The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-proofing and Repression

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The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-proofing and Repression

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ABSTRACT Although seen by many as an unequivocal supporter of Gaddafi’s power basis, the Libyan military’s reaction to the 2011 uprising was far from unified: plagued by desertion as well as disintegration, the regime managed to rely only on the hard core of its armed forces. This was mostly a result of the regime’s decade-long coup-proofing measures which rendered it in large parts militarily useless. Weakened at the micro level, the Libyan military was incapable of acting at the macro level in any meaningful way. Sitting at the analytical intersection between internal and external features of the armed forces, the Libyan case provides useful insights on the study of the armed forces.

KEY WORDS: Libya, Military, Conflict

The study of Arab armed forces had their heyday in history in the two decades following World War II. As governments succumbed to coups in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt, the military came to be considered by Western social scientists a vanguard of modernization and a possible antidote to feudal societies. The academic focus at the time zeroed in on the military’s potential capacity to unite pluralistic societies, reform autocratic systems and generally trigger innovation. ¹ It was argued that ‘the institutions of government (…), with which the new states have begun their sovereign careers are being resisted by the

old societies which they must govern’, because these old societies are marked by rural backwardness, strong kinship ties, regional or ethnic loyalties. They therefore resist being turned into modern citizens and represent an obstacle to the formation of a nation. It was not surprising then that ‘[I]n these early stages of political modernization, the military officers play a highly modernizing and progressive role. They challenge the oligarchy, and they promote social and economic reform, national integration (…), they assail waste, backwardness, and corruption, and they introduce into the society highly middle-class ideas of efficiency, honesty, and national loyalty.’ Huntington thus endorsed the highly politicized military as the bearer of modernization, explaining military coups as a normal step towards modernity. He claimed that once the military accomplished its role as midwife, stable institutions would be established and the armed forces would naturally retreat into the barracks.

Such expectations of the military were hardly realized. By and large, Arab armies in power turned out to be disappointing. Not only did their modernizing impact proved to be limited, their experiences in managing governments were insufficient and their suppression of opponents brutal. Their strategic failure against Israel only added to the general perception of ineffectiveness. Even though the military in power civilianized itself eventually, shedding the uniform and taking on civilian titles, the armed forces in Arab political systems were subsequently considered an integral part of the regime structure and therefore supportive of the central authoritarian power. Study of Arab military forces died down as a result of this rather static conception.

This assumption was challenged during the uprisings of 2011, when Arab military forces performed differently from what analysts had commonly expected. Not only did the Egyptian and the Tunisian military side with the protesters, but the Syrian and the Libyan armed forces suffered considerable attrition during the uprising they brutally attempted to crush. In sum, none of the Arab militaries confronted with the massive social dislocation behaved in the expected way, namely unequivocally standing by the regime and suppressing the uprisings.

The Arab Spring hence raised anew the question of the role of military forces in the Arab world and how to study it. Yet military sociology has struggled with the appropriate framework for analysis; as it tends to divide the study of armed forces into micro- and macro-level, it fails to grasp in this particular case the whole dimension of Arab armed forces. Hence a different framework is needed to study the

\[2^{\text{Shils, 'The Military in the Political Development of the New States', 13–18.}}\]
\[3^{\text{Huntington, Political Order, 203.}}\]
\[4^{\text{Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, Political Armies (London: Zed Books 2002), 18.}}\]
position of the military in politics and society during times of considerable political tumult. Any discussion about the role of the armed forces in a given society must take both internal and external characteristics of the military into account as explanatory variables, combining the societal with the institutional level.

The societal level analyzes the position the military has within a wider social system, how it is connected to other societal bodies (such as the government), what is its image and so forth. Crucial questions related to this level are, for instance, whether the military represents, in society, the regime in power or the state as such; how was its role in the state conceived; and on what societal narrative the armed forces can, or cannot rest. An armed forces which is seen, and sees itself, as an agent of the state, for instance, will have very little difficulty dissociating itself from any given government if necessary, for example, as in the case of Egypt. A military institution representing a particular regime, however, will connect its own survival to the regime and question and hence act as such, as was the case of Libya.

