Analysis

The Effect of Dernisation: Political Stalemate in Libya

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The campaign carried out by the government of eastern Libya and by military forces associated with it (the Libyan National Army or LNA) since 2014 has been mainly finalized towards capturing Benghazi and Derna from the local municipalities. By July 2017 Benghazi was captured, or, to quote eastern Libyan pundits, "liberated" (although, contrary to the LNA reports, the situation in the city is still far from stable), and **the siege of Derna began**. These advancements of Tobruk and LNA leadership, however, failed to solve harrowing problems affecting the whole of Libya, such as radical Islam, lack of fair leadership or social security, economic stability and development, whose solution remains essential for transitioning Libya from the condition of a failed state to a country on the up-hill track of development.

On the contrary, the tendencies to intra-territorial clashes between different seats of power and military forces in Libya **contributed to the rise of traditional historic trends**: the search for a **new strong leader**, who will be able to keep Libya safe, the fatigue of the war and the rejection of all contemporary centers of power. In this context the dichotomist relationship between tribes vs urban centers, which allows for a semblance of stability in several regions of Libya, constitutes a major destabilizing factor along the coastal planes. Derna and Benghazi are the stark examples of this socio-political conundrum, which has determined the evolution of the social psyche from 2011 onwards. Every subsequent government, of which there were quite a few since the "February Revolution", promised peace and modernization of the state but, instead, what we have been witnessing lately, is the phenomenon of "Dernisation".

Prior to the "Great Siege"

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The main characteristics of the cities in eastern Libya can be found in their **political history**: Derna became the first Ottoman-Arab town in Libya, and it was founded as a bastion against the influence of Bedouin tribes. As a consequence, **Derna was excluded from the tribal system**. Benghazi is younger, but in the 19th century it became the center for the al-Senussi Sufi Islamic network of zawias – the Islamic centers, which united Libyan society first against the Ottoman foe and, later on, the Italian occupation.

In the 20th century the tribes made an attempt to put these cities under their control, but they failed because the ruling elites of Derna and Benghazi reached such a **high level of wealth and power they could assert their independence and oppose allegiance to the tribal power structure** by adopting a cosmopolitan attitude and developing strong connections with external forces. In Benghazi, along with Tripoli (both of them were capitals of the state, according to the constitution) all public offices were distributed among the representatives of the royal family. Meanwhile, keen on maintaining the status quo, Idris I, the only Libyan king, showered the tribes with privileges so that they would effectively abandon the idea of controlling the cities.

In the Gaddafi era, after the early 1970s, the situation changed. **Eastern Libya lost its privileged position**, which it had enjoyed as the seat of the monarchy, and all natural resources were then shared between the tribes of Tripolitania and, to a smaller degree, the al-Awagir tribe in Cyrenaica. For the time being, **oil became the main source of revenue for the state and the ruling elites**. Oil was found in Libya just before the 1969 coup led by Gaddafi, and the coastal cities, with their new ports and facilities, became the best points for establishing control over the oil flow. Since that moment, the tribes reasserted their efforts to take over the cities but under the authoritarian and repressive rule of Gaddafi they largely failed. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s he promised the tribes that they would have a "share" of influence in the cities, which translated into a peculiar, dual organization of the urban space of the cities of Cyrenaica: the city center was built with stone buildings and hosted social services, while the tribal camps were used as a transmission belt between the city and the desert. Such camps were not self-sufficient, however, as their welfare strictly depended on the city center and on the services provided by the state.

Post-Gaddafi era

The power vacuum and overall struggle that followed the **collapse of the central state cleared the path for the tribes into the city**. Thus, the largest as well as mightiest tribes of Cyrenaica, the al-Abeidat and al-Awagir, took over control of the state infrastructures located in the suburbs of Derna and Benghazi, respectively. These included ports and airports, and oil pipelines in the nearest districts to the city centers. However, the al-Abeidat and al-Awagir had to fight hard to reinforce their positions in the cities, and they ultimately failed again because of the emergence of a new power in Cyrenaica's urban centers: the **radical Islamist parties** and **militias**.

Radical Islam never gained a significant support base in Libya. However, after the beginning of the civil war, several sleeping cells and branches of organizations such as the **Muslim Brotherhood** and **al-Qaeda** were activated. By the autumn of 2011 Islamists had already consolidated their positions in Egypt and Tunisia, and they were planning to seize power in all of North Africa. Libya, with its resources of oil and water, could become an important economic link between Tunis and Cairo. The effort was powerful and internationally financed, so that the **Islamists became the most organized and structured force in the Libyan political milieu**.

