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Tribalism, Regionalism, and the Stalled Building of the Modern State in Libya**

القبلية والجهوية وتعثر بناء الدولة الحديثة في ليبيا

Abstract: This paper explores the underlying causes of the stalled state-building process in Libya, identifying tribalism and regionalism as the primary obstacles. It examines how different modes of governance and external interventions have aggravated and perpetuated the detrimental impacts of these obstacles, which have been intractable because state-building did not evolve organically over time. Instead, an externally imposed state model bypassed the transitional stages, preventing Libya from addressing its underlying tensions and contradictions. Consequently, Libya has remained mired in a cycle of self-serving, rival loyalty networks, creating an environment that hinders the formation of cohesive national identity – a prerequisite for a modern state.

Keywords: Libya; State-building; Tribalism; Regionalism; Governance; External Intervention.

الملخص: تبحث هذه الورقة في معوقات استكمال بناء الدولة الحديثة في ليبيا، ولا سيما العاملين الجهوي والقبلي بوصفهما عائقين أساسيين. وتدرس تفاقم عواقب العوائق واستمرارها بسبب أنماط الحكم المختلفة والتدخلات الخارجية التي كانت مستعصية جداً؛ لأنّ بناء الدولة لم يتطور على نحو عضوي مع مرور الوقت. بدلاً من ذلك، تعثرت ليبيا في تكوين الدولة الحديثة، ولم تجتز المراحل الانتقالية الضرورية؛ ما منعها من معالجة التوترات والتناقضات الكامنة فيها. ونتيجة لذلك، ظلّت غارقةً في «حلقة مفرغة» من شبكات الولاء المتنافسة التي تخدم مصالحها الذاتية، ما خلق بيئة تعوق تشكيل انتماء وهوية وطنيين على نحو متماسك، وهذه البيئة المتماسكة هي شرط أساسي للدولة الحديثة.

كلمات مفتاحية: ليبيا؛ بناء الدولة؛ القبلية؛ الجهوية؛ أنماط الحكم؛ التدخل الخارجي.

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Introduction

The geographical, political, and security situation in Libya since 2011, an extension of the country's socio-regional composition and divisions, reflects the stalled development of a modern state.¹ Historically, the quest for geopolitical unity in Libya has encountered significant challenges and major setbacks, hampering the development of a nation state capable of asserting sovereignty over its entire territory and population while effectively addressing internal and external challenges. The ongoing conflicts, social and institutional divides, civil warfare, and regional and international foreign interventions reflect the magnitude of the crisis that imperils the unity and territorial integrity of the Libyan state. This study relies on an interdisciplinary sociopolitical lexicon to examine the social aspects of tribalism and regionalism and their political ramifications. It approaches tribalism and regionalism as non-static, dynamic spaces for activities that imply political consequences.

Previous studies have adopted diverse approaches. Some have taken a historical perspective to explain the current Libyan condition,² while others have provided a more sweeping perspective, often overlooking the particularity of the Libyan case, especially in the post-Gaddafi era.³ Other studies have included Libya in their broader theorizing on the Arab state,⁴ while others have applied a descriptive approach.⁵ However, few studies have investigated the evolution of the relationship between the tribe and the state, nor adequately addressed regionalism, in the Libyan context.

Amid the ongoing civil strife and social fragmentation in Libya, important questions arise: How have tribalism and regionalism obstructed the formation of a modern Libyan state? What does the Libyan regional map look like? How has the social structure shaped political culture in Libya? In what ways has the prevailing political culture impeded the development of the modern state?

This study argues that the Libyan state's failure to dismantle the tribal identities and regional affiliations dominating all facets of Libyan society has prevented the establishment of an overarching national identity and unifying, inclusive citizenship. This shortcoming has weakened the state structure and hindered the development of a solid foundation for a modern state.

State Building and Formation Crises

Two main approaches explain state formation. The first attributes it to the natural and gradual evolution of social structures, suggesting that states emerge spontaneously from social interactions.⁶ In contrast, the second views state formation as an artificial process driven by internal interactions or external forces. When internal, the state is the product of a voluntary social contract that transforms society from a natural to a civil state, which can be either partial or absolute in its authority.⁷

¹ The modern state is built on the foundation of the nation-state, an entity that exercises sovereignty over its entire territory and population, the latter characterized by homogeneity and mutual acceptance among its components. The modern state emerged after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and has gradually evolved since then. At present, its legitimacy is based on a system of democratically elected institutions. See: Yasser Abu Hassan, "al-Dawla al-Qawmiyya al-Ḥadītha al-Rashīda: Al-Mafāhīm wa-l-Ma'āyir wa-l-Muṭālabāt," *Majallat Dirāsāt Mujtama'iyya*, no. 15 (June 2016), p. 105.

² Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, "Dawlat Mā Ba'd al-Istīmār wa-l-Taḥawwulāt al-Ijtīmā'iyya fī Lībyā," *Tabayyun*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August 2012), pp. 165-180.

³ Abdelilah Belkeziz, "Mushkilāt Mā Ba'd Suqūt Nizām al-Qadhāfi," *Al-Mustaqbal Al-'Arabī*, vol. 34, no. 393 (November 2011), pp. 119-121.

⁴ Burhan Ghalioun, *al-Mīḥna al-'Arabiyya: al-Dawla Didd al-Umma* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), pp. 35-46.

⁵ Mohamed Abdel Hafiz Sheikh, "Lībyā Bayn al-Širā' al-Siyāsī wa-l-Širā' al-Musallah: al-Taḥaddiyāt wa-l-Āfāq," *Majallat Dirāsāt Sharq Awsatīyya*, vol. 19, no. 71 (2015), pp. 13-39.

⁶ Ali al-Jarbawi, *Al-Ma'rifa, al-Idyulūjīyya, wa-l-Ḥadāra: Muḥāwala li-Fahm al-Tārīkh* (Beirut: Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, 2021), p. 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 95-96.

The artificial formation approach, associated with 19th and 20th century colonialism, involved imposing the nation-state model on societies without consideration of their specific contexts.⁸ This has resulted in structural crises within Arab states,⁹ where colonial boundaries have hindered the development of a unifying national identity, leaving members of society strongly attached to narrow, local, regional, and tribal allegiances and undermining their sense of national affiliation. Authoritarianism has further marginalized society and obstructed the formation of a unifying political culture, leading to growing structural violence in government-society relations.¹⁰

Several factors can negatively impact the stability and continuity of the state, such as the question of allegiance, which arises when affiliations to narrow sub-state entities, like tribes, prevent social integration, leaving society factionalized and divided in loyalties to these closed sub-state structures. Another critical factor is the absence of homogeneity, particularly when a state lacks territorial integration, and when regional disparities exacerbated by distance from the centre aggravate social fragmentation. These two factors are significant in the Libyan case, where they have prevented the development of a modern state.¹¹

Furthermore, the Libyan state has failed to build cohesive institutions and a unified society, which requires not only cultural, linguistic, and civilizational unity but also organic interconnections between the diverse societal components enabled by an institutional structure that fosters inclusive economic, social, and political interactions transcending divisive tribal and regional structures.¹² In Libya, societal fragmentation did not transform into a positive, constructive pluralism, welding the “ethnic and sectarian fractures”¹³ and overcoming the tribalism that prevents the emergence of the individual as a citizen and a contractual society.¹⁴

