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The Libyan conflict and its controversial roots

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Abstract The Libyan conflict is the result of a complex and controversial series of developments, where local political events have been strongly influenced and driven by exogenous factors. A dual set of conflicting interests can be found in both the Euro-Mediterranean and inter-Arab dimensions, with Italy and Turkey struggling against France and Great Britain on one side, and Qatar being opposed by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the other. Muammar Qaddafi's regime, which was certainly not an example of good governance and respect for human rights, was quickly swept away by a conflict primarily fought by non-Libyan actors, which eventually caused the collapse of the central institutions in Libya and the creation of dozens of local militias. The failure of both local and exogenous ambitions has caused a crisis in which additional factors have been able to influence the Libyan civil war, making the situation very opaque and extremely difficult to solve.

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Introduction

When, in February 2011, a protest erupted in Benghazi, few were expecting that Libya would see a phenomenon similar to that which had shaken Tunisia and Egypt in the previous months. In late 2010 and early 2011, the Western media were quick to label the events in Tunisia and Egypt an ‘Arab Spring’, making the assumption that they were a sort of revolution against authoritarianism and dictatorship. Very few understood that the roots of these protests were instead primarily driven by poverty and dignity, as a reaction to the deteriorating social environment, to corruption and to the government’s abuses (Hashemi 2013, 12). The trigger for the Tunisian revolt was the suicide of a poor street vendor, who had been made desperate by the continuous abuses of the local police, while in Cairo the protest started among the youngest members of the population, who were upset by the corruption, the growing unemployment and the widespread poverty. Few talked about democracy or freedom in their protests, while the vast majority openly challenged the government, asking for dignity, employment and the possibility of a normal life (Chulov 2011). To understand today’s Libya, one needs to consider the roots of the recent developments there from a more pragmatic and analytical viewpoint, thereby bringing to the surface the endogenous but also—and particularly—the exogenous factors which contributed to its making.

The roots of the Libyan crisis

The situation in Libya in 2011 was completely different from those in Tunisia and Egypt. Despite being governed by an authoritarian leader, Libya’s relatively small population, combined with its outstanding economic performance, granted a certain degree of prosperity to most of the population. The oil and gas industry was able to absorb most of the skilled personnel in the country, allowing the rest to benefit from the profits. The strict control over politics and security—ensured by a system of loyalty built over the years through alliances, nepotism and money—enabled President Muammar Qaddafi to maintain power for an extraordinarily long time. Spared in the conflicts with the US of the 1980s and the 1990s, Qaddafi gradually normalised relations with the West and, in the early 2000s, was welcomed as a triumphant head of state, revered by Europeans and tolerated by the US (Mezran 2012). No significant underground opposition movements were present in Libya in 2011, as popular dissent was limited to a few elements among the diaspora. No one was expecting a protest or even a revolt in Benghazi in 2011, since it was assumed that Libya was one of the more stable states in the region. When violence exploded in the streets of Cyrenaica, most European countries were caught by surprise, and that is why they sent out ambiguous and confused messages. Even Qaddafi was taken by surprise and reacted in a confused way (Ardıç 2012, 14).

It was, however, soon clear that what was happening in the eastern region of Cyrenaica was something different from a simple revolt, and more complex than merely local insubordination. From the beginning, the coordinated series of actions, the availability of a large quantity of weapons and ammunition, and the existence of a series of targets on the ground clearly demonstrated the presence of a plan, something which is incompatible with a simple riot. Another factor of fundamental importance has to do with the rapid reactions of certain European governments, particularly those of France and Great Britain, which almost immediately supported the anti-governmental positions.

Massive global media coverage started to disseminate a narrative of the Libyan crisis that was largely built on the idea of a violent government reaction to an attempt at a peaceful popular revolt. The primary source of this narrative was the Qatari news network Al Jazeera, which started broadcasting images of violence, destruction, rage and death on a systematic basis, convincing the European public that a massacre had been started by Qaddafi with the aim of ensuring the continuation of his power and privileges (Al Jazeera 2011a, c, d, e). Most of the news stories which were systematically communicated to Western households described how Qaddafi's air force was indiscriminately bombing urban areas, creating thousands of civilian casualties. Thus the message was that it was a massacre which had to be stopped at all costs, with the support of the international community (Krauss 2011).

A reluctant NATO, and an even more reluctant US, was then involved in a short but significant mission which targeted Libyan governmental assets on the ground, annihilating the local air force and stopping the advance of the loyalist forces on Benghazi. The bombing quickly damaged Qaddafi's defences, and he eventually left the capital, taking refuge in Sirte, where he was born and from where his tribe originated. The rest of the story is well known (Mezran 2014a). Qaddafi was eventually killed while desperately moving from one place to another, refusing to surrender to an enemy that he had probably not even identified (Shanker and Schmitt 2011).

