

The Regional Origins of the Libyan Conflict

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Abstract

We explore the effects of Libya's administrative division into Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan on the onset of the Libyan conflict. We argue that Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, in particular, followed two different and distinct paths of political development and socioeconomic transformation. While Tripolitania and its elites are connected to the core of Libyan statehood and the legacies of Italian colonization, Cyrenaica is defined by localized political autonomy and economic autarky with respect to natural resources. Furthermore, the Qadhafi regime marginalized Cyrenaica politically, despite its major significance for the Libyan economy, because of its strong royalist inclinations. By offering an overview of Libya's political evolution and socioeconomic development, we indicate that the current conflict has largely been due to the asymmetric and artificial dominance of Tripolitania over the other two regions, particularly Cyrenaica.

Since January 2011, the Middle East has witnessed popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Libya that continued along different paths, leading to armed strife and civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Analyzing such conflict dynamics, based on ideological and sectarian explanations, is a rising area in the literature, as this has been indicated by the extensive comparative studies on the economics of those three civil wars.¹ Eaton et al. also underscore a political-economy explanation of the Iraq War.² Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Turkmani analyze linkages between civil wars and security by focusing on Syria, while Costantini discusses the Libyan conflict by

¹ Steven Heydemann, "Civil War, Economic Governance & State Reconstruction in the Arab Middle East," *Dædalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 48–63.

² Tim Eaton, Christine Cheng, Renad Mansour, Peter Salisbury, Jihad Yazigi, and Lina Khatib, *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa* (London, Chatham House, 2019).

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arguing that oil played a pivotal role in its escalation.³ The economic dimension of the Libyan conflict intersects with territorial divisions, providing the foundation for the analysis in this paper.

Collier and Hoeffler examine the economic causes of conflict based upon rational-choice theory, while Mitra and Ray model conflict according to economic shocks, drawing evidence from India.⁴ Dube and Vargas explore how income levels shape civil conflict in Colombia.⁵ In addition, Buhaug et al. underscore the impact of spatial inequalities on the outbreak of conflict, while Østby, Nordas, and Rød suggest that the onset of conflict is associated with regional inequalities.⁶ Smith explores several ethnic groups in south Libya that were instrumentalized by Qadhafi.⁷ Based on case studies of Kufra, Sabha, and Ghadames, he describes the relationships among them and concludes that their intercommunal tensions can hardly be reconciled. Kane addresses the failed attempts in Cyrenaica to establish a federal state and return to the constitution of the royal period, citing these ethnic groups' inability to support the boycott of the 2012 elections and defend their eastern identity and interests.⁸ Cole argues that, despite their marginalization under Qadhafi, the people of Bani Walid fought against the revolutionary forces.⁹ To explain this phenomenon, he traces the historical evolution of their province of origin.

CYRENAICA VS. TRIPOLITANIA

Libya is divided into three main regions: Tripolitania in the northwest, Cyrenaica in the east, and Fezzan in the south; the conflict and divisions have mainly been between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. They are divided by two foundational differences: the first is geographic and relates to the distance and ecology between the administrative centers of all three regions.¹⁰ Furthermore, the desert and the lack of rivers have hampered the creation of a unified central state.¹¹ The second is tribal and has to do with the bordering states of each region. For example, there is a strong relationship between Cyrenaica and some tribes in western Egypt, whereas the tribes in Tripolitania have

³ Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Rim Turkmani, "War Economy, Governance and Security in Syria's Opposition-Controlled Areas," *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1–17; Irene Costantini, "Conflict dynamics in post-2011 Libya: a political economy perspective," *Conflict, Security & Development* 16, no. 5: 405–422.

⁴ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "On Economic Causes of Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 50, no. 4 (October 1998): 563–73; Anirban Mitra and Debraj Ray, "Implications of an Economic Theory of Conflict: Hindu-Muslim Violence in India," *Journal of Political Economy* 122, no. 4 (August 2014): 719–765.

