

Review – Understanding Libya Since Gaddafi

Written by Youssef Mohammad Sawani

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YOUSSEF MOHAMMAD SAWANI, JUN 17 2022

Understanding Libya Since Gaddafi

By Ulf Laessing

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Ulf Laessing is the Head of the Sahel Program (Mali) at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. He previously spent 13 years working for Reuters in the Middle East and Africa, including in Libya. In this book, Laessing attempts to help readers better understand Libya and its plight since 2011. The book attempts an understanding of the events that have unfolded in Libya since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 and the consequences of the fall. It provides a portrait of the situation, dynamics and actors involved and touches upon the economic, cultural and security aspects of the crisis. The author also extends his analysis to the different roles and impacts of foreign powers' policies and actions in Libya throughout its modern history, which he claims only began in 1951 when the country was declared independent by virtue of a UN General Assembly's resolution.

One aspect of this book that is particularly worthy of admiration is the wealth of information that the author draws on, including the clever use of a variety of sources such as interviews and first-hand experiences. This wealth of information is especially evident in his treatment of the roles played by militias, especially what he labels as 'super-militias'. In this section, he introduces some key politicians and commanders and assesses their roles within a conflict-ridden country with a rentier economy and shows how these factors contributed to state failure and anarchy post-Gaddafi.

After an introduction in which the author tells the story of the book and its formulation, the author is most concerned with daily events that make headlines. He provides a first-hand account of the difficulties and challenges faced by journalists and reports in Libya. With no appropriate theoretical framework, the author moves to examining the history of Libya as a modern state. In the first chapter, "An Accidental State" (pp.15-35) the author provides a cursory review of the country's modern history between 1911 and 2011. The author adopts the mainstream approach of the nation-state as the center of things and builds an argument about Libya being a state only by accident. This argument makes reference to the great powers' disagreements over the division of Libya, which eventually resulted in granting Libya independence. Moreover, Ulf Laessing argues that both King Idris (1951-1969) and Gaddafi (1969-2011) failed to build the state and relied on tribalism and family instead of institutions. Laessing repeats the much-consumed idea of an accidental state, despite the fact that this idea can run counter to historical facts. While the author argues that Libya's history and existence as a state/nation only started with the actions, or inaction, of the great powers and their disagreement on reconciling their competing interests, he refrains from making a similar argument crediting the same actors with destroying the Libyan state and standing witness to its current state of affairs. This reading of Libya and its history as an accidental state is further developed by the author in chapter nine where he questions its durability.

Chapter 2 "Welcome to Militia Land" (pp.37-53) is a detailed account of the militias ruling the country and blundering its resources. This chapter is a comprehensive account of anarchy as the dominant scenario since 2011, wherein militias are not only the rule-makers and game-changers, but also the state itself. The author allows some space to explain the role played by Islamist militias and the consequences of their confrontation with the Libyan National Army. However, he seems less ready to write about their rejection of the results of the 2014 elections that led to another

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cycle of civil war and division, in addition to their continuous violations of human rights and liberties.

The author moves the narrative from the macro level to a more detailed approach in chapter 3, “the oil port rebel” (pp.55- 75), providing an account of how militiamen have actually become the real effective power brokers in the post-Gaddafi era. While the chapter deals with how oil and its export revenue dominate the economy, the objective is to show how this rentier economy facilitated the ascendance of militias which are both decisive but also able to unaccountably squander public resources. The main focus, however, is on introducing one militiaman and warlord named Ibrahim Jadran, who in 2013 seized Libya’s oil export ports and cost the country billions of dollars and considerable bloodshed. This link between oil and the civil war is the issue to which the author devotes closer scrutiny, as he unpacks how militias, east and west, have acted in total disregard to the interests of the Libyan people.

Tribes or tribal and stateless?

Chapter four, “Libya Divided” (pp. 77-108) tells aspects of the story of yet another militiaman, General Khalif Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army. This strong man currently controls more than 70% of the territory in Libya, including oil production and export facilities. However, he still allows the Tripoli government, which is hostage to militias, to have uncontested access to revenues through the Central Bank. This chapter is the author’s account of the Libyan Civil War and provides a rich description of its negative impact on the country and on ordinary Libyans. However, it is here also that the author is hostage to the same mainstream western views of Libya and its conflict. They almost entirely ignores the gross violations, crimes, including those against humanity, and other criminal acts committed by the militias in the western parts of the country and occupies himself almost exclusively with the Libyan National Army (LNA) and its commander Haftar. The author seems unconcerned or even bothered to provide a balanced treatment of real causes of the conflict and not interested in going beyond a characterization of Haftar as the source of the ills and woes of Libya, including foreign intervention/interference. The same position and dampening of Haftar is repeated again with similar spirit in the epilogue, in which the author provides a biased account of the war of 2019-2020, otherwise known as LNA battle to take control of the capital Tripoli.

It is in chapter five, “Tribe vs. Region vs. Town vs. Family” (pp.109-131) where I have real issues with this book. Here, the author attempts to understand how and why Libya faces the seemingly unsurmountable challenge of building national institutions. Assuming the reasons to be in the deep-rooted divisions of a fractious society suffering an identity complex, the author blindly repeats the same orientalist ideas common in mainstream western literature that is ready only to consider Libya a tribal stateless traditional and backward-looking society. The occupation of the author is not with what unites Libya and Libyans and has provided social cohesion that prevented an all-out civil war, but instead an insistence on repeating the same view of what is tearing Libya apart. The author attempts to provide an explanation of this perceived division at the societal level by highlighting the lack of an acceptable agreement to end the conflict.