In the context of state-building, a crisis can be defined as a dysfunction or a situation where the course of events in the state is disrupted across political, economic, social, or security levels. Disruptions at all levels may interweave, shaping and sustaining the overall crisis,¹⁵ which can throw the state’s operations off-kilter, and cause distortions in its roles or systemic behaviours, pushing it toward instability and paralysis. The longer a crisis persists, the harder it becomes for the state to correct its course over time. The crisis may be linked to internal or external factors, or a combination of both, and it may be material, moral, structural, or systemic.¹⁶

A state may face a cascade of crises that inhibit genuine political development. The most critical are identity, legitimacy, penetration, distribution, and participation crises. The first results from the failure to forge a collective consciousness among members of society. Legitimacy crises stem from obstructions to political participation, which undermine the peaceful rotation of power and leading to its monopolization. The penetration crisis relates to the states’ inadequate reach, which hampers its ability to integrate its disparate communities and regions, particularly those more remote from the centre, into the multifaceted

⁸ Nazih Nasif al-Ayubi, *Al-‘Arab wa-Mushkilat al-Dawla* (Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 1992), pp. 27-29.

⁹ Jamal Khaled al-Fadhi, “Muqāraba Nazariyya Ḥawl Azmat al-Dawla fī al-Mantiqa al-‘Arabiyya,” *Tasāmuḥ*, no. 67 (December 2019), pp. 47-48.

¹⁰ Shafie Boumnijel, “Huwiyyat al-Dawla wa-l-Mas’ala al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya fī al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī,” in: Ahmed Awad al-Rahmon (ed.), *al-Dawla al-Waṭaniyya al-Mu’āsira: Azmat al-Indimāj wa-l-Taḥkīk* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2008), pp. 91-93.

¹¹ Abdullah al-Ghathami argues that the tribe is a closed traditional cultural structure, in which the foundation of social cohesion is kinship and lineage, and loyalty is directed to persons. In the state, by contrast, the bond of citizenship is rooted in the rule of law and loyalty is directed toward the state. Abdullah al-Ghathami, *al-Qabīla wa-l-Qabaliyya aw-Huwiyyat Mā Ba’d al-Ḥadātha*, 2nd ed. (Beirut/Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center, 2009), pp. 229-230.

¹² Mohamed Jaber al-Ansari, *Takwīn al-‘Arab al-Siyāsī wa-Maghzā al-Dawla al-Qutriyya: Madkhal ilā l-‘ādāt Fahm al-Wāqi’ al-‘Arabī* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1994), pp. 123-124.

¹³ Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-l-Ishkālīyyātuh: Dirāsāt Nazariyya wa-Taḥbīqīyya Muqārana* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 96-97.

¹⁴ Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Mas’ala al-‘Arabiyya: Muqaddīma li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī ‘Arabī* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2007), p. 245.

¹⁵ Ubada Muhammad al-Tamer, *Siyāsāt al-Wilāyāt al-Muttaḥida wa-Idārat al-Azāmāt al-Dawliyya: Iran-al-‘Irāq-Sūryā-Lubnān Namūdhajan* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), p. 37.

¹⁶ Edgar Morin, *Fī Maḥūm al-Azma*, Badi’a Bouleila (trans.) (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2018), pp. 53-59.

dynamics of development. Distribution crises are related to reach, resulting from social and economic policy failures that create disparities in resources and investment allocation generally due to selectivity bias favouring clientelist and loyalty networks. The participation crisis encompasses all the above crises. It arises from the monopolization of power, which deprives individuals and their representatives, particularly political parties, of their right to political participation.¹⁷

Grassroots and elite responses to a nation-state crisis may range from demonstrations against the government's inequitable resource distribution policies to more critical challenges to its composition. These demonstrations may escalate to demand a government reshuffle or force its officials to resign. They might even spiral further to seek to overturn the political system, potentially leading to a breakdown that could jeopardize the survival of the state as an integral political and territorial entity. This latter scenario becomes more likely when the state-building process remains incomplete.¹⁸

Libya appears to be gripped by a combination of all the aforementioned types of crises. Several factors have contributed to complicating the state-building process in Libya. While these factors are also present in several neighbouring Arab countries, they have had aggravated impacts in Libya. Mustafa al-Tir notes that these factors are partially linked to Libya's stalled transition to modernity. Foremost among them are the submergence of the individual in the group – particularly in sub-state entities instead of a national collective entity – poor educational systems, the ruralization of the city, the state's diminishing role in producing a middle class, and the rentier economy which has fostered clientelism and reinforced the influence of predominantly tribal based interest groups.¹⁹

The Road to the Modern State: A Stalled Process

The Crisis of Political Formation in Libya: Roots and Contexts

Libya has a long history of crises in its quest for political unity and the formation of an inclusive nation-state. Before independence, it reeled under unstable administrative, legal, and social structures. Different regimes emerged and collapsed before Libya could evolve into a sovereign state with a central government capable of exercising a monopoly on legitimate violence across its territory.²⁰ The fragility of political unity was evident in the country's division into three main regions, each functioning as a relatively autonomous entity: Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the west, and Fezzan in the south.²¹

In the 10th century BC, during the Pharaonic and Phoenician eras, Cyrenaica was under Egyptian rule, while the Phoenicians ruled Tripolitania. The southern region was governed by the nomadic Garamantes tribes.²² During the Hellenic and Roman periods, Libya's political and social landscape largely remained unchanged. Cyrenaica came under Greek rule in the 7th century BC, while Tripolitania fell under Roman rule in the 2nd century BC. This division continued until the end of the Hellenic era and the Greeks'

¹⁷ Muhammad Shatib Aidan al-Majma'i, "al-Nukhba al-Siyāsiyya wa-Atharuhā fī al-Tanmiyya al-Siyāsiyya," *Majallat Jāmi' al-Tikrūt lil-'Ulūm al-Qānūniyya wa-l-Siyāsiyya*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2009), pp. 145-148.

¹⁸ Hani Musa, "Azamat al-Dawla fī al-'Ālam al-'Arabī: Dirāsāt Muqārana li-Hālatay al-'Irāq wa-l-Sūdān," PhD thesis, University of Tunis El Manar, Tunis, 2018, p. 5. [Unpublished]

¹⁹ Mustafa Omar al-Tir, *Širā' al-Khayma wa-l-Qaṣr: Ru'ya Naqdiyya li-l-Mashrū' al-Ḥadāthī al-Lībī* (Beirut: Forum of Knowledge, 2014), p. 84.

²⁰ The name "Libya" dates from the Hellenic era. The ancient Greeks applied it to the whole of North Africa. Over time, it came to designate the geographical area we know as Libya today, which is the territory stretching from the western border of Egypt to the eastern border of Tunisia. See: Nikolai Ilyich Proshin, *Tārīkh Lībyā min Nihāyat al-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Ashar Ḥattā 'Am 1969*, Imad Hatim (trans.) (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīda al-Muttaḥida, 2001), p. 25.

²¹ Shawqi Atallah al-Jamal, *al-Maghrib al-'Arabī al-Kabīr min al-Fath al-Islāmī ilā al-Waqt al-Ḥāqīq: Lībyā-Tūnis-al-Jazā'ir-al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā (Marrākīsh)* (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Library, 2009), p. 127.