⁵ Oeindrila Dube and Juan F. Vargas, "Commodity Price Shocks and Civil Conflict: Evidence from Colombia," *Review of Economic Studies* 80, no. 4 (2013): 1384–1421.

⁶ Halvard Buhaug, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Helge Holtermann, Gudrun Østby, and Andreas Forø Tollefsen, "It's the Local Economy, Stupid! Geographic Wealth Dispersion and Conflict Outbreak Location," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 5 (2011): 814–40; Gudrun Østby, Ragnhild Nordas, and Jan Ketil Rød, "Regional Inequalities and Civil Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (June 2009): 301–24.

⁷ Henry Smith, "The South," in *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*, ed. Jason Pack (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁸ Sean Kane, "Barqa Reborn? Eastern Regionalism and Libya's Political Transition," in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, ed. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁹ Peter Cole, "Bani Walid: Loyalism in a Time of Revolution," in Cole and McQuinn, *Libyan Revolution*.

¹⁰ Cherif Bassiouni, *Libya: From Repression to Revolution: A Record of Armed Conflict and International Law Violations, 2011-2013* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013).

¹¹ Bukola A Oyeniya, *The History of Libya* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2019).

had socioeconomic ties with Tunisia, and those in Fezzan with the Lake Chad region.¹² Moreover, each region has a distinct tribal composition. Tripolitania consists of three main tribes—the Warfalla, Qhadhadfia, and Zinten—while Cyrenaica encompasses the Al-Abaidat, Awaqir, and Zuwaya, and Fezzan is composed of the Awlad Sulaiman, Magariha, and Tebu.¹³ Their tribal composition has a significant impact on relations among these areas and has led to the consolidation of territorial divisions. It is also important to keep in mind that Cyrenaica is the birthplace of the Senussi movement.¹⁴

Italian Capture

The Ottoman Empire took over Cyrenaica in 1517 and Tripolitania in 1551, and it reoccupied the two regions, along with Fezzan, in 1835.¹⁵ From the Ottoman period onward, all three regions have been separate zones. When the Italians entered Libya in 1911, the regions reacted differently. Tripolitania did not offer strong resistance, and several of its tribes collaborated with the Italians. Fezzan and Cyrenaica were less inclined to cooperate with Italian colonizers.¹⁶ In 1917, the Senussi movement under its leader, Idris, attempted to seize Tripolitania but was forced to retreat¹⁷—an incident that illustrates the uneasy nature of relations among these regions. Tripolitans tried to establish the first Arab republic in 1918 but failed because of internal divisions.¹⁸ In 1920, Idris was declared emir of Cyrenaica,¹⁹ but it was not until 1939 that Libya emerged as a union of three regions under one ruler.²⁰

At the economic level, Tripolitania under Italian occupation achieved much better infrastructure than Cyrenaica, particularly roads and a railway network. Given the location of the capital in Tripoli, international trade and banking were also much more developed in Tripolitania. A similar situation held for agriculture. World War II impacted Cyrenaica much more severely than Tripolitania or Fezzan. Cyrenaica became a theater of operations for the British army; the city of Benghazi experienced 1,000 air raids that destroyed its infrastructure.²¹

In the aftermath of the Italian occupation, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica fell under British rule, while Fezzan was ruled by France.²² As a result, their educational systems differed: Tripolitania followed the Egyptian and Palestinian model, Cyrenaica the Egyptian, and Fezzan those of Tunisia

¹² Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009).

¹³ Mohamed Ben Lamma, “The Tribal Structure in Libya: Factor for Fragmentation or Cohesion,” Fondation Pour La Recherche Stratégique, 2017.

¹⁴ Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949).

¹⁵ Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Bassiouni, *Libya: From Repression to Revolution*.

¹⁸ Kane, “Barqa Reborn?”

¹⁹ Bassiouni, *Libya: From Repression to Revolution*.

²⁰ Nadine Schnelzer, *Libya in the Arab Spring: The Constitutional Discourse Since the Fall of Gaddafi* (Erlangen: Springer, 2016).

