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Solidarity and fragmentation in Libya's associational life

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Abstract

This article is a sociohistorical analysis of two regions of Libya, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, following independence in 1951. Building on Pierson (2004), it focuses on path dependent trends in solidarity and the fragmentation of Libya's associative space. It argues that associational life has played a twofold role in Libya's political and social history. First, it actively contributed to the strengthening of resistance against colonialism and tyranny, the development of state institutions and the domestication of state power. Second, it contributed to processes of bonding within groups that compromised the development of a Libyan state, which was a factor in the onset of the Libyan civil war (2014–2020). This dual nature of the associative space is an important point of inquiry for Libyan historiography and something that is important for policymakers presiding over the country's state, nation building and economic development to understand.

Hisham Matar's statement below speaks of the centrality of social and political history to the dynamics of the current conflict in Libya:

> "*Dreams have consequences. There is no turning back. A revolution is not a painless march to the gates of freedom and justice. It is a struggle between rage and hope, between the temptation to destroy and the desire to build. Its temperament is desperate. It is a tormented response to the past, to all that has happened, the recalled and unrecalled injustices - for the memory of a revolution reaches much further back than the memory of its protagonists."* Hisham Matar, The New Yorker, 2014

Existing analysis on the Libyan conflict, however, remains largely focused on the period following the 2011 Arab uprisings and its humanitarian, security, and development[1]. This article follows Pierson's (2004) emphasis on *temporality* as integral to social analysis and presents some reflections on trends in solidarity and fragmentation in Libya's associative space since its independence[2]. The analysis also draws on Noriega's (2012) concept of associative space, composed of autonomous groupings and collective actions that exist outside the formal political, religious, and economic institutions that channel collective voluntary action in disparate areas. The associative space is "*characterized by the logic of reciprocity, solidarity, symmetrical interaction and the defense of common identities*" (Noriega, 2012, p. 47).

This article covers three key periods of Libyan history: The monarchy (1951–1969), the Gaddafi period (1969–

1 Lacher (2020); Swesi et al. (2020); Youngs (2014); Bassiouni (2013).

2 Pierson (2004) calls for bringing "temporality" to bear on social analysis. He explains the importance of embedding social and political analysis in time and argues that analysis of variables in the social sciences is distorted when they do not take into account their temporal context. He holds that placing politics in time can enrich the "understanding of complex social dynamics" (Pierson, 2004, p. 2).

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2011) and the present. The research draws on the author's PhD thesis[3], which used primary data from archives in London, Rome, and Tunis, as well as 80 semi-structured interviews with Libyans and Italians who witnessed the period between 1911 and 1969 in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania (many of whom are deeply involved in Libya's present crisis). Associational life is argued to have played a twofold role in Libya's political and social history. First, it actively contributed to the strengthening of resistance against colonialism and tyranny, the development of state institutions and the domestication of state power as experienced in the Kingdom of Libya (1951–1969). Second, deep localism developed, mainly as an inheritance of aggressive colonialism and the institutionalization and the entrenchment of regional differences[4]. Libya's associative space saw bonding occurring within groups that compromised the development of a Libyan state, and this was a factor in the dynamics of the civil war.

A sociohistorical contextualized understanding of the dual and often contradictory role of Libya's associative space is needed for policymakers to succeed in nation building and economic development. Recognizing its capacity to contribute to the consolidation of statehood, while at the same time threatening it, is necessary to understand the dynamics of social and political change in the history of modern Libya. A more nuanced approach to understanding the evolution of the associative space is also necessary for international actors engaged in Libya.

The next three sections provide an analysis of the development of associational life in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. First, a formative phase during which associations experienced a period of growth following independence. This growth was not without its challenges and was circumvented by political rivalries. Second, a propaganda phase during which associations in Libya were largely instrumentalized by the Gaddafi regime to further its interests. Third, a regeneration phase which covers the period following the 2011 Arab uprisings. In each phase, fragmentation and solidarity among social actors are visible both locally as well as across regions in Libya with key associations operating at the crossroads between aspirations for a national identity on the one hand, and regional or localized grievances and priorities, on the other.