However, the Islamist groups neither received significant grassroots support nor managed to create a united political front in order to increase their own effectiveness. Even if the network of social services established by Ansar al-Sharia (associated with al-Qaeda), attracted marginal urban social groups, this powerful organization failed to become an ultimate authority. In fact, in the rural areas, power was held by tribal sheikhs who, in spite of helping the Islamists out of financial considerations, were not eager to accept their supremacy. In the cities the clashes

between different groups, militias and clans hindered the establishment of political and social stability. As a result of this power vacuum, **in 2014 Benghazi and Derna became natural targets for ISIS**. The Islamic state successfully occupied several blocks in both cities, but failed to come to terms with local power players. While ISIS fought against the LNA alongside Ansar al-Sharia, the two jihadist groups also confronted each other on permanent basis. In 2016-2017, as a result of local discontent, most of IS' forces had to leave Benghazi and Derna (for example see: Al-Warfalli, 2016), which was exactly the moment when the LNA of General Khalifa Haftar approached the cities and began the siege.

The siege and aftermath

At the beginning of the siege, both Benghazi and Derna were ruled by shuras – Islamist councils, including authorities from Ansar al-Sharia and its allies, which formed a wide coalition of Islamist organisations. **Haftar officially launched his campaign against Benghazi and Derna in 2014**, but the operations started in earnest only after three years of foot-dragging: in April-May 2017 he finally succeeded to enter Benghazi, and by July announced his victory over the local shura. He also claimed to have expelled the last IS forces, although they had actually already left Benghazi and Derna in 2016, when the battle for Sirte began. Derna became the last goal for Haftar, and its siege began right after the "liberation" of Benghazi.

In both cases, the strategy was the same: **Haftar blocked supplies to the city** and **deprived it of food**, **medicines** and **fuel**. As Benghazi is a rather large city, Haftar blocked several city quarters, whereas in much smaller Derna the LNA managed to surround the entire city. This caused a humanitarian catastrophe, and none of the world powers expressed its support for the siege, except Egypt, which was directly interested in eliminating all the Islamist forces in close proximity to its borders. Lots of civilians – among them women and children – were left to starve to death, as had already happened in some districts of Benghazi. When criticised by Western countries, Haftar responded: "*Our forces' siege on Derna is now at an irrevocable point, there is no going back*". He rejected "any mediation that targets the lifting of the siege on Derna", and said that "no food, no medicines and no fuel are allowed to enter the city". After nine long months, the assault of Derna began on 7 May 2018, following the return of Haftar after a two-week absence, and causing demolition and a new wave of starvation; and, except for concrete military tactics, nothing changed in Haftar's policy towards the city.

The motivation for such a repressive action may be interpreted in different ways. First of all, if Haftar aimed to control the entire coastline, the easiest way to do this was to completely destroy any serious opposition force. Second, and this point of view was expressed by Abd al-Basit Igtit, a remarkable face in the Libyan political arena, it may be Haftar's revenge on the people of Derna, who had already fought IS quite effectively before his endeavour and might very well challenge his monopoly on anti-Islamist and counter-terrorist operations. For Haftar, personal image is crucial, as he considers himself the "savior of the country". Thus, when anybody challenges the authenticity of his success, Haftar automatically considers him a mortal enemy in the struggle for power over Libya. **The militias of Derna had once been one of the most powerful armed groups in eastern Libya, and as such they posed a serious threat to Haftar's claims for supremacy**.

The internal aftermath of the sieges began to take shape at the end of August 2017, and immediately affected two basic issues: **the rivalry between tribes and cities** and the **lack of a strong leadership that would be accepted by most of the political players and gain the loyalty of citizens**.

The al-Abeidat and al-Awagir intended "to tribalise" Derna and Benghazi by building a new social and political structure that would implement their tribal hierarchy and transfer all the power to the sheiks, their clans and trustees. When Benghazi was captured, the al-Awagir authorities were ready to take the levers of rule in their hands, and they provided Haftar with military support and took part in maintaining the alliances with other tribes in order to continue the struggle. **The**

tribalisation of the city would mean the total inclusion of political structures within the hierarchy of emirs and sheikhs, as well as submission of economic mechanisms to the needs of the tribe and to the system of redistribution that is completely connected to the frameworks the tribal alliances.

