Arab Reform Initiative

THE NEW ARAB DIASPORA SERIES

STRADDLING LIMINALITY AND ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT:

UNDERSTANDING MOBILIZATION PATTERNS OF THE LIBYAN DIASPORA

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Cover Image: A Libyan woman flashes the victory sign while passing close to an election poster after voting at polling station in Dubai, United Arab Emirates - July 2012.
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Introduction

The NATO campaign to unseat long-time Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 was met largely with support by Libyans living in exile. Many had not set foot in their country in decades – some not even since 1969, the year Gaddafi carried out his coup d'état against King Idris I – and in diaspora they formed a close-knit community of intellectuals, doctors, professors, artists, politicians, and other civil society activists who acted as an opposition force to the regime.

With the tragic unfolding of what started as the Libyan uprising in 2011, which morphed into a protracted civil and proxy war, the Libyan diaspora has enlarged to include new categories of activists and political actors seeking refuge abroad but also new socio-economic groups who are fleeing the deteriorating economic and security conditions. Yet despite this diversification in the profiles of those in diaspora, the conflict has never undermined the efforts of Libyans in exile to rebuild a semblance of a community that can mobilize for promoting peace and reconciliation. Building on the rich networks that were made with Western and Arab policymakers during the long years of exile, the Libyan diaspora, which has never been a monolithic entity, has been able to contribute to changes that have occurred in the country since the fall of the Gaddafi regime.

This study explores the formation of Libyan exile communities since 2011, the different relationships they harbour vis-à-vis the homeland, and some of the different roles they have assumed in building the imagined community and in participating in the rebuilding of the country. Through exploration of the nature of the diaspora and its geographical distribution, and with particular focus on those in Tunisia vs. those in the UK and US, the study assesses the diasporic character of Libyans in exile. The research finds that issues related to peacebuilding, reconciliation, and the empowerment of women and minority groups act as nodal points for diasporic Libyans who, despite their different ideological, cultural, and tribal affiliations, can find common ground when discussing the future of post-Gaddafi Libya.[1] Yet, in exploring the work of Libyan diaspora organizations and contextualizing the different waves and destinations of exodus, the research also observes quite different patterns of diaspora mobilization. More precisely, the research finds that the relationships between those in diaspora and the Libyan homeland differ according to relationship, as do the political opportunity structures, which have an implication on the type of mobilization that occurs. In this way, Libyans in diaspora in Tunisia – who maintain patterns of circular mobility and often harbour hopes of return, and who perceive more threats if engaged in political mobilization – tend to either remain under the radar or to engage through the activities and frameworks of international organizations located in Tunis. On the contrary, those in Western capitals have been able to cultivate relationships with foreign policymakers and international organizations for advocacy and lobbying purposes in favour of transitional processes. In all cases, though, direct political participation of Libyans in diaspora in homeland politics has faced a number of institutional, legal, and perceptional barriers, which nonetheless show signs of being able to be overcome through shared belonging to the Libyan imagined community.

Based on structured and semi-structured interviews with four members of the Libyan diaspora, an online questionnaire distributed through a popular Libyan podcast series, a conversation with the Libyan podcast series' creator and my attendance of two Zoom conferences of a Libyan diasporic organization, and drawing on existing statistical data as well as a qualitative review of social media content of Libyan exile groups, carried out between September 2019-January 2021, the study provides an assessment of how members of the Libyan diaspora relate to the homeland and to each others, and how these relationships contribute to different patterns of mobilization. The study concludes with a few recommendations to Libyan and international policymakers regarding how best to support the Libyan diaspora in the implementation of their efforts designed to promote reconciliation, peacebuilding, institutional reform, and transitional justice for Libya.

1 My use of the term "tribal" should be taken in its traditional sense of the pre-Libyan state, denoting the "tribal loyalties, kinship and brotherhood bonds and affiliation with the pre-colonial Ottoman provinces," which have not totally vanished even during the Gaddafi dictatorship. See Anna Baldinetti, The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile, and the Emergence of a New Nation-State, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History, 2010:6.