²¹ John Wright, *A History of Libya* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2010).

²² Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2012).

and Algeria.²³ The Italian occupation also had demographic consequences: the Cyrenaican population dropped by half, while Tripolitania had a powerful Italian community of 40,000, many living on colonial farms.²⁴

Independence & Monarchy

When the Italian occupation ended, Tripolitania was more politically developed than Cyrenaica and Fezzan. Between 1944 and 1947, there were many political groups in Tripolitania: the Nationalist Party, the United National Front, the Free National Bloc, the Egypto-Tripolitanian Union Party, the Labor Party, and the Liberal Party.²⁵ In addition, there were some organizations formed by Italian settlers.²⁶ The diversity of political groups in Tripolitania prevented it from reaching consensus on a unified leadership. However, the less politically developed Cyrenaica agreed on the leadership of Idris al-Senussi.²⁷

In 1948, the idea of a unified Libya reached a critical point. Cyrenaica wanted a state led by al-Senussi, while Tripolitania opposed it and Fezzan was split between joining the other two regions or becoming a French-ruled territory.²⁸ There were also differences regarding the regime type. Cyrenaica advocated a monarchy, whereas Tripolitania favored a republic.²⁹ In 1949, the United Nations issued a resolution declaring that Libya should become independent by January 1, 1952.³⁰ In 1951, Libya declared independence and Idris became king. Furthermore, Cyrenaica and Fezzan were in favor of a federal system due to the dominant position of Tripolitania in the new state and the fact that two-thirds of the population was living there.³¹ It was also argued that a federal system would become a tool used by foreign powers to intervene in Libyan affairs.³² In the end, Libya adopted a federal system as a unified government of the three regions with Tripoli as the capital, despite pressure by Cyrenaica to make Benghazi the new capital.³³

During the royal period, Cyrenaica was the epicenter of administrative rule, since many Cyrenaicans had taken offices in the council of ministers and held top positions in the bureaucracy, including the diplomatic service.³⁴ In addition, Cyrenaicans held top positions in the police and security forces; in 1962, the commander-in-chief of the security forces was a Cyrenaican, Major General Mahmud Bu Gwitin.³⁵ Furthermore, the veterans of the Senussi Army, which was the

²³ Mahmoud Hassan, *Libya between past and present* (Cairo, 1962).

²⁴ Mansour Omar El-Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi: The Politics of Contradiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bassiouni, *Libya: From Repression to Revolution*.

²⁹ St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution*.

³⁰ Geoff Simons, *Libya: The Struggle for Survival* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

³¹ Vandewalle, *History of Modern Libya*.

³² Ibid.

³³ Simons, *Libya: The Struggle for Survival*.

³⁴ Kane, "Barqa Reborn? Eastern Regionalism and Libya's Political Transition."

³⁵ Salaheddin Salem Hasan, "The Genesis of the Political Leadership of Libya, 1952-1969: Historical Origins and Development of Its Component Elements" (The George Washington University, 1973).

army of Cyrenaica before World War II, represented a major part of the new Libyan army.³⁶ Cyrenaican dominance over Libya also had an economic dimension, particularly after the discovery of oil. Several energy beneficiaries came from Cyrenaica as well.³⁷

From an economic standpoint, it is important to distinguish between two different phases of royal rule based upon the location of oil, which began to result in large revenues to Libya in the 1960s. In contrast to this second phase, when Libya benefited from this stream of oil revenues, the first decade of the king's rule was characterized by poverty. When Libya declared its independence, it was one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world, with destroyed infrastructure and extremely low socioeconomic indicators: very high unemployment; low per capita income, estimated at \$25 yearly; and very high illiteracy and infant mortality, at 94 and 40 percent, respectively.³⁸ During the first years of royal rule, Libya had no heavy industries; those industries that existed were not advanced and were concentrated mainly in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, which had some textile and shoe factories.³⁹ The workers were Egyptians, and the most important factories in Tripolitania involved agricultural products; in Fezzan, companies only made products by hand.⁴⁰ Tripolitania also had more schools and teachers than Cyrenaica and Fezzan, and it was the only region to have Italian schools and adult-education programs with more than 11,000 registered participants.⁴¹ In Cyrenaica, there were about 600 registered participants, and none in Fezzan; a similar ranking holds for the provision of healthcare services.⁴²

