

Stealing the revolution: violence and predation in Libya

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■ Executive summary

The success of Libya's 2011 revolution has given way to political disarray, an institutional vacuum, and an extraordinary proliferation of non-state and quasi-state armed groups operating across the country. However, rather than pursuing political or ideological objectives, these groups increasingly focus on resource predation.

Through an empirical study of various axes of violence in contemporary Libya, this report highlights the critical role played by criminal accumulation, land grabs, and protection rackets in the actions of tribal militias and jihadist groups, and in the fighting that has blighted one major urban hub. Whereas conventional representations of Libya's post-revolutionary period dwell on the political battle between Islamists and secular forces, the report suggests that the cause of the country's increasing levels of armed violence can be found in the absence of a functional state and the fragmentation of local, tribal, ethnic and ideological forces, which together make the violent acquisition of material resources essential to group survival.

Introduction: new forms of non-conventional armed violence in Libya

Since the fall of 2011, when the Jamahiriya ("state of the masses") regime headed by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi collapsed, clashes involving tribal factions, army units, political groups, and criminal gangs in Libya have constituted the most serious security threat faced by the authorities and the public at large (Bensaâd, 2013). But while the various belligerents clashed with one another in the early months of the uprising against the Qaddafi regime in order to take back rights that had been violated or to ensure political or ideological supremacy, since early 2012 violent conflicts have taken on new forms and are now being driven by objectives that are substantially different from those seen previously (Leymarie, 2012).

A series of incidents in early 2012 signalled the emergence of new types of violence in Libya and marked the beginning of a phase of conflict characterised by territorial ambitions, resource predation and the eradication of opponents (Lacher, 2014). As a result, it is important to examine the nature of the splits among various groups, tribes and armed factions, and the dynamics that are at the root of the current fierce bloodletting in Libya. The events in the country point towards a typology of diverse armed confrontations that can be categorised according to the table set out in the appendix to this report.

The next section will assess the most widespread forms of violence, the origins of the social and territorial dynamics that have led to the emergence of rival groups, and the nature of their acts of aggression.

From insurrection to predation

The fall of the Jamahiriya was part of a long and bloody campaign of aerial bombing and acts of revenge in the country's key cities and towns (Meunier, 2012). However, the dramatic execution of Colonel Qaddafi did not open up a road to peace and reconciliation in Libya. From political and ideological clashes, the armed factions moved on to violent attacks aimed at gaining control of the financial means and strategic locations that could provide them with the resources needed for supremacy (Kartas, 2013). As a result, these factions graduated from political violence, and became increasingly involved in resource predation with the help of the widespread availability of weapons and tribal or doctrinal mobilisation (Tabib, 2013).

The withdrawal from public life of the insurgents that fought in the initial stages of the revolution, and especially from

combat units, has been noted by various members of Libya's current political elite. According to B. Ghedira, the revolutionary factions "no longer include the early charismatic leaders. The young insurgents emerged from anonymity at a time of uncertainty and the most severe repression."¹ The often voluntary desertion by top-ranking insurgents, who could have been expected to emerge into the limelight following victory over the Jamahiriya, tended to be caused by disenchantment with the drift toward violence during the transition period or the feeling of being shunted aside by the factions' new commanders, who were more intent on taking control of available resources. Acknowledging that this drift detracted from the revolution of which he was a part, A. Chouiref noted a

massive influx into the ranks of pseudo-revolutionary factions who were attracted by the lure of potential gain, as immoral as the means were. Within two years, the claims of freedom and justice trumpeted by the revolutionaries became nothing more than hollow-sounding slogans. The new militia leaders have their sights set on the country's resources and the opulence that comes with power. Predation is the only chapter in the programmes of tribal or jihadist armed factions.²

Ongoing violence, whether political, tribal or criminal, is the common denominator in the practices of various armed factions, with differences based only on territorial context, historical events or specific tribal characteristics (Egmiû, 2014). It is thus important to analyse the main phenomena of violence by identifying the players involved and studying illustrative cases. On this basis, two types of factions appear to be representative of the broader spectrum of groups perpetrating non-conventional forms of violence in Libya. These are tribal factions and jihadist groups.

