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The Politics of Power, Protection, Identity and Illicit Trade

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Post-Revolution Libya has fractured into a volatile plethora of political ecosystems and protection economies, in which access to resources has become critical to survival. The struggle for control over illicit flows has shaped Libya's civil conflict and remains a decisive centrifugal force, actively preventing central state consolidation. Illicit flows exposed the deep fissures within Libyan society, divisions that the Gaddafi regime had controlled through a combination of force and the manipulation of economic interests in both the legitimate and illicit economy. The impact of illicit flows, however, has been different in different parts of the country: in a perverse resource triangle, coastal groups, while linked to the illicit economy (particularly through the control of ports and airports), have been paid by the state, while also relying on external financial support in a proxy war between competing interests centered in the Gulf. In the southern borderlands of the country, by contrast, control of trafficking, and the capture of the country's oil resources, have been key drivers in strengthening conflict protagonists. For some of the minority players in Libya's patchwork state, control over illicit resources became a way to bargain for attention in the transition. The gradual erosion of the legitimate economy following six years of protracted conflict and political stalemate has resulted in a status quo where the size and dynamism of illicit markets for fuel, human smuggling and subsidised goods far outweighs legitimate alternatives for several groups, thereby building the legitimacy of criminal actors over formal institutions. While the focus of much of the coverage of the external reporting of the Libyan conflict is on the divide between east and west, putting a spotlight on illicit trafficking also highlights the disparities between the coast and the interior. Unless the illicit economy, and the priorities of those who control it, are addressed holistically as part of the political transition, the possibilities for a peaceful settlement remain remote and the viability of the central state questionable. There are now no easy policy options.

INTRODUCTION

Muamar Gaddafi, Libya's autocratic and mercurial ruler for more than forty years, made no secret of the fact that he had his favourites. A self-professed man of the populace, he despised institutions and kept them weak, preferring instead to create a patronage court by which loyalty to him personally was rewarded with economic favour. He was a master of 'divide and rule', using a ruthless secret service and internal police to instil a permanent suspicion between elite groups and competing communities, and to ensure they would never unite in revolt. He kept his friends, his allies and neighbouring countries consistently on edge by fomenting dissent, sponsoring regional insurgencies and separatist movements, and either bequeathing assets or brutally stripping them away in order to ensure his own hegemony.

Libya's popular revolution was initially considered one of the major victories of the Arab Spring movement, but has turned into a winter worthy of Westeros. The brief alliances which came together to overthrow Gaddafi in 2011 very quickly fractured into competing militia politics. This is often attributed to the inability of the fragile new political order to disarm the militias, but given that the new political leadership lacked armed forces of their own on the ground, a reliance on militias – which at that time were at the height of their popularity – was essential. For political leaders at the time the options were limited.[1]

The years following the revolution saw a militarised state transform into a highly armed society, fed by investments from other Arab states seeking to influence the conflict, with transitional politics increasingly characterised by growing acrimony over the distribution of power and state resources, particularly oil.[2] While external influences were important in funding and moulding the outlook of key actors, local dynamics, often difficult for outsiders to understand, have remained central to shaping the conflict.

At the same time, the mishandling of the restructuring of the security sector fuelled a feeding frenzy for security contracts and government jobs, attracting thousands of new militia recruits, many of whom had not fired a single shot during the revolution.[3] Libya, given its vast resources, presents a strange contradiction: on one hand, illicit flows and external support encouraged a fragmentation of the state, on the other hand, payments from the central state remain a (fraying) string tying together the country. But dependence on the centre has also created perverse incentives.

Throughout the country, the liberation of formal, informal and illicit economies, as well as of access to weapons, allowed some previously marginalised groups to rise to new prominence and demand their autonomy and rights in the political domain.[4] International efforts to ensure that the revenues of oil production and the formal economy flow into the central state have been critical, but despite payments to all factions from the centre, these resources have not over-ridden local incentives for resource accumulation. Nor have they allowed the UN-backed national government in Tripoli to secure a monopoly on power.[5]

For those at the country's vast periphery, whose remoteness left them out of the politicking along the coast, the transition was an opportunity to settle a number of longstanding Gaddafi-era scores. Tribal disputes, competition over trafficking and trade routes, and the renegotiation of territorial agreements played out quickly and violently. Fortunes rose and fell.

Libya in the status quo thus sees the country caught in a corrosive stalemate: a situation of competitive micro-governance and unstable alliances, where groups lobby to capture support from external sources – the international community and ephemeral proxy backers; control the dwindling yet still lucrative oil production and export facilitates, and where illicit markets are booming at the expense of the formal economy and its institutions. Ironically, illicit flows are building stronger ties amongst groups from the southern borders to the coast than any legitimate efforts could achieve. Any possible resolution will require examining the political economy of the country and its conflict holistically, and simultaneously mapping transnational flows over the microcosms of sub-national control.

This case study is part of a larger, DfID funded analysis lead by the United Nations University, into understanding the impact of global illicit flows on conflict, violence and their resolution. In its totality, the research study attempts to establish a contextualised understanding of the conditions and mechanisms through which organised crime influences conflict, agreements to end violence and conflict, and/or political transitions; in doing so, it attempts to identify policies and interventions that could work to prevent these conditions and mechanisms from developing further, or in future cases. This case study on Libya contributes to a line of inquiry led by the Global Initiative, which looks specifically at understanding the impact of global illicit flows on local conflict dynamics. While each conflict context is, of course, unique both in its antecedents and its subsequent trajectory, lessons learned from the case of Libya and the role of illicit flows within in, offer both macro and micro examples which if better understood could be critical to shaping future responses. The Libya case is particularly important in that it is arguably one of the most intractable conflicts of the contemporary age, now often compared to the long-standing war and central state breakdown in Somalia.