The second decade of royal rule was marked by oil discoveries, which began in the 1950s but increased dramatically in the 1960s. Libyan oil exports jumped from 6 million barrels, with revenues of \$3 million, in 1961 to 1,120 million barrels, with revenues of \$1,175 million, in 1969.⁴³ These discoveries and revenues changed the Libyan economy significantly. Libya was transformed from a deteriorating economy to a booming one; it no longer needed aid, as was the case in the early years of independence, with per capita income jumping to \$1,000 in 1967.⁴⁴ Children eligible for schooling increased from 10 percent in the year of independence to about 85 percent in 1968, with one-fifth of the population in full-time education in 1969.⁴⁵ The Libyan infrastructure also improved. In 1967 and 1968, 2,000 kilometers of roads were built in addition to many schools, hospitals, and some new cities comprising more than 50,000 inhabitants.⁴⁶

It is important to keep in mind that non-oil economic sectors were underdeveloped, employing a workforce in 1969 that was largely unskilled. Out of a population of 2 million, only a few hundred worked in the oil industry, and agriculture's share of GDP was 2.4 percent, while the manufacturing share was only 2 percent.⁴⁷ In 1963, the king abolished the federal system and

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution*.

³⁸ Vandewalle, *History of Modern Libya*.

³⁹ Mahmoud Hassan, *Libya between past and present*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Wright, *History of Libya*.

⁴⁴ St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution*.

⁴⁵ Wright, *History of Libya*.

⁴⁶ El-Kikhia, *Libya's Qaddafi*.

⁴⁷ Vandewalle, *History of Modern Libya*.

proclaimed Libya a unitary state.⁴⁸ His decision was attributed primarily to the discovery of oil, but the need to build a centralized bureaucracy did not match up with regional and local realities or the preferences of other state actors, such as the military.⁴⁹

Although the king's decision to end the federal system indicated his insistence that oil be an asset for all Libyans regardless of region, it is important to consider that the oil discoveries were mainly in Cyrenaica.⁵⁰ The Cyrenaicans benefited highly from oil revenues, and the region was transformed from being rural and undeveloped to urban. This was particularly the case for Benghazi, the capital. In 1954, it had only 329 houses, while in 1958 it had 70 villas and hundreds of apartments.⁵¹ It may be argued that King Idris had created a Cyrenaica-based regime, which lasted until it was overthrown in 1969 by a military coup led by Qadhafi.

The Qadhafi Era

When Qadhafi came to power, he drastically transformed the structure of the political system as well as the territorial base of the new regime. Elites in the executive and legislative institutions shifted; from 1969 to 1975, five members of the Revolutionary Command Council (the supreme authority) were from the west, four from the east, and two from the south. Similarly, westerners dominated the composition of executive bodies from 1969 to 2006, comprising 44 percent of cabinet members.⁵² The territorial base of power during the Qadhafi regime shifted from Cyrenaica to Tripolitania.

Furthermore, Qadhafi favored his relatives, family, and tribe, as well as members of tribes that supported him, particularly the Warfalla (“from the west”), with high positions in military and security bureaus.⁵³ For example, Brigadier Ahmed Qadhaf al-Dam, Brigadier Sayyid Muhammad Qadhaf al-Dam, and Colonel Khalifa Hanaish—Qadhafi's nephews—were the chief commander of Cyrenaica, general coordinator of the Social People's Leadership Committees, and commander of the Presidential Guard, respectively.⁵⁴ Not only did Qadhafi move the territorial base of rule from Cyrenaica; he also adopted a strategy of marginalizing it by using techniques such as deposing Senussi officers from the army.⁵⁵ Furthermore, he purged the Senussi movement's legitimacy as a religious organization, either directly through the shutdown of their lodges or indirectly through the forced imposition of his political-economic ideology defined in the “Green Book.”⁵⁶

At the economic level, Libya witnessed many changes during the Qadhafi period, especially in the first decade of his rule. Per capita income jumped to \$10,000 in 1980, with daily oil revenue

⁴⁸ St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution*.

