

LIBYA: WHERE IS THE TRIBE GOING TO REACH ITS DESTINATION?

ليبيا: إلى أين تتجه القبيلة؟

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ملخص

المقال مخصص لدور القبائل في الحياة السياسية لليبيا المعاصرة. ففي حين أنه من المسلم به على نطاق واسع أن العامل القبلي حاسم في التاريخ الليبي ، إلا أن دوره في العملية السياسية على مدى السنوات العشر الماضية لا يزال غير واضح. لا يبدو أن القبائل قد أصبحت لاعبًا عسكريًا وسياسيًا أساسيًا ، فهي تظل على هامش مشاريع المصالحة المختلفة. فالوضع السياسي لهذه القبائل يثير عددًا من التفسيرات المثيرة للجدل. بالنظر إلى كل ذلك ، يهدف المؤلف إلى البحث في دور العامل القبلي في العمليات الاجتماعية والسياسية الليبية والكشف عن مظاهر السرد القبلي بين الجهات الفاعلة غير الحكومية ، وخاصة ما يسمى بالمليشيات. يستند هذا البحث إلى مصادر منشورة ومقابلات أجراها مؤلف المقال مع مخبرين وخبراء ليبيين. يبحث القسم الأول من المقال في الديناميكيات التاريخية للعامل القبلي في ليبيا ، ويحدد بعض الثغرات الدراماتيكية في التوثيق التاريخي الذي يسلط الضوء على القبائل الليبية. الثاني يحلل تحول هذا الدور تحت تأثير التحديث الاجتماعي. يقدم القسم الثالث مراجعة لسمات محددة للاستراتيجيات القبلية في العقد الأول من القرن الحادي والعشرين. يتتبع الجزء الرابع العناصر السردية القبلية في أفعال وأجندات المليشيات الحضرية التي ظهرت

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بعد الإطاحة بمعمر القذافي في عام 2011. ويوضح المقال أنه على الرغم من أن عملية التحضر في السبعينيات والثمانينيات أدت بحكم الواقع إلى تفكك القبائل. الهياكل الاجتماعية السياسية الرئيسية ، لم تستبدل بشكل كامل السرد القبلي قبل الربيع العربي بمتغيرات أخرى. ونتيجة لذلك ، أدى انهيار نظام حكم الدولة إلى إعادة بناء الهياكل القبلية في ظل الظروف الاجتماعية الجديدة. تم تنفيذ إعادة الإعمار من خلال تشكيل المجموعات القبلية الزائفة - الميليشيات ، أو من خلال استعادة التضامن القبلي ، بما في ذلك باستخدام أحدث تكنولوجيا المعلومات. ومع ذلك ، سعت القبائل التي تم توحيدها حديثاً إلى بناء مؤسسات سياسية جديدة مصممة لمساعدتها على ممارسة السيطرة على الأراضي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ليبيا ، القبائل ، الميليشيات ، الصراع الليبي ، التمدين

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the role of tribes and tribal narratives in the political life of contemporary Libya. While it is widely acknowledged that the tribal factor is crucial to the Libyan history, its role in the political process over the last 10 years remains unclear. Tribes do not seem to have become key military and political players, they remain at the fringes of various reconciliation projects. Their political status itself evokes a number of controversial interpretations.

Considering all that, the author aims to research the role of the tribal factor in Libyan social and political processes and uncover manifestations of tribal narrative among non-state actors, particularly so-called militias. This research is based both on published sources and the author's interviews with Libyan informants and experts.

The first section of the article looks into historical dynamics of the tribal factor in Libya, identifying some dramatic gaps in the historical documentation highlighting Libyan tribes. The second one analyzes transformation of this role under the impact of social modernization. The third section offers a review of specific traits of tribal strategies in the 2010s. The fourth one traces the tribal narrative elements in the actions and agendas of urban militias that emerged after the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

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The article shows that even though the urbanization process in the 1970-80s led de facto to the disintegration of tribes as the key socio-political structures, it had not fully replaced the tribal narrative before the Arab Spring by other variants. As a result, the decay of state governance system brought about a reconstruction of tribal structures under the new social conditions. The reconstruction was carried out through the formation of pseudo-tribal groups – militias, or through restoration of tribal solidarities, including with the employment of newest IT. However, the freshly consolidated tribes sought to build up new political institutes designed to help them exercise territorial control.

Keywords: Libya, tribes, militias, Libyan conflict, urbanization.

