

Weak States and Political Grievances: Understanding the Causes of the Second Libyan Civil War

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Abstract

Since 2014, Libya has re-descended into civil war, albeit amongst different lines. Important to finding a political solution to the conflict is understanding its origins. This research seeks to explain the causes of the Second Libyan Civil War through current theoretical understandings of civil war causes. This research is split into two broad sections: the first concerning the environment in which the Second Libyan Civil War could occur, and the second focused on the motivations that moved involved parties to war. It is found that Libya's state of anocracy, or general state weakness, was the environment that allowed the conflict to occur, and political grievances, particularly of the nation's Islamists, that motivated the involved parties to war. It also found that oil played an indirect role in the conflict, specifically warping the economy to promote militia membership as one of the few viable livelihoods available. These conclusions bear relevance to policymakers as it demonstrates that a strong state apparatus and political inclusion are key to the avoidance of future conflict in the country.

On October 20, 2011, Muammar Gaddafi, the aged dictator of the Libyan Jamahiriya, was killed at the hands of his own countrymen. His death marked the end of the First Libyan Civil War, and a glimmer of hope shone in the North African nation for a better tomorrow. Three years later, on May 16, 2014, General Khalifa Haftar, an ex-Gaddafi general and erstwhile American ally, launched Operation Dignity against the General National Congress (GNC), the Islamist-dominated government that would come to control much of western Libya. This campaign would begin the much longer, and much more complicated, Second Libyan Civil War, a conflict that extends to the present day. Such a change naturally begs the question: what, in the interim period between the end of 2011 and the middle of 2014, would cause this renewal of hostilities in Libya? In the case of the Second Libyan Civil War, two primary factors allowed the country to descend into chaos: the Libyan regime as an anocracy, and the political grievances of the Islamists and related political units within the country. In addition, the presence of large oil reserves played a secondary role in pushing Libya to conflict. Libya as an anocracy is a state-level factor meaning that the regime of Libya was midway on the spectrum between democracy and autocracy, and had neither the means to suppress a rebellion nor address the grievances of insurgents. It was the structure in which the Islamists and related forces in the country were able to rebel once given a proper motive through political grievances. Oil in Libya did not directly cause the civil war like the two previous primary factors, but contributed to its outbreak mainly by facilitating the existence of armed groups in the country due to the lack of economic alternatives.

This essay will detail both the primary and secondary causes of the Second Libyan Civil War. The first section of the paper will describe the weak nature of the Libyan government between the fall of Gaddafi and the beginning of Operation Dignity as the structure in which a civil war could begin. Following that, a section will then explain the political grievances that motivated the involved parties to war. Finally, a section of the paper will give attention to the role of oil as a secondary factor in the conflict. In each section a brief literature review will be given to provide context of the

current theoretical understanding of the role of these factors more generally in causing civil war.

Libya as an Anocracy: Weakness of the Governing Regime

Scholars have delineated numerous factors that can make a state more prone for civil war. These state-level factors include things like the general wealth of a country, a higher population, and the nature of the governing regime.¹ In the case of Libya, the nature of the governing regime is very important to understanding how the Second Libyan Civil War began, as it was the framework in which the various factions could initiate an armed conflict.

Much literature discussing the role of regime type in civil wars focuses on the effects a democratic system has in preventing civil violence. Some scholars take the position that democracy can, in large part, prevent civil wars. Related to democratic peace theory, the thinking goes that in a democracy, citizens have methods of voicing their grievances in a non-violent way and do not need to resort to rebellion. As this is not the case in autocracies, it would be expected that citizens would need to resort to arms to have their grievances addressed.² While Libya was not the most functional of democracies between its civil wars, it still held multiple elections and was by no means the security state it was under Gaddafi. Democracy (or lack thereof) is not sufficient to explain the outbreak of the Second Libyan Civil War. In addition to this instance of Libya, statistical data does not fully collaborate the democracy versus autocracy argument. James Fearon and David Laitin, professors at Stanford university, found in their influential 2003 study “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War” no clear relationship between democracy and peace, and conversely, autocracy and civil war.³ As a possible explanation for autocracy’s strange resistance to internal violence, it is offered that since many autocracies have sophisticated systems of surveillance and repression, widespread discontent can be present without opposition being able to materialize an armed response.⁴ However, Fearon and Laitin did find that states known as “anocracies”—states in between on the spectrum of democracy and autocracy—are much more prone to civil wars.⁵