At the institutional (and even less studied) level, key questions are of an internal nature but pertaining to the armed forces’ external performance. Questions of cohesion, leadership, professionalism and command structure might strike some as technical yet will ultimately decide whether a military force will be able to execute its mission as tasked. An unprofessional and non-cohesive armed force will find it difficult to fight any battle, but will also struggle with making the distinction between state and regime at the macro-level. As an armed force relies on a clear vision of its mission, a blurred perception of the latter will affect cohesion and as a consequence, desertion and disintegration will take place. By the same token, underdeveloped professionalism levels are more likely to result in violence against civilians. Essentially, this approach combines the institutional view of Huntington’s *Soldier and the State* and the systemic perspective of Janowitz’s *The Professional Soldier*. As the former emphasized internal characteristics in order to depoliticize armed forces, the latter argued that the military, as part of a social system, will always be politicized to some extent.\(^5\)

One of the few areas of study where these two levels of analysis meet is the phenomenon of coup-proofing. While coup-proofing is a technique to prevent military forces from staging a coup, it is a very clear expression of the nexus existing between internal military features and external societal factors. Aimed at minimizing the possibilities of small groups leveraging the system to stage a coup, it encompasses a set of procedures such as (1) the exploitation of individual loyalties or identities; (2) the creation of paramilitary structures; (3) the establishment of security agencies which monitor the loyalty of the military; (4) the focus of expertise in the military; and (5) the financing of such measures. The target of these measures is particularly the leadership, as it is the officer corps which initiates the overwhelming majority of coups. States applying coup-proofing measures use internal features of the armed forces to ensure a certain place of the military in society at large. It is hence a deliberate mechanism meddling with the micro-level for macro-level purposes.

As we study the military as an organization, special attention should be paid to its exceptionalism both inwardly, as well as to the outside. Not only does the military and its (sometimes theoretical) monopoly of violence symbolize the state like no other governmental institution, it is also, internally, a profession very different from others. Its fusion of occupation and profession makes for very specific outlooks, attitudes, socialization, identity formation as well as structures, procedures and rules of conduct that we do not find elsewhere. Ignoring this aspect will result in an only partial understanding of the military, and in this particular case of the Arab armed forces’ behavior during the Arab Spring.

When combining these two levels of analysis, essentially four options are possible as outlined below. Whereas the general assumption located most Arab forces in the cohesive/regime-supporting camp, the spectrum of possibilities is far wider, which ultimately explains the armed forces’ behavior during times of social dislocation.

Of course any armed force can migrate from one box to another due to political events, training programs and changes in the geopolitical context. Perceiving the Arab military institutions as statically assigned to one category has proven wrong when anticipating their behavior during the Arab Spring. This article analyses the Libyan armed forces along the lines laid out above, namely on both the internal as well as societal level, dividing the time line in two: from the coup of 1969 to the eve of the uprising in 2011, and from the uprising to 2012 in order

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to take a closer look at the armed forces’ behavior during and after the conflict.

The Libyan military, from its inception as the army of the Sanussi order (called the Libyan Arab Army) in its struggle against Italy which had colonized Libya since 1912, to Captain Muammar Al-Gaddafi’s coup, has had difficulties finding its place in a state. King Idris, the former leader of the Sanussi order and first head of state of independent Libya, distrusted his Royal Libyan Army – and the state as a construct, for that matter. Although the armed forces had emerged from the Sanussi army fighting against Italy and therefore could have been considered loyal, the King viewed any national (as opposed to tribal or regional) institution with suspicion. As a consequence, he dragged his feet on the formation of a regular armed force, spending eight years in creating a small army of 6,500 volunteers. He manned the command posts with loyal yet unqualified fellow Cyrenaicans and armed it lightly. While Libyan GNP started to explode with the take off of oil sales, the military saw rather little of this, its budget remaining rather steadily around 5per cent of the GNP. In addition, Idris created two paramilitary units which were not only manned by 14,000 Bedouins loyal to the Sanussi order, but also heavily armed with armored cars, artillery and helicopters. Although the purpose of these units was to keep the regular army in check, they made very little effort to thwart the coup which was carried out by the Libyan Army on 1 September 1969. This heritage of mistrust regarding the Libyan armed forces characterized the successor regime as well.

Table 1. Situating Arab Armed Forces in Social Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allegiance to state</th>
<th>Cohesive/professional</th>
<th>Non-cohesive/non-professional</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td></td>
<td>Iraq (after 2003)</td>
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<td>Tunisia</td>
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<td>Lebanon</td>
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<td>Allegiance to regime</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
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<td>Algeria</td>
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The Libyan Military’s Role in State and Society under Gaddafi

The Libyan armed forces have occupied a rather peculiar place in a rather peculiar societal structure from its very inception. Although part and parcel of regime change in 1969, the military represented throughout the four decades under Gaddafi’s regime the state and as such a construct Gaddafi not only resented but actively sought to abolish. While necessary for regime stabilization (and as it turned out, for war), the armed forces were logically also seen as a potential threat since it could bring to power a group just as much as it could topple it. Its strength as the only Libyan group capable of formulating a corporate interest across tribal boundaries (most of the officers involved hailed from smaller tribes) ultimately turned it into a threat. Gaddafi, on the societal level, mistrusted the armed forces whose role was deliberately made ambiguous.