In contrast, Khalifa Haftar, who considered Benghazi the new capital of Cyrenaica, **had different plans**. Now there are three political centers in eastern Libya: Tobruk (seat of Parliament), al-Bayda (government headquarters), and al-Mardj (headquarters of the LNA). Benghazi, the second Libyan city by size, is capable of accommodating these three power centres. However, a "captured" city does not always mean a "defeated" city, and some remnants of shura forces and their supporters still remain in Benghazi. **Moving all symbols of power to the city might solve the problems related to their presence** but this required Haftar to significantly **beef up the security apparatus in the city to counter any threats to the sanctum sanctorum of his power base in Benghazi**.

Within this process, the al-Awagir tribe got nothing. Before the campaign the tribe controlled the airport, the port and other strategic points in Benghazi. After Haftar's victory, they were left without any pressure leverage and, therefore, without any guarantees for further influence and power. That caused a conflict between the al-Awagir and Haftar in August-September 2017, which was exploited by the government of Tripoli (Government of National Accord, GNA), which invited one influential member of the tribe, and former officer in Haftar's Special Forces, to take the position of Deputy Minister of Interior (Acting Minister, in fact) in the GNA. In the context of clashes between Haftar and the GNA, Haftar viewed this event as a challenge from both the GNA and al-Awagir tribe elites, and the reaction of the LNA took a rather harsh course.

It is not clear yet whether or not the al-Awagir will take any steps to win back Benghazi, as they consider the city to be within their area of influence, but the fact that a serious split between the LNA and its most powerful ally has appeared is quite telling: Haftar's charisma is upheld by his personal behaviour and by his personal guarantees and promises to his partners, and if he fails to make good on his advances, the LNA would likely collapse into multiple small military groups, losing its leverage as the only organized armed force in the country.

Derna might very well reproduce the Benghazi standoff. When Haftar captures the city completely, or, to be more precise, when the people of Derna are starved enough to surrender, **he will have to share power with the al-Abeidat tribe** – the biggest tribe of Cyrenaica. If he refuses to make any concessions, the al-Abeidat might oppose him, using neighbouring Tobruk as their base. As a matter of fact, the tribes do not need political power in itself, because they aim to control the oil and water infrastructure in order to get their share of resources allocation and revenues distribution, in accordance with their claims for historical rights. If Haftar wants **to hold firm in eastern Libya**, **he must take the tribal interests into full consideration**.

What is "Dernisation"?

At the end of September 2017 Abd al-Basit Igtet travelled around Libya in order to "get acquainted with the problems of each city". It produced a loud response from Derna on social networks, as the people of Derna hoped Igtet might save their starving city. That is the clear representation of the second aftermath of the sieges: **people had lost their trust in any existing political powers and turned to new faces and new organizations**.

Abd al-Basit Igtet has never proposed any clear political program and has never engaged in helping Libya to reach a political agreement. Instead, **he is simply proclaiming that if he becomes head of state**, **he will be able to solve all problems, as he has a "special program"**. Judging from his public speeches, Igtet is trapped inside a non-specific narrative, avoiding clear formulas for the socio-economic future of Libya. However, in spite of a vague and largely unconvincing proselytising, Igtet gains support and understanding in certain portions of society, given the absence of more representative personalities and due to the fact that the majority of old-timers are approaching the end of their political careers.

The population of Derna is now in a desperate situation, as they opposed both governments (Tripoli and Tobruk) and failed. It is unlikely that Derna will get any help from Tripoli and the GNA, as Tripoli is far away and the GNA has not completely resolved any of its problems yet and thus seems to be ineffective. The GNA could not succeed in its struggle against corruption and armed factions, and, as a result, it failed to provide any basic services, effective state procedures and structures. In general, the **GNA now cannot do anything productive in Libya**. On the other hand, the authorities of Tobruk and the al-Bayda back Haftar (or, to be correct, are controlled by him) and will never stop the siege or intervene after its completion in order to make Derna safe. Moreover, the Islamists, whose organisations not only competed with IS, but were also strong enough to expel its forces, are expected to be mostly eliminated, while multiple rebel militias are not interested in Derna and could not guarantee stability and prosperity for the city even if they prevailed over Haftar. Hence, Igtet's statements may not be a good alternative for all these actors, but they may still inspire hope.

