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The Politics of Security and Identity in Libya's State Failure Discourse

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Abstract

In recent years, the term "state failure" has become a very popular refrain to describe and identify states that failed to provide positive outcomes and services to their populations. Libya has been defined as a failed state mainly in relation to its precarious security conditions and political instability. Although many argue that the path to peace and security for Libya starts from elections, what this approach often overlooks is the intricate interplay between the politics of governance and security and notions of political identity. Contrarily to that line, this essay argues that Libya's prolonged political and security crisis cannot be fully understood and addressed without acknowledging the central role of identity politics, and tribalism in particular, in shaping Libyan fragmented socio-political landscape. By examining concepts like identity, tribal affiliation, and heterarchy in the context of the state failure discourse in Libya, this essay will offer an original perspective on the inseparability of identity and security questions. This move will be, therefore, not only useful in reconceptualizing state failure in Libya but also in devising more contextually appropriate peacebuilding and governance strategies. Ultimately, this essay highlights that sustainable security and political stability conditions in Libya depend on the integration of identity considerations into state-building frameworks, rather than enforcing rigid and imported nation-state paradigms. This approach emphasizes the need for hybrid political orders that recognize and incorporate Libya's endemic identity pluralism.

Keywords: Identity Pluralism; Heterarchy; Peacebuilding; Tribalism; UN missions

1. Introduction

For several analysts, journalists, and politicians, the electoral process in Libya is seen as a possible way to permanently put an end to the civil conflict that has been vexing the country since the death of the Colonel Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi and the division of the political power into two main bodies, the Government of National Unity based in Tripoli and the rival Government of National Stability nominated by the House of Representatives (HoR) in Sirte. The political and social disarray of Libya often leads to the incorporation of the country in the categories of weak (Rotberg, 2003) or failed state (Di John, 2008), especially due to its lack of effective political institutions and basic security needs. Furthermore, the profound disagreements between the political and military leaders on the future of post-Qaddafi Libya, evident already in the aftermath of the Colonel's death, and the several feelings of tribal and regional belonging across the country convey the message of a profoundly divided Libya. Evidently, the scattering of its centres of political power reflect a complex socio-political configuration, which the former UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Libya and Head of the UNSMIL Abdoulaye Bathily's several attempts to organise and hold new elections could have not easily merged.

Despite the almost 15-years-long international community's involvement to stabilise the country, Libya is still suffering from poor political, economic and security conditions, and violence is still gripping the civil population and preventing the reconciliation of the parties. However, although efforts to implement a constitutional framework and a roadmap to enable the democratic transition in Libya have been conspicuous, state-building initiatives have rapidly proved to be premature and insufficient to bridge the gap between the ideal of a stable and functioning modern state and Libya's reality on the ground. It goes without saying that relying on political elections as a solution to Libya's deep-rooted conflicts has not necessarily been the most effective way of countering them. Especially when delving deeper into its geopolitical and historical context, the case of Libya appears to be one of political (dis)order and contention, whose destiny is far from being resolved by the renovation of its parliamentary and presidential seats. Other than that, according to many, the presence of tribes and clans and the existence of strong feelings of tribal and regional belonging that manifest in forms of kinship affiliation form part of the obstacles to the creation of a solid and unitary state and the establishment of functioning and shared democratic institutions.

The recent resignation of Abdoulaye Bathily as a result of the conflictual and apparently incompatible interests of Libyan institutional actors is an additional signal of the stagnant stalemate that the country is experiencing. However, drawing on a crucial reflection put forward by Prof. Jacob Mundy on the normalization of post-2011 Libya, 'this protracted interregnum – between the collapse of Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi's decrepit *Jamahiriyyah* system in 2011 and the failure of any political coalition to achieve a new hegemonic order since then – can no longer be considered just that, an interregnum (2021: 1)'. As suggested by Prof. J. Mundy, it is urgent to reflect on the unsustainability of the current political order and opportunities that come forth for the country. In accordance with this epistemic slant, the question that resonates throughout this essay aims at investigating why state-building in Libya has not functioned and offering a critical perspective on the state failure discourse and its trajectory toward state and nation-building. Appreciating the central role played by tribalism in Libyan political culture, this essay turns to the state failure discourse with dissatisfaction, as it inevitably and categorically generalises "failure" contributing to the reproduction of an incomplete and misplaced rhetoric that does nothing but perpetuate the *interregnum*.

