activists, NGO members, lawyers, observers with influence in their sector of activity, notables, mayors and two ministers. Outside Tripoli, I was hosted by locals, which favored contacts. On the same subject, I ensured a balance of opinion between communities, regions and political sensitivities.

2 - A. Bensaâd, *Libye, le processus de réconciliation*, «Le Monde», 15 June 2016: [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/06/15/en-libye-misrata-est-le-principal-garant-militaire-du-processus-de-reconciliation\\_4951078\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/06/15/en-libye-misrata-est-le-principal-garant-militaire-du-processus-de-reconciliation_4951078_3232.html).

3 - It refers to the spirit of a tribal body.

4 - With only one exception, in the region of Sidi Bouzid, a third political force, the Popular Front, won the majority. The region itself doesn't really belong to the Sahel as it represents more the "Northern Interior" itself marginalized compared to the Sahel.

5 - *Fertility rate, total (births per woman)*, "The World Bank": <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?page=6>.

## References

- Achcard G. (2013), *Le peuple veut. Une expérience radicale du soulèvement arabe*, Actes-Sud-Sindbad, Arles
- Allal A., T. Pierret (eds.) (2013), *Au cœur des révoltes arabes*, Armand Colin, Paris
- Ayari M.B., V. Geisser, A. Krefa (2011), *Chronique d'une révolution [presque] annoncée*, in «L'Année du Maghreb», vol. 7
- Bensaâd A. (2012), *Changement social et contestations en Libye*, in «Politique Africaine», vol. 125, n. 1
- Bensaâd A. (2014), "Liens primordiaux, autoritarisme et soulèvement populaire en Libye", in M. Camau, F. Vairel (eds.), *Soulèvements et recompositions politiques dans le monde arabe*, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, Montréal
- Bensaâd A. (2015), *Libye: les trajectoires chaotiques d'une reconstruction étatique*, in «Moyen-Orient», vol. 25, January-March
- Bensaâd A. (2016), *Crise de l'Etat, territorialités et fragmentations politiques en Libye*, in «Orient Stratégiques», n. 4
- Bison V. (2012), *Tunisie post-Ben Ali: le réveil des solidarités tribales?*, in «Maghreb-Machrek», vol. 212
- Bisson, J. (1999), *La Libye, L'identité libyenne*, vol. 1, L'Harmattan, Paris
- Bozarlan H. (2011), *Sociologie politique du Moyen-Orient*, La Découverte, Paris
- Bozarlan H. (2015), *Révolution et état de violence*, CNRS Editions, Paris
- Chaker S., M. Ferkal (2012), *Berbères de Libye : un paramètre méconnu, une irruption politique inattendue*, in «Politique Africaine», vol. 125
- Chouikha L., V. Geisser (2010), *Retour sur la révolte du bassin minier. Les cinq leçons politiques d'un conflit social inédit*, in «L'Année du Maghreb» vol. 6
- Dawod H. (2004), "Tribus et pouvoirs en Irak", in H. Dawood (ed.), *Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d'Islam*, Armand Colin, Paris
- Filiu J.P. (2011), *La Révolution arabe. Dix leçons sur le soulèvement démocratique*, Fayart, Paris
- Lacher W. (2013), *Fault Lines of the Revolution. Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya*, SWP Research Paper, n.4, May, SWP, Berlin
- Martel A. (1991) *La Libye. 1835-1990. Essai de géopolitique historique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris
- Picard É. (2006), "Les liens primordiaux, vecteurs de dynamiques politiques", in É. Picard (ed.), *La politique dans le monde arabe*, Armand Colin, Paris
- Quesnay A. (2013), "L'insurrection libyenne : un mouvement révolutionnaire décentralisé", in A. Allal, T. Pierret (eds.), *Au cœur des révoltes arabes*, Armand Colin, Paris
- Seurat M. (1985), "Le quartier de Bâb Tebban à Tripoli (Liban): étude d'une assabya urbaine", in M. Zakaria, B. Chbarou (eds.), *Mouvements communautaires et espaces urbains au Macherk*, CERMO, Beirut
- Seurat M. (2012), *Syrie, l'Etat de Barbarie*, PUF, Paris
- Tubiana J., C. Gramizzi C. (2017), *Tubu Trouble: State and Statelessness in the Chad-Sudan-Libya Triangle*, Small Arms Survey's, Geneva
- Triaud J.L. (2005), "La Tijâniyya, une confrérie musulmane pas comme les autres?", in J.L. Triaud, D. Robinson (eds.), *La Tijâniyya, Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, Paris, Karthala, 2005
- United Nations Development Programme (2004), *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, UNDP, New York