⁴⁹ Alia Brahim, “Libya's Revolution,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011): 605–24.

⁵⁰ Wright, *History of Libya*.

⁵¹ M. R. Bulugma, “The Urban Geography of Benghazi” (Durham University, 1964).

⁵² Amal Obeidi, “Political Elites in Libya since 1969,” in *Libya Since 1969: Qadhafi's Revolution Revisited*, ed. Dirk Vandewalle (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 105–26.

⁵³ Hanspeter Mattes, “Formal and Informal Authority in Libya since 1969,” in Vandewalle, *Libya Since 1969*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Frederic Wehrey, *The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya*, vol. 14 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Washington, 2012).

⁵⁶ Anthony Bell and David Witter, *Roots of Rebellion* (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2011).

amounting to \$3 million.⁵⁷ However, as Libyan revenues dropped from \$21 billion in 1981 to \$5.4 billion in 1986,⁵⁸ GDP per capita decreased by approximately 42 percent between 1983 and 1988.⁵⁹ As for geographic regions, oil discoveries affected their economic development during Qadhafi's rule. An economic activity map of the country indicates that the dominant activities in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania were grazing and agriculture, and that Tripolitania was the only region involved in fishing; on the other hand, the dominant activity in Fezzan was oasis cultivation.⁶⁰ Most of the oil and gas pipelines, oilfields, and refineries were located in Cyrenaica.⁶¹ From 1964 to 1973, the Cyrenaican share of national income rose from 23.64 percent to 25.74 percent and Fezzan's from 3.63 percent to 4.75 percent, while Tripolitania's share fell from 72.73 percent to 69.52 percent.⁶² From 1973 to 1975, the Tripolitania share of government expenditure was 75 percent, while Cyrenaica and Fezzan accounted for 20 percent and 5 percent, respectively.⁶³

It is also important to note that Qadhafi transferred governmental bureaus from Benghazi to Tripoli and relocated some important economic entities such as the Olympic committee and the national airline in order to transform Tripolitania into the business and economic center of the country, resulting in the economic decline of Cyrenaica.⁶⁴ This facilitated the rise of opposition forces in Benghazi. In 1976, the regime repressed the student movement at Benghazi University, and Qadhafi ordered the purge of opposition students and faculty members. Some of the students were executed; other students and faculty were dismissed.⁶⁵

In the 1980s, the main opposition to the regime came from exiled groups that formed the Libyan Salvation Front, while during the 1990s, Islamists represented the main opposition movement, its members coming from cities in the east such as Ajdabiya, Benghazi, Bayda, Derna, and Tobruk.⁶⁶ In 2000, oppression by the Qadhafi regime of Benghazi was symbolic; the monument of Omar al-Mukhtar was smashed, and the People's Club was locked down.⁶⁷ In 2005, demonstrations and protests against Qadhafi erupted in Benghazi.⁶⁸ As noted above, during the Qadhafi years, Cyrenaica turned out to be the capital of opposition, while Tripolitania became the center of his rule. In 2011, the success of popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in toppling the regimes of Zine

⁵⁷ Wright, *History of Libya*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Vandewalle, *History of Modern Libya*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Abdelrahim Saleh Abdussalam, "External Forces, Economic Development and Regional Inequality in Libya," PhD thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1983.