EARLY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LIBYAN DIASPORA:

Nation-State Building and the Development of Libyan Nationalism

Even before the emergence of the modern Libyan state, the community of those living in exile has played a vital role in the formation and consolidation of the nation-state and Libyan nationalism. According to Anna Baldinetti,[2] the first nucleus of Libyan national identity was formed thanks to Libyan exiles' activities following Italian colonization in 1911. They played a role in merging different ethnic, tribal, and other kinship identities and links into an association of political parties that helped in the formation of the Libyan nation that is known today. As the country gained independence from Italy on 24 December 1951, and under the profound social, political, and economic changes that occurred between 1951-1969, the year Muammar Gaddafi carried out his coup against King Idris I, the process of exile and mobilization of those in diaspora[3] continued to grow. Indeed, the dramatic political change under Gaddafi led to the exile of political, social, and cultural elites to neighbouring Egypt, as well as Western countries, in particular the UK and the US, which house some of the largest Libyan diaspora populations. This latter continued contributing to the growth of the notion of the nation-state and Libyan nationalism.[4]

Yet while the Libyan diaspora in the years preceding 2011 was contributing to concept of Libya, it faced significant constraints to mobilization that prevented its ability to make a significant impact on homeland politics. Seeberg, for example, discusses the marginalization of the Libyan diaspora under the rule of Gaddafi as a consequence of Libya's international isolation between the late 1980s and early 2000s (and after 2011) due to the deteriorating security situation, which made it hard for the community to have an impact in the homeland.5 This would change, however, with the 2011 uprising and the ouster of Gaddafi from power. The violent repression of the regime saw the fleeing of many thousands of Libyans, mainly Gaddafi loyalists initially, to neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt;[6] conversely, the Libyan revolution also saw the return of some of those who had gone into exile since 1969. Dynamics would shift again in 2014, when a new wave of migration occurred of those fleeing the civil war. These different waves of migration thus saw a diversification in the nature of the Libyan diaspora but also new opportunities to engage vis-à-vis the homeland.

Indeed, the downfall of the Gaddafi regime saw the emergence of new roles for the Libyan diaspora in contributing to political developments at home and to the growth of the Libyan nation-state. The engagement of Libyans abroad, having been liberated from transnational repression[7] suffered under the Gaddafi regime, became more prominent with active mobilization to challenge oppression. In particular, the Libyan exile community who mobilized in support of the 2011 uprising from their positions in diaspora helped define the post-Gaddafi Libyan transition, seeking to play an active role in the transition process. Nonetheless, the vectors chosen for mobilization and political engagement with the homeland, as well as the opportunities and constraints that exist for each type of mobilization, are largely patterned on the location in diaspora but also the position vis-à-vis Libya. Comparing migration and mobilization dynamics between Libyans in exile in Tunisia versus those in Europe/North America demonstrates a different set of parameters that inform mobilization dynamics.

"ROOTED UPROOTEDNESS:"

Dynamics of the Libyan Diaspora in Tunisia

"*Due to personal threats that targeted my family, I had to flee the country during the revolution, [I] came back after the liberation [of Tripoli in October 2011], then I left the country [again] in 2014 due to the war. Before the Libyan revolution, we lived in different countries, at one time, my father had to take on a different identity because of the Gaddafi regime's hounding of our family.*"[8]

In taking a generational view of Libyan political migration, exile, and diaspora to Tunisia, what becomes apparent are dynamics of what I dub a "rooted uprootedness" that renders Tunisia an easy and appealing destination for migration but – importantly – that also allows it to act as a staging ground for eventual return. As a result, Tunisia in the wake of 2011 has seen two important waves of migration of Libyans fleeing unfavourable political dynamics and insecurity at home, but who are settling in an impermanent manner. The result has been both propitious for a breakdown in ideological divides but has also acted to favour certain forms of mobilization towards Libya and hinder others.

On the one hand, the size and long history of Libyan presence in Tunisia has produced a dynamic and tightly knit community that is able to absorb new members and provide a semblance of familiarity. The diaspora in Tunisia is one of the oldest communities

2 *Baldinetti, 2010.*

3 *Building on the definition Bauböck and Faist (2010), the Libyan diaspora can be understood as a "dispersed, extraterritorial, and imagined community that shares a basic political identity attached to the 'homeland' and that carries out some form of mobilization or material/immaterial engagement for the specific purpose of supporting or challenging domestic politics or the State of origin." Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, eds., Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods, Amsterdam University Press, 2010.*

4 *Alice Alunni, "Long-Distance Nationalism and Belonging in the Libyan Diaspora (1969–2011)", British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.46 No.2, 2019.*

5 *Peter Seeberg, "Transnationalism and Exceptional Transition Processes: The Role of the Libyan Diaspora from Qadhafi's Jamahiriyya to Post-Revolutionary Civil War and State Collapse", British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.47 No.5, 2018.*