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The article explores the role of the tribal factor in the Libyan socio-political scene. Although contemporary academic editions and politically oriented publications pay serious attention to the Libyan conflict, the role of tribes is very seldom addressed as a subject of consecrated research. Some authors dwell on the peace-building processes as if there had been no tribes in Libya at all, as a matter of principle. Others, while ostensibly recognizing their significance, confine themselves to a mere statement of fact. Thus, Aidar Aganin in his article dealing with this issue narrowed down to listing the tribal groups and providing a brief description of them, avoiding the question about the correlation of tribes and such other forms of socio-political organization [Aganin, 2020]. German researcher Wolfram Lacher, while offering an interesting outline of the tribal policies in the pre-conflict period, then focuses on the research of territorial subjects (Zintan, Misrata, Bani Walid, Tobruk etc.). Simultaneously, he rightly observes that “...in Libya, as elsewhere, social change, government policy and tribal political entrepreneurs themselves constantly refashion the nature and role of tribes. As a result, there are no predetermined fault lines for fragmentation along tribal lines. Political and military mobilization since 2011 has occurred, at least, as much at the level of individual towns or cities, as it has on a tribal basis, which corresponds neither to traditional loyalties nor to the political legacies of the Qadhafi era” [Lacher, 2020, p. 5]. Needless to say that it is not always practicable to define when this mobilization occurred on a tribal basis, and when on a territorial principle or another one. The words of a Libyan expert from the western part of the country are relevant in this respect: “Tribes are important where they are of importance, and they are not important where they are of no importance” [Interview with a Libyan Expert, 2018].

Incidentally, it seems expedient to pose the questions not only about what position is held by the tribes within the Libyan political landscape, but also what role is assigned to the specific narrative regarding the perception of the socio-political reality by the tribes.

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Methodologically, this article capitalizes on the approaches devised by the author in a number of publications focusing on the problems of neo-modernism and possibilities for exploring political processes with the employment of the method involving a reconstruction of narratives used by political actors [Kuznetsov, 2020].

The author's research has drawn on such sources, as published materials and also information gained by the author from his interviews with Libyan informants and experts.

TRIBES IN HISTORY

It seems appropriate to start with a brief survey concerning the historical dynamics reflecting the tribal factor in the socio-political environment of the country. However, even this issue that has been quite thoroughly investigated, to all intents and purposes, presents substantial problems. The first one is what exactly is meant under the notion of tribe in relation to Libya. Aidar R. Aganin defines it as “the largest group of people tracing their ancestry to a single predecessor”, noting, however, that the tribe could have been shaped also as a “military and defence alliance of the non-kinship clans”, united around some family/clan [Aganin, 2020, p. 8].

Amal Obeidi, with a reference to the methodology advanced by Ibn Khaldun, singles out the presence of *'asabiyah* as a key characteristic of the tribe [Obeidi, 2001, p. 108-112], though, following in the footsteps of Halim Barakat [Barakat, 1993, p. 54] she believes that the nomadic tribes - civilization antithesis should be replaced by the nomadic tribe – village – city. The presence of community solidarity is considered to be a key feature of the tribe by Wolfram Lacher [Lacher, 2020, p. 57]. Understandably, these most general characteristics do not throw enough light on the matter. It is not yet perfectly clear what the Libyan tribe is, as far as its internal structure is concerned.

From the days of Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, the idea on a segmentary acephalous nature of the Libyan tribes has been exported from one paper to another [Evans-Pritchard, 1949, p. 57-61]. In addition to the above, while the British

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anthropologist himself described exclusively the Cyrenaica society, all the subsequent authors began to apply his characteristics to the entire territory of the country [Anderson, 2016, p. 48]. However, if Evans-Pritchard's categorization of the Cyrenaica tribes has drawn some critical remarks [Peters, 1990], then it can be, most probably, totally unsuitable for other regions. Mouldi Lahmar, who researched the tribal structures in southern Tunisia and Tripolitania, points out the weakness of sheikhs' power and maintains that the most critical elements of the socio-political and economic environment in Tripolitania was not the tribe (*kabila*), but the extended family (*'aila*) and the rural community (*duvvar*) [Lahmar, 2006]. Notwithstanding some objections on behalf of W. Lacher [Lacher, 2020, p. 68], I am prone to believe that the point made by M. Lahmar is not far from the truth, at least, in relation to the predominant segment of the region's population. It is corroborated indirectly by well-known data regarding some other regions of the Maghreb, particularly, Kabylia [Perret et al., 2012], where the village has remained the primary unit of social organization, as well as southern Tunisia, geographically located in close proximity [Lahmar, 1994].

It is apparent that if we could get access to more precise empirical data regarding other areas of Tripolitania or Fezzan, it would permit us to speak about a greater variety of tribal structures in Libya.

Two other problems are associated with the relationships between the state power and tribes. Certainly, W. Lacher has rightly observed that the above two forms of political organization of society (and quite likely, even a bigger number of such – please refer to the publications by Andrey Korotayev [Korotayev, 2021]) – have always been part of a complex system of interrelations, interdependency and reciprocal influence [Lacher, 2020, p. 67], whereas in Libya and in the Arabian Peninsula countries (in contrast to the Levant), the tribes have maintained a leading role in such relationships. Meanwhile, it is not quite clear what the Libyan monarchy represented in this sense, and it is even less clear what the Jamahiriya was all about.