The formative phase (1943–1969): A slow and difficult birth

The birth and development of an indigenous associative space outside the traditional religious space of the zawiya[5] in Libya was slow and difficult, mainly because of the succession of foreign rulers who occupied the country. While there is evidence of the existence of a few associations in Libya during the Ottoman period, such as an association for women and another political association[6], the associative space, in general, was limited. This is especially true for those that had a political identity. Associations were not allowed to operate during that period or later when Libya was colonized by Italy for fear that they would have empowered the Libyan resistance[7]. It is no surprise that while the Libyan associative space was restricted, Italian associations were thriving. Fascist and Communist associations actively operated in Libya with very limited engagement by the Libyan population[8]. This was not the case in the diaspora, however. Libyans in the diaspora developed their own organizations. In the 1920s, Libyans in exile shifted their attention from collecting arms, money and supplies to supporting the resistance in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

3 El Taraboulsi (2020).
4 Ibid.
5 A zawiya is an Islamic religious school and a meeting point for a group of followers of an Islamic society that coalesced around a person considered to have spiritual authority. The establishment of the first zawiya by the Grand Sanusi was in Bayda in 1843 (Evans-Pritchard, 1946, p. 844) and there the Sanusiyah, a politico-religious Sufi order, consolidated its power in Cyrenaica.
6 al-Tir (2013).
7 El Taraboulsi (2020).
8 Ibid.

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They were also instrumental in developing political and civic associations in other Arab countries like Egypt and Syria, with those associations used as a platform to call for the independence of Libya[9].

A growth of Libyan associations took place following the end of Italian colonization with the transfer of Libya to the British Military Administration and then through the rise of the monarchy in 1951—bearing some resemblance to the effervescence of associations following the downfall of Gaddafi in 2011. The expansion of the Libyan associative space came hand in hand with the emergence of political parties and trade unions that saw the development of Libyan statehood tied to the growth of a national consciousness (although as shown later this was fraught with contestation). More traditional religious forms of association were retained, such as those established through the zawiya, and modern associations that adopted the western model of an organization of people united by a common cause, were established. In the words of a Libyan contemporary political activist whose mother led an association for women after 1951:

> "*This was a period of stability […]. There was a constitution and there were institutions. [..] In addition to big organizations that had a political role such as the ʿUmar al-Mukhtar Association, there was the Nahda Association for women and there were women leaders such as Hamida el-Eneizy and Hamida bin 'Amer. Those organizations were important. They connected the people to the king and the state."*
> (Cited in El Taraboulsi, 2020)

Associations contributed to the shaping of a Libyan national and political consciousness, but this consciousness was distinct in each region especially among the political elite. An analysis of the emergence and development of associations during that period reveals forms of cooperation among social actors and between social actors and the state, as well as deep political contestation regarding the shape and form of the new Libyan state. Because of divisions within the political landscape, they were later restricted under King Idris[10]. Women's associations, however, were an exception; there is evidence that they continued to operate and flourish with rising regional and international interest in a generation of civically engaged Libyan women. Jewish associations also flourished and developed strong networks within Libya as well as abroad around the time of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and through to the Six Day War in 1967. During that period, there was a mass exodus of the Jewish population from Libya to Israel and other parts of the world—most notably Rome[11].

The emergence and unravelling of the Umar al-Mukhtar Association[12] reveals deep political contestation at the heart of this formative period. The association upheld national goals of independence and autonomy, but its loyalty and successes were always perceived to be tied to Cyrenaica and not to the nation as a whole[13]. Named after the celebrated Libyan resistance leader, Umar al-Mukhtar, the association emerged in Cairo as a club of former combatants against the Italian occupation[14]. In 1943, it was formally established in Benghazi and then a branch of it was established in Derna, which is also in the eastern region of Libya. The association was composed of and run by 147 young Libyans. Because of its popularity in the east of Libya, members of this ʿUmar al-Mukhtar Association ran for parliament in June 1950 in Cyrenaica and consolidated substantial power[15].

9 Baldinetti (2010, p.69).
10 El Taraboulsi (2020).
11 Ibid.
12 In 1950, a law for associations was passed and this was followed by a law for journalism. As a result, the ʿUmar al-Mukhtar Club became registered as the National Association, although it continued to be referred to as the ʿUmar al-Mukhtar Association.
13 El Taraboulsi (2020).
14 Esposito (2009).
15 al-Sharif (2010, p.110); Baldinetti (2010).