6 *Megan Bradley, Ibrahim Fraihat, and Houda Mzioudet, Libya's Displacement Crisis: Uprooted by Revolution and Civil War, Georgetown University Press, 2016.*

7 *Dana Moss, "Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of the Arab Spring", Social Problems Vol.63 No.4, 2016.*

8 *Author interview 12 August 2020.*

of Libyans outside their home country and represents a range of ideologies, from the more socially conservative to the more liberal. Libyans can be found living in urban centres, gathering in close communities in Tunis or scattered in smaller urban centres as in the seaside resort of Hammamet and the different towns in the northeast governorate of Nabeul. With the onset of major political transformations in Libya in 2011 and again in 2014, a thriving post-2011 Libyan community was established, including the Tunis neighbourhoods of Laouina and Ennasr, which have become the new "Little Tripoli" where a series of Libyan restaurants opened to cater to the demands of an increasing Libyan clientele. As of 2013, there were five Libyan schools in Tunis, Hammamet, Sousse, Mahdia, and Sfax, all of which fell under the jurisdiction of the Libyan government at the time, and which serve the Libyan exiled communities – often the children of those who have relocated since 2011 - in these Tunisian cities.[9]

On the other hand, though, the Libyan diaspora in Tunisia is marked by a circular movement of going back and forth to the same point of departure. Examples of this diaspora circularity are abundant. One interviewee for example, who has been living in Tunis since 2014, spoke about her family's saga of a continuous cycle of exile since the 1970s: her parents had fled to Europe then the Middle East then to Morocco due to her father's dissident activities against Gaddafi; the family came back to Libya before the revolution but had to briefly leave again during 2011, to finally go on a quasi-permanent exile in 2014, between Europe, the Gulf, and Tunisia. Central to her narrative of recurrent movement to disparate locations is Tunisia, which remains the preferred destination given its proximity to Libya and the possibility it offers to return should the situation in Libya improve. Indeed, the yearning for an improvement in the security situation and for a permanent return haunts many Libyans. Tunisia thus remains the preferred choice of many Libyans for relocation, precisely because it offers the best chance at diaspora circularity.[10] These dynamics of rooted uprootedness have contributed to new waves of migration of Libyans to Tunisia in the wake of 2011, despite important ideological differences between new arrivals. In this way, migration to Tunisia is not based on ideological affiliation, meaning that the exile community is in fact quite heterogeneous. At the same time, though, the proximity and close relations between Tunisia and Libya, along with the existence of circular mobility, also act as parameters to the types of mobilization that those in diaspora engage in.

The fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 saw the arrival of many Gaddafi loyalists into major Tunisian cities, whose lives were marked by mistrust and precarity, as well as a creeping fear of insecurity and threat of retribution. The Gaddafi loyalists live a life in limbo in Tunisia where they are not considered refugees by the Tunisia authorities, given their reluctance to apply for refugee status with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). They opt instead to live under the radar, often overstaying their three-month legal stay in Tunisia. The Tunisian authorities, for their part, turn a blind eye on their "illegal" status, creating a situation of precarity in which many depend on the remittances that their relatives in Libya send – representing a reversed flow of financial resources from homeland to host country.

For Gaddafi loyalists living in Tunisia, their mistrust of the new political class in Libya also adds to the feeling of isolation and neglect.[11] Just as Gaddafi used "proxy punishment"[12] to intimidate Libyan dissidents in the UK diaspora in the 1980s, fuelling a lack of trust towards other diasporic Libyans, loyalists in exile since 2011 fear retribution given their alleged participation in human rights abuses against Libyan civilians during the uprising. This fear was compounded when Tunisia handed over Gaddafi's former prime minister, Baghdadi Mahmoudi, in late 2012 to Libyan authorities -- a move that drew outcry in Tunisia among human rights groups and with Libyan exiles from the Gaddafi regime who feared facing a similar fate.[13]

In 2014, however, the fracturing of the Libyan political space, marked by parliamentary elections that saw the establishment of two rival governments pitting eastern and western Libya against each other and the military ventures of renegade General Khalifa Hafter, produced a new wave of departure for Tunisia of international organizations and embassies - as well as Libyans who worked with them. The flow of Libyans into Tunisia increased in summer 2014 when the Tripoli airport was attacked in clashes between the rival militias Libya Dawn and the Zintan Brigades. This second wave of migration represented those disenchanted with the outcome of the revolution and its evolution into a protracted civil war. This latter category includes those who once supported the Libyan revolution but found themselves in the same situation of insecurity and fearing for their lives as a result of the spiral of violence stemming from different armed groups. Those who sought refuge in Tunisia, for instance, included media personalities, civil society activists, and artists and journalists who found safe haven in the capital city Tunis, where an already established Libyan community had built a bustling social and economic life that can rival its counterpart in Egypt.

