Arab Reform Initiative

YOUTH TRAJECTORIES SERIES

LIBYAN YOUTH IN LIMBO:
COMING OF AGE IN CONFLICT

by Asma Khalifa

About the Author

Asma Khalifa is a Libyan activist and researcher who has worked on human rights, women's rights and youth empowerment since 2011. In 2016, Asma received the Luxembourg Peace Prize and in 2017 she was named as one of the 100 most influential young Africans by the Africa Youth awards.

Acknowledgements

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.

Cover Photo: Libyan youth with a precarious truck on a sand dune.
© Aydoğan Kalabalık/AA

February 2022

Table of contents

Foreword

What are the various consequences on a young person's life trajectory when she or he comes into adulthood in a context of conflict? What happens to anticipated plans for the future – education, marriage, first employment – when they are profoundly disrupted by the eruption of conflict, and what types of coping mechanisms and strategies are adopted by youth in the face of such disruptions? How does the transition into adulthood in a fluid normative context – where violence can be abundant, gender traditional roles can be upended, and trauma widespread – shape individual political values and beliefs as well as social relations with the community and within the family? In exploring how youth navigate their own lives and construct themselves when the transition to adulthood occurs in a context of conflict, evidence shows that conflict acts as both an opportunity and a constraint to youth in terms of livelihood opportunities, pathways for wellbeing, experiences of political inclusion, and feelings of empowerment and disempowerment. At the same time, though, youth trajectories during contexts of conflict are neither linear, nor strictly dependent on the structure of available opportunities. Indeed, how youth make decisions with regards to their own lives, and the factors that influence their decision-making, demonstrate a complex processes involving specific contextual factors, the configuration of social relations, and positionality within conflict dynamics, among others. In this sense, youth trajectories in contexts of conflict are both highly diverse and often unexpected but also, critically, can shift repeatedly. However, unpacking this complexity is of critical importance if we are to grasp the multiple and even contradictory ways in which conflict impacts the trajectories of young adults. It also critical to understanding the broader implications at the societal level in terms of future patterns of political participation, beliefs, and attitudes, as well social and gender relations within and between communities and generations.

From 20202021-, the Arab Reform Initiative undertook a broad research programme to investigate the personal trajectories of youth in conflict, focusing in particular on those who have come into adulthood since 2011 in Libya, Iraq, and Syria. This research, based on 75 qualitative semi-structured interviews in each country and, where possible, focus group discussions, has investigated the perceptions and decision-making processes of youth and broader-term implications in political, economic, social, and personal terms. More precisely, this research investigated youth trajectories and broader social and political implications through analysis at three distinct levels. At the micro-level, the research investigated the personal narratives of youth and how they view the impact of the conflict in terms of personal self-construction. This included investigating their decision-making matrices and aspirations, the coping strategies they have found, as well as how they have felt empowered/disempowered in the context of conflict. At the meso-level, the research explored the contextual factors mediating youth's decision-making and their margins of manoeuvre, including war and peacebuilding economies, existing programming and external aid for youth, shifting power structures and social hierarchies, and normative fluctuations. It also included an intersectional analysis to understand how different social positions (ethnicity, religion, gender, class, etc.) shape different narratives and strategies. Finally, at the meta-level, the research sought to assess the diverse political and peacebuilding content with regards to youth values, agency, and forms of engagement, focusing in particular on youth meaningful political participation, everyday practices of peacebuilding, and the establishment of gender equality, if and where it occurred.

The study presented here relays the outcomes of the research undertaken with Libyan youth, where field interviews took place in 2020 and 2021 in the regions of Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica. In taking stock of these in-depth and highly personal interviews, this study contributes new knowledge and insights regarding how the transition to adulthood under conflict has impacted the acquisition of experiences and skills, needs and aspirations, and changes in perceptions and perspectives of Libyan youth. It thus explores how young people narrated their personal trajectories and the impact of events since 2011 on their own lives, as well as how they understand the country's political evolution and the nature of the conflict itself. The study explores what factors (moral, ideological, political, social, economic, personal, or other) motivate or drive their decisions, how they perceive of opportunities and constraints for their own pathways, and how they find or create opportunities for themselves. The study also investigates how gender norms and gender performative roles have been transformed as a result of the conflict and the impact of these changes in their own social relations and aspirations for the future. Finally, the study sheds light on Libyan youth's personal attitudes towards violence and non-violence, what concepts such as peace, justice, and reconciliation actually mean to them and what they look like in practice, and the extent to which youth perceive of agency in their own lives and the roles they seek to play in the reconstruction of Libyan society in the post-conflict period.

In exploring these various themes, this study also has crucial policy relevance. Youth face particular forms of precarity that render them among the most vulnerable population groups in the transition out of conflict and reconstruction phase,[1] yet at the same time they are a key demographic in sustaining stability and peace and in leading broader conflict transformation processes. Despite this, youth as a particular population subset are often under-investigated and under-serviced by policymakers and external stakeholders implementing programming for conflict relief and post-conflict recovery. Much attention is paid to children (meaning those in adolescence or younger), given the rights-based approaches that have been adopted in the global arena and the existence of large-scale policy frameworks and organizations that care for them, such as UNICEF. At the same time, transition processes in post-conflict contexts are often dominated by adult gatekeepers (such as regional elites, village elders, etc.) that limit youth participation, particularly in political processes. As a result, youth can find themselves doubly excluded. Just as importantly, discursive notions of youth in contexts of conflict are often understood within ideological frames and definitions that push forward certain lines of programming that can be detached from their actual lived experiences, needs, and understandings. The dominant discourses surrounding youth in contexts of conflict tend to focus on youth as development investments, or as threats to security, or as agents of change.[2] Such discourses largely guide the types of interventions made by external actors seeking to mitigate conflict or promote peacebuilding. Yet, such interventions and vocabularies can be tinged with paternalistic attitudes and the imposition of social and cultural norms and expectations that are disconnected from how youth themselves view their lives, their interpretations of their context, and their ambitions for themselves and their communities.

