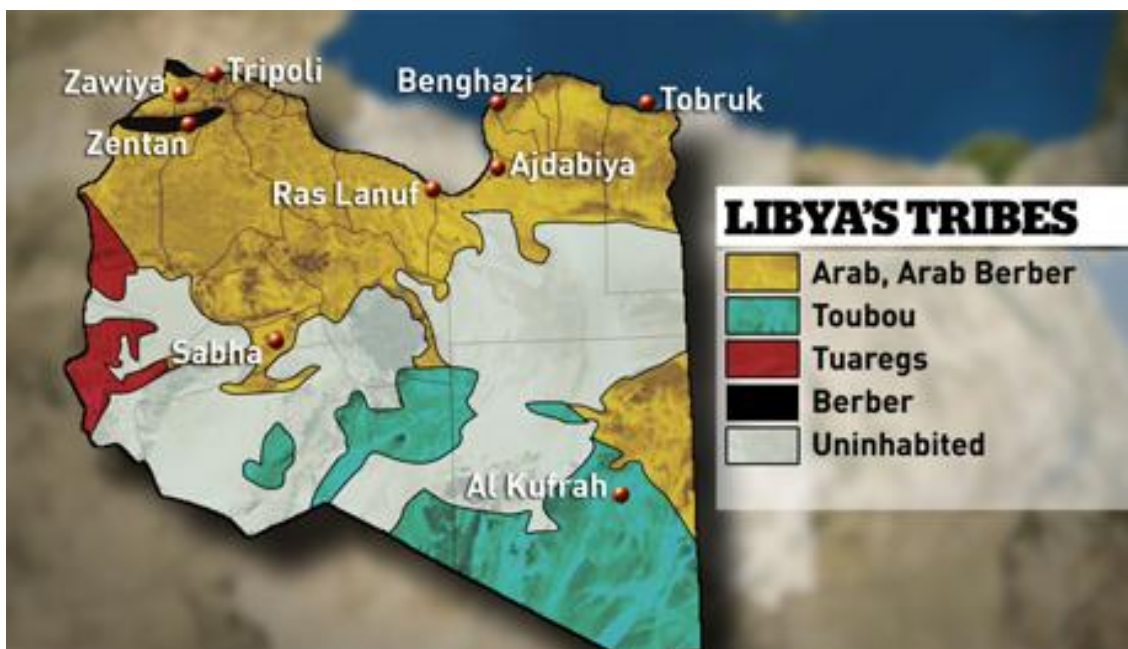




## Libya's Fragmentation: Tribal Conflict, Islamism, and the Quest for Power

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“We used force. They are using force. Nothing has changed but the flag and the national anthem.”<sup>1</sup> This assessment by a former Colonel Muammar Qaddafi adviser reflects on the fact that Libya is undergoing a challenging transition process, seven months after the dictator’s fall. Militia leaders, who have converted Libya into a land of semiautonomous regions, are now entering the political arena. The leader from Zintan, who controls the capital airport, has traded in his military fatigues for a suit, while the military councils of Tripoli and Benghazi are preparing their own representatives for local elections.<sup>2</sup> Who will take control of the country after the dust settles?

The NATO-led mission, sanctioned by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, is frequently cited as an example of successful international intervention that led to the protection of Libya's citizens from Qaddafi's onslaught. Even though there were many issues surrounding the West's implicit intentions in context of facilitating regime change, the unintended consequences of this intervention are often overlooked. To what extent will Islamists and extremist elements influence Libya's future governance? Will Libya remain united? Or will the North African country fragment into different fiefdoms controlled by their respective militia leaders? It is clear that the state, which is almost entirely comprised of Bedouin, is witnessing a tribal contestation for power that may well lead to further civil strife and unpredictable outcomes for the future of Libya and the region.

## **Recent Tribal Clashes**

Even as reported cease-fires are brokered, deadly clashes persist in the southwestern Sabha oasis between various tribes, resembling similar confrontations in the Kufrah region (refer to map) earlier this year. The inability for Libyan troops to maintain peace exemplifies the isolation of desert communities scattered throughout the desolate oases, causing the black African Tabu tribal leadership to threaten the establishment of an independent state in the south. The dictator's "Africa first" focus led to an influx of sub-Saharan workers, mostly from neighbouring Chad, who were favoured often at the expense of indigenous Arabs.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Berber and black Africans continue to clash with Arab tribes in the centre and south of Libya, vying for control of the towns and outposts.<sup>4</sup> These conflicts are proliferating in the absence of Qaddafi's iron fist, which focused on suppressing traditional tribal rivalries and local identities. The ensuing fragmentation based on tribal and militia cleavages is a product of Qaddafi-era policies that inhibited the emergence of any viable government institutions and representative bodies. In the absence of a bureaucracy or military apparatus, the National Transitional Council (NTC) lacks the necessary capacity to assert national sovereignty throughout the country.

