



Chaotic borderlands: Libya's porous borders after Qadhafi

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Porous borders

What has happened on Libya's borders in recent years? Here are some examples: During the insurgency and civil war in Mali in 2011 and 2012, weapons from Libya were reported to play a critical role for the insurgents (Ammour 2012). The terrorist group, which attacked the gas field in In-Amenas in Algeria in 2013, had probably trained in Libya (Cruickshank and Lister 2013). That was also the case



with the terrorists that targeted the coastal regions in Tunisia in 2015 (Bobin 2015). Networks from Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and other sub-Saharan states are currently active in the smuggling of migrants to Europe – and they all move through Libyan borders (U.S State Department, Trafficking in Persons Report 2013). Migrant smuggling through Libya is also increasingly connected to drug trafficking. Some West Africans pay for their transport by carrying small quantities of drugs, including both heroin and cocaine (Shaw & Mangan 2014).

Why has Libya's borders become so central to the illicit trafficking in North Africa, be it of people, weapons or drugs? One answer is Libya's geographical location: Libya is centrally located in North Africa, with a large coastline on the Mediterranean with important borders on all sides. To the east lies Egypt, Sudan in the south-east, Chad and Niger to the south, and Algeria and Tunisia to the west. But this doesn't explain everything. Many countries have long coastlines and numerous neighbouring states, without experiencing similar illicit trafficking. A more important answer is the institutional legacy of Qadhafi's regime and the effects of the NATO intervention.

Qadhafi's legacy

Under Qadhafi's regime, official security institutions were poorly equipped. Much of the security structure was set up so as to avoid a military coup against Qadhafi. He deliberately divided and fragmented the chain of command in the military in order to avoid creating a competing power base. There was no defense ministry and the various branches of the army reported directly to Qadhafi via an Interim Defense Committee. The several brigades that made up Libya's armed forces were kept in separate bases with separate communication frequencies and different chains of command to the Interim Defense Committee. To strengthen his grip on his constituency, Qadhafi gave higher pay and better equipment to brigades with kinship relations to Qadhafi's clan (Cole 2012).

The lack of clear hierarchical lines and the absence of any institutional



coordination left Qadhafi as the sole authorized decision maker. This also affected border control.

There was no centralized institution in charge of controlling Libya's borders.

Competing ministries – which did not coordinate among themselves – were in charge of different aspects of the border control. The Interior Ministry's Immigration Department was in charge of processing visas and passports. The control over customs and imports was done by the General Department for Combating Smuggling and Drugs, which was a part of the Finance Ministry. The patrolling of the maritime borders was shared between the Navy, the Naval Coast Guard, and the Interior Ministry. This led to a control over the borders, which was chaotic and disorganized. When it came to coordination with European border forces for example, all these institutions had their own independent arrangements. Because officials from the European Union knew that control over Libya's borders was decentralized and dispersed, they preferred to make separate agreements with the institutions that were in charge, rather than centralized agreements that would probably not be respected at the local level (Cole 2012).

The institution with the most responsibility for upholding domestic security and border control was the Interior Ministry. But this ministry was itself divided into regional branches operating almost autonomously from each other and from the ministry's central bureaucracy in Tripoli. Consequently, individual border posts and towns enjoyed large degrees of autonomy. Few officials outside the major cities and ports had computers, so they could not access databases for travel documents or international blacklists (European Union 2012).



Approved by the state

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were in place. It could therefore be a lucrative business to smuggle the Libyan goods over the borders. Since border control was weak to non-existent, smuggling of goods therefore became a common way of generating income. The smuggling networks transferred goods both into and out of Libya. Second hand cars from Europe, for example, arrived in large numbers at several ports, most prominently Misrata. They were either sold within Libya or driven to other markets in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are of course moral and social differences between the smuggling of cars and the smuggling of weapons or drugs. But

the fact that there were structures in place for smuggling “innocent” goods, also made it easier to smuggle other types of goods.

The human smuggling economy was also well established. This provided income to the smugglers, but was also a source of labour and even military recruits to the state. The only part of the illicit economy that the regime attempted to crack down upon, was the illicit migration to Europe through the maritime borders. This was because of pressure from the European Union and particularly Italy. Bilateral border cooperation between Libya and Italy in 2004 and 2007 led to joint maritime patrols and capacity building of the Libyan maritime institutions. In addition to security cooperation, Libya tightened its security policies by increasing the penalties levied against the smugglers and the people being smuggled. Illegal migrants and smugglers were subjected to either a 1,000 Libyan dinar fine (today around 800 USD) or indeterminate imprisonment. Migration flows from Libya to Europe therefore decreased substantially from over 37,000 in 2008 to 4,300 in 2010.

But the southern borders remained relatively uncontrolled. Smuggling remained largely in the hands of those favoured by the regime. On the southern border, migrants entered through al Wigh and Qatrun from Niger and West Africa, through a particular valley in the Tibesti Mountains from Chad, or through Kufra from Sudan and Eastern Africa. Once they were in the Libyan borderlands, migrants needed to work to supply the required funds for moving to the Libyan



northern coast, where they had to labour to pay for their journey to Europe. The illegal labour of migrants benefited the national economy by providing services to Libyan citizens (Cole 2012).