In publishing this study, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) is contributing new knowledge on Libyan youth in the context of post-2011 conflict that takes as its point of departure how youth themselves narrate and navigate their trajectories, choices, aspirations, and interpretations of the heterogeneity of the youth lived experience. In turn, this ground-up, evidence-based research can be utilized to adapt policies, programs, and responses designed for, with, and by youth to ensure that they account for the diverse realities of Libyan youth today, and to ensure that they are not left behind in the post-conflict period.

Sarah Anne Rennick
Deputy Director, Arab Reform Initiative

1 With regards to precarity, youth can find themselves doubly excluded: they are not the targets of much of the rights-based programming that is afforded to children and are also limited by adult gatekeepers who constrain their opportunities for participation. Moreover, their trajectories in contexts of conflict, and particular the transition to post-conflict, are particularly precarious as they do not have an existing pre-conflict status to which they can default. As youth are entering their adulthood during the context of conflict, their strategies for livelihood and wellbeing are entirely shaped around the conflict; as that context shifts, though, these strategies can be rendered obsolete without necessarily leaving any obvious way forward.

2 See in particular Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, "Children, Youth, and Peacebuilding" in Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy, Thomas Matyok, Jessica Senehi, and Sean Bryne (eds). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011.

Executive Summary

This study seeks to understand how the transition to adulthood for Libyan youth has been impacted by the context of the past 10 years in conflict. Through in-depth qualitative research carried out with 75 Libyan youth in 20202021-, the study explores decision-making processes and the types of opportunities and constraints that youth face in terms of education and livelihood, the impact of war on their political beliefs and participation, their understandings of peace and security, and the ways in which war has changed gender norms and relations.

The study finds that 2014 represents the pivotal year in terms of their personal trajectories, their critical understandings of dynamics of war and peace, and their own personal sense of wellbeing and hope for the future. With regards to livelihood and employment paths, youth trajectories reveal a complicated dynamic, where opportunities come at a price or with consequences that are counterproductive. On one hand, the conflict in Libya has dismantled old repressive structures, and in the absence of that, there are chances of more independent and ingenious efforts to improve livelihoods. For nearly all participants, for example, the preferred choice of study actually expanded as a result of the opening of society and the political sphere in 2011. Likewise, dynamics of necessity since 2011 have seen the emergence of a new culture for entrepreneurship that is innovative and resilient. Yet at the same time, the destruction of war means that education pathways have been cut short and that the infrastructure needed to make entrepreneurship sustainable for young people, such as a strong financial system and operating legal framework, does not exist.

In regards to political beliefs and participation, many youth attest that the 2011 uprising served as a political awakening of sorts, creating new interest in politics and political processes. However, the descent into war has had an almost universally negative impact on their view towards politics and politicians. Deep distrust in politics and a widespread belief in the systemic depths of corruption translates to pervasive apathy for formal political processes and participation. Yet at the same time, Libyan youth who have come into adulthood in a context of conflict have nuanced views regarding how peace can be constructed and the responsibilities required for this peacebuilding process at different levels. This includes the necessity of rehabilitation and the promotion of tolerance, respect for differences, and values of coexistence – all of which must be carried out both by the State, but also critically by communities themselves. For peace to truly exist, though, youth insist on the necessity for justice as a prerequisite.

With regards to social relations and gender norms, the conflict has had a dualistic impact on both challenging and reinforcing traditional tropes of masculinity and femininity. Because of extreme loss of economic wellbeing, women youth have found themselves in new jobs, with new responsibilities, and in new public spaces that sometimes break away from traditional gender norms. Yet at the same time, the conflict has also reinforced norms regarding masculinity and the role of men in the family and society. As a result, while youth participating in this study do acknowledge profound shifts in the gender roles and gender relations, the extent to which this is viewed as something positive to be maintained in the post-conflict period is much less certain.

Overall, the study finds that youth, facing important psychological trauma and in a perpetual state of uncertainty and instability, have little hope for the future and little ability to plan for their lives. The most reliable strategy they have adopted is that of flexibility and adaptability, with most viewing life outside of Libya as the only real option for the future. In other words, young people are seeking to build their lives elsewhere. Their lack of trust in politics and in the ability that they have to effect change means that core issues related to the resolving conflict and building peace, such as economic and political reform, will continue to be a problem without the younger generation taking active part in contributing to rebuilding of the country. This new generation no longer has the mentality of relying only on the State, but believes instead on pursuing good educational and work opportunities that are more personally fulfilling. They are also acutely aware of the extremely difficult environment in which they try to study or work in, as well as the lack of a broader context that can support them. For youth in Libya today, the pervasive feeling is that they are not safe and cannot set deep roots for fear everything will collapse.

Introduction

For youth in Libya today, life has been dramatically altered since 2011, the year many uprisings took place across North Africa and the Middle East. While in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt mostly peaceful protests changed the political system, in Libya violence spread very quickly. On 15 February 2011, a lawyer advocating for the victims of the Abu Salim massacre was arrested. That drove women to protest before the courthouse in Benghazi. Soon after the breakout of protests, reports of violence against police stations appeared, leading to devastating retaliation against the protestors. The confrontation between the protestors and state police in Benghazi had a contagion effect, and more protests erupted across the country. Citizens and defectors from Gaddafi's regime formed an opposition front in Benghazi, creating the National Transitional Council on 27 February 2011. By March 2011, the United Nations Security Council issued resolutions 19701973- for the protection of Libyan civilians. Under the articles of the resolution, NATO began its airstrikes against Gaddafi's regime (Landen Garland 2012). The armed conflict in Libya officially lasted for eight months, until the capture and the killing of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011.

In reality, the conflict never ended and the country experienced widespread violence on the local and regional levels, and between ethnic groups. There was also a perception, though, in the major cities of the country, of a growing space for freedom of expression, journalism, and civic activism. One of the positive consequences of 2011 is in fact the re-emergence of Libyan civil society after more than four decades of suppression. This space continues to be dominated by young people, but it has been shrinking over the past few years.