In order to address these several points, the article will first outline the hypothesis that lies at the core of this reasoning, that is the fragility and inappropriateness of the notion of state failure

to understand the socio-political situation of Libya, especially if placed side by side with an accurate understanding of tribalism in the country. To test this hypothesis, the article will follow by taking into account the origins and legacy of tribalism in Libya, showing the heterogeneity of Libyan political culture, as well as the centrifugal tensions that prevented the emergence of a Libyan nation-state as such. Through a critical reflection on the state failure discourse, the article will then conclude with an analysis of the reasons why state-building in Libya failed and provide an original perspective on the inseparability of security and identity questions, which can be useful to envision more comprehensive state-building strategies for the country.

2. Methods

2.1 Historical Reconstruction and Critical Discourse Analysis

Historical narration, or reconstruction, as it has been defined by A. Abbott, is understood as a 'syntactic explanation of particular events' (2004: 29) and it is for this reason that this instrument represents a relevant, if not crucial, method for the analysis that will follow hereafter. In fact, it is through history that this paper integrated and contextualised concepts like tribalism, heterarchy, and political identity in order to present them not only as historically coherent but most importantly as intrinsic to the processes of society formation and construction in Libya. However, in view of the fact that it was not possible, for reasons of time and space, to extensively unravel the particularities of Libyan history, this analysis will therefore just briefly mention the most relevant and significant events that are considered to be influential to understand Libyan state failure. In particular, it will take into exam the colonial past of the country, before under the Ottoman Empire and later under Italian domination, the autocratic rule of King Idris I and the 42 years of Gaddafi's regime. Along this historical reconstruction, the analysis will emphasise the role of tribes and the indissoluble ties of kinship affiliation developed across Libya in comparison to the different leaderships' attempts at abolishing or replacing them.

If, on the one hand, the thread of historical reconstruction guided the analysis, on the other hand its engagement with the state failure discourse allowed to incorporate critical discourse analysis as a methodological strand. Generally, critical discourse analysis is conceived as a broad corpus of critical approaches to discourse analysis that focuses on the study of the relationship between discourse and the social world and especially on '[…] the role of discursive practice in the maintenance of the social world, including those social relations that involve unequal relations of power' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 63). Critical discourse analysts maintain that discourse is both constitutive of and constituted by the social world, which means that the latter, along with its embedded sets of social practices, are the products and the producers of discourse (ibid.). It follows that both discourse and the social world are reciprocally constituted and dialectically tied into a mutual relation of co-existence and co-production (ibid.). This makes the study of the social world through the lenses of critical discourse analysis an extremely powerful instrument to detect hegemonic discursive practices and power structures.

As a result, critical discourse analysis appears to be both a normative and explanatory critique as it evaluates existing realities on the basis of their compliance with the fundamental values of a "just" society and it seeks to uncover the underlying apparatus of structures of power (Fairclough, 2013). Another crucial element of critical discourse analysis is its expressively social and political stance that emerges from the critical investigation of the dynamics of power that organize and govern the social world (van Dijk, 1993). In this sense, the critical analysis of discourse aims to provide a political critique of the reproduction of the dynamics of power rooted in the system's structure (ibid.). For the purpose of this research, the discourses on state

failure will be read as grounded on the normative parameters established by examples of positive statehood, which, on the other hand, inevitably produce an elusive understanding of what a failed state is. In this sense, critical discourse analysis enables the exploration of the role of utterly political discourses in shaping ideas and perspectives on state failure, providing a critical understanding of the same, as well as accentuating the reproduction of these discourses in mainstream knowledge and existing literature on Libyan statehood.