The generality was a premise that King Idris as-Senussi relied primarily on the tribal structures in building up his system of governance. Lisa Anderson showed

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that, in the first place, over that period, monarchy had functioned as an alliance of extended families, and secondly, that the federal system built after the country gained its independence “was a compromise” allowing “local politicians to prosper on their own land, while supporting an illusion of national unity for the country” [Anderson, 2016, p. 256].

Most certainly, the inefficiency of King Idris as-Senussi’s state governance practices can be attributed to the lack of adequate competences, but it is not likely to be a sufficient rationale. The problem, in all probability, was that the political class in the country was too small and there was no such basis that it could technically rely upon. The weak political elites, that had not been shaped by 1910-1920-s, were dismantled by the Italian authorities, while a robust layer of urban bourgeoisie and nomad peasantry had not yet been formed in the country [Anderson, 2016, p. 221]. Ultimately, on the eve of gaining independence, the society got back to the sole forms of socio-political existence known to it – the tribes. At the same time, the questions regarding how the Libyan society changed over two decades of being ruled by a monarch, how the monarchy transformed itself, how realistic was the advent of new alternatives for the Royal power, except for the military revolutionaries who took the future of the country into their own hands in 1969, still remain debatable on the agenda.

It is generally acknowledged that having come to power, M. Gaddafi tried to carry out modernization, by overcoming traditional tribalism, however, two decades later, he relinquished his initial intent and made the tribal structures the basis for his governance mechanism. Yet again, it is not quite clear from this view what the real role of the tribes was, when the attempts were undertaken to achieve national consolidation on the basis of Arabism, on the one hand, and to what extent the tribal narrative was instrumental in forging the very essence of the political regime maintained by the originator of the Third International Theory.

The moves to clamp down on the tribes and their critique during the initial years after the September 1 Revolution, were perceivably only the visible facets of the regime politics. Bearing this in mind, three principal factors should not be ignored.

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First, whatever the ideals of the country's leadership were, it had to deal with reality, where the tribes alone remained to be the chief socio-political players. For this reason, despite multiple experiments with the country's administrative and territorial division [Anderson, 2016, p. 262-263; Twati, 2012, p. 58-131], the dismantling of the institute of sheikhs [Lacher, 2020, p. 70] and the formation of new management authorities (People's committees and congresses), throughout the most crucial periods, M. Gaddafi tried to manipulate the tribes in order to win over any opposition forces [Lacher, 2020, p. 70].

Second, as relationships with the tribes were built by the regime, the tribes were never a passive object of the state politics – on the contrary, being guided by their own ideas about the reality, they actively used the new state apparatus as an arena for competition, in an effort to reinforce their influence. It was not accidental, as Thomas Hüsken notes, that in Cyrenaica, they would often adapt the People's committees and congresses to their own interests and needs [Hüsken, 2019, p. 48]. Interestingly, the spouse of the French Ambassador to Libya in 1982 – 1985, Maria Graeff-Wassink, in her memoirs constantly mentions that belonging to this or that tribe was a most important factor in the socio-political life of Tripoli at that time [Graeff-Wassink, 2015, p. 30-31].

Finally, thirdly, as the capital was moved from Cyrenaica to Tripolitania, it factored into a relative marginalization of the country, home to the Senussi Crown. As a result, Cyrenaica, which had always been a less developed economically and less modernized city, appeared to be a territory affected by the patriarchy to a larger extent than Tripolitania [Hüsken, 2019, p. 41] – it is here and in Fezzan, where the tribal factor retained its most powerful influence on public life.

As far as the impact of the tribal narrative on the very nature of M. Gaddafi's regime is concerned, Dr. Mustafa Omar Attir, in his description of the Libyan modernization, notes that while relocating to the cities and adjusting to contemporary society, the Bedouins were compelled to abandon some of their traditional values in favor of modern ones, including respect for the norms of conduct, institutions, property, another attitude towards time etc. The Libyan

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phenomenon, from the sociologist's viewpoint, implied that people, who failed to accept those basic values of a modernized society, were not only endorsed by the state governance system, but were actually placed at the top of it. To provide an illustrative example of it, M.O. Attir cites an episode from 1985, when the leaders of revolutionary committees burned down all the archives chronicling the official records of civil statutes in Tripoli, that contained data on the city's property ownership over the last several hundred years. This occurrence, totally disastrous, in terms of the urban culture, was regarded as of minor relevance within the framework of the tribal consciousness, which has no respect either for private property or any legal documents [Attir, 2016, p. 60-61]. Moncef Ouannes introduces in this connection an idea about the "tribalization of the state" under the late Gaddafi regime [Ouannes, 2009, p. 319-345]. A shift affecting M. Gaddafi's rule in 1990 – 2000, when the tribes became almost the sole key element in the country's governance mechanism, in W. Lacher's opinion, had a negative effect not only on the country, but also on the tribes themselves. The gross interference into the internal life of the tribal communities and active manipulation of them brought about their degradation and led to the loss of a substantial degree of their sovereignty [Lacher, 2020, p. 73].