Such processes feature in almost every city in Libya. There are some exceptions – for example, Bani Walid, not far from Tripoli, which is held by the Warfalla tribe. Bani Walid has its own security system, its own alternative social structure and, and the municipality doesn't interfere in politics. In fact, it represents a city-state, because it has a government, namely the council of tribal sheikhs, and a symbolic leader – **Ayesha al-Gaddafi**, the daughter of Muammar al-Gaddafi, who has been proclaimed "the mother of the Libyan nation" and is believed will one day seize power in the country. But such exceptions are very few. Most of the urban centers do not have such a clear structure of city agencies, as they are filled with different power groups, each with competing leaders. The greatest advantage of Bani Walid lies in its tribal unity that does not allow any militia or Islamist organisation to promote and implement an alternative social order, hierarchy or political values.

Another exception is Tarhuna, a city uniting all militias under a single high command. When compared with Tarhuna, nearly all Libyan cities are mostly fractured, as different armed groups control different districts, claiming different programs and goals, none of which is usually implemented. Hence, the fragmentation of power affects not only the state but also the grassroots level, and the lack of any unifying ideology or political system within at least a single city (except for Bani Walid and Tarhuna) also has become an important factor in the general war weariness all over Libya.

As the clashes between forces in eastern Libya and the GNA continue, and neither side of the conflict strikes a definitive success or gains any important benefits, overall disappointment grows within the country. At the moment, **most of the cities have different power centres and elites**, competing against each other for control over economic resources and infrastructure, but as the war drags on, these elites generally perish or loose the trust of the citizens. The social and psychological process of looking for new alternatives, instead of local authorities that have been holding their positions for years, is exactly what we would call "Dernisation". Nowadays there are in Libya two main governments, neither of which has done anything to stop the catastrophe in Benghazi and Derna; more than that, the Tobruk government even welcomes it. If this trend continues, almost every city might become a new Derna.

The sides of the conflict are not able to find a viable compromise, and that was evident during the summer of 2017, when the two governments entered into negotiations. In this context, **almost every city is a small-scale model of Libya**, with different competing power-centres proving **unable to find a pattern of cooperation and partnership**. The only factor of unity among the countering parties is the emergence of some external enemy, threatening the interests of all sides. Under such conditions, the powers have to fight together against this enemy, but this cooperation will disappear as soon as the threat is over.

A good example of these processes is Misrata, which hosts the strongest militias of Libya. Misrata represents the most powerful support for both the GNA and its old rival, the GNC (General National Congress, which in 2015 did not recognise the formation of the GNA). When Khalifa Haftar started his campaign in 2014, the Misrata brigades united and made alliances with other cities, against which they previously used to compete. The civilians in Misrata who do not belong to any militia or engage in clan politics hardly support any of the competing camps – as they hardly support the LNA, which intended to besiege the city some time ago as it is besieging Derna now. The civilians stay silent, because their search for alternatives may prove fatal in the current struggle for power, but the process of "Dernisation" has already begun, and if the forces now struggling for power further weaken, the population of Misrata is likely to claim their rights and intentions much more loudly and boldly.

Two trends: tribalization of the cities and the search for new leaders

When a conflict lasts for a long time, and the different competing forces cannot stabilise the situation and concentrate on the needs of the population, the fatigue of the war will lead people to search for new ways and alternatives. If we look at world history, most of the revolutions and revolts were preceded by unsuccessful wars, as the vessel of patience overflowed again and again. Nowadays Libya may join the ranks of such cases, as the civil war continues, constantly bringing in new authorities and new powers – but hardly new solutions.

Libya differs from France in 1789 or the German and Russian empires in 1917. **Successful revolts are usually headed by charismatic leaders**, who gain people's trust and who approximately envision the future program of political, economic, social development for their country. Libya, on the contrary, **lacks important leadership**, as all its different leaders are closely associated with governments, militias, tribes or clans. Up to early 2018, there was no such leader or movement who could **be accepted by the largest part of the population** and whose leadership wouldn't become a reason for new clashes and massacres.

In the current context of power vacuum, the tribes are making attempts to establish their own rule in the cities and to **redraw Libya's political landscape once again**. This is the only way for them to gain revenues and to save their tribal identity at the same time. Yet this means a catastrophe for **urban citizens**, because they would risk marginalisation under the tribal structures and, in consequence, would lose all their own social and economic positions. To reach their goals, the tribes do not hesitate to **wage armed attacks by gunfire and bombings**, and the struggle between them and the cities is doomed to turn into an endless massacre.