The role of Qatar, France and the United Arab Emirates

What emerged in the aftermath of the Libyan crisis offered a completely new and different perspective to the events which had led to the fall of Qaddafi and Libya's collapse into chaos. The revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, dictated by popular rage and provoked by poverty and a lack of dignity, had led to the collapse of the traditional authoritarian system in those countries. This had convinced Qatar of the need to implement a new strategy in the region, based on the establishment and/or support of local moderate Islamic political forces (Roberts 2011). This strategy was based on the assumption that only through a transition led by Islamic movements could the Gulf monarchies resist—and survive—the general trend of transition that was being observed by the Middle Eastern powers. While Saudi Arabia had historically linked its protection and political survival to the promotion of radical Islamist forces, such as the Wahhabis and the Salafists, the

former Emir of Qatar—Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani—preferred moderate and participative groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Khatib 2013).

At the same time, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy was being persuaded by his adviser Bernard-Henri Lévy (Lévy 2016) that there was a window of opportunity in Libya to topple Qaddafi, which might open up a rich new market for both energy and the defence industry (Jacinto 2016). Thus Qatar and France—with the collateral support of the UK—combined forces (finances and military capacity) in an attempt to provoke a major popular protest in Libya. Ironically, however, most Libyans refrained from joining the riots, largely remaining passive bystanders, which thus allowed Qaddafi's troops to reconquer most of the country in few weeks and to move quickly towards Benghazi to crush the revolt and restore his power.

Facing an almost certain defeat, the rebels from Cyrenaica (composed of a mix of civilians, former soldiers and religious organisations) requested the aerial intervention of NATO (Brody 2011), which was eventually agreed upon, mostly because of the narrative broadcast by Al Jazeera (2011b, 2016), which built on the fear of carnage and violence by Qaddafi. The political environment that emerged from the collapse of the Qaddafi regime was almost immediately characterised by the historical dualism between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, with a polarisation of interests that soon led to a de facto division of the country.

The impossibility of promoting a concrete plan for national reconciliation eventually led to the disaggregation of both the political and military powers and, with the rise of city-militias and the fragmentation of alliances, to a chaotic and confused map of interests (Zenko 2016).

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, among many other Islamist forces, alarmed Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have always considered the *Ikhwan* (from the Arabic, 'brothers') to be an existential threat to the survival of the Gulf monarchies. However, with the death of King Abdullah on 23 January 2015, and the subsequent appointment of Salman bin Abdulaziz as his successor, Saudi Arabia entered a new and more moderate phase in terms of its attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving the UAE to lead the fierce opposition to the group in the region (Cafiero and Wagner 2015). These events led to open support for Egypt and its new president, General al-Sisi, and for Haftar, al-Sisi's proxy in Libya. Haftar had been a general under Qaddafi but defected during the 1987 Chad war, eventually moving to the US. He re-emerged soon after the collapse of Qaddafi's regime and returned to Libya with the aim of becoming its new strongman (Cafiero and Wagner 2015).

From this dualism, the Libyan crisis was dragged into its current dimension. On the one side, Haftar accuses his opponents of being dangerous jihadists, thereby trying to influence the already quite strong Islamophobic sentiment in the West (Ghanmi 2017). On the other side, the heterogeneous Islamist forces of Tripolitania accuse Haftar and his entourage of being Qaddafian restoration forces, whose aim is to topple the popular revolt which ended the authoritarian regime (Gaffey 2016). It is a chaotic situation,

further complicated by the rise of dozens of local interests in villages and provinces, where militias have been organised and equipped by dubious self-proclaimed military commanders, and where organised crime has started to manage the flourishing business of controlling migratory flows.

Thus what is still impeding reconciliation and the normalisation of the situation in Libya is the outcome of this complex and articulated crisis, where personal and governmental interests are interlaced at various levels, producing an explosive combination which cannot be easily disentangled.

General Haftar's personal ambition is to govern Libya as a sort of new absolute leader. However, Islamist forces are not willing to accept what they perceive as a purely Qaddafi restoration of power, and are fiercely opposing Haftar's narrative and its financiers in the Gulf (Saleh 2017).

Egypt is looking to influence Libya—through its support for Haftar—to chase the Muslim Brotherhood out and prevent its local political consolidation, and is also hoping to gain financial support from the UAE by doing so. Such support would offer the economy a vital breath of life, which would help to contain what is almost certainly the worst economic crisis in Egypt's contemporary history (Wenig 2017).

The threat of Islamic State in Libya

Among the Libyan Islamist militias, the largest, most efficient and best organised was undoubtedly the group known as Ansar al-Sharia. The organisation was formed during the latter days of Muammar Qaddafi's rule, by combining into a unified new entity most of the existing Islamist militias that had chaotically emerged following the clashes of 2011 (Ashour 2015, 7). Ansar al-Sharia was organised around the activities of the charitable organisation Al Dawa al-Islah, which was known for its management of hospitals, schools and public services.