At last, thanks to the combination of historical reconstruction and critical discourse analysis, this research investigated the extent to which the mainstream discourses on history and political modernity have ultimately had an impact on our vision and perspectives of "failed" states, particularly through the production and reproduction of certain internal and external expectations and performances. Accordingly, what this work suggests is that the permeation and proliferation of these discourses have to be intended as the consequence of the normative process of making sense of our political modernity, which ultimately emerges in the creation of categories of thought that are essentially bound to the very notion of modernity and modern state and that indirectly constitutes a modern social world. However, as this paper tried to demonstrate, such categories of thought do not always fit the reality on the ground, or are not always explicative of the state of socio-political disarray experienced by the country in analysis.

2.2 Tribalism and the Legacy of Fragmented Statehood

As F. Menaifi clearly stated, 'tribalism in Libya is a social fact' (2022: 80), and as such it represents a fundamental component of Libyan political life. The prosperity and preservation of tribalism in Libya until today have to be attributed particularly to the large dimensions of the country on the one hand and the low number of inhabitants on the other, which allowed for the emergence and establishment of distinctive tribal and regional belongings. Furthermore, historically, the regions of Cyrenaica in the East, Tripolitania in the Northwest, and Fezzan in the Southwest have always had different identities and functioned as separate entities. Under the Ottoman Empire, these areas corresponded to separate provinces and, due to the Empire's weak centralisation, also highly autonomous. As a consequence, when Italian colonisers entered Libya, what they found was not at all an administratively homogeneous territory, a condition that played in their favour in the attempt to divide the territory into different districts to avoid any endeavour of resistance and rebellion. All in all, the continuous intrusions of colonialism, from the Ottomans before and the Italians later, as well as the direct imperialism imposed in the country, prevented the emergence and formation of indigenous state institutions (Mundy, 2018).

For these reasons, when Libya became an independent country in 1951, it was not accustomed to the modalities of modern governance that envisaged a centralised, solid and unitary state. The first attempt at self-governing of Libya under the rule of King Idris I meant a return to the pre-colonial order of alliances between the monarchy and the tribes; however, the enhancement of the monarchy's power through interpersonal politics and regime-building to the detriment of institutions' independence and state-building left a notable mark on Libya's future stability. These cleavages increased under the regime of Gaddafi, who right after his military coup in 1969 outlawed the role of tribes as local legal and administrative structures and replaced former tribal politicians and officials with revolutionary councils and committees, giving birth to the *Jamahiriya* – the Arab People's Republic, usually translated as "state of the masses". However, Gaddafi's strategy toward modernisation was gradually supplanted by a return to tribal affiliations and obligations and the reintegration of tribal political leaders in light of a renovated

attention to mitigate the antagonism among tribes exacerbated by his previous political strategy and, ultimately, to strengthen his regime.

When, in February 2011, a civil war broke out in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, an anti-Gaddafi liberation movement emerged and formed a committee to rule *ad interim* in the rebel-controlled areas. In March 2011, a coalition of NATO allies intervened in favour of the rebel front and, only eight months later, declared the end of the 42 years of Gaddafi's leadership in Libya. Little we have to say on what happened next, starting from the great void of power that the controversial death of Gaddafi left in the country. After two colonial dominations, a few years of independence under a personalistic and autocratic monarchy, and Gaddafi's 42-years-long regime, Libya returned to be fragmented in different tribal and political factions, had no functioning institutions and could not count on an electoral past to guide its political transition.