Tribal factions: the tribe, the dogma and the spoils of war

The largest share of violent activities can clearly be traced to tribal armed factions (Quesnay, 2012). After the fall of the Jamahiriya, the tribes, including both insurgents and those who remained loyal to Qaddafi until the final skirmishes, feared retaliation from their neighbours or the invasion of their lands by revolutionary battalions. To reduce this threat, tribal elites established armed factions to defend territories and towns where their respective

lineages lived. This led to a general mobilisation, with young people joining armed tribal units in large numbers (Borâssy, 2014).

It would be legitimate to question how tribal mobilisation could be so potent in a country that had supposedly emerged from a revolutionary phase and where the Qaddafi regime's popular slogans proclaimed equality and freedom for all in a pacified, unified country. One of the key explanations for this paradox can be found in the reversible and halting genesis of the Libyan state, particularly during the Jamahiriya (Djaziri, 2009). Beginning in 1970, and continuing for three decades thereafter, Libya experienced a phenomenon known as the "retribalisation" of public space and political life.³ While neighbouring countries saw a process of tribal dissolution, under Qaddafi's leadership Libya experienced the opposite – a premeditated strengthening of tribal political, economic and social clout (Moisseron & Belalimat, 2012).

The grip of the tribal system on Qaddafi's political project was possible only because of the emergence of a rentier state. Oil revenues allowed those in power to escape any obligation to rule through compromise (Bocco, 2005). In effect, Qaddafi curbed the political representation enjoyed by Libya's citizens, replacing it with the establishment of direct ties to the tribal elites (Djaziri, 2009). This conversion of political relationships into a patron-client bond between the "Guide", on the one hand, and tribal chiefs, on the other, became common practice as the result of a generalised institutional vacuum. Thanks to an official ideology that advocated a ban on political parties, associations of all types, and autonomous courts, Qaddafi was able to prevent the establishment of any intermediary structures between the seat of power and the general population (Ouannès, 2011).

However, there were two major effects of this system, the fallout from which is even today hugely significant for the political and social life of post-insurrection Libya. The first relates to the lack of any structure for peacefully mobilising the citizenry beyond the use of identity, whether tribal or regional (Tabib, 2011). The second phenomenon, resulting from the lack of any tradition of political negotiation or compromise, is the inability of the belligerents to use dialogue as a way to resolve conflicts.⁴

The practice of resorting to violence that resulted from the mobilisation of the tribes has to a large extent been

1 B. Ghedira is one of the leaders of the revolution in Tripoli. A former prisoner under the Qaddafi regime and an early insurgent, he announced his withdrawal from the political scene immediately after the clashes in Bani Walid in the autumn of 2012. He was interviewed by the author in October 2013.

2 A. Chouiref is a militant and organisational coordinator for groups that are fighting to free prisoners held in the illegal militia-run jails. He was interviewed by the author in April 2014.

3 In this regard, it would be helpful to cite the approach used by the Libyan political scientist Z. al-Mghirbi (1995: 189), who wrote: "The tribe has been used to respond to internal political and social situations. It has constantly been manipulated during elections, whenever there are political tensions with other tribes, and in the case of intertribal political conflicts. Whenever a Libyan official has been appointed to head an institution, he goes directly to the members of his own tribe without ever considering an individual's level or skills, which gives rise to a profound sentiment of frustration among the country's younger population and reflects a picture of state nepotism."

4 The first ten years of the "September 1st Revolution" were characterised by the systematic exclusion of the elites who had been created under the Senoussis monarchy (1951-69). Many of Libya's technocrats and intelligentsia who did not come from the military were forced to emigrate or were sent into "interior exile". Along with the marginalisation of the elites, the Jamahiriya was characterised by a process that involved the dismantling of the nascent state-controlled structures established by the monarchy, which was accompanied by a revalorisation of the tribe and the reinstatement of its hegemony over society. Paradoxically, in official propaganda this restoration of the tribe was accompanied by a radically revolutionary discourse against the progressives.

inherited from the Jamahiriya (Chandouli, 2013), but the post-insurrection political and security context contributed greatly to the emergence of armed factions with tribal allegiances (Zoubir & Rozsa, 2012). As a result, in a situation characterised by deep-seated uncertainty and instability during both the period of the post-revolutionary National Transitional Council and during the time of the government that emerged after the July 7th 2012 elections, some emergent tribal elites took advantage of the social and economic resources in their “fiefdoms” to profit from the disorder.⁵