ANTECEDENTS: THE PEOPLE'S MARKET

Before the 2011 revolution, Libya was one of Africa's economic and development powerhouses: it citizens enjoyed the continent's highest GDP per capita

and life expectancy.[6] While none of this would have been true without the discovery of oil in the 1950s, nonetheless, that development was achieved to this extent is tribute to Gaddafi's unique governance philosophy. Under Gaddafi, the Libyan state was a blend of populism and highly personified control, with very little in-between, and this extended across both the political and economic domains. He intentionally kept state institutions weak, characterising them as a "distorting buffer of bureaucracy between government and people".[7]

The Libyan state was known as the *Jamahiriya*, which is literally translated as the "government of the popular masses by themselves and for themselves", and it was a highly participatory form of direct democracy, where a series of community committees and sub-regional congresses had direct control over budget allocations and local legislation, building from the bottom up. These popular bodies voted on everything from international trade and treaties, to local social infrastructure investment.[8] Beyond the romantic conception of their powers projected by the regime, their influence was strictly circumscribed.

Partly as a consequence of this discursive and engaged political style, social integration in villages and neighbourhoods is deeply embedded in Libya, and people tend to know each other even in the larger cities.[9] But while Libyan society might have been tightly knit, it was by no means cohesive. Disputes and alliances were crafted along family, clan or tribal lines, and these were often enabled by Gaddafi's personal manipulations in order to ensure his own agenda. He used the country's complex tribal tapestry to shore up the regime, appointing "social people's leaderships" which appointed local leaders who were tasked to mobilise the people, resolve conflicts and deal with local administration. They were also given the special task of weeding out disloyal elements and avenging assaults against the appointed leadership.[10]

Fear and intimidation was part of daily life, in which citizens were encouraged to monitor and spy on each other, with discipline enforced through Gaddafi's scruffy "revolutionary brigades", or the more professional and sinister *Mukhabarat*, the national intelligence service. Whether one was publically disciplined as a traitor, arrested or simply disappeared for dissent or political opposition, such possibilities hung as a spectre preventing genuine participation, civil liberties or human rights.[11] Institutional security and justice architecture and institutions, particularly the military whom Gaddafi always feared would overthrow him, were kept weak, shell structures within a complex and internally competitive bureaucracy with divided reporting lines and multiple parallel structures.[12]

For the economy, the scenario was similar, and used to further reinforce the political agenda. While the rights and revenues to oil exploitation and export were tightly centralised, the wealth was nonetheless distributed back to the population in the form of a panoply of subsidies. Fuel was almost free, housing and basic foods were subsidised, and rites of passage such as marriages and births came with generous government grants. Gaddafi and the controlling elite actively fought against the development of the rest of the economy, confiscating business, and suppressing the private sector and a free market. Their objective was to use the distribution of goods to market as a tool of political control.[13]

But by the late 1980s, Gaddafi's efforts to completely centralise and isolate control over the economy, came to clash with his abrasive and complex machinations with external trade and diplomacy. Sanctions placed on his pariah regime, coupled with the falling price of oil, seriously constrained the regime, resulting in the state unable to put basic goods or foodstuffs into the local markets.[14] As a consequence, a black market in basic commodities began to boom. The markets in the large coastal cities were fed by cross-border smuggling from the country's distant land borders, which reinforced trafficking and illicit trade as a key livelihood for under-served border communities. The transfer of resources from illicit smuggling and trafficking were perceived as a rightful inheritance for ordinary people, and few, if any, cultural or community constraints existed to inhibit engaging in trafficking or smuggling, whether the commodity was consumer goods, arms or people.[15]

Ever the pragmatist, Gaddafi actively embraced the black markets and the illicit economy, as they reduced the levels of restive discontent in the urban centres, and ensured that the border regions could remain largely self-sufficient. In a widely repeated phrase, Gaddafi had stated simply: "what are black markets but people's markets".[16] While he endeavoured to manipulate control over the trafficking economy at the periphery in the same way as he had done on the coast, the sheer distances limited state reach, and territorial disputes had to be settled locally.[17]

Thus, the Libyan political and economic landscape was coloured by Gaddafi's preferences and prejudices: those he favoured retained control of legitimate enterprise, those marginalised from central resources and the legitimate economy cleaved naturally towards illicit industries. The legacy that Gaddafi left was by no means an ungoverned space, but it was a micro-governed one - a spider web of local, competing political economy ecosystems that was centered around his individual force of will, and held together by an increasingly fraying combination of fear and monetary incentives. Trying to understand how illicit resources played into the conflict, therefore, requires moving beyond point in time analysis of political economy, but also looking at the past and the antecedents of the war economy, before hoping to project the analysis forward into the future.

THE PERVERSE RESOURCE TRIANGLE

The immediate aftermath of Libya's revolution seemed to hold so much promise. A surge of popular momentum (reinforced by the decisive NATO air attacks) overthrew Gaddafi surprisingly rapidly, without the sectarian fighting that has characterised civil conflicts in other places.[18] The conflict was short, and although some cities, most notably Benghazi and to some extent Misurata, were badly damaged, the impact on the country's economic (meaning essentially, oil) infrastructure was light. There was remarkably little violence in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Tripoli, and most indications showed that there was widespread commitment to a peaceful transition.[19]

But one part of Gaddafi's legacy was to ensure that there was no natural successor, central institution or agreed upon process around which the transition could coalesce, which meant no capacity for decision making, strategic analysis, planning or the roll out of a broader order.[20] As Cole described it, "political divides … presented no institutional or charismatic authority, but rather a rump state, surrounded by sub-national identities and communities older than [the state] itself."[21] Gaddafi's continual erosion of national security institutions and the military meant that transitional political leaders were also unable to rely on a cohesive armed force to maintain security and order, instead falling back onto the militias which had overthrown the regime, and which at that time retained popular legitimacy (a plethora of new militia groups established in the fragile days of the new order later supplemented these).[22] Furthermore, once Gaddafi's repressive and overbearing authority was lifted and despite the widespread presence of a set of state symbols like the new flag, long supressed tribal identities proved far more entrenched and divisive than had first been supposed.[23] Gaddafi era officials who staffed much of the bureaucracy were viewed with great suspicion by members of militia groups.