Separatist sentiments in the south emulate a similar declaration by tribal leaders and militia commanders for a semi-autonomous state in the oil-rich eastern region of Barqa, espousing administrative independence for managing internal affairs. As the epi-centre of opposition and rebellion to Qaddafi rule, the historically marginalized and underdeveloped east is attempting to revive the three state system characterizing Libya from 1951 until 1963.<sup>5</sup> The NTC, accused of continuing to favour western development, is opposed to any proposals for a divided Libya. These declarations emphasize the NTC's inability to exert authority over Libya, even losing control in the capital as militias partitioned Tripoli's neighbourhoods into multiple fiefdoms. This failure to maintain order undermines Libya's transition to democratic rule and threatens to further destabilize the country.

## **Security Issues – Regional and Domestic**

There is an array of security concerns emanating from post-uprising Libya, raising questions to the future stability of the country and region as a whole. Hundreds of suspected weapons sites were pillaged as the NATO bombing wound down and remained loosely protected after the campaign, contributing to the proliferation of small arms, heavy weaponry, and “man”-portable air defense missile systems (MANPADS).<sup>6</sup> The extensive flow of arms to neighbouring countries has already impacted existing conflicts in the region and potentially constitutes a long-term destabilizing effect. Various types of weapons have reportedly reached terrorist organizations in the region, most notably al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Hamas-ruled Gaza. Moreover, disposing of Libya’s chemical weapons stocks and nuclear materials is an essential priority that requires regional and international assistance and coordination.

Disarming the rebel fighters involved in the civil uprising remains a major focus for the NTC; however the interim government is often outgunned by various militias and lacks the capacity to enforce this goal. Some observers note that the Government’s policy of providing monthly stipends to civil war fighters is actually counterproductive, as this policy helps sustain the militia structure and encourages others to join.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the interim government has suspended its monthly remuneration program citing “mass corruption and fraud.” On May 8, heavily armed rebels stormed the national government headquarters in central Tripoli demanding postponed salaries, killing one security guard and wounding four others.<sup>8</sup> This incident exemplifies the severe obstacles facing the NTC’s reconciliation efforts. According to some analysts, the process of integrating fighters into the national military is often conducted by recruiting through the militia, producing men that remain loyal to their respective commanders. Without a coherent reintegration program, revolutionary fighters will continue to lack the necessary incentives to disarm and Libya’s ongoing fragmentation will remain a central issue threatening national stability.

### **Libya’s Islamists**

The NTC and prominent Islamist figures have repeatedly insinuated that Shari’a will play more of an influential role in Libya’s future governance. The reference to Shari’a law as the primary source of legislation in the constitutional declaration has raised concerns among the countries liberals and Western states. During his liberation speech, Mustafa Abd al-Jalil, the Chairman of the NTC, discussed the superiority of Islamic law and legitimized polygamy, which had been prohibited during the Qaddafi era. Many of the major Islamist groups perceived these comments as a victory for their cause, as leaders reiterated that all new legislation must reference Islamic law and the constitution should reflect the Shari’a. Even though most Libyans believe that Sunni Islamic traditions hold a prominent role in society, there is extensive debate concerning the various degrees of Shari’a law and its imposition on public life. The extent of which Islamic law is incorporated into the legal system and society will only be realized following the nation’s constitutional draft. Islamists are expected to emerge victorious in the elections of the National

Assembly, which will further the political and ideological division that is currently plaguing the country.<sup>9</sup>

Along with various tribes and militias, fundamentalist elements and Islamists are also vying for power, including the Muslim Brotherhood and several other parties with Islamist tenets in their platforms. The more extreme Salafi organizations are not expected to be as dominant as their counterparts in Egypt; however, they are increasing their organizational capacity and public awareness campaigns, as they prepare to participate in the political process. These efforts, however, may translate into greater influence among conservative strongholds, particularly in eastern Libya. It is important to note that as many as 2,000 Libyan Jihadi volunteers are estimated to have participated in armed conflicts abroad from the mid 1980s to 2011. Almost one in five foreign insurgents who volunteered in Iraq came from eastern Libya – on a per capita basis, more than twice as many insurgents came from Libya than any other Arab nation.<sup>10</sup> Following a recent, army backed, ceasefire between rival tribes in Kufra, Islamist fighters arrived from Benghazi, provocatively waving the Prophet Mohammed's black war flag. These facts pose tremendous implications concerning the radicalization process of key Libyan constituencies and Islamism's future involvement in the nation's composition.

The Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC), the successor of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), constitutes one of Libya's main Islamist organizations and Muslim Brotherhood offshoot. The LIFG had previously declared their support for al-Qaeda following the invasion of Iraq and contributed their resources for the global Jihadi cause, yet has since renounced violence. Involved in multiple armed conflicts, their paramilitary knowledge helped train inexperienced revolutionaries and proved instrumental throughout the anti-Qaddafi campaign. Many of its members now comprise part of the Tripoli Military Council (TMC). A former commander of the LIFG, Abdul Hakim Belhadj, who led the attack on Qaddafi's Bab al-Aziziya compound, is currently initiating a political party following his resignation as the head of the TMC.<sup>11</sup> The extent to which Belhadj and similar leaders have reformed since engaging in Libya's "de-radicalization" program will be seen throughout their statements and political platforms.