Because of this, the emergent elites were the primary beneficiaries of the new political configuration, thanks to their use of weapons and their ability to form local militias (Egmiñ, 2014). By imposing hegemony over their tribes, and especially over the tribal territories, militia commanders became the new intermediaries between a far-off central state that had no real powers of coercion and local societies (Borâssy, 2014). But this hegemony over the tribes was only possible and sustainable thanks to their acquisition of resources. Consequently, in parallel with and in addition to the dominance resulting from the ready availability of weapons, militia commanders became engaged in informal trade networks and the predation of resources (Tabib, 2012). Among the resources subject to predation were those generated by proximity to border tribal lands, oil-producing sites, commercial ports, major arsenals and the headquarters of various government ministries.

The involvement of tribal militia leaders in resource predation was possible only because of the use of force against their rivals. By granting themselves a monopoly on violence, the local militia leaders were able to channel a portion of the resources to their own tribes, while also prioritising their own personal interests (Quesnay, 2012).

One particular tribal faction is representative of the emergence of the new elites and the use of violence to resolve conflict, the predation of resources, and the reshaping of Libya’s post-insurrection political configuration. This is the Misrata “Shield Force”.

The Misrata “Shield Force”: from rebellion to hegemony

The Libyan central state’s lack of legitimate coercive means following the events of 2011 prevented the authorities from adopting a decentralised mode of security management, especially when attempting to resolve local conflicts. As a result, the Libyan state opted, either voluntarily or under threat from insurgent forces, to subcontract

the use of legitimate force by delegating the maintenance of law and order, the protection of strategic sites and the subordination of the last remaining households loyal to Qaddafi to armed factions (Tabib, 2013). Among the most seasoned and best-organised factions, the Misrata militias established early in 2012 what has come to be known as the Deraâ Libya (Libyan Shield Force) regiments. These forces were sent by successive governments to the four corners of Libya to “maintain order and security”. In exchange for substantial financial and logistical compensation, the Misrata militias protected strategic highways, borders and remote areas in the southern part of the country. However, because they lacked support and coordination, these units proved to be a major factor in destabilising and increasing tensions among certain communities (Chandouli, 2013).⁶

The choice of Misrata as the centrepiece of Libya’s post-insurgency political and security chessboard drew its inspiration from a number of political and historical considerations.

During the uprising, Misrata was considered the showcase of Islamist insurgency. The parties that preached Islamist obedience included among their most influential leaders a galaxy of chiefs from Misrata. Members of the Islamist movements rose to the senior ranks of the country’s government and influential institutions after the fall of the Jamahiriya, and as a result the Misrata elites profited from the state’s financial largesse, taking on the role of key players in the newly reconfigured Libyan state (Jaôuda, 2014).

Historically, Misrata played a leading role in the country. As the stronghold of the descendants of the former Ottoman occupiers,⁷ the city had enjoyed a wide-ranging autonomy for centuries⁸ and played a significant economic and commercial role because of its access to the sea, its harbour, and the presence of a respected commercial and intellectual elite. All this predestined the tribes of Misrata to play a major role, especially when the local economic elite became fully committed to the insurgency by funding the war effort and mobilising its international connections in support of the revolt (Ouannès, 2011).

During the pursuit of Qaddafi and the last of his remaining loyal fighters as they prepared to leave Sirte, the Misrata militias used exceptional levels of violence, both during the capture of the late “Guide” and his son Al Moûtassam, and at their execution. These executions were symptomatic of the normalisation of radical violence, which expressed

5 Tribal elites coopted by Qaddafi saw their roles exploited and manipulated, discrediting them in the eyes of the newly emerging tribal elites, who were able to protect themselves against capture by the ruling authority. It was these newly emerged elites who formed the first contingents of insurgents in the 2011 uprising.

6 Ties between the militias and especially the “Shield Force”, on the one hand, and Tripoli authorities, on the other, are characterised by ambiguity. The militias possess weapons, mobilise fighters, and support MPs and senior government officials. The influential members of the central authority who have alliance/allegiance relationships with the militias act to safeguard the interests of the latter (pass laws, allocate budgets and pay wages). The militias are not subject to government policies, but tell the government what course of action to follow. If the government or one of the ministries should call into question the interests of the militias or fail to respond favourably to their orders (which are mostly financial in nature), members of armed factions take reprisals, which generally take the form of armed occupations of public buildings or kidnappings of political figures.