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The Association also supported the development of scout groups which were particularly popular in the period following the end of Italian occupation. According to al-'Eneizi, scout groups presented an opportunity for the Association to contribute to the reconstruction of Benghazi after it emerged from the years of war, which had destroyed its infrastructure and left it in poverty[16]. Initially, an attempt was made by the Association to establish a Libyan scouts team in 1944, but it was unsuccessful. The idea was raised again in 1947 when the Association sent a request to the British Military Administration regarding the establishment of a Libyan scouts team—this time it was successful. There was impressive support from the people of Benghazi. It is reported that they donated money, food and equipment, especially when the team members made trips outside Benghazi. In 1951, the Benghazi scouts team was dismantled when the ʿUmar al-Mukhtar Association unraveled. Another scouts group was later established in Benghazi in 1955 by Mansur al-Kikhiya who coordinated with 'Ali Khalifah al-Zaidi who had founded a scouts group in Tripoli in 1954[17].

While the Association's success and strong following in eastern Libya strengthened communication between the people and the emerging state, it also weakened the legitimacy of the state in two ways. First, through its concentration in the eastern region of Libya and limited engagement in the western region and second, through its opposition to western engagement in Libya. Interviews conducted with journalists and civil society leaders who witnessed the period of King Idris, indicated the association's limited engagement with political movements in the western regions. It continued to be associated with Benghazi and the cities of Libya's eastern regions. It was also confined to urban centers, and failed to build coalitions with opposing political groups. It could not appeal to young people from Bedouin and rural communities[18]. The Association's dismantling in 1951 is usually ascribed to a decision made by the prime minister Mohammed Saqzeli, who sought to reduce the threat of the organization's capacity to hold protests against the government. Protests had broken out when an unidentified dead body had been found at a hospital in Benghazi. Many historians, however, hold that it was the animosity between Idris and the Association that led to its dismantling[19].

On the Association's rejection of western control, the ʿUmar al Mukhtar Association was firmly opposed to British control and influence in Libya post-independence. In a speech commemorating the Libyan hero ʿUmar al-Mukhtar, Muhammed al-Sabri, a member of the governing board of the Association, gave a scathing condemnation of the British Military Administration's role in Libya's reconstruction:

> "*Tell us Umar [ʿUmar al-Mukhtar], what would you have done had you been with us in body and soul? You rose in arms against those who wanted to rule the country alongside the nationalists. Those were the [Italian] colonizers and you refused to see any future other than of a free country led by a free people. Now, what would you make of those allies [the British] who we supported like lions in difficult times and welcomed them to our country joyfully but they now have a monopoly over our country and have rendered us strangers in our land, deprived of its riches?"* (al-Mughayribi, 1993, p. 45)

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16 al-'Eneizi (2011).
17 Ibid.
18 al-Mufti (2012, p. 20).
19 al-Mufti (2012, p. 287). It is also worth situating the analysis here within the broader political context. There were two key political currents at the time. The first political camp was a unionist one. It saw Libya, with its three regions of Tripolitania, Barqa and Fezzan, as a unified monarchy under King Idris as the first king of Libya, with a constitution and a democratic parliamentary system. The stronghold of this camp was the Umar al-Mukhtar Association, with its two branches in the eastern region of Libya in Derna and Benghazi. The second political camp was federalist. It called for a federal union of the three regions under the leadership of King Idris, while ensuring that each region had its separate army and foreign policy with its strong hold in the western region (Bin-Halim, 2011, p. 20).

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This opposition by the Association to continued Western engagement, particularly British and American interests, during the period of King Idris was, however, in conflict with its support for the legitimacy of the king. In fact, it has become clear that this opposition actually compromised the authority of the king who was relying heavily on the political and economic support of Western nations to build the new Libya. This led to a conflict between the Association and King Idris, especially in 1947 with the dissolution of all political parties and the formation of the National Congress by a Sanusi decree. In December of that year. the dissolution of political parties and the formation of al-Mu'tamar al-Watani (the National Congress) caused a split within the ʿUmar al-Mukhtar club. The Derna branch wished to respect the Sanusi decree, while the central branch in Benghazi adopted a critical position and argued that the national question should not be a prerogative of the party but that, on the contrary, it concerned all people[20].

The propaganda phase (1969–2011): Manufacturing consent

Despite restrictions on the emergence of associations in Libya under King Idris, there was still space for civic participation through trade unions and women's associations that continued to exist. The Gaddafi period, however, witnessed a silencing of the civic space in Libya. By the end of the 1970s, all associations had either been dissolved and banned, or taken over by the state[21]. Associational life continued within the diaspora, but that too was faced with brutal repression. The development of a national consciousness that had started following independence was circumvented by the regime. Traditional civil society, such zawiya and waqf[22], was brought under the control of the state. Organizations were established that claimed to continue the legacy of associationism in Libya but actually sought to manufacture consent and strengthen the stronghold of the regime both domestically and internationally.