²² For further information on these people, see: Mabrūka Sa'ed al-Fakhri, "al-Mamlaka al-Jarmīyya fī Fazzān mundhu al-Qarn al-Khāmīs Qabl al-Mīlād Ḥattā al-Qarn al-Sādīs al-Mīlādī," *Majallat Jāmi' at Ṣabḥa li-l-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2015).

departure from Cyrenaica in 74 BC. At that point, the Romans unified these three Libyan regions under their suzerainty, which lasted for approximately four centuries.²³

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in 435 AD, Libya was once again divided into three regions. Cyrenaica came under Byzantine control, while Tripolitania and Fezzan remained within the Roman sphere.²⁴ During the Islamic era, from the Arab conquest of Libya in 643 AD until the 16th century, no single power managed to gain control over the entire Libyan territory. Instead, the regions fell to a succession of rival Islamic power centres. Cyrenaica and Fezzan were mostly controlled by the Mamluk sultanates in Egypt, while Tripolitania became part of the Emirate of Ifriqiya, based in Tunis. The absence of a central authority reinforced regional political entities, traditional social entities (tribes), and local regional affiliations, diminishing prospects for their assimilation under a unified civil state.²⁵

Administrative Decentralization and the Reinforcement of Regionalism and Tribalism: The Ottoman Era

Ottoman suzerainty over Libya lasted over three and a half centuries (1551-1911),²⁶ when Libya was governed by the Karamanli dynasty. Originally of Turkic descent, the Karamanlis had significant influence in building a network of loyalties among Libyan tribes, which enabled them to rise to power in 1711 and maintain their rule until 1835. To avoid conflict with this powerful family and its supporters, the Sublime Porte acquiesced in their control over Libya, satisfied with their assurances that tax revenues from that province would continue to flow into the Ottoman treasury, as was expected from other provinces in the Arab region.²⁷

The Ottoman state applied a decentralized administrative model in Libya,²⁸ exercising general oversight through a governor appointed by and accountable to the Sublime Porte. The governor's main tasks included maintaining law and order and collecting taxes, relying on local agents—tribal leaders, religious figures, notables, and other influential individuals. During both the Ottoman periods that preceded and followed the Karamanli era (1551-1711 and 1835-1911, respectively), Libya experienced a rapid turnover of governors, reflecting a deliberate strategy to keep governors bound to and dependent on the Sublime Porte, thereby minimizing the risk they would break free of Ottoman control.²⁹

Apart from the century and a quarter under the Karamanli dynasty,³⁰ the regional political entities remained relatively separate from one another. This decentralization amplified the role of local agents and intermediaries, who, in Libya as elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, were instrumental in reinforcing narrow tribal and local regional loyalties, while simultaneously feeding corruption and power struggles. As a result, the Sublime Porte lost its grip on some regions and provinces. This was evident in the Karamanlis' takeover of the Vilayet of Tripoli in the 18th century and in the colonial encroachments into Ottoman territories during the 19th century.³¹

²³ Muhammad Yusuf al-Maqrif, *Libyā Bayn al-Māḍī wa-l-Ḥādīr: Ṣafahāt min al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, vol. 1: *Mīlād Dawlat al-Istiqlāl* (Oxford: Centre for Libyan Studies, 2004), pp. 40-42, 44-47.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Fathi Hassan Nassar, *Libyā min al-Iḥtilāl al-Asbānī Ḥattā al-Istiqlāl: 1510-1951* (Jerusalem: Dār al-Jundī for Publishing and Distribution, 2015), pp. 15-17.

²⁶ al-Jamal, pp. 129-130.

²⁷ Nassar, pp. 69-70.

²⁸ The Ottoman state treated Libya similarly to its other Arab provinces, even if its approach to managing its provinces varied with time and place. See: Ibid., pp. 39-40.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Under Karamanli rule, Libya experienced centralized governance under which happened the subordination of all the regions to the central authority in Tripoli.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 108-109.

In 1835, the Ottoman authorities changed their approach and switched to direct rule. In 1879, Cyrenaica was separated from Tripolitania and subordinated directly to the Sublime Porte, governed independently from the other regions from Benghazi. The shift in modes of governance and administration did not resolve Libya's social, political, and economic crises. It was at this point, particularly in Cyrenaica, that a reformist Sufi movement emerged, the Sanusiyya,] founded by the Algerian-born Muslim theologian and political leader Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sanusi.³²

The declared aims of the Sanusi movement were reforming the social, economic, and political conditions in the Arab regions under Ottoman rule and resisting colonial encroachment in these areas. Its activities were concentrated in parts of Libya far from urban centres, targeting Bedouin and rural communities across the countryside and oases. The movement established a network of *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) in these areas, which functioned as small government systems with a religious dimension and based on a tribal structure. Over time, the Libyan *zawiyas* evolved into semi-feudal units that eventually coalesced into a theocratic emirate. The political phenomenon associated with the Sanusi dynasty continued until 1911.³³

Regionalism and Tribalism: Colonial Tools

Like the Ottoman Empire's other Arab provinces, Libya did not gain independence after the collapse of Ottoman rule. In 1911, it fell under Italian colonial occupation, which lasted three decades (1911-1940). Historians divide this period into two phases: the pre-Fascist and Fascist periods (1911-1922 and 1922-1940). During the first phase, Libya's constituent regions remained divided, evident in the emergence of an autonomous Sanusi entity in Cyrenaica and the creation of a small republic in Tripoli driven by pressure from traditional political notables in the city and surrounding towns and villages. The colonial power supported the creation of such entities, as they served to fragment Libyan national identity by intensifying the political, tribal, and regional contradictions within society. Nevertheless, these self-governing entities were short-lived. In the second phase, the Italians quashed them and subjected the three Libyan regions to direct colonial rule to tighten and expand their control.³⁴

During both Italian colonial periods, the Libyan national movement lacked cohesion and coordination. It was divided between proponents of appeasing and negotiating with the colonial authorities – as was the case with the Sanusi leadership, particularly after the split within the movement in 1916³⁵ – and the opponents of conciliation with the occupation. This latter camp included many tribes, the Sanusiyya *zawiyas*, and Tuareg groups, all determined to fight the colonizers through military action. The national movement was also plagued by the prevalence of narrow interests over higher national interests. For example, during the pre-Fascist period, the Sanusis continuously strove to transform their autonomous rule into a private theocratic emirate and expand it across the whole of Cyrenaica. Meanwhile, disputes and rivalries over leadership intensified among notables and tribal dignitaries, both within the city of Tripoli and across the regional divides of Cyrenaica in Tripolitania.

Despite this fragmentation across the Libyan political spectrum, active resistance persisted, as vividly demonstrated by the movement led by Omar Mukhtar in the 1920s.³⁶ However, this resistance ultimately receded under the Italian occupation's brutal crackdown on resistance leaders and their

³² Proshin, pp. 58-59, 70.

³³ Ibid., pp. 69-73, 91.

³⁴ Bushra Khair Bek & Aqeel Namir, *Tārīkh al-Waṭan al-'Arabī al-Mu'āṣir: al-Maghrib al-'Arabī* (Damascus: University of Damascus, College of Arts and Humanities, 2015-2016), pp. 196, 206, 217.