This happened gradually, however. The first years after the coup turned out to be a honeymoon phase between the new regime and the Libyan military which was rightly seen as the most important pillar of the new system. After a purge of every officer above the rank of colonel, as well as every Sanussi officer regardless of rank, the size of the Libyan armed forces virtually doubled over night and its equipment was replaced. In no time, the Libyan armed forces had the highest ratio of military to equipment in the Third World and had turned into the prime vehicle for Libyan social advancement.11 This changed however in 1975.

As Gaddafi developed his vision for a political system, later published in his Green Book, ideological rifts appeared in the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). Both sides of the RCC reached out into the armed forces soliciting support: troops loyal to Gaddafi surrounded Tripoli in July 1975, but an actual coup attempt by the two RCC members, Bashir Hawadi and Umar al-Muhayshi was uncovered a month later. The coup, carried out by about 20 to 30 army officers who allegedly hailed mostly from Misrata, failed when the plotters were discovered, subsequently arrested, and executed two years later.12

This event redefined the role of the armed forces in Libya’s political structure. No longer the undisputed backbone and facilitator of the regime, Gaddafi henceforth recognized the pivotal capacity of the military to change power relations – to his advantage or disadvantage. Although his now consolidated power continued to rest in part at least

on the armed forces, his relationship with the military remained ambivalent bordering on the mistrustful. His statement that ‘neither the ASU (Arab Socialist Union) nor the army were authorized to guide the popular revolution’13 clearly underlines his attempt to rebut the role of the armed forces in the political structure he had designed for Libya, and his continuous concern about a coup. As Gaddafi began Libya’s transformation into a Jamahiriya (a state managed directly by the people), he thus had to manage the armed forces in a way that allowed for maximum regime support while at the same time limited its actual capacity in order to curtail its power.

The political system of the Jamahiriya, designed to extenuate the shortcomings of conventional democratic systems, aimed at direct control by the people on all levels of society through committees and congresses respectively for executive and legislative matters. Ranging from basic committees and congresses to municipal and general ones, the system aimed to put all decisions pertaining to management of public life to the people, and essentially abolish the state which Gaddafi viewed as an aberration of social structure.

Curiously, this system had some holes which allowed the regime to control society regardless of the direct democratic system created. As ‘popular rule’ abolished separation of power, it nevertheless excluded a number of issues for the committees and congresses. These included the armed forces as well as foreign policy, but also the police, budget and petroleum sector. In other words, popular rule applied only to those areas that were not crucial for state survival. With the implementation of the new popular system in 1977, the RCC was abolished. Its members, however, retained key positions: Gaddafi and Abu Bakr Yunes Jabr served as heads of the Libyan military, Khuwaylidi al-Hamidi as commander of the police and Mustafa al-Kharubi as chief of staff.

As a result of the armed forces’ exclusion from popular control, issues related to it were never subject of debate within the popular structure. Civilian control of the armed forces did not exist within a system which claimed to hand all control directly to the citizens. It is important to note that although the military was tantamount to regime stabilization, it was never formally tasked with regime protection such as guarding its personnel and institutions or taking on tasks of internal nature, such as policing.14

In this decidedly anti-state system, the armed forces as a classical state institution remained an outsider insofar as in a perfect Jamahiriya world, no need for it would have existed as the people would defend

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13 Quoted in Vandewalle, Libya Since Independence, 86.
14 Vandewalle, A History of Modern Libya, 43–147.
themselves. It is for this reason that Gaddafi developed, from 1975 onwards, the idea of mass mobilization as opposed to a standing and professional armed force. As Article 9 of the Proclamation of People’s Power stated, ‘defending the country is the responsibility of every citizen’. The ‘concept of armed people’ (al-sha‘b al-musallah’) was inspired by popular Libyan resistance against Italian occupation as well as the Bedouin practice of collective self-defense, and led to the establishment of general military training in 1978 as well as the militarization of society at large. From middle school onwards, Libyans were integrated in some form of military structure early on, be it in the form of basic military instruction in school, military service or the People’s Militia which comprised men ages 45–55. However, the role of the People’s Militia never reached the level Gaddafi might have imagined, as it comprised only a small age group and was supposed to protect buildings in times of crisis.15

In order to institutionalize control of society (as well as the military), the regime soon developed a parallel structure to ‘popular rule’ not mentioned in Gaddafi’s Green Book or the Proclamation of People’s Power: the revolutionary committees, which were, not surprisingly, headed by the remaining members of the RCC. Designed to protect the revolution, their primary purpose was to ‘act as foil to any group, including the army, that could threaten the regime and to hunt down opposition figures inside and outside the Jamahiriya.’16 Acting as ideological surveillance, these revolutionary committees infiltrated people’s congresses, committees as well as the military and acted as a spearhead to the split Gaddafi acknowledged in 1979 between those in power (i.e. the people) and those guiding the revolution. Flanked by a military wing of 3,000 troops, the Revolutionary Guards, they quickly turned into the key element in controlling society.