7 These descendants are referred to as *couloughlis*; they are descended from a cultural and civilisational mix with the Ottomans.

8 For example, Misrata had an autonomous government from 1915 to 1918, when Italy began colonising the city.

itself in a way that was as cruel as it was symbolic. Throughout his lengthy rule, Qaddafi had set himself up as the sole seat of all power and, therefore, of all resources. His personality crystallised all the deprivations, frustrations, failures and roadblocks experienced by an entire generation of youths from tribes that had been ousted from the circles of loyalty. As a result, Qaddafi's killing took on the cathartic form of a media-based execution ritual. But the vengeance of the Misrata militias did not stop with Qaddafi's lynching, instead going on to attack the inhabitants of the neighbouring town of Tawergha.

Eradicating Tawergha: violent territorial conquest

Benefitting from the connivance and tolerance of other insurgent factions, the Misrata militias occupied the town of Tawergha on August 13th 2011 and immediately began expelling its inhabitants, who numbered more than 45,000, the overwhelming majority of whom were black (Tabib, 2012). The Misrata militias tried to argue that the Tawerghis were supposedly fighting on the side of Qaddafi, and that large numbers of rapes had been committed in Misrata by loyalist units between May and July 2011 (Egmiî, 2014). However, it should be noted that the Misrata militias also referred to their "historic legitimacy" over the land of the Tawerghis. According to this account, the Tawerghis were supposedly no more than former slaves brought in by the Ottomans to clean up the salt flats where Tawergha's date palm plantations are now located (Chandouli, 2013).

The violent attacks on the Tawerghis did not stop following their expulsion from their home town. On October 7th 2012 an attack was mounted against the Tawergha refugee camp situated near Tajoura, resulting in a dozen victims and some 30 disappearances. Several weeks after its inhabitants were forced out, the town of Tawergha, its date plantations and their abundant water sources were split up among the most influential members of the Misrata militias. Almost three years after Tawergha was wiped out, the claims of the Misratians are now limited to persuading the Tawerghis to renounce their ownership of the land where their date plantations are located, all to the benefit of Misrata.⁹

The southern advance

Two more violent episodes sealed the current status of the Misrata Shield Force. The first was its participation in the expedition authorised by the National Congress in October 2012 under Decree no. 7 against the town of Bani Walid, which was then considered by the authorities as the last stronghold of Jamahiriya loyalists. The attack on the town resulted in dozens of casualties, mainly civilians caught in

the crossfire. The Shield Force used light artillery even in the residential sections of the town (Chandouli, 2013).

This expedition was accompanied by a full-scale mobilisation of symbols from the tribal past.¹⁰ Tribal figures that had taken part in the wars against Misrata and Warfella were glorified, and a psychogeography of bloody memory was reinstated in both territories. The Misrati attack on Bani Walid resulted in almost 60 deaths, most of whom were of children.

The "revolution" of February 17th 2011 does not appear to have affected the tribal hold on power in Libya. As in the Jamahiriya period, a number of nerve centres were exclusively linked to specific tribes, whereas others were marginalised. However, this competition for power in the emerging political network was accomplished through violence and is being perpetuated by violence (Borâssy, 2014).

Repression of civil movements: the Gharghour massacre

In addition to the proliferation of armed factions across Libya's political landscape, a number of civilian and peace movements have sprung up since 2011. These movements, which call for greater democracy, have clashed several times with the militias, especially in Tripoli and Benghazi. Over the course of 2012 and 2013 the protests gradually became more violent, particularly when confrontations with armed factions were involved.

Instead of causing fear among the population, the violence inflicted on protest activists contributed to a wider support base. Thanks to their status as "victims of the new system", as part of their public displays grassroots activists have been able to recoup the reputation of the initial leaders who inspired the uprising of February 2011.¹¹ Since 2012 the Shield Force has been forced to play the role of repressor and the grassroots activists have draped themselves in the flag of the victims of emerging authoritarianism (Egmiî, 2014).