(In)Security after the NATO intervention

When NATO intervened to overthrow Qadhafi in 2011, all of these institutional arrangements were thrown into crisis. NATO intervened in Libya following a brief civil war, which began in 2011 when armed brigades in Benghazi rose up against Qadhafi. The intervention was done on the initiative of French president Nicolas Sarkozy and was initially described by NATO as a humanitarian intervention, which aimed at protecting civilians. This description may be questioned though. There is no shortage of human rights violations in the world, as Laura Nader and Robin Savinar point out in a critical investigation of how humanitarianism can be used as a pretext for war (Nader and Savinar 2016). A key Western ally such as Saudi Arabia, for example, invaded the neighbouring country of Bahrain at exactly the same time as NATO intervened in Libya, in order to help the Bahraini regime to quell a popular uprising. But this intervention by the Saudis was not met with much opposition from NATO countries. When it comes to the humanitarian rationale for the intervention in Libya, even key actors in the U.S. administration at the time were unsure about what Sarkozy's true reasons may have been (Asher-Shapiro 2016).

In March 2011, the Security Council declared a no-fly zone to protect the civilian population from aerial bombardment, calling on foreign nations to enforce it. It also specifically prohibited foreign occupation. Ignoring this, Qatar sent hundreds of troops to support the rebels, and along with France and the United Arab Emirates provided the National Transitional Council (NTC) with weaponry and training (Human Rights Watch 2012). NATO forces bombed Qadhafi's arms stock in southern Libya to weaken Qadhafi. As a result of this, Tripoli fell into the hands of the rebels and Qadhafi was found and killed in October 2011.



Libyan desert border with Egypt, signpost (Photo by [Paul Robinson](#), flickr, [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))

This had several immediate effects on border security in Libya. The attack on Qadhafi's arms stock resulted in a decentralization of the control over Qadhafi's arms and a proliferation of arms in Libya and regional countries. The terrorist group that attacked the gas field in In-Amenas in Algeria in 2013 was based and equipped in Libya, for example. This group was affiliated with Al-Qaida and was led by the Algerian Islamist Mokhtar Benmokhtar. They started their raid from the Libyan side of the border and the weapons they used originated from Libya (The Telegraph, 20.01.2013). Furthermore, the post-revolutionary government did not demobilize and disarm the revolutionary brigades after the fall of Qadhafi. This undermined state building and made it impossible for the state to keep a monopoly on violence. It facilitated the expansion of criminal and jihadist groups within Libya and the wider region. The jihadist groups were not curtailed in their activities by the state and were even able to control complete cities for some periods of time (Schnitt 2015).

Despite a significant investment of military and political capital in helping the Libyan rebels overthrow Qadhafi, international actors have done very little to support state-building in Libya after the fall of Qadhafi.



In contrast with all other cases of recent NATO military interventions, no NATO forces have remained on the ground in order to facilitate stability and security. Only a very small United Nations mission with no executive authority has led the international efforts to help stabilize the country. The United States and its NATO allies have played a very limited role. As a result, the transitional institutions have been challenged by a myriad of armed groups that have taken control over border crossing points. The interim governments that followed – the National Transitional Council (from 2011) and the Government of National Accord (from 2015) – did not manage to regain control over borders. The brigades that had been formed and armed to fight Qaddafi forces in 2011 merged into large well-organized groups that spread across the country. They moved into Libya’s central and southern borderlands, aiming to protect key infrastructures. By 2012, they had managed to formalize and legitimize their operations with the Ministry of Defense, calling themselves the Libyan Shield Forces. The Transitional Council and the Libya Shield Forces attempted to set up a “Border guard” from local groups who lacked the means, knowledge, and legitimacy to perform border control in an effective manner.

The institutional legacy of the Qadhafi regime also had an impact on the new power structures. The Interior Ministry and its Immigration Department remained in organizational disarray. Key decision makers from the old regime were removed by the new authorities, equipment was lacking, and the central and regional units did not communicate with each other (Wehrey 2013). Consequently, Libya’s borders were controlled by hybrid institutions, where both old government officials and new security actors attempted to exercise control. Since Qadhafi had been the sole power holder able to maintain the system, armed groups took advantage of the security vacuum that emerged when he was removed. Civilian fighters in Misrata took control of the seaports and the airports during the lengthy siege of their town in April 2012. Fighters from Zintan gained control of the Tripoli international airport. In the years that followed, the central authorities have never been able to fully restore control.



Uncertain future

Since the fall of Qaddafi, the borderland regions in and around Libya have become more insecure than ever. The militarization of non-state actors tore down the state's monopoly on violence, which undermined the transitional process.

The lack of reliable security institutions, the persistence of powerful local armed militias and the proliferation of weapons have so far blocked any possible progress in the state building process.

This has had heavy consequences for security in the region. A recent UN report has traced the arms trafficking from Libya and has demonstrated how weapons from Libya have reached more than a dozen countries, including Mali, Egypt and Syria. Violent incidents have become common along several borders (Boukhars 2012).

Egypt can be considered as the neighbour that is affected the most, since groups affiliated with the Islamic State control several cities on the border with Egypt. The Egypt-Libyan border is over 1,200 km long, it consists entirely of open desert and it is virtually impossible to secure. The second most affected country is Tunisia. The Tunisian authorities have responded by building walls and fences on the border and have implemented technology for monitoring border crossings (Reuters 2016). Another country that is deeply affected by the situation is Algeria, which shares a border of 1,000 km of open desert with Libya. Algeria witnessed several infiltration operations by groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda following the collapse of the Qadhafi regime. The Algerian authorities have deployed thousands of military personnel in the past few months on the Libyan borders, in order to enhance security in these areas (McGregor 2013).

For the moment, the future of the Libyan borderlands remains uncertain. The lack of effective control over these borderlands by government authorities has opened up the field for extremist organizations, terrorists, and drug traffickers, who are active mainly in the south of the country. The consequences are felt in the entire



area of the Maghreb and the Sahel, in countries which already are experiencing violence and instability.

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