It is this divide between two complexes of power (the people versus the revolution) in Gaddafi-era Libya which explains best the almost schizophrenic position of the armed forces within the Libyan system; in contrast to other institutions, the Libyan military formed a part of both complexes as the regime decided to maintain it as one of several pillars to control society. Not only was it somewhat integrated into the revolutionary structure as it floated freely outside the popular committee structure and remained under the regime’s direct control, but it was also subject to intense control by the revolutionary

16 Vandewalle, Libya Since Independence, 100.
committees. This control had its limits however, due to the ambiguous position of the military in the Libyan power system.

While some assert that the revolutionary committees did ‘effectively outrank all others in the army’\(^{17}\), others maintain that ‘the army remained the ultimate power source’.\(^{18}\) Yet both statements are not in contradiction, as they highlight the equivocal role the military played in Gaddafi’s Libya. As the source of power it had a privileged status; but for the same reason it needed to be controlled more than any other organization. Its unabated influence became clear in 1986, when the revolutionary committees not only failed to mobilize the masses to participate in anti-American demonstrations after the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi, but the armed forces also had to crush a scattered unrest throughout the country which followed the events. As a result, the power of the revolutionary committees declined, and their weekly magazine *Al-Zahf Al-Akhdar* (‘The Green March’) ceased the publication of articles critical of the armed forces.\(^{19}\)

Yet this influence only heightened Gaddafi’s distrust of the military, from which at least four coup attempts were staged after 1975. Although part and parcel of the regime’s power basis, the armed forces were also an expression of popular discontent with the political situation. Attempts to overthrow the regime originated almost exclusively in the armed forces: in 1983, five officers were executed for plotting a coup, in 1984, fighting broke out in barracks over a similar plan, leading to the arrest of several thousand soldiers. In 1985, 60 officers were arrested for a similar cause. The same year, Colonel Hassan Ishkal, the military governor of Surt, was executed for disagreeing over the role of the revolutionary guards within the armed forces. In 1993, another attempt failed.\(^{20}\) As a result, Gaddafi resorted to the Revolutionary Guard Corps rather than the military to crush riots and Islamist activism in the early 1990s. Rumors about the armed forces’ loyalty persisted, particularly in Cyrenaica where it was said to follow tribal rather than national (or rather: regime) allegiances.\(^{21}\)


\(^{19}\)Ibid., 123.

\(^{20}\)St John, *Historical Dictionary of Libya*, 55.

The Institutional State of the Libyan Military under Gaddafi

As a result of his consistent distrust of the Libyan armed forces, Gaddafi proceeded to weaken precisely those elements of the military which could jeopardize the regime, namely all of those which could provide a platform for collective identity and interests. His targets were hence not only cohesiveness, but also leadership as well as command and control structure – in other words, all of the human elements which make or break the armed forces, rather than its equipment.

Morale, élan, esprit de corps or cohesion all encompass ‘the bonding together of members of an organization/unit in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and the mission’. Cohesion can hence be measured best at the smallest unit level, where troops live and fight together. The organization’s function in this context is to not only provide these units with a purpose, but also with a structure which allows for cohesion. Such a structure generally de-emphasizes the individualism of the soldier, allows for extended maintenance of a certain group formation in order to give time for bonding experience and pursuit of common goals. Furthermore, leadership plays a crucial role in the fostering of cohesion as it is the bond between officers and soldiers which will transmit norms, organization objectives and values down to the smallest units. A military institution seeking cohesion will thus ‘use a unit rotation system rather than individual replacements, emphasizing personnel stability within units; (…) prohibit soldiers from belonging to autonomous groups with possibly deviant norm; (…) reduce centralized, bureaucratic control over the good things in the soldier’s life and give control of these to the immediate leaders of the individual soldier’. (e.g. pay, promotion, leave). Cohesion is a variable that is difficult to measure positively, while its absence is measured easily by disintegration and desertion.

But the Libyan regime had no intention of creating strong cohesion in its military force. After all, it was the cohesiveness of the Free Officers Movement that produced the coup of 1969. As a result from this insight, the regime proceeded to weaken the Libyan military in a number of ways directly opposed to those cohesion-fostering measures mentioned above, a process which is part of systematic coup-proofing

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As discussed earlier, coup-proofing consists of deliberate measures that will affect the armed forces’ functioning from the inside in order to ensure a certain position in society at large. As a side effect of all these measures, the armed forces’ core capacity was harmed, namely to conduct war in the most effective manner. As a result of coup-proofing, officers develop lesser leadership skills because promotion and assignment is based on ethnic or religious affiliation rather than on merit, and because centralized structures discourage individual initiative. In addition, frequent rotations of officers in particular will prevent the establishment of cohesive ties between leadership and enlisted personnel. As an overwhelming result of these efforts, the Libyan armed forces suffered tremendously in terms of cohesiveness, and therefore also in terms of war-fighting capacity.