2.3 The Stigma of State Failure

By the end of 2023, Libyans were supposed to be called to vote for the parliamentary and presidential elections in order to constitute new, democratic and functioning political institutions that could guarantee a bright future for Libya and its population. The ambitious project pioneered under the aegis of the United Nations with the name of UNSMIL – United Nations Support Mission in Libya – was initially only aimed at reinstating public security, protecting human rights, promoting disarmament, deradicalization and the rule of law, and supporting the process of reconciliation and transition of Libyan political authorities after the end of the civil war (UNSC, 2011). In order to do so, the enhancement of dialogue among political factions and the reintegration of the several armed groups and militias in the Libyan societal kaleidoscope was considered to be central to restoring the lost stability of the country (ibid.). However, despite the international community's several attempts at reconciliation, in the aftermath of Gaddafi's death, the already existing divisions in Libya became more polarised, to the point that two different and irreconcilable governments were created, several militias and armed groups emerged captivated by the crucial presence of oil on the territory and those radical Islamist groups that were suppressed under the rule of Gaddafi's rapidly reappeared (Kuperman, 2013; Poljarevic, 2016).

The multitude of power interests, lawlessness, lack of public security, and institutional collapse led to economic and political instability, escalating the already existing rifts (Kuperman, 2013), and, ultimately, to the failure of any attempt at reconstructing the organisational and hierarchical structure of the Libyan state, which in the eyes of many soon transformed the North-African country into a failed state (Engel, 2014; Grotenhuis, 2016; Poljarevic, 2016; Campanini, 2017; Costantini, 2017; Mundy, 2021). In recent years, the term "state failure" has become a very popular refrain to describe and identify a specific category of states, those that failed to provide positive outcomes and services to their populations (Zartman, 1995; Rotberg, 2002). However, in so doing, the discourse of state failure instills an urge to fix all those "failed" states whose empirical reality is distant from the positive outcomes of a functioning state (see Eriksen, 2011), or at least promptly intervene before they sink. For example, the international community's effort to stabilise the situation in Libya, the several extensions of the UNSMIL throughout the years and, to a certain degree, the intervention of NATO in 2011 itself, could be understood as attempts to fill the gap between the model of a functioning state and its Libyan version, yet never completely succeeding.

2.4 Critical Perspectives on the State Failure Discourse

The attempt to crystallise an overarching, inclusive, and precise definition of the notion of state failure is an inevitably deceptive one for 'states can fail in a variety of ways, and from a variety of causes' (Goldstone, 2008: 285). Current knowledge of state failure identifies a number of reasons, conditions, and pathways that lead states to fail and, simultaneously, acknowledges that each country is a different entity with their own specific characteristics (ibid.). In this sense, definitions of failed states range from states that 'are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants' (Rotberg, 2003: 1) to states 'that have lost *both* effectiveness and legitimacy' (Goldstone, 2008: 286), to states that are unable 'to assert [their] control over a territory and thereby [their] capacity to impose the monopoly of violence within the borders of that territory' (Poljarevic, 2016: 66).

If generally intended as the incapability of a state to provide positive outcomes (Rotberg, 2002) and the absence of territorial control, popular support and legitimacy of any of the sides involved in the conflict, the notion of state failure bursts, directly or indirectly, in a number of descriptions and reconstructions of the situation in Libya (Rotberg, 2002; Engel, 2014; Grotenhuis, 2016; Poljarevic, 2016; Campanini, 2017; Costantini, 2017; Mundy, 2021). With its failed revolution in 2011, Libya entered a phase of prolonged civil war that jeopardised the existing ethnic, ideological, tribal and geographical divisions (Engel, 2014), and endangered its ability to control its territory (Rotberg, 2003), which soon allowed for the proliferation of illegal activities and the traffic of arms, drug, human and organs across the country's porous borders.