Thus, while the two waves of migration since 2011 represent important ideological divisions between pro- and anti-Gaddafi factions, the lines between them were being blurred as a result of the appeal of resettlement in Tunisia and the intermixing that accompanied it. In this way, for the first time since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, the ideological divisions of Libyans in Tunisia were dissipating. Nonetheless, the proximity of Libya to Tunisia, which allows for this rooted uprootedness of the diaspora, also has an important impact on the nature of mobilization towards the homeland. For example, the strong presence of international organizations (IOs) along with UN missions for Libya in Tunis has an important impact on how mobilization is occurring. For some,

9 *Thomas Rosenthal, "L'école en exil : Étude de l'école libyenne de Sfax en Tunisie",* MA Thesis, *UP1 UFR11 - Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne - UFR Science Politique. 2015, available at* https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-01293211

10 *Author interview, 12 August 2020.*

11 *Bradley et al., 2016.*

12 *Moss, 2016.*

13 *Bradley et al., 2016.*

relocation to Tunisia allowed for new forms of engagement and activism through IOs. One interviewee, for example, recounts how she has been working on capacity building for civil society organizations "to support entrepreneurs on the ground, especially women" through her job as a project manager in the international organization where she is employed. Likewise, some civil society activists based in Tunisia succeed in organizing international events and conferences to shed light on the Libyan conflict and take part in the peacebuilding process in the future Libya thanks to the presence of the UN. For example, one prominent event was supported by the UN mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and represented a cornerstone for the subsequent Libyan national dialogue that took place in Tunis in September 2015. The "Libyan Conference for the Development of Libyan Dialogue" brought Libyan policymakers in politics and economics, along with diplomats, academics, and civil society representatives for "the disarmament in Libya and the creation of a green zone to protect the Government of National Accord." The conference was organized by a Tunis-based media and civil society organization, Salemtom Organization for Comprehensive Development, headed by Libyan media activist, Rabie Shrair.

Nonetheless, overtly political mobilization is by and large avoided. For those living under the radar and largely in precarity, keeping a low profile is a necessary survival strategy. Likewise, for those seeking to return to Libya once conditions improve, political engagement has been avoided. Libyans in Tunisia have exercised more social, economic, and humanitarian mobilization, in particular coming to the rescue of internally displaced Libyans who were victims of renewed clashes between eastern Libya forces loyal to Marshall Haftar and radical Islamist groups (in particular from IS) in 2014. Nonetheless, other forms of political contestation or political pressure from diaspora are less likely given the relationship maintained with their host and home country.

This avoidance of political mobilization, however, is also the result of the Tunisian position vis-à-vis the conflict and its resolution in Libya. Tunisia took a stern stance towards the Libyan community who practiced politics in Tunisia, deporting some who engaged in any political activity on Tunisian soil. Indeed, Tunisia has always retained its rather neutral stance towards conflict by maintaining strong historical ties with the Libyan people and standing at arms' length of all Libyan rivals. As a result, Libyans staying in Tunisia were at last partially dissuaded from tempting to destabilize Tunisian-Libyan relations or putting pressure on the Tunisian government to take a stand with either party. This has been especially true since the outbreak of the civil war in 2014. In 2016, Tunisia was active in its support of Libyan national dialogue and its resultant Government of National Accord with Fayez Sarraj as its president. To this point, Khemaïes Jehinaoui, the then Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs, stressed the importance of a government that brings all Libyans together to agree on and to ensure the stability of Libya and that of Tunisia. Tunisia continued to maintain a hands-off position towards the raging conflict during the 2019 LAAF/LNA's military operation in Tripoli where Marshall Haftar failed to take over the capital city. And while the LNA/LAAF's imminent threat to Tunisia's neutrality was minimized after the failure of Haftar's operation, political mobilization of Libyans in Tunisia remained largely unchanged since 2011. While an important change did occur with the breakthrough Libyan Political Dialogue Forum[14] and Tunisia's hosting of the event on 09 November 2020 (which marked the moment for Tunisia to make a comeback to the Libyan scene as a proactive actor), Libyan diaspora political mobilization from Tunisia has nonetheless remained within the framework of official processes.