Concrete measures taken by the regime included the creation of parallel security structures as well as a systematic erosion of the Libyan military’s professionalism. Although on paper the armed forces benefitted greatly from the regime (by growing from 7,000 in 1969 to 85,000 in 1988, as well as by receiving large amounts of modern weapon technology), in reality it was weakened. Gaddafi’s methods to undermine the establishment of cohesion included frequent rotations of the leadership, strong centralized structures which allowed him to determine every single promotion, and the use of tribal affiliation to his advantage.

Particularly the latter aimed at reducing the role Libyan nationalism had played in the military right before the 1969 coup; it was because of a transcendent sensation of Libyanness that the armed forces, especially the officer corps, had grown into the most cohesive group in Libya at the time, as opposed to all other social formations. Gaddafi’s initial attacks on tribal and regional affiliations, which he considered as obstructive to social advancement and Arab unity, were a logical continuation of his own experience in the armed forces. However, with the growing awareness of the armed forces’ dangerous potential, the regime began to undermine precisely those elements which had facilitated regime change, and used tribalism to its advantage.

For any armed force to function properly a number of mechanisms and norms have to be respected; among these are the principles of hierarchy, of course, but also of meritocracy. Political meddling with promotions and posts is generally resented by any armed force as it circumvents the very principles the military is built on, and therefore affects cohesion significantly. As Gaddafi heavily influenced the distribution of personnel loyal to him in the military, he manned important posts in classical divide et impera fashion, so that no single group – be it tribal, political or religious – could gain a security monopoly in any bracket. As tinkering with the leadership hollowed
out one of the key principles of the armed forces, cohesiveness was weakened considerably. When put to test, such as in Chad or during the uprising of 2011, the Libyan armed forces’ cohesion proved to be feeble.

Part of his tactics included the promotion of junior officers from Gaddafi’s own tribe, the Qadadfa and allocation of sensitive posts such as the responsibility for the Cyrenaica region; military security; responsibility for the Benghazi sector; command of armaments and munitions, of domestic security and many others. The air force was staffed almost exclusively by members of this tribe. But other tribes that were considered loyal to the regime, such as the Warfalla and Maqarha received preferential (though secondary) treatment as well. One would be mistaken to think that these were the only tribes in the armed forces, as the careful balance of this system needed to be constantly revised, and loyalties were never certain – the 1993 coup attempt was allegedly supported by the Warfalla tribe.²⁵

In addition, military leadership was regularly rotated through the seven military regions in order to avoid the formation of close ties between officers and enlisted personnel; and the armed forces were kept busy with the conflict on the border with Egypt, in Uganda and Chad. The enormous amount of money the regime poured into military equipment was in part designed to soothe the military which had felt neglected under King Idris and his restrained spending on military equipment.

The effects of this policy on the Libyan military became particularly visible during its conflict with Chad from 1978 to 1987. Claiming the Aouzou Strip in northern Chad as part of Libya (based on a 1935 colonial treaty between France and Italy which had never been ratified), the armed forces were sent to occupy it in 1972 following a secret agreement between Gaddafi and Chadian President Tombalbaye. In addition to territorial expansion, Gaddafi sought to establish a client state in Chad, useful for his African policy and eventually modeled on the Jamahiriya. When Tombalbaye was removed in a coup in 1975, Chad reclaimed the strip, leading to a decade long confrontation which would involve France and to some extent the United States. In 1993, the International Court of Justice recognized the Aouzou Strip as part of Chad.

The conflict in Chad proved to be challenging to the Libyan military. As the armed forces were not allowed to train with live ammunition, or to conduct military exercises above the level of company, the military proved incapable of coordinating the efforts of artillery, armor and

infantry.\textsuperscript{26} The areas most affected, however, were leadership, and as a side effect, cohesion. ‘Throughout the nine years of direct Libyan involvement in Chad, Qaddafi’s legions suffered high rates of desertion among units deployed there. (...) When morale was high, unit cohesion was stronger and more soldiers were willing to risk their lives for their comrades and their missions. But when they were dispirited, units broke under less pressure, and fewer troops were willing to sacrifice for their mission or one another.’\textsuperscript{27} Overall, the Libyan military never managed to overcome the side effects of extensive coup proofing, and remained an institution weak not only in terms of cohesion, but as a result also in terms of battle performance. Its performance during the war in Chad, but ultimately also its reaction to the uprising were a logical continuation of its internal disarray, and shows the clear impact of coup-proofing on military effectiveness.\textsuperscript{28}

**Role of the Libyan Military during the Uprising of 2011**

When the uprising began in February 2011, the Libyan military had rarely been used to crush riots (in contrast to the Revolutionary Guards and the police) and hence was confronted with a set of challenges new not only in terms of tactics, but also in terms of loyalty. More importantly, its position within the regime’s power structure had internal implications which rendered it in large parts incapable of dealing with the crisis.