³⁵ In 1916, the Sanusi movement experienced a rift between a faction led by Ahmed Sharif al-Sanusi, which advocated armed resistance, and a faction led by Idris al-Sanusi, which supported a political accommodation with the colonial power. The dispute was ultimately resolved in favour of the latter.

³⁶ Bek & Namir, pp. 192-195, 211-215.

grassroots bases in 1930. Omar Mukhtar was executed in 1931, the Sanusiyya's leaders were exiled, the *zawiyas* were closed, and their activities were banned. Italy then imposed direct military rule over all Libyan territories.³⁷

Italy's governance continued throughout the Second World War, eventually leading to clashes between Italian forces and French and British forces on Libyan soil. The confrontation ended with Italy's defeat in 1943, at which point Cyrenaica and Tripolitania fell under British colonial rule and Fezzan came under French colonial rule. The switch in colonial powers made no difference to the Libyan people; they remained excluded from the management of their own affairs and the new colonial authorities were just as determined as their Italian predecessors to exploit inter-tribal tensions and regional identities to sow divisions among the colonized population.³⁸

With the end of the Second World War in 1945, as independence movements gained momentum across Arab and African countries, various political actors in Libya became eager to define the country's future.³⁹ Against this backdrop, the Sanusiyya reasserted its ambition for establishing an emirate centred in Cyrenaica. At the same time, disagreements among Libyan political forces regarding unity and support for the envisioned Sanusi-led emirate,⁴⁰ combined with disputes between colonial powers over Libya's post-war arrangements, brought the question of Libya's future to the United Nations (UN). But before the UN could act, the Sanusiyya pre-emptively declared the independence of Cyrenaica in March 1949. It then began implementing this declaration by establishing a government and parliament and issuing citizenship documents for the people of Cyrenaica. Britain approved and supported this move, as it sharpened the geopolitical divide in Libya. The move simultaneously prompted the UN that year to set a timeline for Libya's independence, inclusive of its three regions, by no later than 1952.⁴¹

The Problem of Building a Modern State: From Traditional Structures to an Inclusive Structure

In 1951, Libya gained independence and drafted its first constitution, a process informed by internal and external interactions, leading to the rise of a federally structured state ruled by a monarchy. Idris al-Sanusi became the king of the newly federated regions. The monarchical period can be divided into two phases. The first phase ended with the constitutional and administrative restructuring of 1963, which marked the transition from a multi-tiered federal state, known as the United Kingdom of Libya, to a unitary state, renamed the Kingdom of Libya. The second phase continued from 1963 until the fall of the monarchy in 1969.

Before the constitutional amendment in 1963, political and administrative decision-making was split between Tripoli and Benghazi, Libya's two capitals as stipulated in the 1951 constitution. This division undermined the monarchy's ability to bind the regions to the centre. It also created an imbalance in the regions' political representation, exacerbating tribal and regional tensions and fuelling regionalist tendencies inimical to the development of a modern polity based on democracy, pluralism, and citizenship.⁴²

By the late monarchical era, the political elites recognized the need for a dynamic political structure that could transcend tribal and regional divisions. Efforts were initiated to transform the coastal city of

³⁷ Geoff Simmons, *Libya and the West from Independence to Lockerbie* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), pp. 11-12.

³⁸ Khalil Hussein, *al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī li-l-Waṭan al-'Arabī*, Muhammad Al-Majdoub (intro.) (Beirut: al-Ḥalabī Legal Publications, 2012), p. 643.

³⁹ One of the key political actors that emerged in Cyrenaica at this stage was the National Congress, which was founded in 1948 with the personal efforts of the leader of the Sanusi movement, Muhammad Idris al-Sanusi. At the same time, several emergent political forces in Tripoli opposed the vision of the Cyrenaica-based National Congress which insisted on those forces' approval for a Sanusi Emirate as a precondition for achieving Libyan unity. See: Simmons, p. 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-39.

⁴¹ Hussein, p. 644.

⁴² Ahmida, pp. 169-170.

al-Bayda into a consensus capital, replacing Tripoli and Benghazi. However, these initiatives were abruptly halted by the September 1969 revolution.

The monarchic era maintained a traditional mode of governance, characterized by its tribal, clientelist, and regionalist elements. Nevertheless, it saw the initial modernization of some state structures, particularly in education and the economy. The pace of these transformations accelerated with Libya's entry into the ranks of oil-exporting countries in the 1960s, leading to the emergence of a middle class that began to challenge the status quo. At the same time, the Libyan political landscape was influenced by radical transformations occurring elsewhere in the Arab world and by the fall of monarchies to revolutionary regimes that resonated more with the aspirations of the nascent middle class. These developments sparked cultural, political, and intellectual currents and dynamics that ultimately weakened the monarchy and propelled the country toward the transition to a republican system in 1969.⁴³

Gaddafiism: Regionalism and Tribalism as Instruments of Control

The crisis in Libya's political system persisted throughout the monarchial era, despite the constitutional amendments, thwarting the political and national aspirations of the Libyan people, particularly the emergent middle class. Reflecting the widespread discontent, a group of military officers, calling themselves the "Free Unionist Officers", led by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, overthrew the Sanusi monarchy in 1969. This event, known as the Fateh Revolution, was based on the pillars of political unity, democracy, and inclusive representation; social justice and empowerment; and an anti-capitalist economic outlook.

These promises were never realized. The new regime soon proved authoritarian and staunchly opposed to political modernization. It showed no tolerance for political and intellectual pluralism, excluded and harassed technocratic elites, and suppressed dissent with the full force of the security apparatus.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Gaddafi imposed a new mode of governance, articulated in his "Third International Theory", an amalgam of Marxist, Maoist, and Arab socialist ideas.⁴⁵

Gaddafi excelled at coining new terms that appeared democratic on the surface but were designed to manipulate, control, and entrench his authoritarian grip. Examples include "popular revolution", "direct democracy", "people's committees", "revolutionary committees", and "youth leagues".⁴⁶ He reactivated traditional structures as instruments of control, forging tribal alliances to strengthen his security grip. Further, instead of protecting and defending their interests, he entrusted tribes loyal to him with policing and containing their communities. Capitalizing on inter-tribal and regional disputes, he pitted adversarial groups against one another to advance his political ambitions and monopolize power.⁴⁷

Such tactics allowed Gaddafi to eliminate the structures and power centres of revolutionary forces pushing for modernist transformation and a more open society. In April 1973, he launched a five-point program to consolidate his leadership. It abolished existing laws, legitimized the persecution of his political adversaries under the guise of "purging the country of the sick and enemies of the people", and initiated what he called an administrative and cultural revolution. Cloaked in the populist rubric of "people's freedom" and "arming the people", he replaced institutional structures with "People's Committees" and other such

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 170-173.

⁴⁴ Yusuf Muhammad Jumaa al-Sawani, *Lībyā: al-Thawra wa-Taḥaddiyāt Binā' al-Dawla* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2013), pp. 34-36.

⁴⁵ Ali Muhammad Ali Salem, "Lībyā al-Ḥurra: Lībyā min al-Shar'iyya al-Thawriyya ilā al-Shar'iyya al-Dustūriyya," in: *al-Mu'tamar al-'Ilmī al-Duwalī: al-Thawra wa-l-Qānūn* (Alexandria: University of Alexandria, Faculty of Law, 2011), p. 630.

⁴⁶ al-Sawani, pp. 40-42.

