

## Book review: Wolfram Lacher & Virginie Collombier (eds.). (2023). *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*<sup>12</sup>

András Málnássy<sup>3</sup>

Violence has transformed Libyan society in many ways since the 2011 Arab Spring-inspired uprising. The collapse of the Libyan government's use of violence has had far-reaching implications on all aspects of social relations. The authors of 'Violence and Social Transformation in Libya', a valuable and informative book, assert that acute violent conflict has shaped new political identities, drawn deep societal rifts between and within regions and communities, propelled the rise of new elites, and remade gender relations and generational hierarchies.

The changes Libyan society has undergone over the past decade prompt the book's main question, whether violent conflict deeply transforms social relations in Libya. The answer is that unambiguous, long-standing violent conflict has far-reaching implications for society. The use and threat of violence create new social relations, transforming loyalties, hierarchies, group boundaries, and identities. At the same time, according to the findings of the research, the transformation of social relations during conflict can help reveal the power relations that held the pre-war social order. Furthermore, the authors pose the question: how can a decade of violent conflict and weakened central authority transform a society, and what insights can we draw from the Libyan experience to answer this question? The purpose of this meaningful book is to analyze the transformations that Libyan society has undergone since 2011.

In Libya since 2011, alliances and enmities have changed dramatically from one phase of the conflict to the next. Since 2011, the state's monopoly on violence has dissolved, leading to relative stability in some localities, prolonged insecurity in others, and the violent rise of armed local actors seeking to establish control in others. Examining the overall links between violence and social change in a specific conflict reveals various types of effects. Violence features in this research: both the changing distribution of control over the means of violence and the violent conflict between protagonists competing for power. The research concludes that the collapse of a monopoly on violence provokes a re-ordering across domains ranging from social capital or the religious sphere to identity politics. The authors identify three distinct types of effects in violent conflict that transform social relations.

The collapse of a particular distribution of control over the means of violence enables

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<sup>3</sup> PhD-candidate at the Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences, Óbuda University, Hungary; ORCID: 0000-0002-3196-4967; malnassy.andras@gmail.com



change across a wide range of domains, including political and religious discourse. The other aspect is that the use or threat of violence alters social relations. Violence serves the immediate purpose of establishing and maintaining a new order. The third effect is that, in some cases, violence can foster social change. Changes in the distribution of control over the means of violence render social transformation across a wide range of domains. The use of violence creates and maintains new social relations in ways that are both temporary and irreversible, and these developments have second-order effects that lead to further social change. These effects, mentioned above, interact with each other, so tracing them requires close and complex observation, which this research has completely fulfilled.

Emadeddin Badi posited that socialization through violence within the context of a popular revolution differs significantly from socialization through an ongoing civil war. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Libya witnessed an unprecedented opening of its civic space and the holding of democratic elections, giving youth a voice in shaping their future and preferred governance blueprints. This reduced the incentive for this generation to retain its presence in the militarized space that became the revolution's legacy. The conflict not only disillusioned many young people with the revolution they had spearheaded; the unfolding violence also socialized an even younger generation. Since then, they are contending with institutional crackdowns on the civic space. The mediums for self-expression that were available to their older counterparts are no longer available to them.

Rima Ibrahim indicated that the 2011 revolution opened a field for women to engage in political and civil activism that had previously been impossible. It also enabled women to enter the public sphere for exercise. However, women's irruption into the public sphere rapidly brought about a backlash. Following the revolution, the political sphere excluded women, prompting calls to restrict their role to the private sphere. Women's exclusion from leadership and policy-making positions necessitated their increased participation in the social and economic arena. Women have ventured into previously male-only professions and established home-based businesses. Women have had to contend with the interplay of two key factors: insecurity and mechanisms of social control, whose severity has increased since 2011 due to security fears. The author emphasized that family-related fears have sustained efforts to enforce gender segregation and confine women to private spaces, and the growing influence of hardline religious currents since 2011 has compounded social control. Worsening economic conditions pushed women to take on new roles as they sought to seize the opportunities presented by the 2011 revolution. At the same time, opportunities for political and military mobilization led to the rise of armed groups and hardline religious actors who countered women's attempts to claim new roles.

Conflict has completely transformed Benghazi, as Mary Fitzgerald discovered in her research. The 2014–18 war's social and economic dynamics not only upended the previous status quo but also sparked the emergence of new identities among most Benghazi residents and those who opposed the operation and faced expulsion.

According to the author, certain narratives of the conflict, including those that reinforce a regionalist sentiment bordering on separatism, appear to have shaped a more brittle sense of identity among the city's younger generation. Future generations are likely to echo down the new social and economic realities shaped by the war and now deeply embedded in the city's fabric.

Virginie Collombier and Misbah Omar's chapter has sought to unpack both the social origins and the consequences for society of the violence that accompanied that conflict. Unresolved questions over political order in the post-Qadhafi era, particularly over security sector governance, sparked the war, along with debates about the redeemability of the old system. The subsequent rise of radicalism on both sides resulted in a weaponisation of social divides. Violent incidents were rarely pre-planned or deliberately contrived. Aggressive actors, who had previously held inconsistent grievances, seized upon violent incidents once they occurred. It became easier for these actors to advance a simpler, clearer, and more motivating narrative, orchestrating a new violence offensive that almost always rested on a new interpretation of the past. According to the author, the immediate origins of this spiral lie in the assassinations led by radical Islamists in 2012 and 2013. Operation Dignity did a lot to intensify this social violence by harnessing it via tribal and neighborhood paramilitary forces.

Wolfram Lacher clearly concluded that fundamental aspects of Libya's public sector remained constant beyond Qadhafi's demise. State employment continued to provide the raw material with which to build patronage networks, while considerations of productivity and the actual need for employees remained secondary. Many public servants continued to supplement their salaries by moonlighting in the formal and informal private sectors. After 2011, the bureaucracy's cogs remained largely unchanged, allowing one to benefit from their prior expertise in manipulating them. The vanishing of the central arbiter in patronage distribution triggered momentous changes. Local armed groups and civil servants within their spheres of influence formed patron-client relationships, while lower-level bureaucrats without clear links to armed actors established these relationships. In most cases, the insecurity of Libya's rapidly changing military landscape made it difficult for them to consolidate.

Christopher Thornton highlighted that in 2014, the international community sought to establish functioning elected institutions through the House of Representatives (HoR). This overlooked the fact that the HoR had limited political authority and was merely one political actor among many. The mediation process that produced the Libyan Political Agreement grew out of this approach. This process failed to reflect the distribution of power within Libyan society. Consequently, it was not implementable in eastern Libya and produced negative externalities in western Libya by forcing the new political authorities into a subservient relationship with militias in the capital. During the period between 2016 and 2019, the international community was frustrated with the fragmentation of Libyan society and desperately wanted a simpler solution, so it advanced the prospects of a bilateral deal between Fayeze al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar. However, this approach overlooked the fact that Sarraj was a weak leader and that



Haftar had no interest in a political settlement.

Millions of Libyans fled their homes in the decade after the collapse of the Qadhafi regime in the autumn of 2011. At least 300,000 Libyans sought refuge in Tunisia, and by 2022, reports indicated that a million were residing in Egypt. The country internally displaced around 1,400,000 people in various locations. Thousands of Libyans died as a result of military operations; for instance, airstrikes alone took 1,100 lives between 2012 and 2022. The book illustrates very well that the disintegration of central authority is an important feature of Libya's experience of violence. In the Libyan civil war, there are not two sides but many contestants—some groups hoping to command the public administration, some aspiring to build new political structures. The research demonstrates that Libyan youth are vulnerable to the consequences of decades of conflict, political instability, poor governance, and violence. The most severe problem is that unemployment, poor quality education, and youth exclusion, on the one hand, put young people at risk of recruitment into violent groups and illicit activities, while militias, on the other hand, appeal to them in terms of income, power, and security.