The situation now in the country continues to deteriorate, with a general collapse of infrastructure and failure of the governments to deliver basic services to its citizens. (Libyans at Risk 2020). Schools and universities are often closed because of the war, or because the premises have been targeted by shelling. As inflation remains high and banks struggle with liquidity, Libyans now spend days in line to access small amounts of their funds. The economic situation has greatly impacted employment opportunities, and unemployment rates continue to be on the rise.

These are the realities of young people in Libya, and the context in which they are embarking on their adulthood. In conducting this study, we sought to understand the impact of these realities on the lives, values, and aspirations of Libyan youth. What is the impact of conflict in terms of the experiences they acquired, the opportunities and constraints that they face, and how has the conflict impacted their livelihood trajectories, political values, and social relations? Just as importantly, what can we glean regarding where Libyan youth are today in terms of their political, social, and economic integration, their vision for the future and that of their country, as well as the roles they wish to play therein?

This study, which delves deeply into the concerns and reflections of Libyan youth, also reveals their inability to plan for the future as a result of the instability and volatility in Libya. It also explores the reasons behind their political apathy, including their complete lack of trust in political elites and the fact that there is no viable political system for them to be a part of. Detailed and personal accounts of the devastation reveal that the war has changed everything for them, especially the 2014 war. Overall, entering adulthood in a context of conflict has heralded drastic changes in their lives that were mostly for the worse, but also with some indirect positive consequences. For those interviewed in this study, this includes finding themselves more self-reliant, independent, and stronger. Yet even beyond living circumstances, the war has also changed fundamental beliefs of young people about violence and what a society should look like. Living in a context of conflict influences their decisions on a daily basis, and pushes them to maintain flexibility to adapt to their environment. While the youth interviewed here feel powerless in the face of this uncertainty, they nonetheless try to take control and achieve their short-term plans and aspirations by remaining productive and educated.

Methodology

This study is based on in-depth qualitative research with Libyan youth, conducted between 20202021-. It examines 75 semi-structured interviews[1] with young women and men from across the three main regions of Libya – Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica. The interviews were gathered through a combination of in-person talks and telephone calls. The choice of regions is motivated by the pre-existing understanding that there is not one homogenous conflict in Libya, but rather very different conflict dynamics, as well as historical and political developments that shape the lived experiences of young people in relation to their geographic location.[2] The participants to this study were at different ages in their adolescence during 2011, ranging from 1028- years old, with most interviewees having been between 1418- years old in 2011. This age group was intentionally selected to best capture those who have come into adulthood since 2011, in

1 Interview tool, Annex I

2 The breakdown of interviews per location is as follows: three interviews from Algatrun, one from Kufra, eight from Sebha, twenty-seven from Tripoli, two from Ubari, one from Zawia and three from Zuwara. The rest did not disclose this information.

alignment with the purpose of this study. Gender distribution is 45 male participants and 30 female participants.

A team of four Libyan researchers conducted the interviews, which were transcribed and analysed both inductively and conductively. The semi-structured interview guide was constructed around a set of themes: life pre-conflict, perceptions of the conflict in 2011, life during conflict, future aspirations, views towards peace and security, and gender relations. These themes guided the narrative analysis process in finding stories and anecdotes linked to our research questions. The software ATLAS.ti was used to find patterns across age, location, and gender in relation to the already set themes. The software was also used to highlight and interpret stories told within the context of the answers.

Through the software, fifty codes were created from the data. These codes connected to the questionnaire themes, as well as others, such as the psychological impact of war and direct experiences of violence. They came directly from the experiences shared by the respondents of the study. The figure below illustrates the number of respondents answering each code.

Political Leanings and Participation: Unpacking the Evolution from Pre-to-Post 2011

Points of Departure: The Intersection of Geography, Social Identity, Socioeconomic Conditions, and Relationship to the Gaddafi Regime

Prior to 2011, the relationship between youth and political life was largely channelled through official school activities. For the older students interviewed in this report, political activities prior to Libya's uprising were linked to school, such as student unions and Student Week, an annual event that consists of fairs that encouraged only pro-Gaddafi political activism. These weeks were often organized by schools in collaboration with the People's Green Committees, an executive branch of the government that served as an as the intermediary between the public and government leadership. The events were also widespread across localities (Vandewalle, 2006). In this manner, the student weeks were part of the political indoctrination that the Gaddafi regime introduced to youth from a very young age.

Depending on their geographic locations, participants expressed different views in regards to their participation in Gaddafi-era political activities. While some were discouraged by their families – or at least told not to become actively involved – others said it shaped how they understood the political infrastructure in Libya. These differences, however, cannot simply be broken down by geographic lines. Two interviewees from Benghazi – which has had a long history of opposition to Gaddafi's regime – spoke of their experiences with dissent at school. The interviewees mentioned that the political system in Libya was oppressive to their lives. Their opinion was further supported by their critical views on the education system, with its lack of services and poor infrastructure.

While some interviewees from the South expressed their support to the regime because of their families' views, and as such were allowed to take part in politically-oriented school activities, the experiences of students from the West of Libya were mixed between support and dissent. Such differences highlight how family perceptions and interactions with politics influenced the interviewees from a young age. The research also reveals that socioeconomic factors influenced such opinions, depending on how the population had been impacted by the previous regime's policies. This is more explicitly evident from the interviews from the East and South, where they outlined how political and economic marginalization influenced their family's perceptions and degrees of regime support.[3] Likewise, the prosecution of political dissidents – which extended often to their families – has a direct correlation to how interviewees described their aspirations and perceptions of what happened in the country in 2011.