⁴⁷ Bilal Abdullah, *al-Ḥirāk al-Amāzighī wa-Dīnāmiyyāt al-Ḥayāt al-Siyāsiyya al-Lībiyya bayn Mumkināt al-Takayyuf wa-Azmat al-Indimāj al-Waṭānī* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014), p. 25.

authoritarian frameworks centred around him. These measures further increased the political role of tribal and regional structures.⁴⁸

Gaddafi's reliance on tribalism stifled opportunities for transformation toward a modern state.⁴⁹ His approach was spontaneous, anti-institutional, emotional, and instrumentalist: the tribes and their attendant social structures were his tools to advance the ends of his regime. He used them for political mobilization, rallying support, spying on citizens, rooting out opposition, and forcing compliance with his regime's demands.⁵⁰

In 1977, Libya experienced a sharp shift toward Gaddafi's personalist rule with the declaration of the Libyan Jamahiriya (Republic).⁵¹ The new order replaced existing political and administrative bodies with new structures designed to secure his control and render his person the sole frame-of-reference of the regime.⁵² All legislative, judicial, and executive authorities were concentrated in his hands, facilitating his monopolization of all decision-making processes. As a further step, he dismantled the army as a national institution by creating new brigades and corps, primarily composed of tribesmen loyal to him.⁵³ In line with the vision laid out in Gaddafi's "Green Book", Tribal Clubs were created to perform security and policing functions.⁵⁴

Gaddafi's methods of governance during his rule of over four decades (1969-2011) exacerbated the regional divides between Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania, and widened the gulf between these regions and the state. Discriminatory policies marginalized the eastern and southern regions, depriving certain social groups of political representation and equitable resource distribution. In contrast, Tripolitania, particularly areas where the Gaddafi tribe and other loyal tribes were concentrated, such as Sirte and Sabha, benefited from favouritism. This naturally encouraged nepotism and other forms of corruption,⁵⁵ further fragmenting loyalties and entrenching obstacles to social integration, which is a key prerequisite for building a unified polity that incorporates all segments of society, particularly those marginalized and remote from the centre.⁵⁶

The long arm of authoritarianism under Gaddafi, the intolerance of any opposition and brutal clampdowns – such as the summary execution of 1,200 political detainees at Abu Salim prison in 1996 created a climate of mounting disaffection and anger. Coupled with its flagrant favouritism toward pro-regime tribes and regions, its insistence on treating citizens as subjects, and its refusal to seriously consider calls for reform,⁵⁷ these factors culminated in a social uprising. Backed by an external military intervention, this uprising overthrew the Gaddafi regime in 2011. The event marked a new phase in Libya's history, one no less fraught with and complex than its predecessors.⁵⁸

⁴⁸ Sadiq Hajal, *Lībyā wa-Ishkālīyyāt Binā' al-Dawla-Al-Umma 1951-2017* (Amman: Academic Book Centre, 2019), pp. 80-81.

⁴⁹ Abdullah, *al-Ḥirāk al-Amāzīghī wa-Dīnāmiyyāt al-Ḥayāt al-Siyāsiyya al-Lībiyya bayn Mumkināt al-Takayyuf wa-Azmat al-Indimāj al-Waṭanī*, pp. 20-22.

⁵⁰ al-Munsif Wannas, *al-Shakhsīyya al-Lībiyya: Thālūth al-Qabīla wa-l-Ghanīma wa-l-Ghalaba* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Mutawaṣṣit for Publishing, 2014), pp. 28-29, 33.

⁵¹ For further details on the Jamahiriya, see: Salem, pp. 637-638.

⁵² al-Sawani, p. 40.

⁵³ During his long rule, Gaddafi spent around \$30 billion on armaments, yet he never established a professional, institutionalized national army. See: *Dirāsāt Tamhīdiyya 'An al-Mujtama' fī Lībyā: al-Wāqī', al-Taḥaddiyāt, wa-l-Āfāq*, Part Two of a Preliminary Study for the Libyan Social and Economic Dialogue Project, prepared by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida (Beirut: United Nations: ESCWA, 2020), p. 23, accessed on 7/2/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3ui2yld>

⁵⁴ Siham al-Ghadhban, "Lībyā Mā Ba'd al-Qadhāfī: Mu'awwiqāt Binā' al-Dawla," *Majallat al-Islām wa-l-Ālam al-Mu'āṣir*, vol. 7, no. 3-4 (2012), p. 161.

⁵⁵ Libya ranked 146 out of 178 countries in the 2010 Global Corruption Index. See: Jibrin Ubale Yahaya, Jibrin Jibrin & Musa Mohammed Bello, "Libyan Crisis and The Escalation of Conflict and Insecurity in Africa," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 18, no. 4 (March 2020), p. 31.

⁵⁶ Abdullah, p. 27.

⁵⁷ One of the most prominent political and economic reform initiatives was launched by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in the 1990s. The Libya of Tomorrow Programme, as it was called, met with a minimal and perfunctory engagement from the regime and its power centres. See: Hajal, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁸ Ramadan Abdelsalam Haidar, "al-Intiqāl min Marḥalat al-Thawra ilā Marḥalat Binā' al-Dawla," *Majallat al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya wa-l-Taṭbīqiyya*, no. 25 (2014), pp. 156-159.

Post-Revolutionary Libya: The Fall of a Fragile Model

The absence of institutional infrastructure and a political culture conducive to democracy precluded the possibility of a smooth or automatic transition to a democratic system of government after the fall of Gaddafi's regime. Instead, underlying tensions due to a lack of institutions, anti-democratic practices, the suspension of the constitution and laws, pervasive tribalism and regionalism, intense factionalism, a weak military establishment, the squandering of national resources, and widespread corruption, erupted all at once. These crises fully manifested after the revolution of 17 February 2011, plunging Libya into an unending cycle of political, military, and ideological conflict that continues to this day.⁵⁹

Sociopolitical fissures flared, revealing regional, tribal, factional, and ethnic⁶⁰ variations reminiscent of the pre-independence era. In the post-Gaddafi period, Libyans disagreed over fundamental issues, including national unity, the structure of the state, the type of government system, and principles of resource distribution.⁶¹ The depth of the discord was most starkly evidenced in renewed demands from Cyrenaica⁶² and Fezzan for a return to the federal system. Some went further to propose a confederate model that aligned more closely with separatist aspirations.⁶³ Conversely, political forces in Tripolitania insisted on preserving the unitary state.

Libyans were also ideologically split over the identity of their desired political and social systems. Some advocated for Islamic rule⁶⁴ and others pushed for secular governance.⁶⁵ Against this charged backdrop, Libya descended into a cycle of violence. Amidst the chaos, city-based brigades and militias proliferated, such as those in Misrata and Zintan, while in Cyrenaica, the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar gained control over Benghazi. Subsequently, Haftar attempted to extend his control across the entire country.⁶⁶

The National Transitional Council (NTC), formed immediately after the February 2011 revolution, was unable to unify Libyans and guide the country toward stability. Although it was unable to resolve the myriad crises that had materialized so potently in the post-Gaddafi era, the NTC took important transitional steps. Notably, it succeeded in drafting a provisional constitution and holding general elections, which formed the General National Congress (GNC) in 2012. The NTC then handed over power to the GNC, which was based in Tripoli.⁶⁷

However, without an institutionalized regulatory framework and given the deeply fragmented political and military map, the GNC was unable to foster national unity and democracy. Its failure became obvious

⁵⁹ Mohamed al-Sheikh, "Ishkālīyyāt Ta'aththur al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī fī Lībyā Ba'd 2011," *Majallat Dirāsāt Sharq Awsatīyya*, vol. 18, no. 68 (Summer 2014), pp. 46-47.