However, this again reiterates and echoes the same approach we criticized above. This is nothing more than repeating Eurocentric theories of social change that ignore the internal dynamics of native social history and the roles played by local actors and traditions not only in establishing order but also in the resistance against colonialism that strengthened Libyan nationalism. The current deadlock and failure to build peace in Libya since 2011 is better explained in the foreign intervention resulting in the destruction of the state and the failure inherent in the UN led process that is entirely focused on elitist power sharing arrangements and the neglect of the social contract and reconciliation that can build a sustainable peace. The modern history of Libya attests to frequent tribal contestations and struggles but it also provides ample evidence to suggest that tribes have continuously stood with the national state and consolidated national unity. Only in times of weak central authority would tribes act differently to provide a safe space for their people without abandoning local traditions, avoiding conflict and making reconciliation and peace endure. Moreover, tribal identity has been a constant factor but has not been employed to counter national identity even though it acted as a point of reference in times of crisis. The recent cycles of civil war that Libya witnessed since the fall of the Gaddafi regime attest to this, as tribes and tribal leaders confirm their stance in supporting the state and its unity and in the direction of national identity. Even federalists have not advanced any claim or demand for separation but insist on maintaining national unity and a unified Libyan state.

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Rentier economy, Gaddafinomics and Foreign Interests

In chapter six, “Fleeing Conflict” (pp.133- 155) Ulf Laessing continues his attempt to explain the failure of state building in Libya by the nature of its economy, fiscal and expenditure policies. The author discusses how economic factors have played a decisive role in the perpetuation of the conflict. He explains how the rentier economy and what a Libyan intellectual termed ‘Gaddafinomics’, a reference to centralization and expanding public spending, contribute to the resource drain and squander reflective of a resource curse. This is evident in the ever enlarging of an overpopulated inefficient public sector, government administration, and expenditure. In addition to mounting public debt, this system, or lack of it, harms work ethics, consolidates corruption, and makes the state unable to perform its duties, especially protection and service provision. However, the author is silent when it comes to how this situation is linked to Libya’s integration into the international capitalist economy, suggesting that Libya is only important in as much as it supplies the market with oil and gas. However, this structure actually perpetuates the rentier economy, as the internationals who toppled the Gaddafi regime are less ready to help maintain stability and development that would lead to a diversified economy and effective democratic governance.

Chapter Seven (pp.157-177) is “The Struggle to Secure Libya’s Borders,” opens with an impassioned portrayal of the predicament of African migrants intercepted by Libyan militias in the Mediterranean while attempting to reach Europe. Comparing it with the failures to construct a Libyan security and army, the author argues how the post-Gaddafi sticky issues of migration worried and drew Europe into the conflict. The author then examines how European nations and their leaders reacted, including information on how Libyan borders became permeable and how Europe attempted to respond with various policies and strategies

Chapter eight “The Arrival of Islamic State” (pp.179-198) further attests to the failure of the Libyan governments that were the product of the UN-lead process. It provides an account of how the so-called Islamic state, Daesh, exploited the chaos of post-Gaddafi Libya to take control of the coastal city of Sirte. However, the author, while going into lengths into the issue, fails to provide the readers with how and why IS was unable to take root in Libya despite its control of a number of cities including the whole of Derna and Benghazi at times before the LNA expelled it by force. The author’s reference to Libyans’ suspicion or mistrust of foreigners is hardly enough of an explanation. The author also does not explain why the US had to intervene directly in Sirte but not in Derna or Benghazi where IS sprang and flourished before being whipped out by LNA forces.

Can Libya overcome its failed state situation?

In chapter nine, Laessing invites the reader to conclude that this is “A Country Beyond Repair?” The author provides so many details of life and “politics” in Libya and queries whether this country can hold together. He tells the story of the UN process aimed at ending the conflict and traces much of the activities of the different heads of its mission in Libya. Apart from the intersecting long details of his many encounters with Libyan politicians, ordinary Libyans and visits to different cities, the author underlines the efforts of the UNSMIL especially those undertaken under the leadership of SGSR Ghassan Salamé only to conclude how Libyans are unprepared for peace deal. The rest of the chapter is about the militias and how they control the capital, making the government dysfunctional and unable to perform any duty.

From the beginning, the author seems predetermined to conclude that Libya has never been a fully fledged state. Interpreting Gaddafi’s experience of the Jamahiriya as a result of his frustration with the less revolutionary ordinary Libyans and his inconsistency vis- vis state-building. The author, therefore, misguides his readers into a naive, to say the least, understanding of the richness of the history of this country and the complex nature of Gaddafi’s ideological design geared towards building a state model entirely different from the western born nation-state system and organization.

Blindly adopting the state-centric western or orientalist view that considers any other forms of social or political governance primordial and backward, the author reflects his shallow knowledge of Libya’s history but also the rather uneducated ill-informed writing that does not stop to question erroneous information that is made to be as facts in times of conflict, civil war, and propaganda. This clearly appears in his inaccurate claim that Gaddafi recruited the

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rank and file of the brigades from his own tribe. The same narrative is employed when explaining the overthrow of the regime as the result of the revolt of majority of Libyan tribes. This narrative overrides historical facts that confirm Libya's major bigger tribes in the western, central and southern parts of the country remaining loyal to the regime or at least neutral whilst NATO led military campaign consumed eight months to end regime's resistance and ensure its downfall.

About the author:

Youssef Sawani is a professor of politics & international relations at the University of Tripoli in Libya with a focus on Libyan affairs. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His recent publications include *Gaddafi's Legacy, Institutional Development, and National Reconciliation in Libya* and *Islamist and Non-Islamist Currents and the Struggle for Post-Gaddafi Libya*. Youssef can be contacted via email at youssef.sawani@gmail.com.