What has captured more and more attention is the preemptive individuation of all those characteristics and early warnings that would usually lead a state to fail or even collapse. In fact, the prevention of state failure, and of all those pernicious perturbations that it would cause on neighbouring countries, is a matter of interest in academia. The attention to studying the factors that at some point prevent a state from 'perform[ing] its core Weberian functions' (Di John, 2018: 2) developed precisely in light of the rupture that the failure of states represents within the international system and, therefore, from the need to prevent their malfunction and avoid possible enlargement to neighbouring countries (Rotberg, 2003; Di John, 2018). From this perspective, then, the state failure discourse and the models of positive statehood that are established alongside it do nothing but construct normative parameters within which a state must situate in order not to be considered failed (Eriksen, 2011). In turn, a failed state necessarily deviates from the model, and therefore 'appear[s] as a lack' (ibid.: 233). In the case of Libya, its precarious security conditions and serious political and economic instability contributed to the country's divergence from such normative parameters, increasing the gap with the performing practices of other functioning and more stable states and inevitably intensifying the state failure discourse.

Although the aim of this essay is not to provide an innovative and positive definition of "failed state", one that could describe it for what it actually is and not for what it is lacking, it is still necessary to address the discourse around state failure in order to emphasise the extent to which this notion is essentially constructed on, dependent, and informed by the definition of state. It is commonly understood nowadays that any definition of failed state will necessarily be subordinate to a previous ascertainment of what the state is, therefore implying that state failure is indeed a very elusive and ephemeral concept. However, given that theories on statehood and state formation are prevented from providing a shared and objective definition of state, the criteria to describe state failure essentially depend on which definition of state we want to accept. This aspect opens up to several other considerations, particularly regarding the enlargement of the notion of state failure in order to aggregate diverse states under the same

definition. All in all, that of failed state remains a fictional category of thought, a legal illusion that relies on overarching definitions of failure, as well as a permissive pretext to justify external interventions to fix such failure.

3. Results

This section delineates the key findings derived from an analysis of Libya's complex political landscape, shaped by both historical and contemporary factors. Drawing on a dual methodological approach that considers the persistent effects of colonial history, tribal social structures, and the ongoing challenges of state-building, the results explore how deeply entrenched tribal affiliations continue to influence political stability and social cohesion.

3.1 Political Order in Libya: the Modern State Put to the Test of Tribalism

Despite the several regime changes that occurred in Libya since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the 'comprehensive and flexible cultural system' (Hüsken, 2013: 216) of tribes in Libya never disappeared. On the contrary, as we have already mentioned above, during the last years of Gaddafi's regime, tribalism became a fundamental source of legitimacy and social values and played a central role in social organisation (Obeidi, 2001: 108-135). On the other hand, 'Libya's post-uprising period has proved that the idea of the state has not yet taken root within Libyan society' (Menaifi, 2022: 80). In fact, the strong feelings of kinship affiliation, typical of tribalism, were never replaced by the kind of civic allegiance that develops within a nation-state (Poljarevic, 2016). As a consequence, tribes appear to be a crucial source of individual identification in Libyan society (Obeidi, 2001: 108-135). Especially after the death of Gaddafi, the elusive substance of Libyan identity became the main reason for fractionality among tribes, followed by the emergence of local and regional interests, both of them working as centrifugal forces in the promotion of a collective perception of the nation-state (Campanini, 2017).

When it comes to the cohabitation of tribal structures and modern state-building, 'the tribe can destroy the state whenever it plays a political role that prioritizes tribal interests over state interests' (Menaifi, 2022: 80). Although the presence of tribes is seen by many as counterproductive to the establishment of a modern state in Weberian terms (see Ben Khayal, 2023), as T. Hüsken noted, 'the interrelation between states and tribes in North Africa is far more complex than this and goes beyond the perspective of antagonism and conflict' (2013: 218). From this viewpoint, to efficiently grasp what happens to the field of politics in Libya before and beyond the state necessarily means to take a distance from perspectives grounded on the modern state and approach the notion of "heterarchy". In total opposition to state-centrism, heterarchy refers to 'the plurality of competing power foci […] and the mutable intertwining of state and non-state actors' (Hüsken, 2013: 214). In other words, to say that the multiplicity of entities that participate in Libyan political life act in the form of heterarchy means to address the particular political composition of the country from a positive instead of a negative perspective (Hüsken & Klute, 2017). From this angle, then, in spite of the several accounts of Libya as a failed state emerging from a failed revolution, civil war and political unrest, the political field comes to be understood as continuously filled with the production of political orders, albeit on the local and regional levels (ibid.).