On November 15th 2013 a march to protest against the presence of and the abuses committed by the Misrata Shield Force in the Gharghour section of Tripoli was organised by a local collective of residents and activists opposed to the presence of the militia in the capital. Despite the prohibition issued by Mufti Sadok Gheriani, the mobilisation proved to be significant. In response to the protest, the militia sprayed heavy machine-gun fire into the crowd. A total of 33 people died, including two mothers. The first victims were old men, and when their bloodied pictures were posted on social networks, a storm of

⁹ It is important to point out that the Tawerghis are not the only "internal refugees" in Libya. Since July 2011 the Gouwaliches have been chased from their territories in the Jebel Nefoussa between Kekla and Al Assabaa by Zintan militias who are considered a component of the revolutionary forces. The Mechachiyas from Mazdah and, to a lesser extent, the Gdhedhfes from Sirte were also forced to cede their territories to militias supported by the new authorities in Tripoli.

¹⁰ Bani Walid and Misrata experienced periods of violent dispute, the most intense of which date back to 1919-20 and to 1993. These battles are still commemorated today in both cities.

¹¹ Most of the early leaders of the uprising of February 17th 2011 withdrew from the political process after Islamist parties gained dominance. Their departure was not always voluntary, because the charismatic leader from Benghazi, a lawyer by the name of Abdessalam Al Messmary, was assassinated by terrorist organisations with ties to the Islamists.

emotions was aroused throughout the country as the veil covering the repressive actions of the militia was lifted.

One week later the Misrata Shield Force withdrew from Tripoli, thereby giving up one of its most precious spoils of war – the capital.¹² This incident in Gharghour led to the birth of a civilian peace movement that is now one of the most powerful forces on the Libyan political scene.

Jihadist factions: from armed preaching to crime

Jihadist groups are the most violent factions in Libya, and their repressive actions affect numerous parties: regular army units, leaders of the civilian opposition, Sufi brotherhoods, banking institutions, and citizens who reject their literal interpretation of Islamic religious texts.

Images of the assassination of General Abdelfattah Younès El Abidi remain alive in the memories of Libyans. When he was assassinated in July 2011, he was commanding his soldiers against an advance by Qaddafi's troops. They also recall the cruel torture inflicted on their late "Guide," the desecration of the mausoleums of venerated saints and the exhumation of bodies, including that of Qaddafi's mother – all acts that bear the jihadist stamp, reflecting their thinking and an ideology that advocates the use of violence.

The jihadist current stems from a split in the Salafist movement in Libya – a split based on the need to excommunicate all believers who do not adhere to jihadist principles. The sudden rise to power by the jihadist militias, especially in Cyrenaica, cannot be explained solely by the support afforded to them by the Gulf state monarchies, but also – and primarily – by the existence of an ancient ideological and organisational substrate in Libya (Ouannès, 2011). It is important to remember that Qaddafi made great efforts to foster, fund and impose an impoverished view of Islam (Djaziri, 1994), thereby solidifying the conservative nature of society and encouraging a puritanical interpretation of religious texts. This theology also led to a legitimisation of killing, and even annihilation.

Abu Mahjen Battalion: resource-based strategies

One of the jihadist factions most notable for its activism and the violence of its actions is the Abu Mahjen Battalion/Phalanx.

While theoretically considered to have its origins in the Ansar al-Sharia (Followers of Sharia), the group enjoys

a very high degree of autonomy thanks to its territorial roots and its often-excessive methods of operation. Like other jihadist factions that are involved in transnational terrorism networks and include foreign fighters among their members, the Abu Mahjen Battalion is purely a product of jihadist "globalisation" (Naffha, 2014). The history of the founders of this group is marked by their ability to recruit from marginalised sectors – idle youth disenchanted with the "Rixos System",¹³ outcasts,¹⁴ the unemployed, smugglers with no political backing, drug users, individuals excluded from tribal networks and habitual criminals. The coalescence of these disparate classes in a programme that is as radical as it is vague has proved to be effective, and has allowed the emergence of a combative and disciplined armed faction.

The way the group operates is often spectacular, alternating between decapitations of soldiers and the inflammatory preaching of its leader, Meftah Al Majbari, broadcast through videos on social websites.

The numerous assassinations of national army officers in or around Benghazi have drawn attention to the involvement of the battalion. Libyan researcher N. Ben Othman believes that the Abu Mahjen Battalion is responsible for most of the attacks on military personnel who are originally from Benghazi. He claims that the jihadists in the battalion

are most likely to be those responsible for the operations to exterminate al-Saiqa officers. They do not belong to any tribe. They have no connections. Most members of the unit are outcasts from tribal circles and influential families. If they attack the army, they will have to bear the consequences alone. If the army carries out cruel repression against the assassins of its officers, there will be no tribal cover for the murderers (Ben Othman, 2014; author's translation).