Between 1969 and 2011 the Gaddafi regime paused the state and nation building momentum that had been undertaken, albeit with significant contestation, within the civic space following independence. In 1972, Gaddafi issued a law that banned political parties and ushered in an exercise of brutal and unremitting suppression that made the formation of, or affiliation to, political parties an executable criminal act. In 1973, in the aftermath of the declaration of the Popular Revolution, hundreds of intellectuals from different backgrounds were arrested. The political scene featured only state-run organizations such as the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) and revolutionary committees, also known as the Basic Popular Congress (BPC). Mass arrests and executions of intellectuals and political activists, within Libya and beyond, continued in the 1970s through to the early 2000s[23].

While free associations and all forms of political participation were banned (a famous slogan in Libya at the time was 'mann tahazzab khan' or 'whoever joins a political party is a traitor'), foundations and charities were launched by the regime to strengthen its hold domestically and to improve its image internationally. Gaddafi's second son, Saif al-Islam's political emergence came hand in hand with the establishment of the Gaddafi International Foundation for Charitable Associations (GIFCA). The foundation was primarily funded by the state and through its support, many other civil society organizations were born. While the foundation had limited impact on the ground, the charity contributed to the strengthening of Saif al-Islam's political clout. Through it, he managed to broker a deal in 2000 for the release of the western hostages held by the Abu Sayaf group in the Philippines[24]. In 2009, Saif al-Islam established a human rights organization that spun off from GIFCA called the Arab Alliance for Democracy, Development and Human Rights. The organization had a mandate that consisted of tracking human rights abuses in the Middle East. The meeting that launched the organization was held in Tripoli with Saif al-Islam announced as

20 Baldinetti (2010, p. 126).
21 Romanet Perroux (2019); Bribena (2017).
22 Waqf is a charitable Islamic endowment. It involves the transfer of a property from its owner to a charitable cause and its main characteristic is that it is permanent and irrevocable and its benefits are passed on from one generation to another (Abdulwahab, 2017).
23 Salah and El Taraboulsi (2013).
24 Pargeter (2006, p. 222).

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chair. The emergence of these organizations was about manufacturing consent and creating an exterior of progress that masked continued political and social fragmentation—no genuine civic participation was allowed[25].

Gaddafi's regime also sought to deepen the legacies of localism and social and political fragmentation through manipulating tribal and ethnic loyalties. After the first ten years of his rule and as his popularity started to diminish, Gaddafi fed rivalries among Libyan tribes through selective patronage to consolidate his control. For example, within the armed forces, Gaddafi's own tribe the Qadhadfa were pitted against the Magariha, which were close to the Warfalla and Zintan tribes. Later, the Zintan tribe would be one of the first tribes in western Libya to join the revolt against Gaddafi in 2011[26]. Dissent and resistance to the regime were largely crushed:

> "*For forty-two years, from the Great September Revolution on 1 September 1969 up to 17 February 2011, when the Libyan civil war broke out, Libya was dominated by a political vision that formally denied both the possibility and the right of Libyans to civil activism of any kind outside that sanctioned by the Gaddafi regime. Resistance to the regime, its objectives, and policies was rigidly excluded, and those who manifested it, in any form, faced unlimited imprisonment and death.*" (Joffe, 2016, p. 117)

Associations, as a result, were mostly absent from the public space except for charities and those sanctioned by the regime:

> "*The majority were active as charity groups, perhaps to avoid clashes with the government. The prevailing supposition was that there was a lack of civic culture in Libyan society, but in fact this was only an effect of the political regime. The Qadhafi regime adopted a totalitarian ideology which fully occupied the public space in society, and therefore according to Qadhafi's theory there was no real need for these associations and very little justification for them to have an independent existence.*" (El Sahli, 2015, p. 271)

Libyans in the diaspora were also affected by the machinations of the regime. The 1980s were marked by extrajudicial assassinations at home and abroad, including in London[27]. Based on the experience of British-Libyans in the U.K., it is argued that Gaddafi's Libya was carefully cloned and recreated within the streets of London:

> "*Libya was a constant source of anxiety and fear even to those living abroad; trust was lacking and respondents related how, in London, Libyans feared one another. Gaddafi's despotism extended beyond the shores of Tripoli and Benghazi, and Libyans who opposed his regime were targeted everywhere. No one was safe, and the younger generation of British Libyans inherited their parents' burden. […] Libyans in the UK are as divided as those in Libya by region of origin, tribe, and ethnicity. One respondent, whose parents come from the western and southern regions of Libya, related how she had little connections to Libyans from the east even in the UK. She said: 'I feel that Tripolitanians, in general, are more free to associate with other regions but that people from the east—I am sure case by case there are exceptions—but people from the east try to find one another; they are tight-knit. And they feel different from those in Tripoli.'*" (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2017, p. 135).

25 Salah and El Taraboulsi (2013).
26 El Doufani (2011).
27 El Taraboulsi-McCarthy (2017).

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By restricting meaningful civic and political participation in Libya, the Gaddafi regime did not allow the development of social and political national consciousness to take place. Solidarity across localities and between regions did not grow, and a culture of suspicion, fed by the clamping down on any form of political expression emerged, both in Libya and for Libyans in the diaspora.

The regeneration phase: Loyalties, divided

In the period following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, a large number of associations emerged in Libya. Like their predecessors, they had divided loyalties, even as they sought to re-establish the Libyan nation. Around 250 new organizations were established during and immediately after the revolution in the eastern region of Libya[28]. The development of those associations was a means through which the nation building process was to be launched. At the outset, the main focus of those organizations was humanitarian, providing food and shelter, as well as medical aid during the war against Gaddafi's forces. Those same constituencies explored ways to shift strategies toward a more sustainable presence. The initial period witnessed significant solidarity among those organizations[29]. NGOs, according to Sahli, helped to form the National Transitional Council (NTC) which embodied "*some aspects of government, with representation from various segments of society, such as doctors, engineers and judges*" (Sahli, 2015, p. 273). Moreover, Sahli's research shows:

> "*[…] how quickly and effectively NGOs came together to confront the regime and to occupy the public space abandoned by the government, to provide essential services and play advocacy roles. The NGOs were able to provide the framework to prevent the collapse of society, which showed their strength, effectiveness and importance. Religious, political, and social roles traditionally played by the government came to be played by some of these associations for a period of time. New types of associations emerged from the uprising, driven by religious, business and advocacy concerns."* (Sahli, 2015, p. 273)

Despite the initial solidarity, polarization within the political landscape during the Libyan civil war between 2014 and 2020 manifested itself within the associative space. The Libyan National Army (LNA), which controlled the eastern region of Libya enjoyed assistance from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while Qatar and Turkey supported the defending forces of the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). Both sides received weapons, vehicles and drones despite a UN arms embargo. Each political and military group was supported by its own associative groups. A study on civic participation in Libya in 2015, reported the founding of an association for Libyan judges that emerged in 2012 as an offshoot of its Tunisian counterpart. He described how the association was focusing on the rights of judges who have become "*swayed by the power dominant in the place where they operate."* For instance, a judge in the eastern part of Libya was likely to submit to the forces of the Tobruk-based government. Respondents in this study also described how human rights organizations were documenting violations related to the opposing political faction but not their own[30]. While this might be expected in a severely polarized political climate, it should be viewed as part of a pattern that originated not only in the current social and political dynamics of the Libyan conflict, but also of trends in solidarity and fragmentation that had been present in Libyan society since independence.

28 Salah and El Taraboulsi (2013).
29 Ibid.
30 El Taraboulsi (2016).

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Conclusion

This article has sought to recast scholarly engagement with the Libyan conflict in a way that rejects ahistorical approaches. Instead, it offers an analysis that considers issues of path dependence in solidarity and fragmentation within the Libyan associative space. It has argued for a contextualized understanding of the dual and often contradictory role of Libya's associative space is needed. Recognizing its capacity to contribute to the consolidation of statehood, while at the same time threatening it, is necessary to understand the dynamics of social and political change in the history of modern Libya. Moreover, this dual nature of the associative space is an important point of inquiry for Libyan historiography which has not fully explored this dimension of Libya's past, and its role in identity formation, as well as for policymakers presiding over the country's state, nation building and economic development. A more nuanced approach to understanding the evolution of the associative space is also necessary for international actors engaged in Libya as it calls for a more considered engagement with local actors.

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