If the conclusion made by the German scholar is hard to contravene, then the arguments offered by him do not seem to hold water.

Eventually, should the tribes have been the key players in the Arab Spring and subsequent developments, all the arguments offered by him could have been used to show how the conservation of tribalism was accomplished under M. Gaddafi. The argument that can be used to prove two directly opposite tenets is deprived of substance. It is likely that the loss of a substantial degree of their identity by the tribes is related not to the political factors, but to the social ones.

[TRIBE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION](#)

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When reviewing the social factors mentioned above, it is expedient to pay attention to three processes: the dynamics underlying the Libyan population size, urbanization and the development of the educational system.

Despite the fact that the population census was conducted in Libya eight times (in 1931, 1936, 1954, 1964, 1973, 1984, 1995, 2006), all data made available regarding the country's population size raise serious doubts. E.E. Evans-Pritchard conceded that no one knew how many people resided in Cyrenaica, however the region seemed to be underpopulated [Evans-Pritchard, 1949, p. 39] – and this was written when Libya had already conducted two censuses. Naturally, under conditions of the domineering nomadic way of living and in consideration of a very incompetent approach undertaken by the colonial administration, it was out of question to expect that the statistical results would be accurate. When in 1969 the M. Gaddafi regime was established, apparently, the situation did not improve in any tangible manner – at any rate, much documentary evidence that bears a totally absurd nature testifies to the effect that the vital statistics had been maintained at an extremely low level in Jamahiriya. Nevertheless, even very tentative data available, in all probability, can be used to describe the general trend of demographic transformations. To enhance the reliability criteria, the data obtained through the censuses can be compared against the figures offered by the World Bank. Overall, the two sources provide a similar picture. According to the World Bank, Libya's population comprised:

in 1960 г. – 1,448,416, в 1970 г. – 2,133,527, in 1980 – 3,219,462, in 1990 – 4,436,663, in 2000 – 5,357,893 and in 2010 – 6,197,667 persons [*The World Bank Data. Libya*, 2021]. According to the censuses: in 1954 – 1,041,599, in 1964 – 1,515,501, in 1973 – 2,052,372, in 1984 – 3,231,059, in 1995 – 4,389,739 and in 2006 – 5,323,991 [Daw, El-Bouzedi, 2019, p. 4879-4880].

If we refer to the World Bank data, we can notice that population growth over the decades was 47, 50, 37, 20 and 17%; whereas the census data indicates 45, 35, 57, 35 and 21%. Thus, both data sources testify to a radical slowdown in the population growth in the first half – mid 1990-s. While analyzing the dynamics of

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the population size under M. Gaddafi, Almokhtar Attwairi also mentions that the highest coefficient (5.1) was reached in 1973 – 1984, it dropped to 2.8 in 1995 – 2006. Concurrently, he asserts that the drastic growth in the 1970-s was linked, among other things, to an influx of foreign migrants [Attwairi, 2017, p. 5]. There is no doubt that this important event had its impact on the growth situation, however, it seems that the declining natural increase rates by the end of the century were linked to the completion of the demographic transfer, just as much.

This assertion can be corroborated by the statistical data regarding the urban population growth. Omar Emhamed Elbendak cites the following statistics in this connection: in 1960 – 358,000 (24%), in 1970 – 862,000 (40%), in 1980 – 1,903,000 (59%), 1990 – 3,146,000 (70,9%), in 1995 – 3,882,000 (88%) and in 2000 – 5,115,450 (95%) [Elbendak, 2008, p. 70] urban residents. Although these figures are much higher than those cited by A. Attwairi [Attwairi, 2017, p. 3], both researchers reveal the same tendency – in the 1970s, the urban population in Libya outnumbered the rural population. In parallel with that, the development of the educational system gained momentum [Elabbar, 2017], including the female education, and by 2009, half of all the students had been women [Attir, 2016, p. 17]. This prompted Mustafa O. Attir to state that if the western model of modernization implied the sequence “industrialization – urbanization – education – modernation”, then in the Libyan scenario, the logic was reversed the development of the educational system led to the urbanization and then to modernization [Attir, 2016, p. 93].

The declining rates of the population growth, therefore, can be regarded as a natural consequence of the urbanization process and the development of the educational system: in the 1990s, the children of those, who moved to the cities in the 1970 – 1980-s, entered the adult life, and in the 2010-s – it was the third generation of urban dwellers.