⁶⁰ Ramadan Abdel Salam Haidar observes that the ethnic minorities in Libya, which account for around ten percent of the population, were politically marginalized under Gaddafi. The revolution inspired them to engage in the post-Gaddafi political scene to strengthen their political standing, improve their economic circumstances, and protect their cultural identity. The largest minorities are the Amazigh, the sub-Saharan Tebu, and the Tuareg. See: Haidar, p. 165.

⁶¹ Kamel Abdullah, "Limādhā Tata'aththar Muḥāwalāt Binā' Nizām Intiqālī fī Lībyā?," *Majallat al-Dīmuqrāṭīyya*, no. 75 (July 2019), pp. 198-199.

⁶² A notable instance of the separatist tendency occurred in 2012, when municipal leaders of Benghazi declared the establishment of a federal region in eastern Libya. See: Hanan Labidi, "Lībyā Bayn al-Tafakkuk al-Dākhlī wa-l-Ikhtirāq al-Khārījī," *Dafātīr al-Siyāsa wa-l-Qānūn*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2021), p. 624.

⁶³ Khaled Hanafi Ali, "Dawla Manzū'at al-Saytara: Muḥaffīzzāt wa-Kawābīḥ Tafakkuk Lībyā Ba'd al-Thawra," *Majallat al-Siyāsa al-Dawliyya*, vol. 49, no. 195 (January 2014), p. 21.

⁶⁴ Libya saw intense competition between several political currents which surfaced immediately after the revolution. These currents have sharply conflicting visions for the future of the state and the political system in Libya. See: al-Sheikh, "Lībyā Bayn al-Şirā' al-Siyāsī wa-l-Şirā' al-Musallah," p. 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Abdullah, "Limādhā Tata'aththar Muḥāwalāt Binā' Nizām Intiqālī fī Lībyā?," p. 200.

⁶⁷ Khaled Hanafi Ali, "Suqūṭ al-Jamāhīriyya: Man Yaḥkum Lībyā Ba'd al-Qadhāfi?," *Majallat al-Siyāsa al-Dawliyya*, vol. 46, no. 186 (October 2011), p. 141.

in 2014 when the GNC refused to hand over power to the newly elected House of Representatives (HoR).⁶⁸ This behaviour deepened the crisis as it precipitated institutional bifurcation: from that point forward, two rival parliaments and governments have vied for power, one based in Tripoli and led by the GNC and the other based in Tobruk in the east and led by the internationally recognized HoR.⁶⁹

As the conflict between Tobruk and Tripoli escalated, the UN intervened to mediate. This effort eventually culminated in the Libyan Political Agreement, signed by representatives of the HoR and GNC in Skhirat, Morocco, in December 2015. The agreement established a State Council and a Government of National Accord (GNA). Once again, however, this unifying initiative failed to resolve the crisis. Instead, factional and regional interests became more pronounced as external actors became increasingly involved.⁷⁰

In the broader context of the the MENA region, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates backed the political forces in eastern Libya, namely Haftar in Benghazi and the HoR in Tobruk, against Islamist forces. Qatar and Turkey pitted their weight behind the Islamist forces that dominated the GNC and later the GNA, headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, against Haftar and his military expansion.⁷¹

Obstructing Modern State-Building: The Core Impediments

This section addresses the main impediments to building a modern state in Libya, which have emerged over successive eras and have become particularly intractable in the present context.

The Tribal Factor

Around 140 tribes, to which most Libyans belong and varying in size, influence, ethnic origin, and sectarian affiliation are distributed across Libya. In the south, particularly near Libya's borders with non-Arab countries, there are concentrations of Tuareg tribes and, nearby, Tebu tribes of sub-Saharan African origin. The Amazigh, who are indigenous to North Africa, primarily inhabit the highlands of western Libya. The remaining tribes, which make up the majority, are spread across Cyrenaica and Tripoli. Among the most prominent are the Bani Salim, al-Awaidat, Bani Hilal, Warfala, Tarhuna, Karaghla, and Tawajir tribes. The Qadadfa tribe grew in influence following Gaddafi's rise to power in 1969 despite its relatively small size.⁷²

Understanding Libyan political history requires familiarity with the tribal system and the relationship of the Libyan individual to the tribe. For centuries before independence, the tribe served as the primary mode of sociopolitical organization, defining the rights and duties of its members and shaping their relationship with other tribal entities. This explains why the outlook of the Libyan individual often conflicts with the notion of the modern state. Successive governments have entrenched tribal affiliations rather than loosening their hold to promote democratization, institutionalized government, and civil society.⁷³

⁶⁸ The GNC's refusal to hand over power stemmed from the refusal of the Islamist forces that dominated the GNC to accept the results of the 2014 elections. This crisis led to a clash between these forces and the eastern-based army commanded by Khalifa Haftar who aligned with the HoR in Tobruk and against the Tripoli-based GNC.

⁶⁹ Ahmed Moussa Badawi, "Taḥawwulāt al-Thawra al-Libiyya: Tafkīk al-Dawla wa-Zar' al-Irhāb," *Majallat Āfāq Siyāsīyya*, no. 16 (April 2015), pp. 86-87.

⁷⁰ Talaat Romaih, "Lībyā: al-Ḥall al-Siyāsī al-Ma'zūm wa-l-Sirā' al-'Askarī al-Malghūm," *Majallat al-Bayān*, no. 391 (November 2019), pp. 42-44.

⁷¹ Kamel Abdullah, "Lībyā Bayn Mufāraqat al-Mashhad al-Dākhilī wa-l-Mawāqif al-Iqlīmiyya wa-l-Dawliyya," *Majallat al-Siyāsa al-Dawliyya*, vol. 52, no. 205 (July 2016), pp. 152-153.

⁷² Mustafa Shafiq Allam, "al-Qabaliyya wa-l-Thawrāt al-'Arabiyya: Namudhajān al-Yaman wa-Lībyā," *Majallat al-Bayān bi-l-Sa'ūdiyya*, Cairo, no. 9 (2012), p. 136.

⁷³ Adnan Shabeen, "al-Nizā' al-Ijtīmā'ī al-Mumtadd fī Lībyā Bayn Rahānāt al-'Unf wa-Tadā'iyāt Inhiyār al-Dawla," *Majallat Dirāsāt fī al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya wa-l-Ijtīmā'īyya*, vol. 3, no. 5 (2020), p. 362.