Among the 40 interviewees who shared their aspirations for 2011 and what they expected would happen before violence erupted across the country, 35 said they hoped it would bring structural change, that Libya would become democratic, and that it would lead to state-building. These positive aspirations are all connected to the root causes of their discontent with the previous regime. In addition, several interviewees repeated what was being shared in social media at that time: that a Libya without Gaddafi

3 A common example of this amongst Libyans is the loss of property and business in the 1980s to the State (Ibrahim 2016).

would look like Dubai, seen as a beacon for better economic opportunities, strong infrastructure, and a life of luxury. For interviewees from the diverse ethnic groups that compose Libya – such as the Amazigh and the Tebu – different reasons for their aspirations can be identified, and namely their marginalization and the identity erasure targeting indigenous communities that Gaddafi had conducted for 40 years. The remaining interviewees responded they either had no visions for Libya post-2011 beyond stability or hoping that Gaddafi would take control of the situation for fear of insecurity.

These perceptions, however, changed drastically when violence erupted. Among the interviewees, there were conflicting accounts describing the events. While many of the interviewees called 2011 a revolution, others described it as a revolt that led to civil war. These diverging accounts highlight that even ten years later, young Libyans have yet to reconcile over what happened in 2011.

"Because I belonged to an ethnic minority (Tebu) we had massive issues with the others or the majority. In 2008, there was a rebellion that Gaddafi suppressed quickly, but the Arab community had not forgotten and continued to look down at us. So, it was not possible for a Tebu to enjoy that many opportunities to study or work…" **Male, Kufra.**

Like political views and aspirations, participation in 2011 varied depending on the geographic location and gender of the interviewees. In the East of Libya, young men joined both armed confrontations and peaceful protests, while female participants expressed that they joined protests only after the "liberation" of certain areas. This also is indicative of a generational difference, since the first protest to occur in Benghazi was led by women on 15 February 2011 (Hilsum, 2012). Likewise, the interviewees from the West of Libya displayed a similar pattern of participation, but with much contention and conflicts since the liberation of certain towns and cities took months. In the South of Libya, interviewees had a distinct experience of erupting ethnic conflicts that limited people's ability to participate, as illustrated by this quote:

"I did not join any movement. I don›t think there were opportunities to volunteer with a political party or a certain ideology and as you know in Sebha whatever activity existed was in favour of a certain tribe etc,, but I was part of the Scout's movement because it serves people, it›s not political and is in the best interest of the public…" **Female, Sebha.**

Respondents shared more detailed accounts of their participation after 2011. Some recalled extensive accounts of their experiences as fighters in the various military campaigns, volunteers for humanitarian projects, or as civil society actors. These answers are a clear indicator of two things: first, the existence of an open and free space in the period between 2011 and late 2013. For many participants in the study, even with the violent conflicts that were occurring, there was a sense of optimism and the potential for rebuilding the country. Second, the shared negative perception of social movements. Of those who stated that they were mobilized, only a few said their involvement could be seen as joining a movement. Indeed, in a subsequent question regarding whether or not they would advise a person to join a social movement, the majority answered that people should be cautious and sceptical. They elaborated that individuals and groups must question motives behind goals and actions, and to steer clear from politically motivated goals because they could be infiltrated from the outside to establish foreign agendas. Such statements show a level of awareness regarding group dynamics and link directly with what happened during 2011 and its consequences.

Reflecting on Violence, Impunity, and Personal Resilience: The Impact of War on Political and Personal Beliefs

For nearly all of those interviewed here, the experience of war has provided insightful and profound learned lessons, as well as opinions regarding violence. Even those who took part in the fighting shared their scepticism over violence as a solution – except for when facing extremists such as ISIS. Likewise, a prominent learned lesson for some of the interviewees has been related to dynamics of community violence and its impunity. They view these as shared mistakes committed by all sides, even those who did not pick up weapons but stood by and allowed it to happen:

"It had enabled and entitled many to pick up weapons and to try and resolve issues their way, it has created this environment of entitlement and justification that led to impunity. The level of mistakes then continued to increase over the years, and people allowed it; this is a lesson I have learned from this war." **Female, Benghazi**

"If there is anything I have learned from the war is that don›t support an armed movement." **Male, Tripoli**

Indeed, the following quote underlines a cause for the continuous cycle of revenge across the country, explaining that a collective narrative of trauma is difficult to end without a thorough due process of both justice and reconciliation:

"Yes, perhaps it is one of the things that have changed completely, violence is not at all acceptable. It only begets more violence. Let me address this more through ideas and examples, towns like Marj are small and were labelled as pro-Gaddafi. They endured the most injustice, similarly to what happened with Misrata. Both protect the principles or reasons for the wars from which they suffered and triumphed. So, they see stopping or not continuing this cycle of violence as a betrayal to those who died. So, in a way they are stuck, but this has lessened so much over the years." **Male, Benghazi**

Nonetheless, throughout the interviews, a consistent pattern of duality presents itself when it comes to the conflict and how it impacted the interviewees' lives. While they all convey the tremendous challenges and devastation caused by violence and loss of sense of safety and security, they also express that they have learned to be more independent and strong:
"The positive thing about war is that we became more independent. But also, there is corruption and devastation." **Male, Sebha**

"On a personal level, the war made me stronger and made it so that we could learn things that we would not have learned if the war did not exist, like how to behave and how to occupy my brain in the most difficult times. It even taught me how important empathy with the people around you is, and how important the people with you are, despite everything that has happened." **Male, Sebha**

"My life changed fundamentally in 2011, especially intellectually, when it comes to philosophy and the realm of big ideas. All the civil activities and experiences, I see that they have influenced me positively, despite the challenges and conditions that these experiences came about. This taught me that there is no such thing as black and white, or a clear distinct outcome to an event. I think once I realized this, I understood what it means to feel compassion. Feeling compassion when I place myself in the shoes of other people to try and grasp why they have taken such choices. All this personal growth would not have happened if it were not for 2011." **Male, Benghazi**

Likewise, numerous interviewees spoke of the war's impact on their political awakening. 44 respondents stated they understood truly little of politics before 2011, and even the ones who took part in student political activities claimed that it did not increase their knowledge. All students in Libya before 2011 were taught political studies from the age of eight. Their perception was that the country was ruled by one man and a contingency of corrupt complacent politicians. Many of them shared they either were discouraged by their parents to share critical views or ask questions, or that they found out themselves that there was no space for such questions.