Obviously, urbanization, as such, does not mean an instantaneous crisis of the tribal system. It is notable that the researchers, relying on the data pertinent to the 1990-s, mention that many resettlers often relocated to the urban agglomerations (primarily, to Tripoli and Benghazi, which account for 40% of the urban population)

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in whole dynasties, occupying city blocks [Lacher, 2020, p. 69], and transferring with them the rules of tribal relationships. Nevertheless, O.E. Elbendak, drawing on the survey of 300 respondents from Tripoli, shows that slightly more than half of them were prone to associate themselves with small nuclear families [Elbendak, 2008, p. 182], and further even goes as far as asserting that the Libyan society was tribal *before* [Elbendak, 2008, p. 136].

Such assessment is in sharp contradiction with the data obtained by A. Obeidi through field research in 1994. Out of 492 respondents, 96% belonged to the tribes and around 90% felt their affiliation with tribes. However, almost half of the polled (47%) would be happy to relinquish their tribal identity in favor of the entirely Libyan one [Obeidi, 2001, p. 121-125].

It would be reasonable to assume that the inner contradiction between the tribal affiliation and the desire to dismiss the tribal culture typically displayed by the first and second generation of urban residents has been more explicit with the next generation.

As a result, by the early second decade of the 21-st century, the tribe, as a political and socio-economic institute, had begun to disappear from the realm of the Libyan public reality, but it had retained its presence as a substantial element of identity and also as a source of specific narrative. Indirectly, this conclusion is substantiated by the field research of Peter Cole and Fiona Mangan conducted in 2015 in Tobruk, Bani Walid and Sabha: while almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the polled identified themselves with the tribes (much less than the figure cited by Obeidi), only 13% met with tribal leaders in the previous year and only a third of respondents considered the tribal affiliation a cause for pride [Cole, Mangan, 2016, p. 10-12].

[THE TRIBE AFTER 2011](#)

Admittedly, the weakening of the tribes did not imply their full disappearance from the socio-political map of the country. Moreover, after 2011, under conditions of relaxation of the state power, they experienced a certain wave of revival. Aidar Aganin provides a long list of governance structures set up by these or those tribes

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and tribal confederations [Aganin, 2020, p. 32] amid political turbulence of the 2010-s, however, it is very problematic to establish their real weight and caliber. A citation of the sheikh of the Cyrenaica tribe *Obeidat* given by the author [Mana', 1991, p. 176] to the effect that the country is in effect “witnessing an intertribal war” [Mana', 1991, p. 31] is remarkable not a statement of fact (which cannot be evidenced with certainty), but as an example of a feasible perception of the current developments.

Overall, it is rather obvious that some general tendencies in relation to the tribal activities in the 2010-s can be specified. First, as has been already noted, neither the 2011 Revolution, nor the subsequent armed conflict, nor the various settlement initiatives had ever developed with an emphasis on the tribal framework. The tribes could have been meaningful factors, to a greater or lesser degree, in the development of those processes, but they had never been key players in any of the above circumstances. Even the National Conference, that drew controversial comments, but was initiated by Ghassan Salamé and facilitated by the Swiss-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, although it was run on the principle “from the bottom upwards” implying the support of local forces, did not include any individual tribal institutes [*The Libyan National Conference Process. Final Report*, 2018, p. 8].

Second, the tribes had a more significant role to play in Cyrenaica, than in Tripolitania. If the reinforcement or weakening of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF is a more accurate name for the Libyan National Army (LNA) headed by Khalifa Haftar), in a great measure, depended on its backing by the large tribal groups in Cyrenaica, then in Tripolitania, where up to two thirds of the entire Libyan population reside, the logic underlying political coalitions had never been connected with the tribes. In all probability, it can be accounted for by a lower concentration of the Cyrenaica population, a traditionally more mosaic tribal structure of this area and, in general, a comparatively lower level of modernization.

Third, a number of large tribes, after 2011, appeared to be split. The most conspicuous of such cases is with the largest Libyan tribe *Warfalla* [Mana', 1991, p. 387], whose western stronghold concentrated in the town of Bani Walid, acted in

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support of M. Gaddafi and retained loyalty to the ousted regime for several years afterwards, while the eastern tribes aligned themselves with the revolutionary movement [Ben Lamma, 2017, p. 16-17]. In this context, the splits affecting the tribes occurred not only along horizontal lines – between various segments or territorial communities, but also along vertical lines. Valery Matrosov in his insightful research [Matrosov, 2022] showed a profound intergenerational rift in the Cyrenaica tribe ‘*Awaqir* [Mana‘, 1991, p. 116], whose younger generation members accused the traditional tribal leaders of weakness and opportunism.

Forth, the relaxation of state power led to the resumption of old inter-tribal conflicts – not so much over the territory as such, but over the resources. A shift in the political balance that deprived certain tribes of their patronage, created a window of opportunities for others. A vivid example of such conflict was a controversy between the *Awulad Suleiman* [Mana‘, 1991, p. 261] and *Kadadfa* tribes [*Libye: La tribu “Ouled Slimane”*, 2021, p. 7].