No universally accepted definition of anocracy exists. Fearon and Laitin characterize them as states with a weak central government and insufficient policing and/or counterinsurgent methods.⁶ Others have defined it as a regime that “permits some means of participation through opposition group behavior but that has incomplete development of the mechanisms to redress grievance.”⁷ This piece will use both of these definitions when describing Libya as an anocracy. Other studies in addition to Fearon and Laitin have found a strong correlation between anocracy and civil war. More specifically, Patrick Regan and Sam Bell, researchers at the University of Notre Dame and Kansas State University, respectively, have found that an anocracy is at most risk for civil war at

¹ Jeffrey Frieden, David Lake, and Kenneth Schultz, *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, Institutions*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 228–230.

² Marie Lounsbury and Frederic Pearson, *Civil Wars: Internal Struggles, Global Consequences* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 56–59.

³ James Fearon and David Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *The American Political Science Review* 97 (February 2003): 84–85.

⁴ Frieden, Lake, and Shultz, *World Politics*, 229.

⁵ Fearon and Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Patrick Regan and Sam Bell, “Changing Lanes or Stuck in the Middle: Why are Anocracies More Prone to Civil Wars?” *Political Research Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2010): 748.

the beginning of its transition from either democracy or autocracy. As well, they found that the larger the political transition, so is the likelihood of violence.⁸ Political scientists still do not completely understand why anocracies are more prone to civil wars. However, the case has been made that anocracies allow rebel groups to form and express their grievances violently due to a weak security apparatus, but cannot redress the grievances of rebel groups also due to their weak structure. Thus in an autocracy, rebel groups would simply never be able to be formed due to a strong security apparatus, and in a democracy grievances would more likely be addressed through peaceful means. Anocracies simply have the worst of both worlds.

Given the role of regime type in the outbreak of a civil war, it is important to understand why and how Libya was an anocracy. Libya lacked the strong central government needed to prevent civil war due to the particular nature of the fall of the ancien régime and the prevalence of armed groups in the country. As well, Libya between 2011 and 2014 existed in the most precarious state of anocracy—the immediate time period following the transition from autocracy. Lastly, Libya was also at strong risk for civil war given the enormous size of its political transition, attempting to go from a complete autocracy to democracy in a short period of time.

Libya, before its first civil war in 2011, was led by the brutal and bizarre dictator Muammar Gaddafi for over four decades. Gaddafi and his revolutionary ideologies very much became Libya itself; the country was conceived as the *jamahiriya*, the state of the masses.⁹ However, with Gaddafi's death, the regime came crashing down with few institutions left standing.¹⁰ What little remained was left to a motley crew of rebels, exiles, and would-be revolutionaries, and the state had to be constructed almost from scratch. In addition, years of oppressive dictatorship left most Libyans politically inexperienced; no political parties had existed for forty years.¹¹ Furthermore, in the First Libyan Civil War the various rebel forces that took down the Gaddafi regime were by no means a unified force; various groups of regional urbanites, indigenous Amazighs, and Islamists all sought different ends in the revolution.¹² There was no consensus of what post-Gaddafi Libya should be, making the country into a disorganized anocracy.

In addition to lacking the proper political experience, Libya was awash with weapons and consequentially armed groups.¹³ Gaddafi had stock-piled thousands of weapons in the country for the eventual Pan-Arab assault for Palestine. As the revolution spread, the Libyan people quickly got access to these weapons and formed scores of militias.¹⁴ These militias however did not disband following the fall of Gaddafi. In fact, many consolidated control in their local areas and became the de-facto security forces. It is now believed that the number of these armed groups reaches into the hundreds. They are organized around different bases including political ideology, tribal ties, or simply geography.¹⁵ The existence of these armed groups posed an immense problem to the National Transition Council (NTC), the first government following the fall of Gaddafi. Indeed, the NTC neither had the carrot nor the stick to control these groups. Given the physical security and economic benefit that came from militia membership, it was difficult for the Libyan government to persuade militia members to disarm.¹⁶ As well, the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 747.