Deprived of tribal cover, the battalion faces numerous reprisals from units of the army in Cyrenaica – a situation that may force it to take refuge in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, such as Gawersha, Houwari and Si Fraj in Benghazi, or in areas that were devastated by the bombings that were carried out in Sirte by the anti-Qaddafi alliance.

The launch of Operation Karama ("dignity") by General Khalifa Hafftar sounded the death knell of the Abu Mahjen Battalion's impunity. As revenge for its assassinations of

12 The incident in Gharghour revealed the differences among the various Misrati groups. Here it is important to note that the city cannot be reduced to a unified entity. Schematically, Misrata includes three influential groups. A new emergent elite originating out of the business and industrial segment was very much involved in the 2011 uprising. This elite is motivated by a desire to build a civil state and a liberal economy in which it would play a leading role. The second group includes the most influential merchants, who have close ties to Islamist circles and are developing a highly conservative approach. It does not hide its sympathies or even its alliance with Turkish business circles that are close to that country's ruling Justice and Development Party. The final group is one that originated among the militia leaders who have amassed great fortunes. The stable security situation in Misrata has allowed the economic elite to carry out a number of business projects – an experiment that it would like to extend to the rest of Libya. However, members of this elite are convinced that the presence of the Shield Force militia in Misrata represents an obstacle to their plans. Since November 2013 this elite has initiated several attempts at a national dialogue to develop a peaceful alternative to the crisis.

13 This is a pejorative term referring to Libyan governments since 2012; most ministers and senior officials stayed at the Rixos Hotel, located on the Tripoli coast.

14 The Libyan paradox lies in the fact that it is a rich country while its people are poor. The fabulous wealth during the Jamahiriya was and still is very unevenly distributed. It should be noted that 23% of the population in Libya lives in a state of poverty.

army officers, the covert operations units commanded by Colonel W. Boukhmada exterminated the unit's operational leaders who had taken refuge in the town of Derna. In this operation, M. A. Marâach, one of the battalion's leading bomb experts, was killed by a group of assailants from the jihadist fiefdom of Chiha. In the same week in May 2014, the booby-trapped car of A. Chaâlali, who was responsible for attacks on Benghazi armouries, exploded, killing its owner and two others with him. These two targeted actions were only the beginning of a cycle of repression against the battalion. Pursued by the army, lacking any tribal protection and without political support or resources, the Abu Mahjen Battalion, like many other jihadist movements in Cyrenaica, opted for self-funding through the use of arms. Two new types of action have thus appeared in its repertoire – kidnappings for ransom and attacks on armoured vehicles transporting cash.

A kidnapping spree

June 2014 was punctuated by multiple attacks on armoured vehicles transporting cash for banks in the central region, primarily in Sirte. Sirte is held by jihadist splinter groups, including the Abu Mahjen Battalion, which has not helped to refute accusations that it lay behind these attacks.

During the same period the battalion carried out a series of kidnappings involving businessmen or members of the central region's tribal elite. The ransoms demanded were so high that in some cases the hostages' families were forced to carry out reprisals against the presumed members of the jihadist group living in the towns of Cyrenaica in order to secure the captives' release. These kidnappings and reprisals resulted in numerous clashes involving jihadist factions and heavily armed tribal militias.

Since early July 2014 the battalion seems to be mutating, turning gradually from a jihadist splinter group to criminal violence in an attempt to mobilise the financial resources it needs to survive.

The jihad for oil: gaining a place in the new Libya

A further significant mutation in the history of the Abu Mahjen Battalion began with its participation in the attempt to retake the oil terminals in the Ajdabiya region. In April 2014 the General National Congress, in a state of confusion, passed a law calling for the removal by armed force of the blockade of the Briga oil terminals, a blockade that had been erected by local militias. After voting to pass this law, the authorities in Tripoli appealed to the armed jihadist factions in Cyrenaica for assistance. This appeal included

a major financial incentive for armed groups engaged in the "terminal liberation" campaign.

