

**SHERINE N. EL TARABOULSI**

Email: s.eltaraboulsi.odi.org.uk

Peacebuilding in Libya

Cross-Border Transactions and the Civil Society Landscape

“ Efforts to contain and resolve conflict must employ a regional lens and take into consideration the role of cross-border transactions.”

Summary

- Cross-border transactions in North Africa support both conflict and peacebuilding. For instance, while these transactions include arms smuggling, they also include civil society exchanges that are helping to shape both the political and civic landscape in Libya.
- The emergence of complex networks across North Africa has made it impossible to effectively design an intervention without taking them into account. More multilateral and bilateral attention to civic regional transactions would help build a sustainable infrastructure for peace.
- These cross-border networks are rooted in historical and communal ties. Their strength presents an opportunity and a challenge to peacebuilding.
- Achieving peace in Libya is partly dependent on the continuity and reworking of these networks and how they manifest themselves on both sides of the borders. Regional and international actors must participate in efforts to realize a unified local vision.

Introduction

Despite the United Nations (UN) brokering of the Government of National Accord in Libya, there is no political consensus on the ground and militia groups maintain a stronghold.¹ While the implications of Libya's unrest in the region have been analyzed, little attention has been given to transactions across the Tunisian-Libyan borders beyond arms smuggling. While arms trafficking is indeed occurring, other exchanges are helping to shape the political and civic landscape in Libya. Organizations in Libya are learning lessons from Tunisia's experience with civil society engagement and political settlements. In fact, a large portion of Libya's civil society now operates out of Tunis. Thus, the structuring of political capital, defined here as investment in a particular political settlement for Libya, is undoubtedly informed both in the short and long terms by cross-border transactions. This means that the regional context is as significant as the local and international contexts when designing a peacebuilding intervention.

This brief draws on qualitative analysis that combines desk research and fieldwork in Tunisia in April 2015. As the centrality of regional and international networks unfolded, particularly related to activist and Muslim Brotherhood members, follow-up and verification interviews were conducted with respondents in the United Kingdom (in person) and in France, Turkey, and Malta (via Skype). Twenty semistructured interviews were conducted with Libyan civil society leaders based in Tunisia; Tunisian civil society leaders with activities in Libya; and Libyan youth activists in the United Kingdom, Tunisia, France, Turkey, and Malta with activities in Tunisia and Libya.

Networks and Tribal Linkages

Cross-border exchanges between Libya and Tunisia are rooted in historical and communal ties. The Jefara Region has a history of largely informal, cross-border tribal and economic exchanges between Tunisia and Libya. These exchanges flourished in the 1960s following the discovery of oil in Libya.² The Twazin tribe in Tunisia and Nwayel tribe in Libya developed a range of black market services, including exchanging money and smuggling people. The exchanges continued to expand, particularly during the UN embargo of Libya and after adoption of the 1989 Treaty Establishing the Arab Maghreb Union, which opened the borders between Tunisia and Libya. In 2010, an estimated ten thousand Libyans and Tunisians crossed the Ras Jedir border each day.³ However, following the 2011 revolutions, informal economic exchanges in the Jefara Region collapsed; trafficking across Ras Jedir became one way from Libya to Tunisia and demand shifted to mainly staples like food and medical supplies.⁴

Civic Transactions Post-2011

Between 2011 and 2015, hundreds of civil society organizations (CSOs) and initiatives emerged in Libya, but the majority have stopped operating because of the conflict or have shifted their focus to humanitarian aid.⁵ Of the 1,900 CSOs registered in Libya, 90 percent were officially registered after the 2011 uprising.⁶ Interviews conducted in Tunisia show that most CSOs have fled the conflict and are operating out of Tunis. For Libyans, starting an organization in Tunisia is difficult, but most respondents have been trying to either partner with a Tunisian organization or secure funding from international donors.

In 2015, Libyan civil society activists were facing extreme security threats. One respondent said, “Civil society activists are getting jailed, photographers are getting kidnapped, and young people are disappearing from Libya.” She estimated that “60 percent of civil society leaders and activists are operating from abroad and many pass through Tunisia.” Libyan civil society leaders now based in Tunis are benefiting from their observations of Tunisian counterparts. An association called We Love Sousse, which heads the Anna Lindh Foundation’s national network in Tunisia, has been developing linkages between civil society in Libya and Tunisia via roundtable discussions and workshops. However, the association has been facing challenges (e.g., getting Libyan workshop participants to Tunis because of insecurity in Libya and navigating the Tunisian border control, which, at times, does not allow participants in).

Some institutionalization of the lessons learned has occurred; for example, an association for Libyan judges emerged in 2012 as an offshoot of its Tunisian counterpart. According to one founder, although the association has no official headquarters in Libya, it is registered and currently focusing on the rights of judges who have become “swayed by the power dominant in the place where they operate.”⁸ For instance, a judge in the eastern part of Libya is likely to submit to the forces of the Tobruk-based government. Generally speaking, all respondents decried the lack of an independent judiciary in Libya and identified it as a main cause of the civil war.