⁹ John Wright, *A History of Libya* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2012), 199.

¹⁰ Christopher Chivvis and Jeffrey Martini, *Libya After Qaddafi: Lessons and Implications for the Future* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2014), 9–11.

¹¹ Wright, *A History of Libya*, 239.

¹² *Ibid.*, 238–239.

¹³ Chivvis and Martini, *Libya After Qaddafi*, 8.

¹⁴ Wright, *A History of Libya*, 239.

¹⁵ Chivvis and Martini, *Libya After Qaddafi*, 13–15.

¹⁶ Christopher Chivvis et al., *Libya's Post-Qaddafi Transition: The Nation-Building Challenge* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2012), 5–6.

sheer number of the groups, the NTC did not have the ability to absorb them all into the civil service or other government-sponsored jobs. Worse, the NTC lacked powerful enough army or police force to compel these groups with the threat of violence. Consequently, the NTC, and later the National General Congress (NGC), would always be wary of the opinion of various militias when attempting to implement any policy.¹⁷ This element of Libya politics would be key in the start of the Second Libyan Civil War as the presence of these armed groups prevented the building of a strong enough security apparatus to move Libya outside the realm of anocracy.

As mentioned earlier, Regan and Bell found in their own research of civil wars that an anocracy is most ripe for civil war in the time period during the transition, and when the size of the political transition is large.¹⁸ Libya between 2011 and 2014 matched both these qualities. Libya only existed as a non-Gaddafi state for two years before its second civil war. Indeed, it never truly emerged from the revolutionary period of its first civil war against the Gaddafi regime. Furthermore, Libya attempted to completely change the character of its nation with the fall of Gaddafi. Under the sole rule of Gaddafi for more than forty years, Libya became synonymous with the Colonel himself. After his fall, all traces of Gaddafi were attempted to be washed away—even the flag was changed. A state attempting to make such a large transition, not only from autocracy to democracy, but to refine its very nature, is much more at risk for a civil war.

It is clear that Libya's state of anocracy was one of the primary factors allowing the Second Libyan Civil War to begin. The state neither had the means to accommodate potential rebels, nor fight them effectively in an insurgency. Given the already numerous armed groups in the country, it was a matter of time before the proper impetus was given to attempt to seize the state. That impetus would come to the nation's Islamists and related factions in 2014 as their latent grievances against the state crystalized into armed opposition.

Political Grievances of the Islamists

In addition to state-level factors in understanding why civil wars occur, scholars also emphasize the importance of group-level factors, especially the motivations of individual groups. Concerning the motivations for civil wars, there are two broad camps in which most scholarly arguments lie: grievance and greed. Correspondingly, two prominent scholars take the mantle of these schools of thought: Frances Stewart of the grievance camp, and Paul Collier of the greed camp.¹⁹ Stewart and the grievance camp take the broad position that a "grievance" is the primary motivation for rebellion. A grievance can be derived from any number of things such as repression of culture, lack of political access, and denial of education.²⁰ This line of thinking sees civil wars in a much more political and localized light.²¹ On the flip side, the "greed" camp headed by Collier sees civil wars in a more universal economic view, where a civil war might be predicted if a rebellion is of relatively little cost to start or if a country has many "lootable" resources such as oil or rare minerals.²²

Indeed, rarely in any civil war are rebels purely motivated by either greed or grievance, and the question is much more to what degree. It is also somewhat subjective

¹⁷ John Lee Anderson, "The Unraveling," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling>.

¹⁸ Regan and Bell, "Changing Lanes," 747.

¹⁹ David Keen, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *International Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July 2012): 757.