⁶³ The distribution of industrial establishments in 1973 indicates that the Tripolitanian provinces had 4,111 establishments, while there were 1,147 and 163 establishments in Cyrenaica and Fezzan, respectively. The share of industrial loans of each region differed significantly during the period of 1968-1977. Tripolitania had 76.4 percent of these loans, while Cyrenaica and Fezzan shared 1.45 percent and 22.38 percent of such loans, respectively; Ibid. Although about two-thirds of oil and gas products came from Cyrenaica, this did not coincide with improvements in living and infrastructure conditions in the eastern part of Libya (Wehrey, *Struggle for Security*).

⁶⁴ Thomas Hüsken, "Tribes, Revolution, and Political Culture in the Cyrenaica Region of Libya," in *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World*, ed. Malika Bouziane et al. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶⁵ Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, "Libya, Social Origins of Dictatorship, and the Challenge for Democracy," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, no. 1 (2012): 70-81.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ariel Ahram, *Break All the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁶⁸ Ahmida, "Libya, Social Origins of Dictatorship."

El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak inspired several Libyan activists, who called for demonstrations against Qadhafi. When the Libyan uprising broke out in February 2011, it had a strong territorial dimension, starting in the eastern cities of Benghazi, Derna, Tobruk, and Bayda. In contrast, western Libya did not witness significant demonstrations; several of them, such as Bani Walid, were loyal to Qadhafi and fought against the revolutionaries.⁶⁹

By March 2011, revolutionary forces had seized Cyrenaica and formed the National Transitional Council and started to take control of the west and Tripolitania. Soon the Libyan uprising turned into an armed conflict. On the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, NATO intervened in the conflict,⁷⁰ and Qadhafi was captured and killed in October 2011.

Arab Uprisings & Civil War

The Qadhafi regime's collapse was announced in Cyrenaica, where the National Transitional Council was established. The selection of several Tripolitanian ministers to form the new government sparked discontent in Cyrenaica.⁷¹ In reaction to these developments, a movement seeking to establish a federal system came into existence. In March 2012, around 3,000 people declared Cyrenaica a federal region and proclaimed the emergence of the Cyrenaica Transitional Council headed by Ahmed Zubayr al-Senussi, the great nephew of Idris.⁷² The council had an armed wing and complained about the marginalization of Cyrenaicans and their weak representation in the new National Transitional Council and Libyan diplomatic service.⁷³

The Tebus complained about economic and political abuse under the rule of Qadhafi and accused the Zway tribe of discriminating against them. Their leader demanded an international peacekeeping force for their protection and warned that they would establish a Tebu state. On the other hand, the Zway tribe threatened to create a self-ruled area and shut down oil production in its areas, which produced around 17 percent of Libyan oil.⁷⁴ The general election of 2012 transferred authority from the National Transitional Council to the General National Congress, and then to the House of Representatives. In May 2014, General Khalifa Haftar declared his intention to dissolve the General National Congress.⁷⁵ The Zway tribe, which was fighting against Tebus in the south and the Zintan militia, which opposed the General National Congress, supported Haftar.⁷⁶ The federalist movement in Cyrenaica, on the other hand, formed an alliance against Haftar called Libya Dawn, which consisted of Misratan merchants, members of the General National Congress, and some local Islamist militias.⁷⁷

The Libyan political system is now split among three governments: the General National Congress in Tripoli, the House of Representatives in Tobruk, and the Government of National Accord, which resulted from peace talks at the end of 2015. All three have sought to take control of

⁶⁹ Cole, "Bani Walid."

⁷⁰ Bassiouni, *Libya: From Repression to Revolution*.

⁷¹ Kane, "Barqa Reborn?"

⁷² Wehrey, *Struggle for Security*.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ahram, *Break All the Borders*.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the oil through the national oil company.⁷⁸ In Fezzan, several movements emerged to address the grievances of the South. In addition, there were armed confrontations between the Awlad Sulayman and Tabu tribes, while in October 2013 several groups blockaded the oil sites in Fezzan.⁷⁹ Under the conditions of a security vacuum and weak state institutions, the regional divisions in Libya after the fall of Qadhafi have increased and are likely to persist in the long run.