While successive governments exploited the tribal system to forge clientelist networks to serve the agendas of the ruling elites and their perpetuation in power, the Gaddafi era was unique. During his years in power, the role of the tribe waxed and waned. Initially, he restrained tribal influence, but with the declaration of the Jamahiriya in 1978, he recognized the potential of organic affiliations, channelling them through the Tribal Clubs and the People's and Revolutionary Committees, which were structured around tribal affiliations.⁷⁴

The tribe has thus continued to function as an intermediary between the individual, society, and the state. Beyond its role in political life, tribal affiliation has served as the main vehicle for people to secure jobs or access financial support from the state. Since Gaddafi came to power, the tribe has functioned as the antithesis of institutionalization and the formation of the modern citizenship bond.⁷⁵

The Gaddafi regime's approach toward the tribes varied from one to the next depending on his strategies for augmenting their differences and driving wedges between them. Some tribal leaders, such as those from the Warfala and the Zintan tribes in western Libya, received preferential treatment. Others, like the Misrata in the north and the Awlad Suleiman in the south, faced discrimination. Differential treatment explains the outbreaks of intertribal violence that occurred after the fall of the regime in 2011, including clashes between the Awlad Suleiman and Qadadfa tribes, and between the Warfala and Misrata tribes.

In the absence of institutionalized constitutional frames-of-reference and the consequent lack of vehicles for social and economic justice, the tribe has remained a formidable obstacle to integration and citizenship. Additionally, it has hindered the emergence of a civil society capable of reining in the sway of traditional structures. Likewise, the tribe has been instrumental in disseminating a culture of feuding and fanaticism, and, as such, it has been a destabilizing factor,⁷⁶ which is why it has been an obstacle to modern state-building.⁷⁷

The violent clash that erupted between the Tawergha and Misrata tribes following the outbreak of the 2011 revolution, which resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Tawergha, best illustrates how the tensions generated by the Gaddafi regime's instrumentalization of tribal and regional contradictions erupted once the regime fell. It also exemplifies how the underlying fragmentation resurfaced following the collapse of the central authority.⁷⁸

The Regional Factor

Historically, subregional identities have prevailed over a unified national Libyan identity. Even after Tripoli was designated as the capital of the Libyan state, the political and administrative centre of gravity never fully shifted there. Cyrenaica, in particular, continued to countervail the capital's influence, a dynamic that was notably reinforced after the events of February 2011.⁷⁹ Today, this tug-of-war persists, manifesting in the political and administrative schism between the east and west – reminiscent of Libya's pre-independence era when it had two official capitals: Benghazi and Tripoli.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 364, 376.

⁷⁵ Haala Hweio, "Tribes in Libya: From Social Organization to Political Power," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 117-118.

⁷⁶ Tribal affiliations have been a main facet of the ongoing conflict in Libya since 2011 as, for example, 2014 when Field Marshal Haftar secured the support of the Farjan, al-Awaidat, Warshefana, and Maqarha tribes against the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord. See: Karbal Ibrahim al-Khalil & Khalasi Ka'asis Khalida, "Ishkālīyyāt Indimāj al-Qabīla fī Masār I'ādat Binā' al-Dawla al-Lībiyya Ba'd 2011 fī Zill al-Taḥawwulāt al-Nazariyya: Muqāraba Taḥdīthiyya Binā' iyya," *al-Majalla al-Jazā'iriyya li-l-Huqūq wa-l-'Ulūm al-Siyāsiyya*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2021), pp. 829-830.

⁷⁷ Shabeen, pp. 376-377.

⁷⁸ Ali, "Dawla Manzū'at al-Sayṭara," p. 20.

⁷⁹ Khalid Muhammad bin Amour, "Anāṣir al-Da'f al-Juyūbūlītiyya wa-Ātharuhā 'alā Kayān al-Dawla al-Lībiyya: Dirāsāt fī al-Jughrāfiyya al-Siyāsiyya," *Majallat Abḥāth* (University of Sirte), no. 13 (March 2019), pp. 259-261.

Since the revolution began in the east, Benghazi naturally became the revolution's capital. It became the headquarters for new institutions, such as the Transitional National Council, the revolutionary field commands, and some embassies. Suddenly, Tripoli had been stripped of its status as the country's sole political and administrative capital. Now that Benghazi shared some of its functions and status, Libya operated with two centres of power.⁸⁰

The persistence of Libya's sub-regional identities can be largely attributed to three factors. The first factor is Libya's geographical expanse (1.75 million square kilometres)⁸¹ combined with low population density (about seven million inhabitants in 2021).⁸² To this, Tripoli's peripheral location in the far northwest can be added. The second factor⁸³ is the lack of inclusive social, political, and economic policies that could unify Libyans. This has hindered the development of a national, supra-regional identity. The third factor is the permanence of the main geographic administrative divisions (Cyrenaica, Fezzan, Tripoli). Together with the sociopolitical impacts of the tribal system, these divisions have engendered closed local communities mired in disputes with their neighbours. The clientelist alliances and accommodations promoted by successive governments have deepened these divisions, making them even more intractable.⁸⁴

Political Culture

Political culture is a major facet of a society's overall culture. It encompasses people's values, behaviours, knowledge, political participation, and attitudes toward their government.⁸⁵ Political culture is transmitted across generations through socialization processes, beginning within the family and extending through schools, peer groups, the media, and other social and political influences.⁸⁶

During his rule, Gaddafi made no efforts to connect and affiliate Libyans to the concept of the modern state. Instead, he imposed his version of "revolution", the Jamahiriya system, the Green Book, and the clientelist Tribal Clubs, at the expense of the modern state and its institutions. Under Gaddafi, the Libyan state experienced a four-decade-long caesura, during which no effort was made to foster political socialization or equip citizens to engage in participatory politics. There was no attempt to cultivate a cohesive national political culture grounded in values like tolerance, pluralism, and democracy, nor to promote institutionalized government or uphold the rule of law. Rather, the Gaddafi era reinforced a fragmented and manipulated political culture, which, to some extent, erased the Libyan citizen as an individual with political agency. It deepened the sociodemographic divides, obstructing the development of a collective national political life.⁸⁷ Given this context, it is not surprising that, when the regime collapsed in 2011, many Libyans sought refuge in their tribal and regional allegiances amid the ensuing anarchy.

The tribal system, both during and after the Gaddafi era, has played an important role in shaping the political attitudes and culture of Libyans. It has informed their core value system, which is often reflected in a submission to authority, an intolerance of opposing views, and a strong sense of tribal insularity. As a result, Libyan political culture has remained caught between fragmentation and manipulation.⁸⁸ This also

⁸⁰ Abdullah, *al-Ḥirāk al-Amāzighī wa-Dīnāmiyyāt al-Ḥayāt al-Siyāsiyya al-Lībiyya bayn Mumkināt al-Takayyuf wa-Azmat al-Indimāj al-Waṭanī*, pp. 27-28.

⁸¹ Amour, p. 261.

⁸² "Libya," *The World FactBook* (CIA), accessed on 13/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/48k5QCC>

⁸³ Amour, p. 262.

⁸⁴ Muhammad Najīb Boutaleb, *al-Zawāhir al-Qabaliyya wa-l-Jihawiyya fī al-Mujtama' al-'Arabī al-Mu'āṣir: Dirāsāt Muqārana li-l-Thawratayn al-Tūnisīyya wa-l-Lībiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2012), pp. 143-144.

⁸⁵ Salim Nasser Barakat, "al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya: Mafhūm wa-Mumārasāt," *Majallat al-Mawqif al-Adabī*, vol. 50, no. 606 (October 2021), p. 5.