Matters were complicated by the competing international interests – at one point Libya had four groups competing to serve as the official arbiter of the transition, the African Union, Turkey, NATO lead by France, and Russia[24] - and that international sponsorship of the political transition insisted that the rights to oil exports and profits would remain the privilege of the central state, with international oversight in the interim period, thereby denying the opening of a competitive market. This ensured that the transitional authorities and all of the competing interest groups within Libya remained focussed on external actors nominally providing oversight to the transition, but at the same time jockeying for influence over the future of Libya's influential hydrocarbon economy.[25] This heightened the stakes for competing groups to ensure themselves well positioned in the transitional process. In what a senior minister described to us as a form of "legacy behaviour", Gaddafi's insistence in pitting tribes, families and ethnicities against each other meant that the positive interests in an inclusive peace rapidly translated into a 'winner-takes-all' attitude that replicated his model, ensuring that whoever could provide local security could capture the political and economic spoils.[26]

Ensuring the capacity to finance military strength and resource political power became key criteria for success as the transition unfolded, creating a predation logic. In Tripoli, politicised interest groups began seizing key infrastructure points to hold the economy hostage for political influence: in Tripoli, the Misuratans seized the port, the Zintanis the airport, and Berber groups controlled the central Martyrs' Square.[27] Further afield, Revolutionary Councils that formed during or shortly after the war secured local weapons stockpiles and assumed the local administration functions, including the distribution of resources.[28]

Those groups unable to secure local control sought to position themselves with external sponsors with which to compete for local hegemonies. Money from the Gulf had poured into Libya as the revolution had gained pace. Qatar in particular had played a highly public role in supporting the overthrow of the state. External interests continued to give support to the different factions, and these proxy relationships deepened in the wake of the revolution. These alliances were crucial in transforming the contemporary political economy. The fragmentation of control among the militias, and the inability of the new state to disarm and provide clear leadership, encouraged rather than inhibited the influence of external players.[29] External flows, and internal competition around the control of licit and illicit markets, reinforced the same outcome: a splintering and localisation of power.[30] As a recent analysis of the conflict has noted:

> *"External sponsorship meant that local militias had little incentive to resolve their differences, since that would mean the drying up of their revenues streams. It also meant that the central state had little hope of imposing its authority over them".*[31]

In the post-revolution period and in a series of localised political eco-systems, militias perform the most essential function of the state: providing security against real or imagined threats coming from outsiders, including neighbouring towns and/or rival communities.

Post revolution Libya laid bare exiting divisions within Libyan society, and after a brief period of optimism in early 2012, competing communities scrambled to shore up their position and secure power and resources for themselves. The process exasperated the fragmentation of the Libyan political economy but also consolidated localised political eco-systems that typically include the municipality (*beladiya*) – arguably the most successful post-revolution political institution - tribal elders, and other influential societal figures, local military councils and the various militias attached to the town.

This is well-summed up in an interview with a key player in Libya's transition, who has since fled the country:

> *"It was obvious to many by that point (by 2012), that the revolution was not about uniting Libya. Different groups were looking after their own interests, making money and gaining power… Constant fighting by different militias, revenge killings, abductions… nobody felt safe and the militias started taking money from anywhere they could, including smuggling… everything, cigarettes, fuel, people, checkpoints, wherever they could get their hands-on; money to arm themselves and get rich".*[32]

In what might be unique to the case of Libya, the central state remained a source of resources, paying the salaries of individual militia members often in lieu of local police, thus reinforcing the system of local patronage and control; the very disruption that militia's caused was often proffered as the very reason why the state needed to pay them to keep them on-side.

The net result was a perverse resource triangle that the most successful coastal militias fully exploited. Resources were drawn from three sources: payments from the central state; cash and weapons from external backers; and, the profits from the illicit economy. Mexican stand-off style, none could disarm as the threats came from too many directions: competing warlords, splinter groups, criminal and terrorist groups that roamed across the broader Sahel.

In this way, the growing militias – an irony in itself since the war was ostensibly over – were essentially given the financial platform to pursue their own agendas. Crucially, this reinforced the frenzied competition that required ever greater amounts of capital, 'graduating' revolutionary brigades from political violence to resource predation.[33]

While the militias close to the capital and the main cities could secure access to money through the patronage and/or bullying of powerful politicians, in the peripheral towns that were cut off both geographically and politically, armed groups turned to whatever they could get their hands on - and the taxing of smuggling was a convenient and readily available source of income for many of them.[34] This dynamic has had crucial long-term implications: it reinforced a north-south political divide that has long characterised the country but had been papered over by the Gaddafi regime.