The Abu Mahjen Battalion was one of the first groups to join the project, and as a result received substantial sums of money.¹⁵ Its participation, however, earned it a stinging rejection from the Cyrenaica population, whose support of the blockade leader, Ibrahim Jadran, remained steadfast throughout the crisis. Battalion leaders on several occasions attempted to justify their decision to side with the Tripoli authorities by acknowledging that they were pursuing a two-fold objective – ensuring wages for their fighters who would as a result be paid by the central government and, first and foremost, occupying the oil terminals or oil fields themselves. It was this latter objective that represented the true purpose of the battalion's actions: it was intent on taking over a fiefdom that would provide it with substantial resources and enable it to play a strategic role on the Libyan and international petroleum stage.

Daily armed violence: the town of Sabha

Following the fall of Qaddafi, the southern region of Fezzan in general, and the city of Sabha in particular, experienced a resurgence in inter-tribal conflicts and armed reprisals as levels of violence were fed by the rise in smuggled weapons, stiff competition among various local factions for control of the country's southern border, and disputes over land containing large underground resources. After the fall of the Jamahiriya in late 2011 the city's population doubled as a result of the massive influx of the "internally displaced" – Libyans who had become refugees in their own country.¹⁶ NATO bombings and tribal clashes, the most important incidents of which occurred in May 2013 and January 2014,¹⁷ served to cleanse both ethnically and tribally neighbourhoods where only a single tribe or, at best, groups linked by alliances now live (Tabib, 2013).

Along with the ethnic and tribal segregation that has been taking place, since the spring of 2012 various neighbourhoods have been experiencing a feverish race to equip themselves with weapons and store munitions, as though the residents were seeking to arm themselves against attack from their neighbours. As a result, the city has gradually turned into a vast armed camp, with the weapons concealed in residential areas. These arsenals are generally small, hardly exceed a few homes, and include a small area where machine-gun-equipped vehicles can be parked.

Two main tribes are vying for control of the city: the Ouled Slimane (allied with the Hssawnas and the Boussifs), and

¹⁵ The battalion, like most other jihadist factions, refused to join with the Ministry of Defence (even though doing so was a simple formality), and therefore it did not receive any pay for its fighters. However, in Libya there are many ways to work around this type of situation, and as a result the Abu Mahjen Battalion entered into a support agreement (*helf al fazâ*, literally a "mobilisation alliance") with the Benghazi brigades, which were officially in charge of the liberation campaign. A portion of the budget for the Benghazi Shield Force was legally transferred to the battalion. At this point, only Islamists were sitting in the General Congress, following the withdrawal and resignation of most of the other MPs.

¹⁶ After entire clans and tribes were expelled from their lands in the war, Sabha was gradually transformed into a refugee camp for populations who were often looked on as losers in the war. Refugees arrived there after having fled the combat zones in the north and west, especially zones deemed, rightly or wrongly, to be loyal to the former government (Gdhdhfas from Sirte, Tawerghas from the coast, Toubous from southern Fezzan and Tuaregs from Ghedames). These groups quickly became mobilised in militias, thereby contributing to the spiral of war.

¹⁷ Incidents that resulted in the deaths of 143 and 69 people, respectively.

the Toubous (who have ties to the Gdhedhfas, the M'garhas and the Werfellas). The violence that takes place between these two belligerents can take the form of either a widespread confrontation or a limited skirmish.

Two major confrontations have taken place in Sabha, resulting in dozens of victims and major destruction of public buildings. In both of the city's two important battles the parties used heavy weapons and artillery in an effort to redraw the boundaries of their zones of influence. Skirmishes, meanwhile, are more numerous, but result in fewer deaths and are generally the work of second-ranked factions attempting to gain a foothold through the use of weapons on the city's political and security chessboard.

Of all the cities in the Fezzan, Sabha was the locale of and the principal stake in the violent confrontations involving the Toubous and other factions loyal to the central government in Tripoli (Lacher, 2013). There is nothing arbitrary in this contest, and its rationale can be found in the strategic role played by this city. In effect, Sabha is a hub where three major routes connect from the south: the Dongola road, which starts in the city, goes through Koufra and then on toward Darfur; the Chad road; and finally the road that crosses the southern part of Algeria and goes to Niger and Mali. So from Sabha there are routes that carry the transborder commerce to all three countries, involving primarily the trafficking of weapons, subsidised consumer goods, black-market fuel and, importantly, illegal migrants (Pliez, 2004). Sabha is also the capital of Fezzan, a territory that has the country's largest petroleum reserves. It also has an international airport and one of the country's largest military installations, which still houses sophisticated weapons spared in the 2011 bombings.