THE LIBYAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA:

Shaping the Transnational Imagined Community

In contrast to the exile community in Tunisia, Libyan populations in Europe and North America are endowed with different relationships vis-à-vis the homeland, as well as different opportunities and constraints to mobilization, including rich networks with host country policymakers as well as different abilities to invest the public sphere. As a result, the types of mobilization that are occurring are often far more political in nature but are also being carried out by diaspora members that maintain different relationships with Libya, based more on a sense of moral obligation to contribute to the nation's healing more than hopes of return, and largely based on the actions of second-generation Libyans. As a result, Libyan diasporic populations across North America and Europe have been marked by more proactive engagement with post-Gaddafi Libyan reconstruction, peacebuilding, and mobilization at the political, economic, cultural, and social levels.

When the Libyan uprising against the regime of Gaddafi began in February 2011, a group of young Libyan activists in European and North American cities, many of whom who had never lived under his autocratic regime, gathered and were able to connect online to establish transnational civil society organizations aiming towards the regeneration of the country. Due to decades long transnational repression of their voices, lives, and beings, Libyan exiles in farther locations had lost grounded touch with their homeland. The daunting idea of transitioning from "subjecthood to citizenship," a process that involves transcending "the shackles of authoritarianism and embrace civic participation as a means of social change"[15] for the first generation of Libyan exiles was realized by the successor generation, those who were usually born outside of Libya and knew it through the lived memories and accounts of their exiled parents. In this way, the coming out of members of the Libyan diaspora when the uprising against Gaddafi started represented a break with the past lack or

14 *UNSMIL, "Libyan Political Dialogue Forum Kicks Off in the Tunisian Capital and Discusses a Draft Political Roadmap" November 2020, available at* https://unsmil.unmissions.org/libyan-political-dialogue-forum-kicks-tunisian-capital-and-discusses-draft-political-roadmap

15 *Moss, 2016:495.*

absence of mobilization and a reckoning with the reality of the changing dynamics of the Libyan diaspora.[16]

What emerged were different forms of transnational activism, connecting Libyans in diaspora with those still inside the country, and working toward the empowerment of marginalized groups. These include the Libya Youth Forum and Civil Initiative Libya among the most prominent transnational NGOs,[17] as well as the establishment of other organizations including the Libyan Women Platform for Peace, the Tamazight Women's Movement, and Together We Build It, all of which have been playing active roles in empowering women, youth, and the Amazigh minority population. In addition, a new type of transnational Libyan community, characterized by the use of online spaces and new technologies, emerged through the new generation of Libyans living abroad.[18]

The use of digital media has in fact been a major factor in the process of virtually gathering Libyans in diaspora and creating shared sense of community. Indeed, the single most prominent means of mass communication that spurred the Libyan diaspora during the 2011 uprising was Libya Al Ahrar TV, a Qatar-based TV channel whose journalists represented a generation of mainly young Libyans. These journalists, who lived in exile before the 2011 events, saw in this media outlet a window to the new, post-Gaddafi Libya. Broadcasting from Doha, the satellite channel echoed an anti-Gaddafi and pro-revolution rhetoric that reverberated abroad. This channel broadcast, for the first time in modern Libyan history, a program in the Tamazight language, a long-repressed language of a significant portion of the population living in the western part of the country.[19] Its star presenter, Sana Mansouri, is a Libyan Amazigh from the coastal town of Zuwara, near the Tunisian border, and herself a diaspora Libyan. This, combined with rising pop singer Dania Ben Sassi and her "revolutionary" songs, galvanized not only Libyan Amazighs inside Libya but diffused across borders to the wider Amazigh diaspora in Europe, contributing to a pan-Amazigh cultural revival movement.[20]

Diasporic Libyan online mobilization can also be perfectly epitomized in the active participation of young Libyans in the UK, Germany, Ireland, and North America who interact with new technologies to affect significant change in the social and political sphere in Libya as well as across the diaspora by building the transnational imagined community and by undertaking a process of frame alignment. Aware of the power of new media such as blogs, podcasts, and social media channels such as YouTube and Facebook, they have played a pivotal role in shaping the feeling of belonging to the Libyan nation, and in contributing to a shared understanding of the stakes of the Libyan conflict and the critical issues for peacebuilding to occur. In so doing, these new platforms have also been revealing the faces of a reinvigorated post-Gaddafi Libyan political and social sphere.