CENTRAL POLITICKING AND THE GROWTH OF PROTECTION ECONOMIES

In Libya, there are very few genuine national actors – i.e. those with a remit that can command beyond their immediate regions. The vast majority are local players with interests that are either geographic or ethnic, who seek representation and influence in the centre.[35] This meant that from the

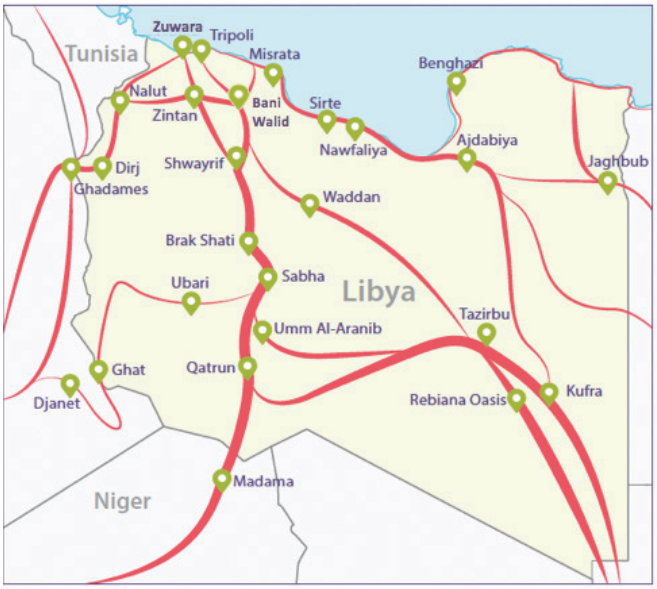

Figure 1: Major smuggling routes and hubs across Libya (source: Micallef, 2017 with author modifications)

onset of the post-revolutionary period, and throughout the long years of conflict that were to follow, the transition was marked by a series of fractious and volatile alliances, that went through a tangled narrative of steady splintering, where militia power and military force played an important role. This was particularly true along Libya's coastal cities, where kidnapping, hostage taking (including of whole institutional buildings in some cases) and death threats against politicians were rife as a means of coercing continued allegiance or breaking down opposition groups. But it also reached down into the south, where alliances were forged between coastal militia groups and southern tribes, often trading oil field protection for access to the illicit economy.

These were to fracture completely the hopes of a unified central state. By 2012, Libya had divided into two factions which proceeded to bicker and backstab in Tripoli; by 2014 the internationally sponsored and recognised government was unable to hold Tripoli and was forced to seek refuge in Tobruk near the eastern border, where it also had only tenuous control.[36] Its authority was challenged by an Islamist-led administration installed by a parliament whose mandate had expired following a previous round of the transition, yet nonetheless had sufficient militia support to hold control of the capital.

By 2017, however, this has left the country ostensibly with two governments and three centres of power: the Presidential Council which was created in October 2016 as the UN-backed central government, situated just outside of Tripoli; a rival central government headed by the Prime Minister based in Tripoli proper, though with no control of any relevant institutions, and finally, the Tobruk-based former government that had previously been the internationally recognised authority prior to creation of the Presidential

Council.[37] But the scramble for power encompasses a far wider set of interests, including a ever changing set of militias, powerful elites from Libya's major cities, as well as a number of prominent tribes.

Despite the promise that Libya's wealth provided (a point often commented upon in the first days of the new order), rather than having a stabilising effect, in fact only served to prolong conflict, as there was little incentive that could be offered for disarmament. Oil wealth and a benevolent state had meant that Libyans had long enjoyed a high standard of living and militia members expected that life post-Revolution would deliver not only generous salaries, but "a substantial and appealing alternative form of identity, prestige and social position."[38] Central oil reserves had a contradictory impact: on one hand they funded the very militias that competed for local and sometimes central influence; on the other, the oil infrastructure itself became a target for armed control.

Through the chaos generated by the power vacuum, as a direct result of the 2011 conflict and the subsequent 2014 civil war, and as legitimate funding streams began to decline as a result of the instability, falling oil prices and economic controls, the black economy became a dynamic source of resources for the militias. Libya slowly transitioned into a major illicit trafficking hub of arms, antiquities, drugs, migrants, and fuel.[39]

This quickly created a self-sustaining feedback loop: the smuggling money helped to fund the *katibas*, which offered a security role of value to the community. The community or parts of it in turn often also makes money from smuggling either through indirect economic benefits such as employment of individuals with a smuggling network or through the purchase of goods and service such as food, currency, fuel and accommodation. In a few instances that were documented during our field research, it was reported that prominent smugglers have established themselves to such an extent where they take on a leading or overbearing role, directly financing some local militias and/or institutions or funding social services or projects. The more marginalized or vulnerable a community feels, the more exposed it is to this sort of system of patronage. As one local municipal leader stated:

> *"Of course we'll take his money, I have no problem with that. Libya right now is like a room full of people with their guns pointed at each other. If you have a gun pointed at you, would you give up your weapon because it was bought with dirty money?".*[40]

Militias thus brought territorial control to smuggling, which enhanced the capability of smugglers by simplifying logistics. What has thus been established in Libya are three typologies of 'protection economies' where security and territorial control has been monetised:

1. Taxing of checkpoints where a militia takes a bribe in exchange for allowing smuggled goods or migrants to go through their position. This is sometimes an organised enterprise with the revenue being administered by the militia leadership, but also takes place informally as the initiative of a few members within a particular group.

2. Levying (or extorting) protection money. These are more formal arrangements where militias enter into agreements with smugglers to allow (or at times even promote) smuggling activity within territory or facilities they control in return for regular payment.

3. Directly running smuggling activities, either of illicit commodities produced by the facilities they control (as in the case of oil facilities), or through direct involvement in the operations of a smuggling network, as in some cases of human smuggling.

