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Post-Qaddafi Libya: A Failing State*

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August 20, 2016 marked five years since the fall of Mu‘ammar al-Qaddafi’s regime, which ruled Libya with an iron fist for more than four decades. With the collapse of the tyrannical regime, the state order also collapsed, creating a chaotic and violent power vacuum. The “new” Libya — physically destroyed, hemorrhaging, stricken by dramatic political and military upheaval, as well as by fierce religious cleavages and financial distress, and lacking civil society institutions— has failed to replace the Qaddafi regime with a functioning government.

Libya’s multiple internal divisions — tribal, ethnic, religious, geographical, cultural, social, political and economic — were tyrannically suppressed by Qaddafi. Following his regime’s collapse, these differences violently boiled to the surface and erupted into a civil war in the summer of 2014. The ongoing fighting represents a battle over the identity of the state, its economic resources, and its territorial framework. Weak Libyan leadership from two competing governments, which have been struggling for the last two years for control of the state, has consistently failed to forge a new path or even provide a sign of hope for the post-Qaddafi state. The Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, which was established following tireless efforts by international officials in early 2016, has thus far failed to change the existing political balance of power. Yet the GNA did realize its goal of forming an effective Libyan military camp that made substantial gains in its fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Libya during the summer of 2016.

Symbolically, the image of the fugitive Qaddafi after his murder on October 20, 2011, and the image of his captured son Saif al-Islam, whom many viewed as an heir to his father, in November 2011, marked an end to what Fouad Ajami called

Libya's era of "Kleptomania."¹ The new era began with grandiose expectations of dramatic change. The rhetoric adopted by politicians and rebels during this period indicated an intense desire for fundamental and rapid improvement that would bring with it political and social freedom, improved standing for neglected and deprived tribal and ethnic groups, and economic growth that would fix social injustices and include groups that had been excluded from sharing in state resources for almost a half-century under Qaddafi. At the center of the rhetoric was the phrase "a new dawn" (*al-fajr al-jadid*), an expression that was, ironically, an integral part of the political-ideological fabric of Qaddafi's regime. Mustafa 'Abd al-Jalil revived this phrase as the head of the rebel Libyan leadership until elections in 2012 (Jalil had served as Qaddafi's Justice Minister until he defected from the regime at the start of the 2011 uprising).

The use of the same political terminology by both Qaddafi and his successors illustrates the paradox of the Libyan tragedy during the post-Qaddafi period: the difficulty of abandoning the terms and the political violence that were articulated and etched into the public consciousness during the Qaddafi era, on the one hand; and the insistence of post-Qaddafi Libyan society on establishing new priorities and new power relations that were completely disconnected from the characteristics of the management and previous political order, on the other. Adhering to the same idiomatic phrases and, even worse, following the same tyrannical and violent patterns of behavior, without taking into account the interests and identities of non-dominant groups, demonstrates the failure of Libyan society to disconnect from egocentric and aggressive characteristics and behavior that were, to a large extent, a legacy of the Qaddafi regime.

The line dividing the Qaddafi and post-Qaddafi periods was further blurred by the surprising release of Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi from jail this summer. Saif had been held in a jail controlled by the Zintan militia, one of Libya's two strongest armed factions in the post-Qaddafi era. Saif's release, first announced in early July 2016, came despite the death sentence meted out to him by the legal system in Tripoli, and despite being wanted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The circumstances of his release are still shrouded in mystery, and it is still too early to tell if he is actively involved with the political camp backed by the Zintan militia, which opposes the rival camp backed by the powerful Misrata militia. It is also unclear whether his release was connected to Libyan and Western efforts to dislodge the Islamic State organization from Libya's coastal strip, and particularly from Sirte, during summer-fall of 2016. Whatever the exact reason behind Saif's release, it symbolizes the chaos of the post-Qaddafi era and is an indication of the lawlessness and opportunism that flow from the

¹ Fouad Ajami, "A Thrilling Spectacle in Tripoli," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2011.

political and military power of the armed militias and their respective political camps in Libya.

Apart from General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), the Zintan and Misrata militias have been the two most powerful armed groups shaping the post-Qaddafi landscape. The Zintan and the Misrata militias, along with a horde of jihadi militias and criminal groups, engage in trafficking humans, drugs, and weapons. They are fighting to advance their essential material and political interests, while supporting the country's rival governments: The Tripoli-based government is backed by the Misrata camp, which is of an Islamist bent. The other government, supported by the Zintan camp, is based in the east, in Tobruk, and is perceived as more liberal, and has received international legitimacy and aid.

The IS was the biggest beneficiary of the militant disagreement between the two rival political capitals in Libya. It has succeeded in exploiting the violent rifts, empty governance and lack of confidence in the state, the broken economy, and the population's desperate struggle to survive such adversity. In the latter half of 2014, the IS established itself in Libya, spreading its influence in the midst of a collapsing political order and growing insecurity in 2015.

The Islamic State established a stronghold in Sirte (Qaddafi's birthplace, 450 kilometers east of Tripoli), on the coastal strip of Libya, along the Mediterranean, which is the political and industrial heart of the state. The Mediterranean coast, the center of the country's agricultural production and home to the oil export industry, is also where the majority of the population resides. The IS has exacerbated threats to the failing political order and acted to strengthen its religious-ideological, military, economic, and territorial presence in Libya, particularly as it suffered defeats in Iraq (Ramadi and Fallujah) and Syria (Palmyra).

In response, a range of Libyan armed factions are now collaborating with one another and are waging war against the IS. Impressive military achievements for the anti-IS Libyan forces were registered during the summer of 2016, with the Misrata camp playing an especially salient role in defeating IS in Sirte, although not totally uprooting it from the country. However, this tactically unified front against the IS has not ended Libya's political and military schisms and they may even further deepen the intra-state conflicts now that the common enemy is on its heels.

Libya's strategic location — relatively close to southern Europe, and sitting in the *Maghreb* (North Africa) along the African Sahel, which is lined with failed states

and home to many global jihadi groups — made it an attractive strategic rear base from which to spread the Islamic State's vision of the caliphate. Libya also offers a comfortable location from which the IS can send weapons to Europe and the Arab *Mashriq* (Egypt and the Levant), particularly Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, where the jihadi group, *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*, identifies with the IS ideology. The IS has sent weapons from Libya to the African Sahel, collaborated with Boko Haram in Nigeria, and has worked with comparable groups in Algeria and Tunisia. The short distance from Libya to Italy and southern Europe, and Libya's endemic political and military chaos and lack of security, has increased the scope of illegal immigration from Africa and the Arab Mashriq through the Libyan transit lane to Europe. Trafficking in humans, drugs, and weapons has been of major importance to the IS. Nevertheless, the recent Western-backed military campaign has eroded the IS' power in Libya. If the IS is eventually uprooted from Sirte, it may relocate its base to other regions in the hugely desolate territory of southern Libya, or in the adjacent African Sahel, or even to other areas along the Mediterranean coast, including Tunisia and even Algeria, as it seeks to maintain its presence in Libya's environs.

Libya's failing political order is nearly five years old. Will the weak Libyan state survive its fracturing and segmentation and escape complete destruction? Will Libya be able to forge a new national identity and preserve its territorial integrity? These are just a few of the many questions hovering over the dark skies of Libya.

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