"My knowledge of politics prior to 2011 was non-existent, but there were a few things that I understood after the revolution. Of course I knew about the structure of green committees and all that knowledge given to us by textbooks and observations of the meetings that we were forced to attend during school activities. I remember an incident where I stood in one of those lectures and voiced a critical opinion; it just came out as something and did not seem to make sense to me. I discovered after that it can be extremely dangerous to do ask questions, that people can go missing or be arrested [just for thinking critically].

I think of politics now as the wheel that moves the common best interests amongst groups, all parties, even those that seem to be in opposition have interests in common. You cannot function as a society without having all those views, otherwise conflict will continue. If a person were to wish to make reforms and create change on the local level in their municipalities, then yes, I would like to be politically active in my city." **Male, Benghazi**

"Politics before 2011 was limited to a certain group, the rest were excluded. Now it has changed, even with all the challenges, you still can think about participation. From 2014 we went through a tribal war as Tuareg. We are underrepresented, partly because of lack of political awareness and in part because political parties were not interested to recruit people from Ubari. When I moved to Tripoli, I joined the Lebu party…" **Female, Ubari**

While 2011 introduced more politics in the daily lives of Libyans and a few interviewees shared that it improved their knowledge of politics, it nonetheless did not improve their perception of politics. The majority of respondents think that today's political scene is no better than the one that existed prior to the uprising. In their view, politics in Libya are restricted amongst war lords and corrupt individuals whose interests converge on claiming more power through resource acquisition. This negative perception of politics greatly affected the interviewees' understandings of good governance. Out of the 44, only three responded positively to wanting to become political activists.

"I didn't know anything about politics. We were politically oppressed. Now I think politics is a dirty game and that is why I will not become a politician." **Female, Algatrun**

"My political opinion became more passive with time because I felt like it doesn›t matter what I think; it doesn›t matter who I support, so I decided to ignore the whole thing. It doesn›t matter how they portray things, the way they change the narrative, but bottom line is that what we, normal people, care about is never applied. I do remember a time when I cared

more, a time around the first couple of conflicts, I think up to the 2014 conflict." **Female, Tripoli**

The sentiment of the quote above is shared by other respondents. Several respondents attributed this to a general feeling of burn out, that it became increasingly difficult to follow up with the political developments in light of violent armed conflicts and their catastrophic consequences. Indeed, even those who were conducting civic activities expressed that they feel more apathetic after 2014.

Personal Trajectories in Conflict: 2014 as a Critical Inflection Point

Disrupted Education Plans, Displacement, and Reduced Opportunities

In parsing the narratives of interviewees, it becomes clear that international intervention and subsequent armed conflicts in Libya caused major transformations in the lives of all participants in the study. An example of this is that almost all the interviewees changed their fields of study after 2011. Most interviewees said that their plans at the time of the uprising revolved around choice of field and university, with very few saying that they already had plans to start a family. Moreover, most interviewees – regardless of gender – were making plans to continue their education in order to pursue careers in science or engineering. Due to the political landscape and restrictions imposed on social and political sciences prior to the uprising, preferences of families had been medical sciences, engineering, or law – stemming from a belief that careers in these fields are more successful and safer. Following 2011, however, many interviewees sensed that their perspectives had branched out to different fields of interest.

"Those in my age group and myself have all planned to either do medicine or engineering. But that changed after the war; things have changed drastically, and I realized I could study something that would involve me in political or social life. So, I studied economics. It was possible after 2011 to dream of so many possibilities that would enable a person to have an impact…" **Male, Zuwara**

More broadly, this transformation not only applied to aspirations regarding education but also to the interviewee's fundamental beliefs. All interviewees expressed that their lives had changed completely because of the war, that challenges continued to increase, and that life generally became more difficult. These changes were not only on an individual level, but societal as well. Some interviewees shared that now they see their communities as more violent and aggressive, while others see society as more corrupt and selfish.

For participants in the study, 2014 was a pivotal year – even more so than 2011. It wasn't just the split in power between the East and the West of the country, but also the numerous other conflicts that took place across Libya. Post-electoral violence in 2014 plunged the country into various conflicts, many of which are the result of a long legacy of marginalization and unresolved grievances among Libyan social groups. These conflicts led to a power split between the executive and constitutional bodies of governance. (International Crisis Group 2015)

The year 2014 represented turning point that brought about irrevocable changes and loss of hope in the future of the country. For most of the interviewees, it was the year schools and universities stopped, violence became widespread, and foreign companies and embassies left the country—taking with them job opportunities. The quote below, said by a respondent from Benghazi, gives a poignant picture of how people turned on each other because of perceived differences that ended in so much bloodshed.

"2014 changed everything. In May 2013, the war in Benghazi started, schools stopped, and life got complicated and changed drastically. There was a curfew, no school, and everything stopped. Then assassinations were happening. People broke the law. At first it was slow, just rumours on people that no one fought, then killings started to happen and that was devastating. They went into houses, killed the men and threw their women in the streets. I was horrified, people would blame the victims. It was atrocious. Violence became normal.

I dreamt of becoming an architect, so I always thought that Libya would evolve and change, [and that] more opportunities and improvements would arise. It was strange. It was the first time in Libya we›d experienced something as dangerous and scary like a bombing. Not only that, but we even got used to it. I was always scared; we always thought that at any moment in time a missile could come inside the house, or that something would happen and we'd have to leave. There was a time where we would be fully dressed in the house just in case something happens. And at its peak, in Benghazi when the murders and the violence began, the family suggested we leave a little, go to Tripoli for a little while." **Female, Benghazi**

"2014 especially affected my life forever. I was interested in music before 2014, life was good then. But then I got involved with militias. They think the conflict was good back then in 20142015-, they had so much power and did not question it. And the more they grow the more they plan to start their own faction; there is a lot of internal struggles." **Male, Tripoli**

This quote highlights the drastic experience interviewees from Benghazi had with violence, in contrast, for instance, with those from the West of Libya who experienced the violent conflict in all its aggression. 11 participants to the study shared experiences of direct violence that ranged from being kidnapped for ransom, to receiving death threats for their activities, being shot at, to being forcefully arrested and tortured for a couple of years. These experiences were a vivid illustration of how violence can be so prevalent that no one can be safe.