For the coastal cities, particularly the prominent cities of Benghazi in the east and Misurata in the West, the importance of militia dynamics and the ability to develop protection economies around both the oil fields and illicit trade became a bellweather to their fortunes in the political process. Rising Islamist factions, including the notorious ISIS that secured the coastal city of Sirte as its base, presented a challenge to all of the political powerbrokers and increased insecurity for all, but despite the hopes of the international community, it failed to provide a unifying threat. In fact, the rise of Islamic extremism re-emphasised the need for military strength, and presented a strategic opportunity for certain political actors to ratchet up their associations with militias, and to use militia groups to secure strategic towns.

The self-proclaimed 'Petroleum Facilities Guard' is a pinnacle example of militia dominated politics. Headed by Ibrahim Jadhran, a skilful yet controversial figure who, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, built a small militia to protect oil production in the east. Over time, he built up and strategically wielded control of his eventual 20,000 strong militia force, including, in 2013-14, to blockade oil fields to demand political concessions. He sought to lift the monopoly of state enterprise over oil revenues, and to give greater autonomy to the east of the country.[41] His actions, however, were to deeply shape the smuggling economy in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, all but closing down one of the country's longest-standing smuggling hubs, Ajdabiya, 150kms south of Benghazi.

The city's topography and geography had historically made it an ideal staging point to the coast, and control over this small city could translate into considerable influence. Through the course of 2013-15, Ajdabiya was a key transit centre for virtually all migrants travelling through Kufra from the Horn of Africa. In 2016, however, conflict between Jadhran's Petroleum Facilities Guard and the Haftar

controlled Libyan National Army (LNA)[42] in Benghazi caused a ratcheting up of arms in the region, and left the town completely militarised. The confrontation ended in a win for the Benghazi Defense Brigades, who have begun construction of a wall and trench to encircle the town, and regular patrols to prevent any illicit movement through the town and its immediate surrounds. Security sources interviewed in the course of this research said that these measures were not only to secure the oilfield, but are also deliberately designed to disrupt smuggling which is seen as a source of potential funding for jihadi groups.[43] The combination of these measures completely displaced smuggling routes coming up to the eastern shore, and channelled all trafficking towards the southeast, to Sebha and Bani Walid.[44]

In the Fezzan, to the west, illicit trade was to have a different trajectory. The rise of Bani Walid, 180kms southeast of Tripoli, as the strategic smuggling hub to the east, and major staging point to the coast. The town is home to the Warfalla tribe, one of Libya's largest, and one of the last Gaddafi strongholds to fall. The municipality shielded key Gaddafi loyalists up until the very last days of the revolution, and has continued to be quite prominently counter-revolutionary. It is a decision for which the town has paid dearly. Not only was it sieged during the revolution itself, but has been subsequently attacked repeatedly by Misuratan militias, marginalised from the political process and systematically deprived of state resources.[45] This isolation and vulnerability has made the town strategically inclined towards the illicit economy, as a means to access essential resources and commodities, but also as a continued political protest.

For another community, association with illicit flows became a means of muted political protest. On the west coast, a marginalised minority community, the Amizagh, used control over human smuggling to boost their fortunes in the fight for political and cultural rights.[46] The Amazigh were Tamazight speaking Berbers, heavily marginalized by Gaddafi, who saw their cultural pride as an impediment to his vision of an Arab republic. He outlawed the teaching of Tamazight in schools, the publication of books in Tamazight, and speaking the language in public. Gaddafi even prevented children from being registered with traditional Tamazight names.[47]

In the aftermath of the revolution, the high hopes amongst the Amazigh that they would be permitted greater freedoms and political inclusion in a post-Gaddafi Libya, gave way to bitter disappointment. Not only were they systematically excluded from each successive transitional authority formed, but they were also denied a requested veto power in the constitution drafting process. They sought influence over 'cultural components', such as the name and identity of the Libyan state, the flag, anthem and language rights. Their priority was to prevent post-Gaddafi Libya from increasing its identity as an Arab state, and to leave space for inclusion of the myriad of other national identities.[48]

Shut out of formal political and economic opportunities the Amazigh asserted themselves in one of the largest and most lucrative of Libya's criminal economies: migrant smuggling. The rise of the migrant smuggling trade in Libya is thus inextricably linked to the Amizagh struggle.[49] With the support of the community, the boats that left from Zuwarah's shores were unhindered by the local police, authorities, or competing militia groups prevalent on other parts of the shoreline. This peace through collusion appealed to migrants as well, who considered Zuwarah a preferred destination and launch point because of its relative security. Consequently, the number of migrants departing from this tiny town on the west coast began inexorably to rise.[50] One way to view the Amizagh involvement in the trade, therefore, is to consider it not just an act of economic opportunism, but of political survival. In the swirling maelstrom of Libya's militia-driven politics, the ability to secure resources is a critical component of ensuring relevance going forward. The profits of the smuggling trade enriched the Amazigh and the entire Zuwarah community, affording them a point of leverage with the fractured Libyan government and the international community.[51]

Interestingly, however, by late 2015, when the burgeoning human smuggling trade had become commoditised, brutally violent, exploitative and deadly, and was generating international censure, the Amizagh chose to recuse themselves from the industry altogether.[52] Fearing that the pejorative views of human smuggling would undermine future efforts to achieve political legitimacy, the Amizagh leaders drove the smugglers out of town with a vigilante brigade, and publically shamed, sentenced and imprisoned any who continued to facilitate it. That they were about to achieve this, however, was in part a facet of the local social cohesion and homogeneity; but realistically the more important factor was the town's access to other forms of revenue. Zuwarah was a hub for cross-border smuggling with Tunisia, which provides the Amizagh ample opportunities for generating income from overseeing and taxing the cross-border flow of subsidised goods and fuel, both legitimate and otherwise. The town is also a logistical centre for seaborne fuel smuggling which expanded exponentially after the revolution.[53]

The example of the Amizagh and the Warfalla highlights how important it is to review and address the illicit economy holistically, including reference not only to a primary flow that may have caught the attention of international actors – in this case, migrant smuggling – but also to examine it within the political ecosystem, commensurate not only with other illicit flows but with the broader legitimate economy.