⁸⁶ Youssef Salem Abdulaali Amtair, "al-'Awāmil al-Dākhiliyya wa-Atharuhā 'alā 'Amaliyyat al-Taḥawwul al-Dīmuqrāṭī fī Lībiyā," *al-Majalla al-'Ilmiyya li-l-Dirāsāt al-Tijāriyya wa-l-Bī'iyya*, no. 1 (2021), p. 131.

⁸⁷ Zayed Ubaidallah Misbah, "Ishkālīyyat Binā' al-Dawla al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya fī Lībiyā: al-Qiyam wa-Ittikhādh al-Qarār," *al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabī*, vol. 35, no. 403 (September 2012), pp. 76-79.

⁸⁸ al-Fitouri Saleh al-Satti, "Al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya fī al-Mujtama' al-Lībī," *Majallat Shu'ūn Ijtīmā'iyya*, no. 135 (2017), p. 191.

explains the absence of a culture of institutions and citizenship, the stalled democratic transformation, and the weak sense of a national identity that transcends narrow, pre-state affiliations.

The External Factor

Since the onset of the current conflict in Libya, external intervention has taken two forms: direct military intervention, as in NATO's 2011 campaign against the Gaddafi regime, and indirect intervention through political and material support to rival factions. Both forms of intervention have been motivated by economic ambitions, such as securing control over Libya's oil wealth, and geopolitical aims like curbing illegal migration to Europe, combatting extremism, or countering Chinese and Russian penetration into Africa.

The main international actors in the Libyan crisis are France, Italy, the United States, and Britain – countries that were also the colonial powers in Libya prior to its independence. Their involvement in the conflict conjures up lingering complexities of the late colonial era,⁸⁹ with its entrenched geopolitical interests and rivalries. Thus, Italy and the United States backed the Tripoli-based governments to safeguard their oil interests in the west,⁹⁰ while France, keen to promote its influence in the east, has provided political and military support to Haftar's forces.⁹¹

The conflicting interests of global powers have significantly aggravated the Libyan crisis.⁹² Each actor has sought to extend its influence over Libya and incorporate it into their geopolitical, economic, and military spheres. Their meddling in Libyan affairs has deepened the political and security vacuum, transforming Libya from a state to an "anti-state", i.e., a condition of pervasive anarchy characterized by the proliferation of arms, fanaticism, and fragmentation along tribal and regional divides.

Regional powers have also been vying for a foothold in Libya, and their interventions have entrenched the country's internal divisions. The main regional players include Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia,⁹³ which back Haftar in eastern Libya, and Turkey, Sudan, and Qatar, which support the Tripoli-based GNA in the west.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Libya's crisis of modern state formation has social and political roots. The central issue is the absence of national unity among its diverse social components. In 2011, Libya, an already fragile state, transitioned abruptly from the concealed weakness of Gaddafi's authoritarian rule to open disintegration and failed state in the post-Gaddafi period.⁹⁵ The tribal and regional dynamics were instrumental in undermining the development of a unifying political culture, and their impacts were compounded by the detrimental influence of external factors.

The Libyan crisis is primarily rooted in the artificial origins of the Libyan state. Instead of evolving organically through a smooth and gradual process or emerging from a consensual social contract, Libya's statehood was imposed exogenously. Moreover, the colonial powers that imposed the state model exploited

⁸⁹ Abdullah, "Libyā Bayn Mufāraqat al-Mashhad al-Dākhilī wa-l-Mawāqif al-Iqlīmiyya wa-l-Dawliyya," p. 153.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 153.

⁹¹ Shabeen, p. 375.

⁹² Western powers sought to achieve other ends by intervening in Libya. They include countering Chinese penetration into Africa and Libya in particular. See: Muhammad Abdul Hafiz al-Mahdi, "Athar al-Tadakhul al-Khārijī 'alā al-Thawra al-Lībiyya 2011," *Majallat Shu'ūn 'Arabiyya*, no. 162 (Summer 2015), pp. 178-179.

⁹³ See: Jonathan M. Winer, "Origins of The Libyan Conflict and Options for Its Resolution," *Policy Paper*, Middle East Institute (May 2019), p. 8, accessed on 7/11/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3HL8RAS>

⁹⁴ See: Hajal, p. 136.

⁹⁵ For more on the concept and nature of the failed state, see: Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, World Peace Foundation, 2003), ch. 1, p. 5.

regionalism and tribalism as instruments of control. The consequent structural contradictions and tensions impeded centralization, while strategies of control based on clientelist relationships forestalled the coalescence of cohesive citizenship.

The Libyan crisis did not end with independence in 1951. Successive governments failed to address the underlying structural crises, which hindered their ability to establish a legal and institutional edifice capable of fostering citizenship, national integration, and peaceful coexistence. Nor did they leverage the wealth generated by the oil sector to establish a productive economy.⁹⁶

The mismanagement of Libya's ethnically, tribally, and regionally diverse society created an environment that has perpetuated the causes and symptoms of the ongoing crisis: the absence of a social contract, weak and fragmented institutions, reliance on authoritarian-dictatorial rule, and the dominance of tribal, regional, and ethnic determinants in political processes. Such conditions bred divided loyalties, extremism, and violence, while also creating a detachment from participatory political culture. As a result, concepts such as the modern state, equal citizenship, and democratic governance remained elusive. Instead, people retreated behind narrow local identities and interests at the expense of the broader national good. The current crisis in Libya is not just a product of Gaddafi's rule – though he certainly exacerbated it. Its roots stretch back to the pre-independence period and even before the monarchy.

In the post-Gaddafi era, Libyan society has become even more fragmented, with ethnicity playing a greater role. The Amazigh,⁹⁷ Tebu, and Tuareg communities have grown more active in defending their distinct identities and cultures, driven by a history of discrimination and exclusion. The political understandings and arrangements forged by Libyan factions in the post-revolutionary period have failed to satisfy these groups.

The continued fragmentation of Libya poses a serious threat to its future. Ongoing instability has fostered the persistence of regional entities defined by sub-national identities, overshadowing efforts to build unifying concepts and political frameworks. This dynamic threatens Libya's existence as a unified state within its current territorial borders.

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⁹⁶ Oil was discovered in Libya in the late 1950s, and production and export began in the early 1960s, transforming Libya virtually overnight from a poor to a rich country. Libya currently ranks fifth globally in subterranean oil reserves, accounting for 2% of the global output. It became a rentier state relying almost exclusively on oil revenues. However, successive governments did not take advantage of this boom to promote economic and political modernization or to build infrastructures to shorten the distances between the centre and the peripheries. Colonel Gaddafi had little interest in comprehensive development. To him, the vast oil revenues were a means to consolidate his grip on power, strengthen his alliances with certain factions, and buy tribal loyalties. See: Yusuf Muhammad Jumaa al-Sawani, "al-Wilāyāt al-Muttaḥida wa-Lībyā: Tanaquḍāt al-Tadakhkhul wa-Mustaqbal al-Kayān al-Lībī," *al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabī*, no. 431 (January 2015), pp. 9-11.

⁹⁷ The Amazigh made its mark early in the post-Gaddafi period with the establishment of the Libyan National Amazigh Congress in 2011. For more on Amazigh national demands, see: Abdullah, *al-Ḥirāk al-Amāzīghī wa-Dīnāmiyyāt al-Ḥayāt al-Siyāsiyya al-Lībiyya bayn Mumkināt al-Takayyuf wa-Azmat al-Indimāj al-Waṭanī*, pp. 46-49.

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