One prominent example of a participatory online mobilization platform is the Da Miri podcast by Libyan American Tariq Elmeri.[21] The platform has become the main go-to online community for the Libyan diaspora in Europe and North America, inviting Libyan artists, students, journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, and writers. In particular, the podcast has shone a spotlight on Hisham Matar, an award-winning novel writer and a son of a Libyan dissident assassinated by Gaddafi in the 1970s, whose depiction of loss, exile, and memory have given the platform an international outlook and garnered an important following not only among members of the Libyan diaspora but also researchers and journalists working on Libya. Elmiri, himself the son of a Libyan exiled in the USA (with previous experience of living in Morocco), wanted the platform to bring together different Libyan voices for positive change in their lives as well as to reconnect Libyans from all walks of life together – all to be achieved through story telling.[22] Likewise, the podcast Libya Matters,[23] the flagship online platform for the human rights network Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL), has featured since its launch in 2019 human rights practitioners and activists, civil society activists, as well as artists, lawyers, and academics. The podcast aims to produce casual conversations with experts and practitioners around issues of truth, justice, and human rights in Libya. In so doing, the podcast contributes to shaping the way both Libyan and non-Libyan listeners think about justice and rights-related issues in the Libyan context.

Podcasts have in fact proven to be one of the most valuable means of communication with otherwise hard to reach Libyans in the diaspora, given the unavailability of some on social media. Perhaps more importantly, though, podcasts have built a new level of trust among different diasporic Libyan communities, and in particular those in Europe. As Alunni elaborates on the issue of trust among Libyans abroad, mistrust and suspiciousness added to the sense of isolation but also the building of smaller communities along narrow ideological lines. As a result, there was a failure a to "create an all-Libyan diasporic public space."[24] Podcasts have thus been able to counter these dynamics. In addition, the creation of an online community of diaspora Libyans has also served to spur others to continue in their activism, even if just by contributing to the building of the imagined community and participating in the virtual transnational space. Indeed, looking at a sample of profiles of Libyan diaspora listeners of the Da Miri podcast reveals an important continuity in activism. Among the six listeners who responded to the online questionnaire

16 *Moss, 2016; Alunni, 2019. See also Martin Russell and Ramadan Sanoussi Belhaj, "A Study on Libyans Living Abroad: Profiling of Libyans Living Abroad to Develop a Roadmap for Strategic and Institutional Engagement", International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2020.*

17 *Libyan Youth Forum Facebook page, 2012.*

18 *Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020.*

19 *In the Jabal Nafusa region, in Zuwara, and Ghadames in the Fezzan region in particular.*

20 *Fatima El Issawi, "Transitional Libyan Media: Free at Last", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013; Karlos Zurutuza, "The Amazigh of Libya Revive Their Previously Banned Language", Middle East Eye, 09 January 2018.*

21 https://www.tariqelmeri.com/podcast

22 *Author interview, January 2021.*

23 https://www.buzzsprout.com/450046

24 *Alunni, 2019: 254-255.*

distributed through the podcast platform, all but one were civil society activists in Libya and all had left their country since 2011. And all but one continued their activism abroad, undertaking a variety of different online and offline activities to contribute to peacebuilding, consolidation of individual and civil liberties, and women's empowerment in Libya. These members of the Libyan diaspora, who are connected in the virtual online community, all express their desire to play a pivotal role in empowering the social categories in Libyan society that have often been marginalized, in particular women, and supporting the democratic process in Libya.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR DIRECT POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE DIASPORA

Beyond online activity and the shaping of opinion and the sense of nationhood, the Libyan diaspora is also engaging in direct forms of political activity that seek to have an immediate impact on the transition process and the post-Gaddafi order. At the broadest level, a historic moment for direct involvement of the Libyan diaspora in homeland politics was opened in 2012 with active efforts to include voting for Libyan citizens abroad in the legislative elections.[25] The first democratic elections in modern Libyan history (since its independence from Italy in 1951), Libyans of the diaspora were active in the mobilization of their communities in North Africa and the Middle East, Europe, North America and as far as Asia (in particular in Malaysia and China where there is a sizeable Libyan student population). The elections saw 60,000 register to participate, with women voting for the first time in Libyan history, casting their votes for the choice of 200 members of the General National Congress.[26] Yet, despite this "moment of enthusiasm" marked by a "moment of connectivity and community"[27] of the potential role of the diasporic community to contribute to the future of Libya after Gaddafi, limited institutional capacity resulted in low voter turnout of exiles, with only 8,021 actually casting ballots. The heavy legacy of the Gaddafi era and its institutional, informational, and implementation gaps acted as hurdles to the effective engagement of diaspora Libyans in the elections.[28]