TRIPOLITANIA VS. THE REST

The ascendancy of Tripolitania over Cyrenaica and Fezzan during the Italian colonization and the Qadhafi regime facilitated the persistence of regional inequality. It also provided secession incentives to local elites and citizens of the two lagging administrative districts. For example, Tripolitania has dominated Cyrenaica and Fezzan in terms of both school enrollment at all three stages of pre-university education (primary, preparatory, and secondary) and absolute numbers (male and female).⁸⁰ It is obvious that the administrative and academic elites of the country are located in Tripolitania, whereas Fezzan's population is tribal, and Cyrenaica was the locus of energy extraction, with powerful local elites that were excluded from the power mechanisms in Tripoli. In particular, the power shift from the royal regime to Qadhafi offered the basis for the continuation of this inequality, which created major political discontent and a constant source of internal competition between Tripoli and Benghazi.

While total government expenditures per capita are higher in Cyrenaica and Fezzan than in Tripolitania, the center of Libya's economic activities since the early 1970s has been the capital region.⁸¹ Similarly, household inequality was much higher in Fezzan and Cyrenaica than in Tripolitania.⁸² This observation is also in line with descriptive evidence. Tripolitania scored much higher than Cyrenaica in 2002 in terms of both publicly and privately insured people.⁸³ When the focus shifts toward the 1950s and public expenditures on agriculture, water, and forestry, the amount spent in Tripolitania shows a steadily increasing path, whereas the quantities of Cyrenaica and Fezzan remain stagnant or marginally increasing.⁸⁴ The same situation holds when it comes to public expenditures on transport and communications.⁸⁵ However, expenditures on education appear to increase more symmetrically across the three Libyan regions.⁸⁶

The consolidation of the Qadhafi regime exacerbated the socioeconomic backwardness of Cyrenaica and Fezzan compared to Tripolitania. Data from the 1970s show that Libya's industrial core

⁷⁸ Richard Barltrop, *Oil and Gas in a New Libyan Era: Conflict and Continuity* (Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2019).

⁷⁹ Rafea Tabib, "Mobilized Publics in Post-Qadhafi Libya: The Emergence of New Modes of Popular Protest in Tripoli and Ubari," *Mediterranean Politics* (Frank Cass & Co.) 21, no. 1 (2016): 86–106.

⁸⁰ Robert Gordon Hartley, "Recent Population Changes in Libya: Economic Relations and Geographical Patterns," PhD thesis, University of Durham, 1968; National Bureau for Information and Documentation, "Social and Economic Survey," 2001.

⁸¹ Abdussalam, "External Forces."

⁸² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and The World Bank, *Libya's Socioeconomic and PFM Challenges and Opportunities* (2015).

⁸³ Abdussalam, "External Forces."

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Mohamed El-Mehdawi, "A geographical analysis of industry in Libya, with special reference to industrial location," PhD thesis, University of Durham, 1975.

was located in the capital district, a phenomenon that is skewed by the abundance of liquidity toward Tripolitania and the more limited provision of liquidity toward Cyrenaica and Fezzan.⁸⁷ Moreover, the distribution of industrial establishments, as well as of industrial units and loans at the province rather than district level, underscores the massive shift of the economic center of the country in the direction of Tripolitania.⁸⁸ Cyrenaica's linkage with Libya's royal legacy and the political-administrative infrastructure provided to Tripolitania by Italian colonization offered a significant elite base to Qadhafi's military regime that allowed it to subjugate the other two ports under Tripolitania's control. This is also partly the reason that the Libyan administrative district that suffered the most significant losses in human capital as a result of the civil war has been Tripolitania.⁸⁹

We argue that the socioeconomic profile of Libya's three administrative regions in the period covering the twilight of royal rule up to the civil war in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings shows that the initial difference between Tripolitania and the rest of the country only became larger in the course of the Qadhafi regime and the events leading to its collapse. This widening gap between the capital district and the rest of the country created two paths in Libya's socioeconomic development, which have clashed and produced the ongoing civil war that is dismantling both national and local economies. Data from the royal period suggests that Tripolitania already maintained a comparative advantage vis-à-vis Cyrenaica, which was, however, reduced as a result of the emerging energy industry in Libya's eastern provinces. The strong military aristocracy of Cyrenaica, which was never fully accepted or incorporated into the domestic political equilibrium, experienced major marginalization when the Qadhafi regime imposed its rule over the Libyan economy and society.