Analysis of the evolution of the human smuggling economy also illustrates how control over illicit resource flows is both shaped by and in turn shapes the political trajectory. Whereas the Amizagh was a territorial control group concentrated in the coastal town of Zuwarah, along the southern border, the movement of people was capitalised upon and

increasingly controlled by an ethnic minority group: the Toubou. This occurred as part of a series of conflicts which began in the immediate aftermath of the revolution between those who had benefitted from smuggling or trafficking under Gaddafi, and those who were seeking to enter the market under the new order.

CONFLICT ALONG THE BORDERS, BUT WITH CONNECTIONS TO THE COAST

The efforts of juggling the swirling alliances overwhelmed the capacity of actors involved in negotiation and mediation efforts around the central state political process,[54] both domestically and internationally, and left little bandwidth for monitoring developments along the southern borders and with the illicit economy.

Thus, throughout the transition, cross-border smuggling was permitted to flourish without check, fuelled largely by Libya's subsidy policy. Fearing growing social dissent, the transitional government not only maintained but steadily ratcheted up the level of subsidies being distributed across the country. This reinforced a trafficking economy along the borders, as competing groups built up livelihoods on cross-border arbitrage.[55] The scale of this flow should not be under-estimated: by 2012, 25 per cent of Libya's GDP was going towards subsidies, and by 2013, the fiscal cost of subsidies to the Government of Libya, including both energy and food, was US$11.5 billion.[56] In the same year, the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) estimated that one third of all subsidized food and fuel from Libya was smuggled into neighbouring countries,[57] meaning that the smuggling of licit commodities from Libya alone was worth an estimated $4 billion dollars a year.[58] By December 2012, in a largely symbolic attempt to stem the uncontrolled proliferation of smuggling, the Libyan transitional government announced the closure of Libya's southern border, but this had little practical impact given the weak control that the centre had over the periphery.[59]

A two-way traffic developed: subsidised goods were distributed to the borderlands, and then arbitraged in neighbouring countries, smuggled and illicit goods found their markets in the big cities, and products that needed export would transition to the coast to find their international buyers.

Militias from Misurata have dominated the strategic trajectory of territorial control and conflict in the West. The prosperous port-city of Misurata was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting against Gaddafi forces during the revolution. In an attempt to pacify the city and his perceived opponents, Gaddafi had staffed the local police force with people drawn from the surrounding rural communities who had little in common with the local Misuratans.[60] As such, as soon as he was overthrown, the Misuratans chased the national police, such as it was, out of town, replacing it with their own powerful militias: a force that is not a cohesive as they are portrayed and perceived,[61] but which have nonetheless had significant impact that has parlayed well into political success.

The influence and manipulations of the Misuratan militias, for example, was not exclusive to the coast, but reached down the Fezzan region to the southern border, including its regional capital of Sebha, a city that has long been a strategic node in trans-Saharan trade. It sits at the convergence of three historic trade and trafficking routes, from Algeria to the immediate east, from Niger to the South and across Libya's southern border from Chad. Its close proximity to the Sharara oil field, historically Libya's highest producer, and its importance as an economic hub, has meant Sebha has been the theatre for almost constant conflict, and has exchanged hands numerous times, with all manner of interests at play.

The Misuratan 'Third Force' stationed itself in Sebha, nominally to "save the south" from tribal divisions, but has played southern politics divisively to promote its own territorial control. In the past two years, Misuratan militias formed an alliance with the Awlad Suleiman tribe to wrestle control of the borders from the Toubou, while also forming an alliance with the Touareg to control the Sharara field and the surrounding areas, thereby capturing the ability to tax the passing illicit flows of humans, gasoline, food, weapons, drugs, and alcohol. The Toubou, in turn, formed an alliance with Zintani forces to control the field. This contestation of control of Sharara caused the neighbouring al-Fil oil field to also close multiple times due to security concerns. The ongoing warfare over smuggling routes, porous borders, and oil resources contributed to the significant decrease of Libya's oil production and subsequent revenues, further constricting the government's ability to finance effective border control, and placing even greater emphasis on the illicit economy.[62]

In the southeast, the Toubou faced off against the Arab Zwaye, redressing a discriminatory policy conducted by Gaddafi to strip the Toubou of their citizenship and their land and ownership rights, in favour of the Zwaye. Having looted a Qaddafi weapons stockpile, the Toubou drove the Zwaye out of Kufra, and proceeded to secure the borders to Chad and Sudan to the east.[63] This gave them monopoly control of trade and trafficking coming out of the Horn, which proved a boon as the Syrian refugee trade shifted into this route creating unprecedented profits in human smuggling.