4. Discussion

4.1 2023 Libyan Elections: A Way Out of State Failure?

One way that has been pursued in the case of Libya to reestablish its legitimacy after the civil war has been that of state-building through the recourse to democratic elections and the pledge to national unity, directly supported by the United Nations and the international community. In

light of the rapid jeopardization of the Libyan question, especially in terms of increased human and arms trafficking, sociopolitical instability enhanced by the increased violence and the presence of Al-Qaeda cells, illegal migration and export of oil, soon after its creation, UNSMIL took the mantle of deepening the process of state-building by re-establishing unified and shared institutions, assisting the electoral process, and the drafting of a new constitution (UNSC, 2012; UNSC, 2014). Over the years, and as a consequence of the crystallisation of the ever-more distant positions of the political factions, the UNSMIL mandate's aim of supporting the dialogue among Libyan political factions transformed into the search for a sustainable compromise between the UN-recognised *interim* Government of National Unity in Tripoli, led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah and which controls the westernmost belt of Libya, and the Government of National Stability in Sirte, headed by *interim* Prime Minister Osama Hamada, which extends its authority from the East to the more central areas of the country and is backed up by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) under the guide of the former General Khalifa Haftar.

Yet, that of democratic institutions soon proved to be a premature and disappointing path to pursue when in July 2012, right after the downfall of Gaddafi, the winning moderate and secular government of Mustafa Abu Shagur was displaced one month after the elections with a vote of no-confidence from the parliament (Al Jazeera, 2012). Over the years, the electoral question has always been a problematic issue for Libya due to the several votes of no-confidence, postponements, disagreements on the elections' rules, and major regional rivalries (Al Jazeera, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2023). Similarly to what happened in 2012, the parliamentary and presidential elections planned for December 2018 were postponed to December 2021 and later to December 2023, structurally damaging the legitimacy and effectiveness of Libyan institutions. In fact, disputes over the elections not only prevented the formation of a solid Libyan state but radically precluded the realisation of the type of state-building prompted by the United Nations in accordance with the design of UNSMIL. Furthermore, the delay in elections worsened economic insecurity, heightened political instability, risked renewed conflict, and raised the specter of partition (UN Secretary-General, 2023), substantially undermining the peace project and increasing the legitimacy crisis between the two governments.

On the other hand, despite the huge inconvenience of continuous postponements, the electoral question is a very divisive and controversial one. In fact, if, on the one hand, having elections could effectively raise perceptions of legitimacy and justice, it may also not necessarily be the best way to increase the country's effectiveness in implementing decisions which could be crucial for the stabilization of the regime (Goldstone, 2008). In this sense, when in February 2023 the former UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Libya and Head of the UNSMIL Abdoulaye Bathily encouraged the 'launch of an initiative aimed at enabling the organization and holding of [Libya's] presidential and legislative elections in 2023' (UNSC, 2023), the legitimacy issue had clearly acquired a priority position. Abdoulaye Bathily's plan was to bring together several influential personalities and find a shared and mutually agreed solution to Libya's political *impasse*, hopefully aiming at the participation of all relevant Libyan actors in the political arena. Although definitely an ambitious one, for the first time the project allowed major Libyan personalities, including heads of political institutions and civil society organizations, tribal leaders, security officials, and women and youth representatives to gather all together and find a long-term compromise. In this scenario, the African Union and the High-Level Committee on Libya had a central role in the promotion of national reconciliation and unity in Libya 'through an inclusive national reconciliation process, to foster political and social cohesion' (AU, 2024).