Nonetheless, there remains a potential to tap the diaspora for the purpose of rebuilding the new Libya.[29] In the wake of those elections, additional efforts have been made to mobilize the voting capacity of the Libyan diaspora. The High National Electoral Commission (HNEC), partnered with UNSMIL and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), engaged REBOOT, an NGO made up of strategists, organizers, and designers working on the development of solutions for the inclusion of under-served communities around the world in effecting structural and social change for the designing of a platform for election inclusiveness in Libya. Out of this partnership was born the world's first mobile-based voter registration system used in December 2013 to support Libya's Constitutional Assembly Elections in 2014. With 11 integrated mobile and web applications, the system "facilitated secure voter registration for more than 1.1 million citizens, representing both those in Libya and diaspora in 13 countries."[30] Moreover, the HNEC has been organizing several workshops, conferences, and events on voter registration and elections aimed at Libyans abroad since 2013. This is in addition to the Commission keeping a database of news and press releases of the different electoral campaigns, voter registration, and election-related partnerships with international organizations.[31] The establishment of a voting platform, Vote Abroad, for diasporic Libyans was also created to boost Libyans abroad to participate in elections, while using their right to vote as enshrined in the Draft Libyan Constitution, which contains Article 149 on the "Rights of Libyans Abroad" stipulating that the "State shall undertake measures to ensure their participation in the electoral process."[32]

At the same time, however, the engagement of Libyans in diaspora in homeland politics has been curtailed by legal restrictions but also a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of those who have stayed in Libya. Though the National Transitional Council (2011), the General National Congress (GNC), and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (2016) were mainly composed of technocratic Libyan exiles, they had little-to-no experience with politics, given their estrangement to the Libyan political scene during the Gaddafi years, but were also alienated from the general population. Indeed, the term "double *shafra*," which has become a pejorative catchphrase for any Libyan who is dual citizen or is a second or 1.5 generation of the Libyan diaspora, demonstrates the lack of legitimacy that Libyans abroad may hold in the eyes of those still in the homeland.[33] Adding to these constraints, one of the most prominent critical political junctures was the 2013 Political Isolation Law, which significantly shaped the potential role of the Libyan diaspora to participate directly in post-Gaddafi politics. The law banned the Gaddafi-era high officials from holding office for a period of time, a process compared to Iraq's de-Baathification, that has resulted in an increase in the number of losers of the Libyan transition.[34] The law has had a

25 *Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020.*

26 *UNDP Libya, "Supporting Inclusivity in Libya's National Congress Election: Out of Country Voting," July 2012, available at* https://www.ly.undp.org/content/libya/en/home/stories/out-of-country-votiing.html

27 *Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.*

28 *Laurie A. Brand, "Arab Uprisings and the Changing Frontiers of Transnational Citizenship: Voting from Abroad in Political Transitions." Political Geography, Vol.41, 2014.*

29 *Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.*

30 *Reboot, "Case Study: Supporting Democratic Transition Through Fair Elections", 2014, available at* https://reboot.org/case-studies/ict-for-voter-registration-libya/

31 *HNEC website,* www.hnec.ly.

32 *International Commission of Jurists, "The Draft Libyan Constitution: Procedural Deficiencies, Substantive Flaws", 2015:31-32, available at* https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/57ee86814.pdf

33 *See Alunni, 2019 for a detailed description of these generations.*

34 *Roman David and Houda Mzioudet, "Personnel Change or Personal Change? Rethinking Libya's Political Isolation Law", Brookings Doha Center – Stanford Paper Series, No.4., 2014.*

negative impact on diaspora Libyans as it has weakened their ability to influence the political developments in Libya[35] and adversely affected the well-functioning of Libyan institutions. It thus exacerbated the already volatile security situation in Libya.[36] This has also added to the scepticism about the ability of Libyans abroad to play an effective role in the rebuilding of the country and its institutions.[37]