Nowhere did the nexus between internal and external level of analysis, between macro- and micro-level become clearer than within the Libyan military in the months of 2011. To recall, the Libyan regime had styled the armed forces as a crucial pillar in its power structure. By the same token the regime weakened those characteristics necessary for an armed force to function as a cohesive force. However, cohesion in the armed forces was fostered primarily in those units deemed loyal to the regime. In these units, loyalty to the regime and unit cohesion were almost identical features. Ultimately, the armed forces’ reaction to the large-scale social unrest was therefore determined by institutional variables which had been created by the regime.

Hence, the military reacted in broadly three ways to the uprising: individual exit as individual soldiers deserted, collective exit as units

\textsuperscript{26}Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 358–424.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 404.
disintegrated en bloc in order to join the rebel forces and loyalty as some units remained in the armed forces to crush the revolt.

There is a difference between desertion and disintegration. The former is first and foremost an expression of discontent of an individual, albeit being the loudest form of questioning an army and its legitimacy; it is also always more the product of the military institution rather than the society it is embedded in.29 This does not mean that desertion is always politically motivated, however, as other variables in its motivation are accommodation, violence within the army, and the military’s relationship with society. Sometimes, desertion indicates how soldiers perceive the likely outcome of a conflict and take sides in time.30 Generally, the rank and file rather than the officers deserted.31

Disintegration, however, is on a totally different scale than desertion. Disintegration is the disengagement of a whole unit, expressing not only the individual’s discontent with his circumstances. Disintegration reflects strong cohesion within that particular group as it takes a collective decision. It is for this reason that disintegration automatically has a far more political twist to it than desertion, and it is therefore much more damaging. ‘Disintegration may be considered so damaging to the army, the government, to that most delicate fabric, the national psyche, that the event’s documentation is put under lock and key for generations.’32

Four reasons can be identified for disintegration: the first is failure of leadership, the second collapse of primary groups, meaning cohesion. As Janowitz and Shils33 have shown, it is the primary group, the buddies, that makes or breaks cohesion. Whenever these groups collapse, no political ideology can uphold fighting morale. The third reason for disintegration is alienation: when ‘individuals within primary groups are suddenly confused as to what they ought to

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believe', a shifting of values takes place and makes the individual reconsider. If the whole group follows in this reconsideration, disintegration soon may follow. The fourth reason is desperation over a hopeless situation.  

As the analysis of the Libyan case shows, the large majority of men opted for the first option, namely desertion without joining the rebel forces. The further the uprising moved from East to West, these desertions grew, particularly along lines of geographical and tribal loyalty. Areas where regime support was traditionally stronger (in Sirte, in tribal areas of the Qadhadhfa, Warfalla and Maqarha), desertions were less frequent whereas they were higher in areas in the East traditionally considered pockets of resistance against Gaddafi. The longer the conflict lasted, however, the more the regime's circles of support eroded to the point where formerly loyal tribes (such as the Warfalla) switched sides, and triggered even more desertions.

In the first month of the uprising, 8,000 soldiers had reportedly defected in the East, and by June 2011, four months into the uprising, the Libyan military had allegedly shrunk to somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 (from its original 51,000). The exact numbers are unclear, as official numbers from before the conflict have very likely been inflated just as much as the actual numbers of deserters.  

Suffice it to say that desertions were substantial, and depended essentially on three variables: the actual location of the unit, which could or could not offer the individual safety, the individual's opinion of the conflict and/or the regime, and the cohesion of the unit in question.

As a result, units deployed in areas that had been overtaken by the rebels found it a lot easier to desert than those posted in Tripoli which fell only in August 2011; in addition, troops deployed in the areas in which they came from deserted quicker when tasked to brutally suppress the uprising. Loyalty to one's local identity prevailed over loyalty to the regime. Desertions occurred in Benghazi where the uprising had begun, and continued to spread in the rebel-held territories in the East, where deserters could assume safety for themselves and

34 Watson, When Soldiers Quit, 156–63.
their family, more so than in areas controlled by Gaddafi.\textsuperscript{36} This is not to say that desertions did not occur in the West: considerable numbers of officers deserted as early as March in Zintan, located in the West, while other officers based in the West collaborated with the rebels while remaining in their actual post.\textsuperscript{37} Geographical constraints hence played a role in the decision to desert.

Second, desertions increased as the conflict dragged on and it became increasingly clear to the soldiers that the regime would eventually fall; taking sides at the right time would play as much a role as the unwillingness to crush a revolt of the people this armed force was supposed to protect and from which it hailed.