However, on the eve of the 2023 Libyan parliamentary and presidential elections, some challenges were still to be overcome. In this sense, one of the main frictions between the two governments has always been the electoral law, on which a compromise was eventually found in late 2023. More specifically, the main rupture between the two sides has to be found in the determination of the eligibility criteria for the presidential candidates, who, according to Tripoli's representatives, should renounce their dual citizenship and any military role. The incompatibility of public and military positions, in fact, is one of the crucial principles that the Tripoli government does not want to renounce, especially to avert the possible rise of another military leader in the wake of Colonel Gaddafi's experience. In addition to this, the absence of a clear roadmap toward the voting process prevents the planning of several intermediate steps before the holding of democratic elections, in the same way as the lack of a solid constitutional and legal framework hinders any attempt at reestablishing the legitimacy of Libyan political institutions. By the same token, Libyan institutions' legitimacy rests also on the restoration of public services to the population, the reconstruction of a security apparatus in disarray, and the installation of effective executive institutions. If these main questions are not resolved, it is unrealistic to expect a reconciliation between Tripoli and Sirte.

4.2 Questions of Identity Beyond Libyan State-Building

Evidently, the disputes and disagreements between the two governments surround a much more complex picture that concerns the hierarchical organization of power in the country and the coexistence of local groups and tribes with the state. The role of tribes in modern states has been extensively studied with the aim of investigating the relationship between tribal and national identity (Obeidi, 2001; Campanini, 2017; Poljarevic, 2016), as well as the former's perpetuity in time despite the existence or formation of a hierarchical state structure (Hweio, 2012; Hüsken, 2013; Mundy, 2018; Menaifi, 2022; Ben Khayal, 2023). Throughout this essay, the case of Libya has been representative of the permeation and distention of tribalism into society, to such an extent that it functions as a strong identitarian criterion. If, on the one hand, Libyan society is composed of several diverse tribes, on the other hand, it is not characterised by major ethnic-demographic disparities, its population is largely homogeneous and composed of a majority of Sunni Muslim Arabs, 4-10% of Berbers Amazigh and <1% of Tuareg (Minority Rights Group, 2024). This makes tribal identity the major factor of determination of Libyans identity, inevitably undermining the existence of a national identitarian criterion.

In addition, the case of Libya has proved to be particularly explicative of tribalism's perdurance over time, as well as of its resistance to the establishment of the modern nation-state (Hweio, 2012; Hüsken, 2013; Mundy, 2018; Menaifi, 2022; Ben Khayal, 2023). In particular, the multiplicity of centres of power, especially tribal, Islamist or state-like entities shaped Libyan political culture toward what has been called "heterarchy", to the extent that the incorporation and interrelation of the same into the modern state did not cease them to exist (Hüsken, 2013). If to this we also add that the notion of "failed state" is necessarily determined by what a state is, any depiction of state failure is contingent on the definition we want to attribute to the state and therefore the absence of a unitary centre of power could be considered a symptom of state failure as well as a characteristic feature of an heterarchical political system. In the attempt to circumnavigate the deceptive notion of "state failure", as well as respond to the unsuccessful policies of the United Nations and international community in the country, deeper attention should be given to the centrality of tribalism in the construction of political orders other than the state.

Although the aim of this essay is not to suggest that the rise of a tribal order in Libya should be the only accepted path to the political transition of the country, the extent to which tribes in

Libya play the fundamental role of centres of power, socialising catalysts, and sources of political order should not be underestimated. In this sense, then, accounts describing Libya as a failed state should not ignore that 'the crisis of the state in Northwest Africa is indeed "the local" that becomes a prior place where political order is generated' (Hüsken & Klute, 2017: 89). As a result, any attempt at state-building in Libya should necessarily need to take into account the particular constellation of the diverse political centres, tribal identities and power orders.