General Khalifa Haftar and the elite members of his tribal-based army claim to be working on the expulsion of Islamists from Libya, and they describe their activity as a straightforward fight against terrorism. In fact, they are targeting both the Islamists and the secular forces that control the cities. The Islamists' structures formed social and civil networks and played a significant role in establishing those municipal councils that ended up being the only governing bodies taking care of people's needs during the war. Those municipalities, therefore, **enjoy great support from the population**, while there is a universal suspicion that falling under Haftar's control will inevitably lead to their destruction and to a return to the chaos of 2011.

Two main trends in Libyan cities can be observed. First, the armed opposition to a**ny attempts by the sheikhs to "tribalise" the cities**, and to establish their control there. Second, **the search for a new leader**, who could be strong enough to help the cities in the current dire situation; since none of the Libyan politicians has enough authority to solve their problems, Libya is drowned in distrust and despair. Thus we argue that the main and most destructive process in contemporary

Libya is the process of "Dernisation", which started in the small coastal city of Derna and swiftly encompassed the whole of the country: namely, the confrontation between the **city and the desert**, and the desperate search for unbiased intervention.

"Dernisation" is a process composed of a number of factors, among which are:

· A complicated, differentiated social system in urban space as opposed to rural space: the urban system appears impossible to reduce to tribal hierarchy, either because tribes were not historically present in the cities as a social kernel, or tribal ties had previously dissolved because of different reasons;

· A direct threat of armed confrontation with the tribes, and the consequent efforts by urban citizens to isolate themselves from the tribal system and sheikhs claims;

· Popular distrust of every centre of power - except for the municipal authorities - and consequent lack of any shred of faith in their ability to solve problems and meet the needs of the population, as all previous promises and claims failed to be put into practice.

· The cities' attempt to turn into city-states, which can be independent from power centres in Tripoli or Tobruk, as well as from the tribal hierarchy and from the concept of a new distribution of economic resources.

If we try to forecast which places will be next on the way to "Dernisation", **Misrata**, **Zintan**, **Zuwara** and **Sabratha** seem to be the most likely candidates. The situation in Misrata remained complicated for several months after the disbanding of the GNC forces from Tripoli, leading the city to dissolve into several warring camps. However, if the tribes began to target Misrata as they did with Benghazi and Derna, its clans might unite to oppose the external threat. The situation in Zintan is similar: both cities have powerful local authorities and mighty armed forces, but, at the same time, they lack unity among their elites. Zuwara is claimed by the Amazigh minority and by local tribes like the Zuwara tribe, and it may become a new battlefield, especially since neighbouring Algeria is interested in securing stability at its borders and may interfere according to its own prerogatives. Finally Sabratha, which is rather close to Tripoli and lies between the zones controlled by large tribes, lacks any real effective power and has become a new target for IS.

All the cases mentioned above may become parts of a new political mosaic and shape new patterns of confrontation.

Conclusions

Over the last three years the nature of the conflict was defined by the **struggle between the west and the east of the country**, but now the main trend seems to be shifting towards the **strife between the city and the desert**, between the tribal hierarchical systems and the exorbitant appetites of the sheikhs on the one hand, and the social and civil networks and the state-modelled cities on the other. The "Dernisation" trend is expanding to different parts of the country, and the only solution at this critical juncture would be the **replacement of the current authorities with fresh faces who would control both sides of the conflict**, and work out programs for social and economic development which would satisfy the tribes as well as develop the urban social networks of citizens.

As the tribal identity is strong enough, and the unwillingness of the cities to yield to it is also quite powerful, any peaceful solution to the "Dernisation" process cannot be simply represented by the immediate integration of the city with the desert, which we deem to be impossible in the current circumstances. The solution must run in parallel for the two socio-economic entities with an **effective compromise**, which is reachable, as both need services and products provided by the other (the cities are the core of finance, education, medicine, security, trade, etc., while the tribes supply agricultural products, water, oil and gas, and they patrol the borders etc.). **If the way out of**

this crisis is not found in the very near future, **Libya will face the disaster of a "total Dernisation"** across the country and any procedural process of democratic transition and participation, like nation-wide elections, **is unlikely to succeed**.

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