Fifth, as far as the relationships of the tribes with the big time politics are concerned, two tracks can be outlined. On the one hand, the tribes use the existing political institutions as a source granting them access to the resources and a field for a standoff, as has always been the case. In this sense, any promotion of a tribal representative to the security apparatus or his assignment to a senior political job is regarded as a successful endeavor by the tribe, making its position more powerful. At the same time, any concrete politician or military leader cannot be viewed exclusively as a tribal representative, as the tribal support is not always guaranteed to him *a priori*. Suffice to say that none of the outstanding leaders of the 2010-s achieved his top position exclusively or chiefly due to the tribal connections. Moreover, during the phase of heightening tensions between K. Haftar and Aguila Saleh in the spring of 2020, the situation of the latter was determined largely by the fact whether he could be given a vote of confidence on behalf of the largest Cyrenaica tribe *Obeidat* or not [*Interview with representatives of the Libyan authorities in Tobruk*, 2020].

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As it turned out, the tribe passed its vote of confidence for him, but it was not something taken for granted. On the other hand, the tribes seek to become political actors themselves and set up various governance institutions that have not been in place within the traditional system before, as a matter of fact. (Community Board of the *Warfalla* tribes [*Al-Majlis al-ijtima 'i li kaba 'il warfalla S.C.W.T.*, 2021]), Higher Board of the *Zintan* Notables and Rulers [*Al-Majlis al-a 'la li a 'yan wa al-hukama' al-Zintan*, 2021] etc). These institutions normally prove their efficiency mainly under such conditions, when reference is made to the compact tribal settlement pattern – being a dominant presence on a particular territory, the tribe is capable of forming and running its own administrative body. Sixth, it can be observed that the tribes have started to use the modern communication technology (primarily, Facebook) for the purpose of consolidating tribal identity [Matrosov, 2022].

Finally, seventh, the tribal narrative, in general, has preserved its basic features. Analyzing the Facebook material posted by the '*Awakir* tribe, Valery Matrosov notes the lack of meaningful content in many publications, such as flaring slogans glorifying the tribe, images of the lions, eagles or expensive cars, etc. [Matrosov, 2022]. However, if we look at them within the context of common traditions related to the tribal culture, then we can see here a most vivid manifestation of the key elements of the traditional tribal narrative with its values depicting unity, gallantry, bravery etc., praising oneself and co-tribesmen, denouncing the enemies, lamenting the heroes, striving to dominate others, featuring the cult of force etc. In broad terms, we can see a certain discrepancy between the real role of the tribes in the political process and their attitude towards the political process, as such. The attitude has been very much in conformity with the tradition: the tribes tend to consider themselves as independent actors, they fight with each other, try to compete in the political arena etc. Moreover, it can even be asserted (with some caution) that for the young generation, the tribal ideals have become more important than for their parents, who are more inclined to get integrated into the modernized institutional political space. Alongside with that, the real niche held by the tribes has been seriously altered. The tribes prove to be effective socio-political instruments whenever they can get consolidated on a territorial, primarily urban platform, whether in the city of Zintan,

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the town of Bani Walid or Tarkunah. However, under such scenario, the governance institutes created by them become the institutes of territorial, rather than tribal control, in effect. Simultaneously, if it is rightly stated that the tribes have surrendered their positions as socio-political actors, then the question arises: What players have come to replace them?

NEW TRIBES OF THE 2010-s?

Observing the Libyan political process suggests the idea that it was in no way linked (fully or partially) to the internationally recognized bodies – such as the House of Representatives, the Presidential Council or multiple (National salvation, accord or unity) governments. The occasional attempts to reduce the entire complexity of the conflict to a confrontation between East and West have also failed to stand up to scrutiny. First, because the bulk of the country's population is concentrated in the capitals of these two historical regions, that are far away from each other, so consequently, any civil clash translates into the struggle between East and West purely due to the geographical factor. Second, a consummate consolidation of the regions is not even in the equation: the strife between Zintan and Misrata, Misrata and Sirte, Tripoli and Tarhuna, the isolation of Bani Walid etc. had been a constantly sustained note of the conflict over the entire last decade. In the East, although the unity was much more conspicuous there, conflicts between the main urban centers also occurred periodically (in particular, reference is made here to Haftar's Operation Dignity seeking to gain control over Benghazi and subsequently Derna) [Eaton et al., 2020, p. 21].

Another circumstance is also indicative of the fact that the state institutions had only a secondary role to play in these developments, whereas all of the key events that unfolded over the last years, disrupting the trajectory preplanned for the political process to follow, were related to the activities performed by non-state actors: the conflict between Zintan and Misrata formations and the emergence of the Libya Dawn alliance in 2014, the offensive launched by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces

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(LAAF) on Tripoli that torpedoed the National Conference scheduled to be held in 2019, the undermining of the elections in 2021 etc.