Ultimately, desertion is however always a product of the armed force, and so was the outcome of systematic weakening of leadership and cohesion as part of Gaddafi’s coup-proofing system.

Those who remained either in the armed forces or left as a collective were those who actually professed the highest degrees of cohesion; the majority of cohesive units were found, not surprisingly, in the 32nd Brigade (approximately 10,000 troops), but there were also a few units (approximately 1,000 troops\textsuperscript{38}) which left the military and joined, as intact units, the National Liberation Army. These units often followed leading generals such as Major General Abdel Fattah Younis, the Minister of Interior, who urged the Libyan Army to ‘join the people and respond to their legitimate demands’,\textsuperscript{39} He later became the commander-in-chief of the rebels’ National Liberation Army. These units proved to be the best trained and organized and contributed significantly to the rebel forces’ success. Nevertheless, they were eyed with suspicion as many rebels doubted their loyalty.

However, many militias never became part of the new armed forces, and claimed that their contribution to the eventual success of the


uprising was more important than those of the defected troops. An example of this difficult cooperation between military deserters and rebels is certainly the assassination of Younis in July 2011. Regardless of this infighting, the defection of closed units was facilitated by the leadership skills of generals such as Salim al-Hasi, the comparative cohesion as well as the location in the ‘liberated’ country’s East.

The remnants of the armed forces were clustered in the 32nd Brigade of the Libyan Army. Commanded by Gaddafi’s son Khamis, these units continued to fight against rebels until the fall of Tripoli. In contrast to other, less privileged units, the so-called Khamis Brigade had high levels of morale and cohesion, which explains its comparatively low levels of desertion despite ongoing casualties. These units were almost exclusively drawn from the Qadhadhfa tribe, who were loyal, well-equipped and constituted one of the main regime pillars within the military structure.\(^{40}\) Coup-proofing measures never affected this brigade, and having been set up by Khamis Gaddafi himself, went through extensive training. It is precisely for this reason that this unit was used extensively during the conflict: sent to Benghazi as early as 19 February, it also was held responsible for the assault on Misrata, and ultimately attempted the defence of Tripoli.\(^{41}\) As the military continued to lose troops to desertion, the brigade was supported by non-national militias, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa.\(^{42}\) Thanks to its privileged training, this brigade was capable of anything to save the regime, such as deliberate targeting of civilians, torturing and executing captives, and using indiscriminate weaponry such as cluster bombs and land mines.\(^{43}\)

As a force that had been consistently weakened in terms of cohesion, the Libyan military was hardly prepared for a situation which can be challenging for any armed force, namely to act against its own people.


The Libyan Military in the post-Gaddafi Era

Reconstructing the security sector, in particular the armed forces and police, became one of the major challenges after the fall of the Gaddafi regime in October 2011. Once the uprising’s objective was achieved, security fragmentation accelerated just as fast as infighting between the different factions. At the time of writing, Libya is in a process of Somalization, counting several hundred militias, an armed force in the process of reconstruction, and a central government without any authority to enforce a monopoly of violence.

The National Transitional Council (NTC), an unelected body which represented the revolution from its beginning, has lacked the legitimacy to not only reform security in the months since the last regime’s fall, it also has been incapable of bridging the serious divisions (be they regional, political or tribal) existing in society. As a result, Libya is awash with weapons as well as militias, and incapable of securing its borders or holding perpetrators of human rights accountable. NTC announcements that disarmament of the militias would begin on 21 September did not materialize, while its order to all militias to disband and disarm by 31 December was ignored altogether; so far only 60 per cent of the police forces are back at work.\(^4\) Militias are therefore proliferating in a general atmosphere of lawlessness, whereas tensions are rising all over the country. As early as November, tribal tensions near Tripoli resulted in 13 deaths; security started to implode all over the country.\(^5\) In this context, the reconstruction of the armed forces is a slow and politicized process.

The core of the new armed forces is the National Liberation Army (NLA) which emerged from the uprising largely as the collection of units that had defected from Gaddafi’s military, mostly in the East. This NLA did not comprise other militias, which preferred to co-exist rather than being integrated with the NLA during the conflict. It has been deployed several times since the regime’s fall to intervene in clashes between militias and tribes, with much success.\(^6\) The army is widely seen as an Eastern brigade rather than a national force and lacks

legitimacy because of its past history in Gaddafi’s military, and its comparatively low participation in the uprising. Presently 8,000-strong (of which 75 per cent are returnees from the former armed forces), it is busy vetting Western officers in order to be seen as a national institution and attempting to integrate militias. 47