Tunisia has a largely unified front of human rights defenders, which is lacking in Libya even though civil society exchanges are taking place. The effort is immediately inhibited by the fragmented and polarized Libyan setting; while the exchanges between Tunisia and Libya are helping sustain the civic consciousness that emerged in 2011, they are also feeding existing divisions. Human rights organizations in Libya are as divided as the country's politics; those in the east are documenting violations taking place in the west to gain the favor of the government in the east, and those in the west are doing the exact opposite.⁹

Key Tensions

Cross-border transactions are affected by myriad tensions that manifest themselves differently in each country. However, the regional dialectic that occurs as a result provides an opportunity to maintain civic capital and ease those tensions.

Civil society and political shifts. While Tunisian civil society is heavily influenced by political shifts, it has the capacity to operate in an apolitical manner. There are still cultural and grassroots organizations that do not support a particular political effort. For Libyan civil society leaders, this is not the reality. One respondent, however, described an organization she cofounded as apolitical; and when asked to describe what that meant and what politics was for her, she said that “politics for me is governmental politics... We do not side with political parties or do events for them and we do not get funding from them.”¹⁰ When probed regarding how she manages to engage young people from different political leanings, she described how civil society is a means to “give back” to Libya and that it can be a mechanism whereby young people from a divided country can be united behind one cause. She emphasized that “politics are split but the people are not” and that they should be given a chance to exercise unity. Civil society in Libya seems to be defining itself by what it is not, rather than taking up a consolidated identity.

Profit- and mission-driven goals. One respondent related that “it is all about money” and that the flood of donor funds in Libya has led to more harm than good.¹¹ Political activists became “hired” and thus attached to particular efforts instead of staying autonomous and helping establish a vision for their country. Donors, according to most respondents, are selective; certain organizations are focused on, but they are not necessarily the ones that will have the most impact on the ground.

Donor-driven activism was described as a problem. “Star-activism” impedes the coalescing of a vision needed for national unity. According to one respondent, “I have seen cases where donors would give us a call and say we have \$25,000—what projects would you like to launch?”¹² Eight to nine organizations continue to receive funding in Tripoli; the rest are not funded either because of the lack of capacity to develop proposals and applications or lack of related experience. In addition, donors are often driven by pressure to “burn” or spend money, without regard to what is happening on the ground. For example, donors agreed to fund an initiative to raise awareness around elections, but the funds arrived only three weeks before the elections and, thus, the money became useless.

Minority groups and identity politics. Minority groups in Libya have been caught in a precarious situation where they either become allies to one of the two governments or maintain a low profile to avoid polarization. Now, with many minority group members located in Tunisia, a country with a stronger and more coherent identity, the groups are exploring ways to align their identity with Libya's statebuilding project. Some Amazigh activists expressed their desire to launch a separate state, while others have committed to becoming part of a unified Libya.¹³ Within that struggle, a window of opportunity for minority groups to negotiate and assert their identity has presented itself via the civic landscape. A founder of a youth organization for Touareg described its

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Sherine N. El Taraboulsi is a research fellow for the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute and a doctoral candidate in international development at Oxford University. This brief is based on desk research and fieldwork conducted in Tunisia in April 2015 to examine the role of cross-border transactions in peacebuilding in Libya.

effort to “change the perception of Touareg as solely tribal” and learn from Tunisia’s experience to develop mechanisms that “cultivate allegiance to a state and not to neighbourhoods or tribes.”¹⁴ However, having been internally displaced after 2011 (because of supporting the Gaddafi camp), the organization is laying low politically and not openly engaging militarily. The Tebu have also embarked on establishing their identity via the creation of associations and coalitions.

Conclusion

Efforts to contain and resolve conflict must employ a regional lens and take into consideration the role of cross-border transactions. Donor money has flooded the civic space both in Libya and, subsequently, Tunisia, but resource use has not fully accounted for regional activities or the needs on the ground in Libya. Donor spending should be coordinated with various local actors to effectively support the peacebuilding process and achieve a unified vision for the country.

Notes

1. Rana Jawad, “Libya: Can Unity Government Restore Stability?” BBC News, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35959847, accessed April 14, 2016.
2. Moncef Kartas, *On the Edge? Trafficking and Insecurity at the Tunisian-Libyan Border* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2013).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. See Sherine N. El Taraboulsi, Mahi Khallaf, Ahmed Salah Eldin, Almongi Zidi, and Naila Taji Farouky, *Giving in Transition and Transitions in Giving: Philanthropic Practices in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia 2011–2013* (Cairo: John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, American University in Cairo, 2013).
6. Walid Salhi and Khalil Jibara, *Mapping and Participatory Needs Assessment of Civil Society in Libya* (Tripoli: Foundation for the Future, 2012), www.foundationforfuture.org/en/Portals/0/Publications/Mapping%20and%20Participatory%20Needs%20Assessment%20of%20Civil%20Society%20in%20Libya.pdf, accessed April 14, 2016.
7. Interview, civil society leader, Tunis, April 9, 2015.
8. Interview, former security officer, Tunis, April 17, 2015.
9. Interview, former security officer, Tunis, April 17, 2015; interview, civil society leader, April 9, 2015; and interview, civil society leader (youth), April 12, 2015.
10. Interview, Tunis, civil society leader, April 9, 2015.
11. Interview, Tunis, civil society leader, April 9, 2015.
12. Interview, Tunis, civil society leader (youth), April 12, 2015.
13. Interview, Naples, Italy, Amazigh activist, December 2014.
14. Interview, Tunis, civil society leader, April 20, 2015.



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