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, LIFG and others are comparatively less organized and have historically lacked the institutional structure required to connect with the population on the level of Tunisia's Ennahda and Egypt's Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the Libyan Brotherhood is expected to emerge as Libya's most organized and popular political force, increasing grassroots efforts modeled on regional affiliates and enhancing legitimacy following decades of severe suppression under Qaddafi. These groups' revolutionary credentials and ability to exploit religious rhetoric in a conservative society has provided them with the necessary name recognition to overcome Libya's other political parties.<sup>12</sup> This narrative has prevailed as the general theme in post-uprising Arab societies, as Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco have already claimed overwhelming electoral success.

## Upcoming Elections and Future Concerns

Is the goal of holding elections in Libya premature? Many see the upcoming elections as a positive development which is encouraging Libya's transition to a more democratic state. However, critics of early elections argue that the lack of viable institutions to facilitate the election process would undermine democracy and stability, especially following violent civil strife. Recent incidents highlight the chaotic preparations associated with the election, as reports of confusion regarding the registration process are prevalent. Furthermore, hasty elections can give various factions opposed to the anticipated results the pretext to further engage in violent protest. The Barqa Council, representing the Cyrenaica region, is boycotting the elections and calling Libyan people to do so as well. The Council argues that the NTC has unfairly allocated the National Assembly seats – 100 for Tripolitania, 60 for Cyrenaica, and 40 for Fezzan.<sup>13</sup> The ongoing hostilities along various societal cleavages pose tremendous implications concerning early elections, which can reinforce conflicts or cause a reversion to authoritarian governance. Unless, this transition can ensure the institution of power sharing agreement that satisfies many of the various regions' and factions' core demands, the ongoing struggles will likely continue.

Ideally, Libya's key issues would be resolved prior to an election in order to minimize the chance of post-election conflict. However, this would entail disarming and reintegrating former combatants, resettling the internally displaced, repatriating refugees, and achieving national reconciliation. Armed Islamist organizations and other militias are likely to emerge as a challenge to the state, especially if these fundamental issues are not addressed successfully. These are extraordinary pre-conditions for Libya's democratization, as more than 150 armed groups with various ideological, regional, and political affiliations are reluctant to surrender their weapons before stability has been assured and a legitimate government has been formed. The international community must therefore exhibit patience and extend its support throughout Libya's transition, assisting the TNC. The world should not pressure Libya to rush into its first elections, since voting for leadership that cannot consolidate power and enforce national sovereignty will not bring stability to a country that has no institutions and has not witnessed an election in almost half a century. It remains to be seen what will be the consequences from the upcoming elections; however, what is clear is that Libya faces many critical challenges ahead and the future of the country lingers in the balance. As a member of the NTC recently noted: "getting rid of Qaddafi was the easy part."<sup>14</sup>

## Endnotes:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, David. "Gaddafi Era Rivalries Still Haunt Libya" 7 Apr. 2012. The Jerusalem Post. <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=265190>

<sup>4</sup> "Libya: The Uncalm South." 12 May. 2012. The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/node/21554576>

<sup>5</sup> Al-Shaheibi, Rami. "Libya Barqa Region Declared Semiautonomous." 6 Mar. 2012. The Huffington Post [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/06/libya-barqa-region\\_n\\_1323875.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/06/libya-barqa-region_n_1323875.html)

<sup>6</sup> Blanchard, Christopher M. "Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy." 28 Mar. 2012. Congressional Research Service. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=265190>

<sup>8</sup> "Fighters Attack Libyan Government HQ." 8 May. 2012. Al-Jazeera. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/05/20125813525293203.html>

<sup>9</sup> Ashour, Omar. "Libya's Muslim Brotherhood Faces the Future." 9 Mar. 2012. The Brookings Institute. [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2012/0309\\_muslim\\_brotherhood\\_ashour.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2012/0309_muslim_brotherhood_ashour.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> Wood, David. "Anti-American Extremists Among Libyan Rebels U.S. Has Vowed To Protect." 19 Mar. 2012. The Huffington Post. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/19/extremists-among-libya-rebels\\_n\\_837894.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/19/extremists-among-libya-rebels_n_837894.html)

<sup>11</sup> "Libya Islamist Quits Post to Enter Politics – aide." 14 May. 2012. Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/14/libya-islamist-belhadj-idUSL5E8GEJ8H20120514>

<sup>12</sup> Ashour, Omar. "Libyan Islamists Unpacked: Rise, Transformation, and Future." May 2012. The Brookings Institute. [http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7054~v~Libyan\\_Islamists\\_Unpacked\\_Rise\\_Transformation\\_and\\_Future.pdf](http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7054~v~Libyan_Islamists_Unpacked_Rise_Transformation_and_Future.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Eljarh, Mohamed. "Are Libya's Elections Premature?" 14 May. 2012. CNN. <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/14/are-libyas-elections-premature/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/21554576>