Another major theme of the youth's trajectories in conflict is displacement. While many interviewees mentioned the term displacement at one point or another as a result of conflict, six of those shared details about the impact of these experiences on their lives. This included the feeling of being uprooted and not accepted by host communities, and the derailing of plans because of being displaced. Female participants were more open to recall these experiences in detail: for some, it was a short time of being away from their homes, for others it was years followed by a return to destroyed livelihood:

"The war in 2014 was extremely difficult because we were displaced, and uprooted to a new environment that was not entirely friendly. I spent three years there. We were not accepted and often harassed, because we were labelled as against Gaddafi, while the hosting community were Gaddafi loyalists. On the other hand, we were waiting to go back home, our life was hanging by the instability. So, we moved to Tripoli." **Female, Ubari**

The Psychological Impact of War

Nearly half of the interviews addressed the psychological impact of the war. This is especially noteworthy because the interview wasn't designed with questions on the matter. The topic came up as a consistent pattern that highlights greater awareness of a prevalent issue, yet that is unspoken of in many of the communities in the region. While many of those identified themselves as depressed, experiencing constant anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), others shared a strong sense of disassociation with their environment. Yet despite this psychological trauma, none of the interviewees receive proper help or support when it comes to mental health, which has caused many to think that they have no future in the country and that they need to leave to be able to rebuild themselves and their lives.

"The last war on Tripoli 2019 – 2020 had the strongest impact on my mental health and my family. It was very difficult, we had to move out of our place in a hasty, scary way and it was complicated. You›d have to stay somewhere, then you wouldn't know whether to stay or to leave. We moved so much and our house was being bombed, money was short and we were scared; it was really difficult for me and my family. I always think I could stay. I never say I won›t stay, but for me leaving the country is a goal; immigration is a goal. I don›t believe in having to stay in one place, building the Earth is a human goal so I believe in doing it everywhere. Yes, I feel a bit more passion for Libya. It is and will always be home for me, but I really think leaving is the only opportunity for me... The security situation and the economic crisis are the worst obstacles in our way. Especially after the 2014 conflict– life only got harder from there… things changed though, youth work now, women work more." **Female, Tripoli**

"Most people have psychological and nervous illnesses." **Male, Benghazi**

Constructing Adulthood Under Conflict: Flexibility as a Strategy in Uncertain Times

Subsequent to the drastic changes in the lives of respondents after 2014, the negative impact on livelihood is a predominant concern amongst all of them. The main strategy of the interviewees in responding to their unstable environment is to remain flexible and, to quote one interviewee: "deal with the issues when they come and try to survive." For example, this has led some to take on multiple jobs to support their families, and others to change their fields of study as they moved or were displaced to another location inside and outside the country. Indeed, the majority of responses highlighted that economic and personal factors influence their decisions in life. For only a few interviewees, mainly in the East, involvement in the war against terrorism or fighting in the West of Libya during 2011 are explained as based on ideological or political motivations.

At the same time, answers regarding the opportunities presented by the war were conflicted. Interviewees view those who benefited from the situation as mostly working in

the black market, being a member of a militia, or as a corrupt politician. While some agreed that changes brought by civil society and the presence of international organizations have given them some opportunities, they also felt that it was not worth it, given all the challenges and difficulties brought about by war.

"I do not personally know those who benefited from the opportunities the war has provided, but I did hear of those who did not have the same social traditions and restrictions, and had jobs in Tripoli or Tunis. So, I would say the restrictions posed on me as a female have compounded what was already happening in war. It is a slow kind of death, so unlike the violence we see every day." **Female, Benghazi**

The quote above not only is relevant to the gendered element of war's unequal impact, but also how location and social class either limit or present a separate set of opportunities for youth to construct their lives and adulthoods under conflict. In regards to their futures, interviewees at the time of the study were either students or had temporary jobs. Many of them aspire to pursue higher education – preferably abroad. This ties in with the fact that many of the young people interviewed are losing hope in the future of the country, and want to build their lives somewhere more stable. Two interviewees expressed a desperation that if they don't leave the country, they are considering ending their lives. More generally, questions about the future were difficult for most interviewees to answer: the lack of stability and general uncertainty makes it simultaneously hard to make future plans, but also to continue with previous plans. Further to this point, 47 interviewees said that they don't even plan. Their reasons were not only related to the lack of opportunities but also to the fact that the conflict is changing too often and drastically for them to feel grounded, or secure in planning something that could go wrong as per their experience after 2011.

"I can only see myself leaving Libya as soon as possible, we can›t survive here, me and other youth, the militias and the economic situation, among many other things; we don›t feel capable of change, nor can we contribute to Libya. That›s why we want to leave." **Female, Tripoli**

"Honestly, it's really hard to build an ambition in Libya because it's always complex whenever you would plan to do a particular thing, there is always a bad day, a random war gun shooting, and it would cancel your ambition. So you have to be agile to survive and live here, because to me it's not an option not to have an ambition. I think people who do not aspire to anything guard themselves. It's really difficult to plan things in Libya; you would make a plan and start working towards it and then something really bad would happen and everything will fall apart, and then you would be desperate for a while, and then you make another plan and so on and so on." **Male, Tripoli**

In response to the question regarding where they would see themselves in ten years, interviewees either had no answer or said that they are continuing their education, have started a family, or are working abroad. Some said their society would be worse in ten years, others wished things would improve, but are not overly optimistic.
Interviewees who finished their education wanted to either pursue higher degrees abroad or find good jobs in their fields. Those who studied philosophy and other fields of humanities were sceptical that they could work in their fields and that they would prefer a scholarship to do a Master's or a PhD abroad. The main prerequisite for respondents' aspirations is political stability, an end to armed conflict, and economic reforms that would increase opportunities across the country.