Nonetheless, mobilization of diaspora Libyans for the purpose of contributing to the transitional process and reconstruction has found different channels for action, ranging from traditional lobbying of the political sector in host countries to the channelling of development aid to the pursuit of transitional justice. One prominent group, the Libyan American Alliance (LAA), which is based in Washington DC and caters to the Libyan American community as well as Libyan Canadians, has long engaged in lobbying and outreach to US policymakers. Describing itself as a non-partisan group dedicated to "advocating rule of law, civil state, democracy and an end to the conflict in Libya," LAA recently lobbied for a lawsuit against General Khalifa Haftar, accusing him of having committed atrocities during his military campaigns notably in 2019.[38] In November 2020, LAA also celebrated a symbolic victory for its lobbying work with US policymakers with the passage of the Libyan Stabilization Act by the US Congress that "requires the US administration to clarify its strategy, report on foreign interventions, and impose sanctions on those who violate the arms embargo or seek to undermine the stability and security of Libya."[39] Yet beyond lobbying actions, LAA has also engaged in work with women in Libya and civil society more generally during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included coordinating with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on Libyans and support Covid-19 medical infrastructure in Libya.[40]

Another major player on the scene is the transnational network Lawyers For Justice in Libya (LFJL), which seeks to hold accountable anyone involved in human rights violations in Libya. Working in collaboration with international organizations and some Western governments and their agencies, LFJL is prime case of a post-2011 mobilization network of human rights practitioners that has arisen not only in the Libyan case but indeed in numerous other post-2011 MENA diasporas. The organization's activities include suing perpetrators of crimes committed on civilians and providing assistance to victims of forced displacement, in addition to advocacy efforts toward international organizations including the UN and the International Criminal Court. For example, in June 2020, LFJL supported the UN fact-finding mission bring to light the Tarhuna mass graves, which indicted General Khalifa Haftar's LNA forces for having perpetrated crimes against civilians and forced disappearances early in 2020. The organization also publishes a Universal Political Review with fact-sheets on the state of human rights in Libya.

Most recently, the role of the Libyan diaspora in contributing to the political transition in Libya has been observed in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) and the breakthrough achieved in February 2021. The LPDF, composed of 75 members representing the broadest possible cross-section of Libyan society along with a larger digital dialogue, was an attempt to escape the impasse of the UN peacebuilding process by establishing a fully Libyan-owned effort at mediation to define a potential resolution. The LPDF, which notably included members of the Libyan diaspora, was able to successfully designate a new prime minister and presidency council in the run-up to the elections scheduled for December 2021. The presence of diaspora Libyans in the LPDF and its adjacent groups has demonstrated the capacity of those outside the country to directly participate in transition processes under a banner of shared Libyan national identity – and the capacity to overcome the divisions between those inside and outside Libya when provided with forums for meaningful dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This study is not meant to be an exhaustive catalogue of Libyan diasporic communities across the world; rather, it aims to shed light on the various dynamics that inform diasporic engagement. The Libyan diaspora remains poorly covered and researched, given the complexity of the topic and the enmeshed narratives of Libyans in exile, ranging from political and economic elites long-since settled in Western capitals to more recently irregular migrants fleeing to southern Europe following the deteriorating economic and security situation in Libya. Nonetheless, leveraging the capacity of the Libyan diaspora to act as a political actor for the country's transition, reconstruction, and reconciliation requires a more substantive strategy to map out this population that balances quantitative and qualitative methods with the scarcity of updated and reliable data on the demographics of Libyans abroad. Social media has played a major role in shedding the light on the rich experience of engagement and mobilization of Libyans abroad for the betterment of their communities. These new spaces have also promoted an image of a Libya that cuts with the usual news of a conflict-ridden country where the quest for the rule of law and the upholding of human rights are absent from the historical narrative. Indeed, the diasporic Libyan media sphere can continue to promote democracy and peacebuilding while also encouraging additional representation of Libyan marginalized groups in order to enlarge the sense of belonging to the nation.

Beyond these more symbolic efforts at nation-building and the promotion of an inclusive Libyan-ness, other concrete actions

35 *Russell and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.*

36 *Seeberg, 2019.*

37 *Russel and Sanoussi Belhaj, 2020:41.*

38 *Bassma Barakat, "Tunisia: Conference to Seek Disarmament Strategy in Libya", Al Araby Al Jadeed, 07 September 2015.*

39 *House Bill HR 4644.*

40 *LAA Zoom meeting, 25 July 2020.*

can be taken in order to ensure the inclusion of diaspora Libyans in the country's post-Gaddafi future. Most importantly, the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2021 provide a ripe opportunity for the diaspora to play a role in election monitoring, logistical support, and the provision of information to voters – and in this way to continue participating the in country's political transition.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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