The leadership of the group was firmly in the hands of Mohammed al-Zahawi until his death in early 2015, which was probably caused by injuries sustained during clashes (Gratrud and Skretting 2017).

The first major activity carried out by Ansar al-Sharia took place on 7 July 2012, in Benghazi, when it burst upon the city in a convoy of about 200 armed off-road vehicles and declared its intention to impose shariah on Tripoli. There is also good reason to believe that Ansar al-Sharia planned and organised the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi on 11 September of the same year, in which Ambassador Christopher Stevens died (*Reuters* 2014).

The Islamist organisation never enjoyed great popularity in the territory of Benghazi, even when it tried to develop a stronger bond with the population by providing public utility and security services. The violent methods it adopted, its radical guiding

principles and especially its ongoing attempts to impose shariah on a society which was not particularly observant, led, in September 2012, to the Benghazi population revolting against the units of Ansar al-Sharia, forcing them to fall back to more remote inland villages. With the departure of Ansar al-Sharia from the city of Benghazi, the other, smaller Islamist organisations were gradually forced to dissolve or leave the city, often reorganising themselves into smaller groups (Zelin 2015).

For much of 2013 and early 2014 the forces of Ansar al-Sharia did not represent any real threat to the security and stability of Tripoli and Benghazi, as they were mostly being sheltered in rural areas. It was General Haftar who revitalised and re-legitimated the group, by launching a campaign against terrorism and jihadism that was based on the assumption that all Islamist forces were part of the Al-Qaeda network.

Operation Dignity, officially launched on 16 May 2014, declared war on all organisations and militias politically hostile to Haftar, with the clear objective of gaining the support of Western countries and Egypt (Eriksson 2016). This move generated an almost immediate reaction, that of the reunification of many Islamist groups, radicalising some of them and promoting their partnership under the weak but functional umbrella of the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries.¹ When in early 2015, Ansar al-Sharia's leader al-Zahawi died, his organisation gradually fragmented into smaller groups, led by different commanders with quite heterogeneous backgrounds. A growing number of clashes resulted in a divide appearing among the various groups, as some decided to remain loyal to al-Zahawi's original mission, while others opted to evolve towards even more radical positions.

Within this complex crisis the first local affiliation to Islamic State (IS) emerged, mostly composed of militias that had already fought with Daesh in Iraq or Syria.

The official constitution of the local Daesh component dates back to October 2014, to the coastal city of Derna. This group almost immediately started clashing with other former Ansar al-Sharia groups, resulting in a new, long and painful period of violence. The reaction of the other Islamist groups forced IS to withdraw from Derna and move to the city of Sirte. However, even in Sirte, IS never significantly grew in size.

Nevertheless, a new narrative, built on the massive presence of Daesh in North Africa, and its potential spillover to Europe through the flow of migrants, became central to increasing support for the Cyrenaican strongman, General Haftar, who presented himself as the last bastion against IS, asking for support and—particularly—for political recognition (Sizer 2014).

The real defeat of IS in Sirte, however, came towards the end of 2016, thanks to the role of the militia of Misrata, which was allied with the official government in Tripoli and

¹ Formed in 2014 as an organisation opposed to both the anti-Islamist Operation Dignity and the newly composed Council of Deputies, the Council was mostly composed of Islamist militias afraid of being sidelined by Haftar in the domestic political framework.

opposed to both Haftar and radical Islamist groups. The fierce battle, which was fought street by street in the coastal city where Daesh had established its local command, resulted in a huge number of casualties on both sides, but eventually forced Daesh to withdraw into the desert.

Conclusion

What has been generically defined as the ‘Arab Spring’ was, in fact, a series of extremely different events which began unfolding in the Middle East at the beginning of 2011.

The Libyan crisis was completely different from the events which shook Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, as it was the result of a local political evolution where exogenous factors contributed to maximising the effects of the crisis. Libya has been subject to a political experiment led by Qatar and managed by France (Black 2011), which has sadly resulted in a real civil war in which a Pandora’s Box of long-repressed tribal interests has been opened (El-Gamaty 2016). The interests of the various political forces which clashed, and are still fighting for predominance, have produced a narrative which is often totally detached from the reality on the ground (Mezran 2014b).

The West has been intentionally misled into the usual reading of a conflict between secular forces (the good side) and Islamist radical militias (the bad side), and has fallen into the trap of interpreting the crisis in a monolithic way. In contrast, the local narrative is based on the idea of a conflict between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces, in a context where a huge number of different ideological and political groups represent the mosaic of interests in post-dictatorial Libya. The threat from IS has again been part of a manipulation of the local narrative, with the precise goal of supporting the interests of one party over the other, in a zero-sum-game logic of conflict which is still far from being solved.

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