The increasing regional economic differences revealed the need for political self-organization and autonomy across tribal lines and institutional legacies. While Fezzan's economy and location did not allow for the rise of a major opposition movement, this was not the case for Cyrenaica, whose local communities had been actively seeking an opportunity to change the economic status quo in their favor using political means. The economic preponderance of Tripolitania throughout the Qadhafi period is also reflected in the regional distribution of industrial establishments in 1971.⁹⁰ Furthermore, in 2007, while the Qadhafi regime was still in power, socioeconomic indicators showed a convergence between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, while Fezzan lagged behind significantly.⁹¹

At this point, it is also important to underscore the importance of the colonial and royal periods regarding the persistence of the divide between Tripolitania and the other provinces, particularly Cyrenaica. Data on workers engaged in handicraft in major cities, as well as on the distribution of modern enterprises, indicate that Italian colonizers developed Tripolitania much more than Cyrenaica.⁹² However, in the royal period, the development gap between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica was reduced as a result of targeted government policies. In terms of the quantity of public goods and income per capita, the major Cyrenaican provinces such as Benghazi and Derna

⁸⁷ Abdussalam, "External Forces."

⁸⁸ Ibid.; El-Mehdawi, "Geographical analysis of industry."

⁸⁹ El-Mehdawi, "Geographical analysis of industry."

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and The World Bank, *Libya's Socioeconomic and PFM Challenges*.

⁹² El-Mehdawi, "Geographical analysis of industry."

approximated Tripoli and Misurata.⁹³ This trend is also observed in the development of human capital during the royal period, which was much stronger in Cyrenaica than in Tripolitania.⁹⁴ The Benghazi and Derna provinces exhibited significantly higher shares of educated citizens compared to several Tripolitanian provinces.

While unemployment rates do not show any major differences between the two regions, this is not the case when it comes to public expenditures on health.⁹⁵ The demographic boom in the capital region and the lower level of entrepreneurship and private initiative in Tripolitania during the 1950s led the royal government to increase its level of public spending on health infrastructure in western Libya. It becomes obvious that the monarchy was much more active in maintaining the regional balance between Tripoli and Benghazi than the Qadhafi regime. It may also be argued that the implementation of socialist-style central planning under Qadhafi increased the necessity for a strong administrative apparatus in Tripoli and created tensions with the pro-royal elites of Benghazi who were involved in the energy business. While the royal government formed the basis for a soft authoritarian regime, the military coup imposed by Qadhafi's team was intended to reverse Libya's orientation toward the west and place Tripolitania at the epicenter of a state-led modernization with an economic and security-policy doctrine influenced by the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSIONS

We have analyzed the historical and socioeconomic origins of the Libyan conflict by examining the country's composition of three regional entities: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. While Tripolitania already enjoyed a political-economic advantage due to Italian colonization, its status was significantly advanced as a result of Qadhafi's central role in Libyan politics. Since the twilight of the royal regime in the mid-1960s and throughout the rest of the 20th century, Cyrenaica and Fezzan have experienced underdevelopment and an increasing socioeconomic gap in comparison to the capital region. In contrast to Fezzan, whose tribal structure and remote location did not permit the rise of an influential opposition movement, the persistence of royal legacies and the preservation of local military elites, financed by the energy industry, created the conditions in Cyrenaica for mobilization and conflict.

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⁹³ Ibid.; Abdussalam, "External Forces."

⁹⁴ Hartley, "Recent Population Changes in Libya."

⁹⁵ Ibid.; International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, *The Economic Development of Libya* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1960).