On the other hand, being tribes the typical conformation of Libyan society and a major identitarian criterion, and precisely because 'it seems impossible to define the state apart from "society"' (Wendt, 1999: 199), state-building and nation-building seem to be inseparable to the extent that the creation of the state needs to be sustained by the creation of the nation. Yet the case of nation-states' formation in Europe is exemplificative of the fact that, for state and nation-building to take their course, it is first and foremost necessary to build a national identity. In fact, taking from a more constructivist perspective here, the formation of national identity is not a natural development of human history but rather it is a cultural artefact which took its transformations, meanings, and influences along with the untangling of history (see Anderson, 1983). In Anderson's words, then, it follows that the nation is nothing more than 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (1983: 6) and as such a notion constructed and altered in order to encompass the identity of a certain political community (see Grotenhuis, 2016). To the extent that national identity is already a cultural construction and a historical artefact, revolving around the creation of a unitary identity for Libyan people would mean taking that artefact to the extreme. Instead, Libyan national identity could precisely be condensed in the multiplicity of its tribal identities, simultaneously being many and none.

Although, then, processes of state and nation-building should be concomitant, state-building initiatives in Libya were not backed by similar efforts to work toward nation-building in the construction of a proper Libyan national identity to the extent that '[t]he relationship between the central government and local authorities […] has remained imbalanced' (Costantini, 2017: 155). Especially from the early 2000s, the insistence of donors on avoiding the enlargement of conflicts and threats by preventing states from failing was such that nation-state building rapidly transformed into the safeguarding and reconstruction of economic and political institutions, and lesser attention was paid to issues of identity. The marginalization of the latter, however, is nothing less than problematic, making it a critical hurdle in the successful implementation of those same UN-led state-building missions (Grotenhuis, 2016). In this light, then, the attempts of UNSMIL and the international community to build a solid and unitary state in Libya seem to be somewhat conflicting with Libyan political realities on the ground, raising questions of identity and legitimacy.

5. Conclusion

More than a decade later, Libya is still under the grip of persisting political, security, and societal disarray. While it would be quite easy to draw the causes back to the missed opportunities in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution and regime change, questions remain open on what should have been done differently. With an eye to the past and one to the present, this essay suggested the need to problematise the attempts at state-building in Libya in view of their incompleteness. If, in the early 2000s, a solid consensus was established on the importance of state-building for conflict-affected countries, this model would soon prove to be more of a problem than a solution. Furthermore, precisely for being the first application of the Responsibility to Protect under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, what several authors condemn in the case of Libya is the absence of a concrete and feasible project to rebuild the country after

the intervention. In this sense, then, more than a decade later, it is not surprising that many refer to Libya as a failed attempt at state-building. However, although similar considerations on Libya's failure are surely not new, this essay raised questions of identity to the picture.

The case of Libya could be compared to a 'semifictional overlay of institutions that [mask] the continuance or development of other more protean forms of social organization' (Brooks, 2005: 1174). In fact, the coexistence and perdurance of tribes and the state illustrate the extent to which the role of tribes in Libya is indeed central to state formation. The tribal component underlying the socio-political structure of the country strongly prevents the emergence of a central authority and destabilises the already eroded hierarchical state architecture. In this sense, the existence of tribes and their centrality in Libyan political culture is seen as a centrifugal and decentralising force, pushing for an ever-more heterarchical, instead of hierarchical, structuring of political life. On that note, what this essay emphasised as the major reason why state-building in Libya has not functioned is the insufficient consideration of already existing Libyan political, social and identitarian structures and orders, whose major example is tribalism. It is not surprising then that the international community's pressures to put an end to the decade-long political *impasse* have so far proved ineffective and incompatible with the country's socio-political conformation and needs. On top of that, the rush to elections appears to be not only premature but also clashes with the political and identitarian substructure of the country.

In this sense, in order to have a wider perspective on Libya's socio-political fragmentation, further questions that could prompt future research regard precisely the causes of such fragmentation, which on the one hand is the outcome of the colonial necessity to identify and impose geometrical borders to the country and, on the other hand, is interesting in terms of further analyses of borderless and stateless political communities. Similar lines of thought could then stimulate research on the extent to which the panopticon of the state is able to prevail over such stateless political realities, or on where the state begins and ends both in terms of territorial boundedness and socio-political performances.

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