Further west, the Toubou took on another of Libya's "major minorities", the Berber Tuareg tribe. Having competed over Libya's southern border for decades, if not centuries, quite early in the post-revolution period, they managed to negotiate an agreement around zones of control: the Tuareg administered the Western region from Sebha, via Ubari, to

Ghat, whereas the Toubou controlled the region eastward from Sebha to Kufra on the eastern border with Egypt.[64] However, the two groups played their strategic interests differently. While the Toubou traded in commodities that were of low priority to the international community, including initially stolen goods, like farm equipment, alcohol and tobacco smuggling and facilitating irregular migration, the Tuareg played a much higher-profile game. They linked their cause in Libya to the Azawad independence movement that was flourishing in Mali, and brought the taint of cocaine smuggling from the West African coast up through the Sahara. These two strategies meant that while the Tuareg may have been given a bigger voice in the central state politicking, the Toubou were able to position themselves as allies to the international community, protecting oil fields and offering support in the fight against terror.[65]

In early 2013, the serendipity of geography then allowed the Toubou to exploit and consolidate control of a coincidental boom of the human smuggling industry in the Horn, sparked by the movement of deep-pocketed Syrians towards Europe.[66] While their zone of influence was limited to the southern border, without being able to penetrate secure either of the major hub cities of Kufra or Sebha. Just before, they handed their cargo over to other militias that would move people towards the coast. Trafficking through the southern zone thus began to develop important connections to coastal communities, ironically tying them together in a web of economic interactions that the central state was unable to achieve through legitimate means, and control over the smuggling economy became a new form of both local and central leverage.[67]

In the years following the revolution, therefore, conflicts over territorial control and trafficking routes played out across Libya, and as transnational flows began to connect from land border to the coast, new societal linkages began to develop. The country was transforming itself, eschewing the former system of micro-governance of the community, towards far-flung alliances forged along trafficking lines.

CONCLUSION: THE PATCHWORK STATE

Illicit flows have unquestionably had a decisive impact on the Libyan conflict in that they have bolstered local independence and provided incentives that have mitigated against political compromise. However, it would be a mistake to assume that they were they only forces at play. Illicit flows aligned with significant financial flows from external proxies in a context where central state weakness allowed the growth of local control, and a patchwork of protection economies have developed.

The wider proxy war, broadly between Qatar and Turkey (with support from Algeria and Morocco) in the east, and a changing combination of the UAE, Egypt and Russia in the west, has ironically opened, not closed, spaces for trafficking. The purpose of the proxy war has been to ensure that external interests are protected or advanced, but the enduring conflict has provided localised spaces for action, driven in part by the needs of survival, and the absolute requirement to ensure armed capacity in a volatile and often rapidly changing conflict.

The media, often working with limited access to the interior, have simplified the conflict as one only between east and west, playing out over the oil industry.[68] According to their depiction, in its current configuration, the conflict map of Libya is divided into two broad and competing sets of forces, one in the east and the other in the west. But that neat distinction belies the inter-tangled nature of the conflict however. Multiple groups are engaged in the fighting and drawing clear battle lines on the ground is often difficult. Broadly, the forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA) occupy the western coastal strip with some limited control extending into the interior. In the east, based in Tobruk, the Libyan National Army under General Khalifa Haftar is the dominant force.

The reality then is in many ways far more complex, with local actors dispersed across the national territory playing a decisive role in shaping national outcomes, and developments in the south too often ignored. The interior largely now constitutes a self-governed space that, while sparsely populated, occupies an important place in the trafficking economy, as it is through this space that people and illicit commodities move.

Protection markets have developed linked to all sorts of smuggling and illicit activities and in many cases, they had the support of the neighbourhoods, tribes, or communities the militias were affiliated with. Militias turned inward remarkably early in the process, almost in anticipation of central state failure. As one militia leader explained to us: "We realized it was each to his own so you think, f**k them [the politicians and the other Libyan groups], we will find our own way to make money and to protect ourselves."[69]

A vicious cycle, centered around illicit flows, has developed and planted firm roots. Smuggling money funds the militias which in turn offer protection to their town, tribe or neighbourhood and this buys them back a measure of acceptance from their community. Moreover, some of the money that flows through smuggling also goes to the community by way of ancillary economic benefits – employment opportunities / procurement of goods such as food, fuel, medicine and accommodation – offering militias unparalleled local legitimacy, especially where the state has no meaningful presence.

But this dynamic has led to all sorts of unintended consequences for communities that saw resource predation as a necessary evil, and it has fed a beast that is now beyond

the control of mainstream Libyan society and the central state political agencies. Surveys show that the former revolutionary brigades and militias are viewed both as a source of insecurity, but also as a crucial security provider.[70]

Between inflows from external powers, profits from oil being earned either through protection or threat, and control over illicit trafficking, the country is stuck in a hurting stalemate, where none have either the financial resource base, the military might, or the political support to prevail. While the international community debate continues to focus on the binary, oil-driven conflict between Tobruk and Tripoli, there are actors in the south, most notably the Toubou, who have consolidated a sustainable source of income and been enormously strengthened by resource flows that effectively enable a delinking from the state. Toubou leadership has long been suspicious of the coastal peace making process, conscious that their interests are likely to be disregarded, but their influence could significantly change the dynamics on the coast if they were to become more forcibly political. At this point in time, given their monopoly over the southern border, peace in Libya is not a credible proposition without Toubou support.

BREAKING THE STALEMATE? IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The political economy of Libya's revolution and its subsequent civil war has been driven by a complex set of overlapping resource flows, both internal and external; licit and illicit. Their exact configuration has differed in different parts of the country, but the net result has been the same: a set of economic forces that have provided strong incentives for local action and control. Ironically, as we have noted, this has itself occurred in a context where some of the payments to local forces have been from the central state itself.

Libya, in some respects, has been profoundly unlucky in its attempted transition from revolution to democratic society. A combination of security concerns (including the attack on the US compound in Benghazi), caution, and a full policy agenda elsewhere, prevented sustained involvement by the United States and to some extent European actors. At a crucial period in the country's transition, these circumstances left the field to an array of other non-traditional international actors whose influence – and their delivery of resources – acted against the creation of a new democratic order. Their influence should not be read as taking away local agency from Libyans, but the proxy war that has increasingly emerged in Libya (and elsewhere in the wider MENA region) bodes ill for an easy resolution.