The key players in all of these events were the so-called militias, modelled on the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (*katiba suvvar at-Tarablus*) and such similar groups.

Although their activities across the country's territory are reviewed today in great detail [Eaton et al., 2020, p. 21], their intrinsic nature has not been fully revealed.

It seems that we can single out about ten characteristics that distinguish the Libyan militia from the other forms of societal self-organization, likewise from other groups/formations bearing the same name in other countries (Lebanon, Iraq etc.).

The first characteristic is a perfectly obvious militarized background of the militias. Some of those groups were set up in the course of the 2011 Revolution to combat M. Gaddafi's supporters, their combatants underwent special training (e.g. in the camps built up with the assistance of Ali Belhadj in the area around Zintan), some came to the surface later, as a kind of self-defense units. Regardless of their origin, after their formation, they began to operate as military groups engaged, among other things, in coercive entrepreneurship [Volkov, 1999, p.56]. Moreover, as opposed to other forms of socio-political organization, they have displayed a fairly high degree of sustainability – as an overwhelming part of the militias that got underway in 2011, have been in operation up to now.

The second meaningful characteristic is that the militias, in the vast majority of cases, are formed on the territorial basis, and the urban identity has an essential role to play in their functioning. This is what differs them from traditional bandits, once described by Eric Hobsbawm [Hobsbawm, 2020], Afghan field commanders [Marten, 2012], Iraqi organizations set up on a confessional platform [Mamedov, 2021, pp. 206-211] etc. In the early 2010-s, Tripoli was the venue of incessant fighting between the militias from Zintan and Misrata [Lacher, Al-Idrissi, 2018]. Sirte's

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affiliation with the ISIS (banned in Russia) was perceived by the local population as a means of defending their own independence from the Misrata formations [Interview with Tripoli Residents, 2018]. When K. Haftar attempted to storm Tripoli, the most severe resistance was offered to him by the local militias, who took a stand for their city's independence and acted as the city's local defense volunteers. However, in the less urbanized regions – in Cyrenaica and Fezzan – the formation of militias was not accomplished on the urban platform, but on an ethnic (Tubu, Tuareg) or tribal basis. In particular, the LAAF is sometimes described as an “amalgam of formal units of mixed tribal composition” [Eaton et al., 2020, p. 21].

In some cases, the militia's territorial identity can be complemented by this or that ideology. Thus, there are a few groups (such as *Kuvvat ar-rad'*), who adhered to the Salafi views and commitments, there were militias who embraced the ISIS (banned in Russia) and there were those, who professed their loyalty to M. Gaddafi. Nevertheless, it appears that in none of the above cases, ideology was a critical element for the militia. On numerous occasions, when the militia joins forces with this or that movement, the Libyans tend to regard it as a mere instance of political pragmatism [Interview with Tripoli Residents, 2018], and for this reason, all speculation *du jour* circulating outside Libya as regards the closeness of some groups to the Muslim Brothers and others – to the Salafi Madkhalis, and the third – to the Jihadists, is often met with an ironic reaction.

Not only the militias are formed (primarily) on a territorial basis, but they also seek to gain control over their territory, largely viewed by them as a source of resources. In 2018, everyone knew exactly what areas were controlled by which particular forces, and what properties located within those areas were used to generate this or that income. *Kuvvat ar-rad'* was in control of the city's prison and airport, the 301-st Battalion controlled the wholesale market, while the forces subordinated to Nadji Gnidi were in charge of security arrangements for the UN mission etc. At the same time, several militias were involved in a confrontation in connection with gaining control over the Corinthia hotel providing accommodation for the foreign visitors.

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On the territory controlled by it, the militia is not only engaged in the coercive entrepreneurship through turning security into the object of market relations, but also in the execution of administrative and court functions – this constitutes its fundamental difference from the ordinary criminal groups. ‘Abd al-Hani al-Kikli, who controlled the district of Abu Slim in Tripoli, founded a Support Center in Abu Slim – a special agency designed to provide assistance to the population – and former policemen were employed there, among others. ‘Abd as-Salyam az-Zubi, who headed the 301-st Battalion, also created a special purpose body to resolve controversies among the local residents. *Kuvvat ar-rad*‘ owned by ‘Abd ar-Rauf Kara is engaged, among other things, in performing the functions of vice police etc. In Cyrenaica, in 2017 – 2018, the LAAF morphed from a purely military into a military-economic and military-administrative agency, conflating the functions of boosting the development of the local economic infrastructure and performing administrative management [Eaton et al., 2020, p. 29-32; *Interview with an Expert from Tobruk*, 2019].

As a reasonably sustainable structure, engaged in various activities, the militia, most commonly, possesses its own name and symbols.