In late December 2011, the NTC announced a plan to integrate former rebel fighters into the military, police and civilian institutions, but these plans are progressing slowly as most militias request to be integrated as whole units rather than as individuals. It is not clear how many of the militias are to be absorbed, but circulated numbers go as high as 50,000 for an armed force whose total numbers are not determined yet. A total of 100,000 militiamen have registered for further employment with the combatants’ committee. 48 In addition, the armed forces have made retraining mandatory for militia personnel, a procedure many militias reject. This is not made easier by the fact that ‘former officers typically view the thuwwar (revolutionaries) as undisciplined, uncoordinated upstarts seeking to advance their narrow agendas’. 49 At the time of writing, only smaller militias had been integrated (such as the Eastern Brigade 17 February) in the real sense of the word. Others, mainly in the East, have formerly relinquished control to the military but have neither been retrained nor dispersed within the army. The biggest challenge remain those militias that control important territories. For example, the airport of Tripoli is controlled by the Zintan militia. They demand that the government accept them as the airport’s security unit, a situation in which they would merely change their name and uniform, but not their structure or loyalty. The government, in the absence of professional military expertise, is now in the process of signing several cooperation agreements with countries such as Jordan or Turkey to retrain the militias 50 and begin the process of rebuilding the armed forces. Ironically, the new Libyan Army comprises at this stage too many officers and too few foot soldiers due to widespread desertions during the conflict.

Hampering attempts to rebuild the Army are the effects of political tensions prevailing in the country. The first fissures appeared in November, when 150 officers and non-commissioned officers decided to elect Lieutenant General Khalifa Haftar (an officer who served in the previous armed forces and had acted at some point as a rebel field commander) as the new Chief of Defense in the Eastern city of Baida.\(^1\)

Ignoring this decision, the NTC appointed Youssef al-Manqoush in December as the Chief of Defense, a decision rejected by an alliance of Eastern militias called the Coalition of Libyan Thuwar (revolutionaries) and the Cyrenaica Military Council who had proposed a list of six candidates, all hailing from the East. Instead, the council named Salah Salem al-Obeidi as its man to head the new army, a decision that was equally ignored by the NTC.\(^2\)

Manqoush, though born in Benghazi, hails from a Misratan family which makes him more acceptable to Westerners, which is probably why the NTC chose him. This power struggle has yet to be decided. Its persistence obstructs efforts to reform the security sector and disarm and disband the militias, Libya’s overall security situation remains a shaky one.

Although the military are occasionally accused of having participated in Gaddafi’s regime, a large-scale ‘De-Gaddafication’ in this process has not set in yet, or at least not yet. Although rumors initially predicted the dismissal of every officer above the rank of colonel, this seems not to be enforced so far. Significant progress in the reconstruction of the armed forces can be expected only once a legitimate central government has been elected; in the meantime, Libya has been witness to almost one year without proper security institutions. Whether a new Libyan armed force will be capable of shedding the legacy of coup-proofing and allowing for cohesion and leadership remains to be seen.

Conclusion

A study of the Libyan armed forces before and during the Libyan upheaval of 2011 shows a strong interconnectivity at the two levels of analysis: while its political place in society from 1969 onwards originally had been determined by its institutional cohesion which led

\(^{1}\)Agence France Press, ‘New Chief for Libya’s revamped national army’, 17 Nov. 2011, <www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5s2GtUw73moWubwhdFPXQ-ZouMDzg?docId=CNG.a3f2fe1bf5ddf5725a77594ecef0ea23.211>. 

to its intervention in politics, it had to be weakened institutionally in order to curtail further political involvement. The military’s ambiguous role in society was therefore reflected in its equivocal treatment by the regime which kept it outside the general Jamahiriya structure, but tinkered with its organizational features to the extent that it rendered large parts of its military useless.

As a result, the Libyan military had turned into a hollowed out pillar of the regime, incapable not only of fulfilling its tasks during the war in Chad, but also of acting against the upheaval of 2011. A large majority of the armed forces deserted, but did not join the rebel forces. The regime possessed an army without cohesion or leadership. The coup-proofing techniques and distrust of the military backfired just at the point the regime needed it most.

In a new Libya, the standing position and internal structure of the armed forces will be largely determined by the ability of the government to rein in and incorporate the militias which have become the major security actors on the ground and political power centers in their own right. Left as is, they will seek to curtail the potential and power of the armed forces. State-building or rebuilding after extreme episodes of violence in the Lebanese, Angolan and Bosnia-Herzegovina cases show clearly that these militias will constitute the biggest challenge in terms of security sector reform. While the exclusion of militias from new security forces has led in Angola to the relapse into civil war, their complete inclusion in their existing formation and hierarchy will lead solely to a change in status, but not to a change in power relations. A good example is Lebanon, where a rather symbolic amount of militias was integrated, mostly from the lowest possible ranks in order to maintain the Lebanese Armed Forces’ authority at the officer level. In other words: the right amount, and the right kind of militia has to be integrated in order to achieve the desired outcome; otherwise, their impact on state reconstruction is unequivocally negative.53

Note on Contributor

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