Fostering Peace: State and Communities Responsible for Rehabilitation, Justice, and Coexistence

As mentioned earlier in this report, 50 interviewees said that they have changed their minds about violence after living in war. Those who did not change their mind explained that they either saw war as a necessary evil, or that violence must be met with violence. While this illustrates an incredible awareness of the consequences of violence on individuals and societies, the answers also highlight a deeper understanding of violence as both a dynamic and action. They see individuals who continue to perpetuate violence and view it as a solution as the product of their environment. For many interviewees, there is need for rehabilitation:

"Before 2011, I used to think violence is only physical but now I know there are many kinds, such as violating your rights, cutting off electricity, and raising prices. I never thought to see a gun, or someone who would use it against another. Nowadays you are not safe if you don't have a gun. Today I'm emotionally violated. I personally think that we need violence to solve the problem. Because Libyans don't understand other ways." **Female, Ubari**

"At the beginning of the war, I was 15-years-old. The first time we heard the word violence, what came to my mind was physical violence. But during the past 10 years, I realized that physical violence is gentle compared to other types of violence, such as verbal violence that sometimes ends the life of someone who is exposed to it. I knew that in our daily lives we are exposed. There are many types of violence that we are not aware of. But

come on, in reality, they have a huge negative impact, and we must draw two lines under them and find solutions that reduce them, because violence does not solve the problem and can make it worse. Yes, I know people who engage in violence, even against their children, and to the point where they even use fire to punish the child. It is certain that the people who consider violence as a solution need to be rehabilitated, and this is due to the background and culture of the person. People who use violence resort to the easiest way to deal with things without trying to think and solve the problem with their minds." **Female, Sebha**

In addition, interviewees provided meaningful and insightful definitions for terms such as peace and justice, stemming from their experiences of living through war for a decade. Indeed, their definitions highlighted an interconnectedness and a correlation between the two concepts. 59 of those interviewed have answered that peace is strongly related to co-existence, justice, and having better living conditions. In turn, justice for them is equality before the law, and for those who have committed crimes to face consequences, which indicates a strong need for transitional justice.

"When I think of peace, I think of justice that would eliminate all discrimination. Because if you just remove war, then it is a temporary kind of peace. For example, enforcing sharia as the only source of legislation when there are people of different or no faiths, enforcing an Arab identity uniform on others in society. The same goes for religious sects – there must be complete respect of differences. If the grievances are not alleviated, then we would continue to fight." **Male, Zuwara**

"Peace is coexistence; peace is going through whatever without killing each other. It's basically no more gun fights. I don't believe that peace is the absence of conflict; it's rather the proper way of handling conflict." **Male, Benghazi**

26 interviewees shared their ideas on how to increase peace and security in their communities, with the most prevalent being raising awareness regarding healing and peace, which should be integrated into the education system. There was also an emphasis on rehabilitation programs that would address the psychological wounds Libyans suffer from.

"I think if I can do something in our communities to improve coexistence or re-enforce it, I would start with awareness campaigns and community dialogue sessions that address issues such as difference and being open to discussing things that matter to them from different perspectives. I see these sessions starting with small topics such as hobbies or activities and then after that could evolve to bigger, conflict-related issues." **Male, Zuwara**

Reconciliation was another prominent idea amongst the respondents, with an emphasis on open dialogue to expose communities to each other's differences. A few have also shared that better work opportunities would help in disarming young men who are joining and fighting in militias for economic reasons.

"I think what would increase peaceful coexistence is an effective civil participation and doing more peace work, encouraging unity. War is not a solution." **Male, Benghazi**

"I don't think we can literally go ahead and build peace; I think we need to start with small things such as services that would improve people's livelihood. Encourage running businesses and provide services that can make a difference. This will actually improve a lot of people's lives and then this will eventually support peace." **Male, Tripoli**

Responses about peace and justice indicate that the process towards peace falls to both the government and the community. Interviewees pointed towards reconciliation, accountability, and transitional justice for the authorities, while awareness regarding coexistence and acceptance of differences is a social responsibility. Most respondents saw themselves contributing to the latter. Two interviewees saw that the conflict is not only a Libyan affair. Because there is direct foreign influence in Libya, that aspect has to be addressed in order to be able to achieve peace, they said. There is evident yearning and desire for reconciliation, peace, and stability from the answers. This is a positive development in that it shows young Libyans not only view the conflict differently, but that they also have concrete ideas and steps on what the process for peace could be like.

Expansion of Women in Public Space vs. the Persistence of Traditional Gender Norms

Questions regarding gender relations revealed some interesting dynamics in how both genders perceived changes. In general, the appreciation of these changes depended largely on the background of the interviewees: those with conservative views perceived these changes as negative, while those living in urban settings and/or who work regularly with women see it as positive. A few male interviewees claimed that they do not interact with females outside of their families, therefore could not observe any changes.

Both female and male interviewees agree on the fact that the war has forced a change in gender roles. Women are

working more and therefore have more responsibilities in the household, which also allows for greater independence and the ability for women to be able to make decisions and make choices that are not connected to societal expectations. Interviewees have also noted a generational shift in regards to these changes: they view younger women as more self-reliant and assume proactive leading roles when the space permits. This indicates that restrictive social norms have changed.