A crucial element in its functionality is the figure of its leader. Such personalities, who headed Tripoli’s most powerful militias as Haitham at-Tajoori, ‘Abd ar-Rauf Kara, Bashir al-Bugra, ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, ‘Abd as-Salam az-Zubi, Nadji Gnidi, as well as their “political father” Hashim Bishr, who created together with Abdelhakim Belhadj Tripoli’s Revolutionary Brigades, have been familiar names to everyone, and the interaction between the forces subordinate to them was viewed, as a rule, as interaction between the leaders. It is noteworthy that each leader was provided with his own biography, some elements of which, in all likelihood, were consistent with reality, while others bore an apparently legendary character. The tales about the majority of leaders say that though born in Tripoli, they originally came from different locations – either from the families descending from the Mashreq (Kara, Gnidi) or from the western areas (Tajoura), or from a family that lived for some time in the Mashreq (Bishr) etc. One way or another, but their

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background did not resonate well with the traditional local tribal structure more often than not, and sometimes they held underprivileged positions under M. Gaddafi, many of those leaders served a term of imprisonment. However, most of them are credited with such qualities as piety, courage, bravery, loyalty to justice. Of course, it is hard to verify such data, but there is a blatant contradiction between a rather low-profile standing of those leaders within the traditional social hierarchy and the most outstanding personal qualities ascribed to them – such practice is fairly typical for portraying various types of popular tribal heroes, likewise “law and order avengers” (compare with the life history of ‘Antarah bin Shaddad). Finally, one more significant aspect is how the militia has built up its relationships with other socio-political players.

It is apparent that the strategy for its interaction with government institutions and other militias are drastically different. While other militias are treated as partners and competitors, the state, in the totality of its institutes, is viewed as a source of accessing resources and a platform for competition. Exercising physical control over the government institutions, kidnapping powerful officials or infiltrating into these or those power-wielding agencies – all represent the techniques of accumulating wealth and increasing the resource portfolio.

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CONCLUSION

The above dynamics underlying the role of the tribal factor in contemporary Libya allows to assert that the urbanization processes, which in the 1970-s triggered a preponderance of the urban residents over the rural population and witnessed a rapid development of the educational system, ultimately resulted in the weakening of tribes as the basic socio-political units of the Libyan community in the 21-st century, however, they did not cause the tribal identity or the tribal narrative to disappear. Against the background of the erosion of state sovereignty in the 2010-s, this gave rise to two related consequences. On the one hand, it led to the attempts to enhance the tribes, which proved to be effective in the event that administrative control was established over a limited territory and new governance institutions were founded.

On the other hand, it led to the formation of militias that can be viewed primarily not as a mere variety of criminal groups, but a certain urban variation of the tribal organizations – some sort of pseudo-tribes.

There are at least three arguments in favor of this rationale.

Firstly, militias operate on the basis of principles shared by the tribes. The narrative used by them to interpret the reality has the same features as the tribal narrative, made known to us through other Arab states. The history behind the militia operations is an epic saga depicting a confrontation between the brotherhood tied by bonds of *'asabiyah* and its adversaries over the land and resources. The very fact that the narrative has an epic quality is clearly evident to anyone who is trying to get an insight into the militias of Tripoli.

An extensive coverage of their operations presents an endless sequence of narratives dealing with the newly created and collapsing alliances, competition, betrayal and battles. The narratives include exciting topics and fascinating episodes, but, essentially, the outcome is always the same – “our guys” prevail over the “other guys” and reassess their superiority. At the same time, there is no such thing as a

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historic movement or global objective that would mean establishing control over the country, putting an end to a conflict, achieving social justice or celebrating the triumph of a political or religious idea. Bravery, dignity, straightforwardness in dealing with people, fairness have the status of the most cherished ideals for those narratives, while the striving to dominate defines the modus vivendi for the relations with competitors.

Secondly, the phenomenon of tribes morphing into militias can be perfectly well explained from a logical standpoint. Indeed, by the second decade of this century, the Libyan society had found itself in a most precarious situation. The urbanization brought about a crisis of the tribal structure, however, no viable alternative to it had been offered. A significant part of the population remained unemployed, the state persistently placed a premium on the tribes within the governance system, additionally making a particular emphasis on the loyalty to the traditional tribal values. As all of the government systems were destroyed, the society, most naturally, began to get reorganized in accordance with the sole narrative known to it – the tribal one – by recreating the pseudo-tribal structures under the new conditions. It should be noted, however, that in the areas where the tribes retained their relevance as effective socio-political actors, such as Cyrenaica, the city militias found much less proliferation.

Intrinsically, the events of the 20th century described by Lisa Anderson have happened again, when the disruption of the weak modernization elements caused the society to refer to its tribal experience again and again.

Finally, thirdly, this has been confirmed in part by the recent history of its neighbor, Tunisia. As a matter of fact, no city militias have been formed there, but the sedentarization and urbanization processes have driven the tribal relations to reemerge within the urban environment, as a result territorial groups came to the surface, being aware of their own unity and competing with each other.

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