The armed violence that occurred in Sabha was therefore fuelled by numerous material interests. These include the need of tribal factions to control territory that was considered a resource, ensure the security of all of the Fezzan, control its borders, manage trafficking and smuggling to and from southern neighbours, build up the arsenals of weapons seized as part of the events of 2011, tax large oil companies for use of their sites, and collect funds illegally charged at the *bawabets* (gates, i.e. checkpoints on the roads run by the militias).

Tribal violence among the factions in Sabha is one of the destabilising factors that can be seen throughout the

Sahel-Sahara region. The proliferation of weapons supplied from the Fezzan to adjoining countries has contributed to the spread of criminal bands and groups, thereby undermining the power of these countries' armies and security forces. But there is one other destabilising factor that is inherent in the tribal structure of this vast region. Since the first clashes in Sabha in March 2013 there have been numerous instances of revenge attacks reported in Chad and Niger involving members of the Toubou and Ouled Slimane tribes. Here it should be remembered that the tribes living in Sabha have influence in most of the countries that neighbour Libya. This means that whenever a crime is committed in the Fezzan capital, reprisals are bound to occur somewhere in the Sahara-Sahel area.

Conclusion

The violent activity that has brought tribal factions into confrontation with jihadist groups since the fall of the Qaddafi regime has undergone a significant increase because Libya's new authorities have been unable to establish a national army. The security challenge is all the more pressing because those institutions that sprang up since the elections of July 7th 2012 have been unable to implement any new methods of regulating the conflicts among the country's various factions. Conscious of both the state's structural weakness and the perils that threaten their interests, tribes have been quick to equip themselves with armed militias while jihadist groups have simultaneously been expanding.

The confrontations that have occurred over the past two years have centred primarily around issues of control over tribal territories and cross-border smuggling routes, establishing a presence in other strategic sites, and the predation of resources. Far from being practices that are limited solely to specific militias, resource predation and organised criminal activity have gradually come to dominate the violent actions of armed factions, whether they are jihadist, tribal or ethnic in nature.

The effects on tribal coexistence and the presence of jihadist networks in the Sahara-Sahel region are aggravating violence across this part of the African continent. The divisions among the various Libyan tribes and the clashes with jihadist groups are resulting in the propagation of violence generated by the age-old customary obligation to seek revenge.

Appendix: typology of violence and armed factions in Libya

Opposing factions		Issues	Specific examples
Tribal faction	Tribal faction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redrawing tribal territorial boundaries • Revenge • Occupation of strategic locations: border posts, barracks, weapons depots, smuggling routes, oil fields, local markets, areas where the former regime's arsenals were located 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clashes involving Misrata militias and clashes between the fighters from Bani Walid • Clashes between Zintans and Mechachiyas • Clashes between the Gdhedhfas and Ouled Slimane • Clashes in the Fezzan between Toubous, on the one hand, and Zouis and Ouled Slimane, on the other
Loyalist forces (militias loyal to the Ministry of Defence)	Tribe or town deemed not loyal	Weakening of political potential in the context of competition for supremacy in state institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aziziya region attack by the Shield Force on fighters from the Wercheffana tribe
Tribal militias	Civilians or militants from politically motivated rights groups	Suppression of movements protesting against the authoritarian drift of the new rulers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suppression of demonstrations organised by residents of the Gharghour section of Tripoli on November 15th 2013 • Suppression carried out by the Misrata militias stationed in the neighbourhood since the capital was taken
Jihadist groups	Political militants and civil society activists	Elimination of historic or charismatic leaders suspected of opposing the "Islamic project"	Assassinations of lawyers and human-rights activists since the Jamahiriya and of the original leaders of the February 2011 uprising, S. Bouguîguis and A. Messmari.
Jihadist groups	Army units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military occupations of towns and garrisons • Armed attacks on banks or armoured vehicles carrying cash 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operation Al Karama led by General K. Hafftar • Attacks on armoured vehicles carrying cash from Sirte and Weddan
Criminal gangs	Marginalised ethnic or tribal groups	Extortion, sexual exploitation and forced enrolment in criminal organisations	Kidnappings and rapes of immigrant girls from sub-Saharan Africa or Libyan refugees in Tripoli

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