In a crucial period of Libya's failed transition, some actors were receiving funds from three sources: proxies, the illicit economy and the state itself through subsidies. Each encouraged the strengthening of local control: to ensure leverage with proxies and the central government, and to tap into illicit markets. Discussing proxy interests was often taboo in the multilateral system (with much of this being in any event conducted in secret by intelligence services), and the role of illicit flows was not well understood and largely overlooked, despite the central role played in reinforcing this process.

Absent a strong set of centralised state institutions, local actors have been empowered to assume local control, effectively taxing both licit and illicit trade. In the trajectory of Libya's transition, illicit market control has been particularly beneficial to groups in the interior, excluded from proxy payments and central state largesse – here the Toubou have emerged as largely unannounced victors. At the time of writing, all the multiple parties to the conflict are 'locked in' to this resource configuration, explaining a reluctance to compromise as the UN attempts to negotiate a pathway forward.

Peace and a unified state in Libya then seems some way off. And, even if achieved, it will be threatened by the external proxies and extremist groups whose interests lie in long-term disruption. In this arrangement spoilers have much to gain by intransigence. What has been missing in the wider academic and policy discussion is just how these resource flows have reinforced some players over others. Political pronouncements hide underlying drivers for the conflict, which is understandable in part, because much of the resource economy is hidden from public view and most actors have masked their interventions in political or ideological clothes.

Our engagements with many Libyans both before and during this project, is a reminder that ordinary people are tired of war, still desire democratic governance, and understand only too well that the cancer of conflict which is increasingly deeply embedded in their society, is closely tied to a political-economy over which they have little control.

But the 'locking-in' of the resource conflict and the development of a proxy war – whose key players themselves have highly conservative views about democratic outcomes – suggest that the long-term objective of achieving democracy in Libya is unlikely to be realised within the next few years. Given the present status quo, policymakers have few obvious options, but a few points are worthy of consideration:

1. Further calculations underpinning political negotiations will need to be broadened to account for a holistic view of the political economy, including at a sub-national level, accounting for both formal, informal and illicit resource flows, as well as those flowing from proxy interests.

2. Viewing the illicit economy will also require broadening from beyond just the 'major' flows of interest to the international community: e.g. human smuggling, to encompass those flows which may generate resources for local control groups. This may include, inter alia, assessing cross border smuggling fuels in subsidised goods, tracking the sub-regional hashish economy, the illicit cigarette trade, or even prescription pharmaceuticals.

3. A shift from an exclusive focus on the central state negotiations, towards a more localised approach where the municipalities are the focus for mediated and inclusive settlements. This accounts for the reality of existing protection economies, but can provide incentives for the recusal of specific behaviours or illicit trades, which can be amplified on an incremental basis over territories.

4. For specific efforts to counter organised crime or illicit trade, e.g. human smuggling, political or cultural incentives may prove more potent than financial inducements or development (such as 'alternative livelihood' projects), as these struggle to outweigh the profits of lucrative illicit trades.

With the benefit of hindsight, or if, as some have suggested,[71] the Arab Spring is only the beginning of a long process of political realignment in North Africa and the Middle East, the experience of Libya offers a number of lessons to be considered in future scenarios:

1. As above, from the earliest possible point, political negotiations and transition arrangements must be predicated on a holistic political-economy that maps both licit and illicit flows. This cannot be a one-time analysis (which is often the model used particularly in trying to measure criminal flows), but must recognise the antecedents prior to the conflict, in order to anticipate the shape, trajectory and interests that will play into the evolution of the war economy and the role illicit resources play.

2. Moving beyond the binary - east/west; legitimate/illegitimate; smuggler/anti-smuggler – towards a more contextual analysis that situates local control within the context of transnational illicit flows, and understanding the vested interests and political aspirations of each group will be critical.

3. Recognising that resource deprivation and association with illicit economies are interlinked – just as sanctions at the national level have been shown to encourage illicit trafficking, at a local level 'retribution', especially when expressed by restricting access to resources, meted against specific groups in the post conflict period may encourage an association with illicit flows in the transition. Involvement in organised crime and illicit trafficking can thus become an act of political protest, or survival, increasing its importance and legitimacy, and thus the likelihood it will serve as a spoiler to future efforts.

4. Broaden the scope for engagement around the cessation of illicit flows in the immediate onset of the transition – too often this is left as an issue to be dealt with 'later', after the political settlement is made. This is likely to require building partnerships globally, regionally and locally, and putting illicit flows and their linkage to conflict into the mandate of multilateral actors whose neutrality in conflict is likely to be higher.

5. Monitor and act rapidly to assess and anticipate the impact of new external resource flows, whether licit or illicit, as new high value flows can distort the trajectory of conflict considerably.

6. Support and protect civil society responses at local level, recognising that players such as the media, local civic councils, identity, ethnic and religious groups may have a critical role in influencing outcomes, but as a consequence they might be threatened. The international community must learn to identify and defend those groups who are positively reinforcing change, speak out and sanction violations against civil action groups, as a counterweight to securitised responses.

Analysis of this nature has been sorely missing to date often because of security constraints on the ground. Achieving it will require advance policy work and capacity building within the multi-lateral system to embed the study of illicit flows and the development of integrated responses to address organised crime within the broader peacekeeping and peacebuilding architecture. It presently remains silo-ed within the criminal justice and law enforcement arena, which limits the extent to which proactive, creative and multidimensional approaches can be developed, piloted and then, where successful, reinforced.

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