"Women in general – even when allowed to study – were confined to feminine work roles, and aspired at most to be married and have families. This changed after the war, especially the experience of displacement that made women join the work force. Conservative gender norms relaxed because both members of society were needed. Relationships changed of course. Men who were restrictive of their female family members have now relaxed because of circumstances. Not all of them are happy of course, women are still being harassed, but they cannot confine them as before. I did not notice at first until I went to school, and my male classmates were somehow offended by me taking initiative. In Tuareg before, we had mixed marriages and things were relaxed but lately with the spread of religious conservativism, things have gotten worse. Things will be even more different after the war; it is impossible to go back. There is so much more awareness now regarding the issue. Many women I see will not accept to go back to how things were." **Female, Ubari**

These views are mostly shared by females, although the tension mentioned in this quote was also evident in the answers from some of the male interviewees. The differences have been perceived by male interviewees who are especially conservative, as they saw all these changes as signs of deteriorating morality of society, that both young women and men have become materialistic and abandoned traditions. Examples of these convictions were given about young men working in the black market, trafficking, and smuggling. Another example is that young women are working in mixed-gender settings and that they do not observe the same traditional values as before. Those who expressed such sentiments hoped that things would go back as they were before 2011, with no clear answer or understanding as to what that was.

The reference to religious conservativism was mentioned vaguely in a few answers. There is a perception that social groups such as the Amazigh and the Tuareg, who hold different social values when it comes to women, were affected by a wave of religious conservativism that predates 2011. This could also be linked to the anti-religious conservativism sentiment some interviewees mentioned in consequence to the Islamic State's presence in Libya and its devastating impact on all communities.

Another aspect of the changes to gender roles revealed how the image of masculinity has shaped these changes. Several interviewees reflected on young men who were pushed, coerced, and were given incentives to join armed groups because of the economic situation, but also as not to be perceived as weak and to be able to protect their families. A few interviewees also reflected that this expectation of masculinity is what made young men join armed groups so that they do not lose power in a highly patriarchal and hierarchal society.

These same responses added that they see more underage girls being pushed into early marriage by their families to unburden them of providing and protecting them. Yet, this in turn makes girls and young women effectively always dependent on men in the family for protection. This dysfunctional dynamic is negatively self-fulfilling since the same "protectors" could get killed at the front or impacted by the war, which in turn leaves the young women extremely vulnerable having not finished their education, with little prospect to lead households.

"War has changed the ambitions of young men. Rather than do something with their lives, they are now joining factions or groups for power and to marry young girls – underage girls to be precise. The war has affected young men a lot because of power and money. I see change of gender roles in certain experiences, but I cannot recall them; families are now more fragmented and sensitive. I don›t think much will change after the war, especially if there is no mental health care or therapy." **Male, Benghazi**

Again, the duality of the consequences of the war presents itself here. While gender roles have changed in different ways, the pressure caused by the war and its consequences is incredibly negative. Gender-based violence, for example, is a prevalent issue. Multiple responses mentioned that domestic violence has increased, and others speak of the harassment women and girls face in public and private spaces.

"Women have it harder in Libya, and youth in general were pushed in many directions because of the security situation. It was either you do as you are told, take control, and become one of them or you are endangered. The community struggles to accept change, although I think it is now more changed than ever. I still believe being different in our community or at least being upfront about it is really dangerous. As for women, it is really bad and it requires a lot of work to change that. You see women on daily basis being abused, harassed, hurt, assaulted, and more. But no one defends them because somehow women are always blamed, our community does so little to support women and even when - in times like now - they are out there working and helping and aiding the community recover, there

is little change in the social dynamic that can empower women through that change. But then again, being a part of this community, they are also part of these ideas and stereotypes. They are the community, as well, and they did push for things to stay the same. It›s not safe for anyone in Libya, wherever you go, you always have that potential of being a victim – but as a woman you are not even allowed to be a victim." **Female, Tripoli**

This poignant quote about Libyan women's position in society is extremely important. It is harder for women to overcome any restrictions imposed on them when society's morality is linked directly to their life choices. Victim blaming of women in Libya and stigmatization are powerful tools of control.

Respondents to the questions regarding changes in gender dynamics amongst families answered in line with how families have been strained because of the conflict. Female interviewees spoke of tension at home with male siblings, fathers, and husbands who attempt to limit their freedoms because of security concerns. The majority of respondents reflected that they have not observed any changes in the relationships between themselves and the opposite sex.

Finally, with regards to future changes in gender relations, most interviewees state that things will be different, but it was difficult for them to envision what these changes would look like. Interestingly, those who wish for a return to more traditional values in society are generally those who perceive themselves as civilians and did not take any part in the conflict.

Conclusion

Life for young people in Libya is increasingly challenging overall, and the quality of life is deteriorating. For many, there is no sense of hope that the situation will improve. This is not only a consequence of the decade-long war and how it has derailed infrastructure and any form of stability, but also the psychological impact that has left so many burned out and depressed. Youth in Libya struggle to complete their education because of the continuous armed conflicts – and when they do, they do not find work opportunities that would meet their needs and aspirations.

Instability and uncertainty prevent youth from making long-term plans or having big dreams that do not involve leaving the country for somewhere better. Nonetheless, for those who want to leave to study and return to Libya, or those who want to remain in the country – all are involved in civic engagement or have had the opportunity to start their own businesses. This demonstrates the urgency for youth to find pathways for social and economic integration in order for a future in Libya to still be envisaged.

The political apathy of some of the young people in this study stems from a lack of trust in the political structure and politicians. This is in part a long legacy from Gaddafi's era, but also how politics have played out in the past decade. There needs to be support for transparent political processes that are inclusive of the public. Accountability is also needed to repair such damage. Placing those responsible for crimes over the years before fair justice mechanisms will ensure not only that there is an end to impunity, but that young people will feel they can engage in the system without becoming corrupt themselves.

The interviewees all shared the observation that the social fabric of Libyan society has been torn to pieces. Trust is not only gone in the government but in society itself. Ideas were shared regarding raising awareness on peace and reconciliation, with respondents stressing the need for community dialogues not only on the conflict in general, but on fundamental issues such as tolerance of differences. It is evident from the testimonies that reconciliation is badly needed, coupled with justice. Indeed, all of the responses regarding peace were linked to the point that justice must be addressed first.

The future of young Libyans remains uncertain. Despite all the hardships, there is resilience that is rooted in more awareness and a different understanding of what life could be from the older generations. However, much needs to be done in order for them to feel stable and safe to build their lives and be engaged.

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.

contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis