Libya 2013: Cyrenaica and Possible Autonomy
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Abbreviations
AFRICOM – Africa Command
AGOCO - The Arabian Gulf Oil Company
CTC – Cyrenaica Transitional Council
GNC – General National Congress (of Libya)
LSF – Libyan Shield Force22
NTC – National Transitional Council
NOC – National Oil Corporation
SCC – Supreme Security Committee
Executive Summary

The issue of Cyrenaica succeeding from the State of Libya was brought to a head on March 6th 2012 with the creation of the Cyrenaica Transitional Council headed by Ahmed Zubayr al-Sanussi. Initially an increase in the 60 seats given to them by the GNC was demanded. However, over time the CTC grew into a federalist movement demanding more devolved powers citing Tripoli’s neglect of the region. 1 While the CTC lacked a popular mandate, the mantle has been taken up again by the Political Bureau of Cyrenaica, which is threatening to use force in order to gain more autonomy from Tripoli. 2 Considering that 80% of the country’s oil reserves are located in Cyrenaica, it is critical that Tripoli maintains the province in order to fund its new army and government as well as help professionalize the militias under its control. With increasing calls for more security Al-Zeidan has started to clamp down on militias. However, with plans to use NATO resources to train Libya’s army, this is unlikely to be done in the near future. 4 While historically the claim for a separate state makes sense there are now too many conflicting interests, with the power being held mainly by a few militia groups with their own separate mandates. Ultimately while the security situation may worsen, the economic value of the region coupled with its fragmented population makes independence of Cyrenaica unlikely.

Background

Since Roman times, Libya has been divided into three distinct provinces: Tripolitania in the West, Cyrenaica in the East, and Fezzan in the South. These distinctions are largely predicated upon geographical boundaries that separate the regions from each other. Historically, Cyrenaica has been the most hostile towards foreign invaders, including the Ottomans (1515-1911) and the Italians (1911-1943), which continues to provide a certain pride in the region. 5 In 1949, allies expelled the Italian forces and in 1951, Libya became an independent country under the rule of King Idris al-Sanusi of the Senussi monarchy, which has its stronghold in Cyrenaica. 6 Under his rule, the country was run along federal lines with considerable power devolved to its three historic regions. Following the 1969 coup by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, however, power was largely centralised in Tripoli. Subsequently, Cyrenaica suffered under political

5 U, Holm. ‘Libya in transition: the fragile and insecure relation between the local, the national and the regional’, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2013.
6 Ibid.
and economical marginalization by the central government.\(^7\) The feeling of neglect was especially based on the perception that their share of political influence did not correspond to their contribution to economic output: Cyrenaica contains 80% of Libya’s proven oil reserves, three of the country’s four oil refineries and three main ports.\(^8\) Considering the political marginalization, it is understandable that the revolt that toppled Colonel Gaddafi started in the main city of Cyrenaica, Benghazi, before spreading to the rest of the country.\(^9\)

While it is possible to identify distinct differences between the three historic provinces of Libya, they all suffer from deep societal fragmentation. The political culture of Libya is thus comprised of overlapping tribal, religious and ethnic identities with different interests and conceptions of power and legitimacy.\(^10\) Cyrenaica, a region of merely 1.6 million inhabitants, is thus home to several hundred tribes, many of which have branches in other regions of Libya.\(^11\) Consequently, there has been divided reactions to the unilateral action by delegates of the March 6 Barqa Conference to declare Cyrenaica an autonomous region. Powerful local militias, such as the Union of Revolutionary Brigades, and the Muslim Brotherhood have declined to offer their support, calling it the work of narrow-based and personal interests.\(^12\)

## Responses by Neighbouring Countries

Libya’s neighbouring countries are concerned with the stability of the country as the proliferation of terrorism and local conflicts threaten to spread across its borders. With regards to the unilateral declaration of autonomy in Cyrenaica, however, they generally refrain from expressing biased opinions on Libya’s internal strives. Rather, official statements show sentiments of good will and wishes for societal cohesion.

During Zeidan’s visit to Jordan and his meeting with King Abdullah II, the following was cited:

“King Abdullah II of Jordan stressed that he also underscored the importance of boosting the unity and cohesion of the Libyan people as well as their endeavours to shore up democracy and national dialogue and to rebuild their country and institutions,”\(^13\).

In Morocco, King Mohammad VI stated that: “Morocco was following ‘with great interest’ the ongoing political transition in Libya and was willing to help wherever it could”\(^14\)

The Arab League has not issued an official statement so far with respect to Cyrenaica secession, however, Egyptian statesman, Mahmud Pasha Azmi is said to have stated that “the 1951 Constitution was superior to contemporaneous constitutions”\(^15\). Egypt is however is unable or unwilling to make a political position

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\(^10\) Ibid. p.26


on or contribution to the Libyan revolution other than to maintain border security and control due to its own security issues.

In Tunisia, the two sides are called to “protect each other’s revolution,” Larayedh said. They also looked at regional security challenges and the need to strengthen cooperation between North Africa and the Sahel states (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan) so as to ensure stability. A more active and enhanced role for the Arab Maghreb Union was also agreed – a development earlier approved by Morocco during Zeidan’s talks in Rabat\[16\]

Interestingly, however, on one of Aljazeera’s popular political talk shows: The Opposite Direction, those interviewed from academia to discuss the Libyan revolution, Khaled Alwarfali and Omar bin Kifah, stated that: “It was/is a peaceful revolution toward political transition” and that “there were no calls for secession in Libya only mere expressions of the desire to build a system/ regime that brings about stability and security for the country, as a whole, justice and rule of law”.

“While there are (22) million pieces of weaponry scattered about and around the country in the hands of militias, tribes and civilians, there are no major front line clashes in the country, with the exception of a few minor ones here and there. And although Gaddafi’s regime was bad, it has now become worse with the outbreak of violence and instability across the country, many nowadays long for Gaddafi reign\[17\].”

The general standpoint of Arab and Middle Eastern countries is that they are ready to support the Libyan government on matters of security and border control. Issues of trafficking and terrorism, which have become more significant since the revolution, are being monitored closely by surrounding countries.

**Reintegration of Militias**

Since the fall of Gaddafi in October 2011, militias under control of the Libyan Government have controlled many of Libya’s cities.\[18\] Since the end of the revolution, it is estimated that 300 separate militias are present in the country.\[19\] The Gaddafi regime’s previous neglect of the military and the police has left them ill-equipped and unable to respond to the rising influence of the militias.\[20\] The militias initially refused to hand over their weapons realising much of the power they had earned in the war would be lost to the interim government.\[21\] The NTC in response created the Libyan Shield Force (LSF) and the Supreme Security Committee (SCC) in order to harness the power of the militia under the remit of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence.\[22\] Providing certain militias with authority, however, has escalated the violence between these militias and tribes previously loyal to Gaddafi.\[23\] Ceding power to these groups has led to sectarian divides between Salafists and Sufis as well as extra-judicial killings.\[24\]

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\[17\] Aljazeera talk show: The opposite Direction, ‘Where is Libya heading’, 26\(^{th}\) December 2013, http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/f7ae37d7-a200-46b6-a305-2db19e02d5f6 (accessed: 05/12/13)


\[20\] Ibid.


\[23\] Ibid.

\[24\] Ibid.
The kidnapping of PM Ali Zaiden by the LSF in October 2013 is an example of this growing abuse of power.\textsuperscript{25} Though directly accountable to the National Security Committee the group has been involved in fighting with rival militias and civilians. The killing of an estimated 40 residents during an anti-militia demonstration resulted in a three-day general strike in Tripoli. Subsequently, militias, including the Ghardour Brigade and elements of the Libya Shield Force, have been expelled from Misrata.\textsuperscript{26} In Benghazi the Salafist Ansar Al-Sharia militia clashed with the Libyan Special Forces on the 25\textsuperscript{th} November 2013 killing 9 people and injuring 49.\textsuperscript{27} Local residents who had burnt out the Ansar Al-Sharia headquarters had demanded a return of the police and army to take control of the security of the city.\textsuperscript{28} This fighting came a day after PM Ali Zaiden made pledges to integrate the militias into the armed forces.\textsuperscript{29}

Initial attempts by AFRICOM to train a counter-terrorism force failed after militias stole vital equipment.\textsuperscript{30} NATO has since implemented plans to train Libya’s army outside of the country in Turkey, Bulgaria, Italy and the UK.\textsuperscript{31} Libya’s security forces are currently too fragmented and partisan to ensure the safety of its civilians. The new army would aim to unite Libyans.\textsuperscript{32} Pay for the standing army has increased in order to entice militias to integrate by the 31\textsuperscript{st} December deadline.\textsuperscript{33} However, in the east of the country, militias are reluctant to hand over their weapons citing distrust of the central government. Al Zaiden has brought into action Law 57 banning militias from the city of Benghazi.\textsuperscript{34} This may be met with more opposition than when militias were evicted from Tripoli using Law 27.\textsuperscript{35} There is little indication yet, however, whether the militias under the control of Ibrahim Jedhran, the leader of the new Political Bureau of Cyrenaica, will leave before the deadline.\textsuperscript{36} Initially, given the control of the Petroleum Facilities Guard numbering roughly 17,000 troops by the government, Ibrahim Jedhran has used the militias to threaten to cut off Libya’s oil supplies.\textsuperscript{37} Violence has continued to escalate in Benghazi indicating perhaps that militias are less likely to want to integrate with the army or leave the city.\textsuperscript{38} We can see that the value of a new Libyan army would not go amiss in this situation and strides to professionalize militias and create a new army are vital to maintaining security in Libya, especially if the government wants to keep the county united.


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} UPI, “Libya pushes back against militia’s in Banghazi”, November 25\textsuperscript{th} 2013, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2013/11/25/Libya-pushes-back-against-militias-in-Banghazi/UPI-92591385397315/ (accessed: 01/12/13)


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} Global research

\textsuperscript{34} Libya Herald, “Zeiden moves to enforce Benghazi militia ban”, 3\textsuperscript{rd} December 2013, http://www.libyaherald.com/2013/12/03/zeid-4e471-moves-to-enforce-benghazi-militia-ban/#axzz2mXn1VPGb (accessed 04/12/13)

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Libya Herald, “Jedhran swears in his new cyrenaican cabinet”, November 3\textsuperscript{rd} 2013, http://www.libyaherald.com/2013/11/03/jadhran-swears-in-his-new-cyrenaican-cabinet/#axzz2mXn1VPGb (accessed: 05/12/13)

\textsuperscript{37} BBC News, Guide to key Libyan Militias and other armed groups, 28\textsuperscript{th} November 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19744533 (accessed: 05/12/2013)

\textsuperscript{38} Libya Herald, “Killings continue in Benghazi”, 5\textsuperscript{th} December 2013, http://www.libyaherald.com/2013/12/05/killings-continue-in-benghazi/#axzz2mXn1VPGb (accessed: 05/12/13)
Conclusion

Libya’s resource-rich Eastern province, Cyrenaica, constitutes a distinct historical and geographical region. However, it is home to various tribes, ethnically and religiously diverse groups and opposing militias. These differences prevent the formation of a cohesive social identity. This is exemplified by the diverse attitudes to the province’s unilateral declaration of autonomy.

The social fragmentation and the competing political interests constitute a significant threat to the unity of the country. The TNC, in coordination with allied governments, has thus been very concerned with bringing local militias under the control of the national government. In spite of its efforts, violent clashes continue to occur.

The CTC’s efforts to establish regional autonomy significantly hinder the TNC’s work to ensure security and stability. Neighbouring governments have thus expressed hopes that Libya will maintain its unity.

Timeline of Key Events:

Pre-2011:

1st March 1949

- Formation of the Emirate of Cyrenaica, proclaimed by King Idris I of Libya, with support of the United Kingdom.39

24th December 1951

- The Emirate of Cyrenaica was absorbed into the Kingdom of Libya.40

6th-20th August 1980

- The Libyan government suppressed a nationalist military rebellion in Tobruk, Cyrenaica.41

2011 to present:

Mid-February 2011

- The uprisings in Libya began, initiated by a pro-human rights demonstration in Benghazi, Cyrenaica.42
- The protests in Benghazi became widespread as security forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gadhafi opened fire on the demonstrators.43

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
27th February 2011

- The National Transitional Council (NTC) is formed in opposition to the Gadhafi regime, Benghazi, Cyrenaica. 44

20th October 2011

- Colonel Muammar Gaddafi dies whilst fleeing in a convoy, near the Libyan town Sirte. The exact circumstances of his death remain unclear. 45
- With the death of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, fighting in Libya began to subdue. 46

23rd October 2011

- The National Transitional Council officially declared the liberation of Libya.47

6th March 2012

- At the inaugural ‘Congress of the People of Cyrenaica’, held in the outskirts of Benghazi, civic leaders declared semi-autonomy for the Cyrenaica region of eastern Libya. 48
- The Cyrenaica Transitional Council, which organised the congress, proposed the transformation of Libya into a federal state, involving: the proposed creation of Cyrenaica’s own parliament, court system, police force, and control over domestic policy.49 50

7th March 2012

- Head of the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC), Mustafa Adbel Jalil, vowed to defend the national unity of Libya, amid the declaration of semi-autonomy for eastern Libya, 6th March 2012.51

10th March 2012

- 5,000 people demonstrated their opposition to calls for the autonomy of Cyrenaica, at a rally in Tripoli’s Martyr’s Square. 52
- Meanwhile, between 3,000 and 4,000 Libyans joined in anti-autonomy protests in Benghazi’s Tahrir Square. Fear that the autonomy of Cyrenaica could break-up Libya fuelled the demonstrations.53

16th March 2012

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45 Ibid. p. 28
46 Ibid. p. 28
53 Ibid.
Armed anti-federalism protestors clashed with a crowd demanding Cyrenaica’s semi-autonomy, in Freedom Square, Benghazi. One person was left dead, and five seriously injured.  

3rd May 2012

- The Council of Cyrenaica, a group seeking autonomy for the Cyrenaica region of eastern Libya, protested against the 7th July 2012 General National Congress election; calling upon its members to shun the election.  

1st July 2012

- The High National Election Commission (HNEC) in Benghazi was stormed by a 300 strong group of armed protestors demanding greater autonomy for Cyrenaica.  
- Protestors calling for Cyrenaica to be given a larger proportion of seats in the 200-member legislature, ahead of the General National Congress election on the 7th July 2012.  

8th August 2012

- The National Transitional Council handed power over to the newly elected General National Congress.  

5th June 2013

- Prime Minister Ali Zeidan announced the Libyan government’s intention to relocate the National Oil Corporation (NOC) headquarters, from Tripoli to Benghazi, Cyrenaica.  

July 2013

- Militias demanding semi-autonomous status for Cyrenaica closed the Tobruk’s main al-Hariga oil terminal, in addition to four other oil export terminals in eastern Libya.  

17th August, 2013

- Ibrahim Jadhram was elected as the head of the self proclaimed Cyrenaica Councils Political Bureau.  

3rd November, 2013

- Federalists in eastern Libya declared the formation of a Cyrenaica ‘Barqa’ Government, in a direct challenge to the Libyan central government in Tripoli.  
- Abd-Rabbo al-Barassi, a defected air-force commander, was named as Prime Minister of the regional Cyrenaica Government, at a ceremony in Ajdabiya.  


http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/01/uk-libya-elections-idUKBRE8600H720120701 (Accessed: 01/12/2013)

57 Ibid.

58 University of Central Arkansas, ‘Libya (1951-present)’ December 2012,  

59 The Tripoli Post, ‘Libyan Government Moves Headquarters of Four Major Public Institutions from Tripoli to Benghazi’, 6th June 2013,  


61 Libya Herald, ‘Cyrenaica “government” unveiled’, 24th October 2013,  


63 Ibid.

9 | Richardson Institute
10th November, 2013

- Prime Minister Abd-Rabbo al-Barassi, of the self-declared Cyrenaica Government, announced the establishment of the Cyrenaica regional oil company ‘Libyan Oil and Gas Corporation’, in a direct challenge to the Libyan central government. 64

14th November 2013

- A group of rebels blocked the entrances to the offices of ‘The Arabian Gulf Oil Company’ (AGOCO), in addition to the state-owned ‘National Oil Corporation’ (NOC) oil refinery. 65
- The rebels demanded semi-autonomous status for Cyrenaica, and fairer distribution of Libya’s oil resources. 66

1st December 2013

Libyan army officials issued a statement demanding protesters, including former militia fights, end their occupations of oilfields and ports in the Cyrenaica region. 67

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