²⁰ Frieden, Lake, and Shultz, *World Politics*, 220–221.

²¹ Keen, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," 776–777.

²² Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (October 2004): 564.

what can count as a “greed” or “grievance” as David Keen, a political economist at the London School of Economics, pointed out in a critique of Collier: “Lack of access to education is taken as a proxy for greed. But we know from many countries, including Sierra Leone, that a key grievance motivating many fighters has been lack of access to education.”²³ This classification becomes very muddled in Libya, especially concerning access to public office. While normally labeled a grievance, seizure of political office can have enormous economic impact, as handouts potentially can be doled out to the militia or tribe of your choice.

In the case of Libya’s Islamists, though, motivations were much more of a grievance nature than of greed. This is evident by the fact that the Islamists had a clear political ideology, long sought after political office to spread said ideology, and that the initiation of violence between the Islamists and General Haftar’s forces began only after the Islamists perceived an intolerable increase in political exclusion. The role of economic incentive (the greed factor) is not altogether absent in the motivations of the Islamists, but it takes backseat to the more ideological and politically based grievances.

Islamists in Libya, as well as throughout the Arab world, have long been the most organized opposition to the various secular regimes that, until the Arab Spring, dominated the region. Islamists’ ideologies and operational strategies both in Libya and throughout the Arab world are varied, however, the unifying feature is that they believe Islam should be the essential foundation of society and governance.²⁴ From that initial basis there is a great deal of variation amongst Islamists, but all have a clearly defined ideology that their organizations gather around. Islamists’ presence in Libya dates back to the 1950s, and they battled against Gaddafi through both violent and non-violent means.²⁵ Libya has its own branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose *modus operandi* focuses on a more peaceful participation in politics, as well as more violent jihadists trained in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, represented by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).²⁶ Both groups would bear a strong presence in the 2011 revolution and coalesce again under the rebel Libyan Dawn front in the Second Libyan Civil War.²⁷ Before the 2011 revolution, Islamist factions in Libya were routinely persecuted and routed by Gaddafi’s forces and unable to stimulate a large revolt in the country.²⁸ This is key, as it shows that the Islamist forces in the country were truly committed to their ideology even when chances of political success were slim. This goes against any sort of “greed” argument, as Islamists’ revolts against the state were not dependent on the presence of rational, economic opportunity costs.

In addition to having a clear ideology, Islamists were always interested in seizing political power. Following the fall of Gaddafi, various Islamist groups formed into political parties to capture seats in the GNC in 2012. Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood branch was often considered one of the most organized and effective parties across the spectrum.²⁹ A more greed-based group would be less interested in public office. Greed-based groups put a high focus on acquiring control of natural or lootable resources, such as oil. If the various Islamist groups present in Libya between 2011 and 2014 were more greed-based, it would be expected that their efforts would be centered on taking Libya’s oil fields, with a comparatively smaller focus on running candidates. Libya’s oil plays a

²³ Keen, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” 761.

²⁴ Mary Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place: Libya’s Islamists During and After the Revolution,” in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, eds. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2015), 177–178.

²⁵ Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place,” 178.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nicholas Pelham, “Libya Against Itself,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 19, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/02/19/libya-against-itself/>.

²⁸ Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place,” 179–180.

²⁹ Wright, *A History of Libya*, 239.

role in the Second Libyan Civil War, but more as an afterthought to fuel the political aims of both sides. This will be expanded on in a later section. Furthermore, at the outbreak of the Second Libyan Civil War, Libyan Dawn sought to take the capital city of Tripoli first, not the oil fields, in order to establish their political legitimacy.³⁰ In short, it is difficult to accuse Libya's Islamists of greed-based motivation given their large focus on achieving arguably less useful economically political offices, and their general apathy toward control of lootable resources in the country.

Finally, it is important to note when the Second Libyan Civil War broke out. Most, including this essay, choose the start of Operation Dignity by General Haftar as the formal start of the conflict. However, any assertion of the start of the Second Libyan Civil War is fraught, as much communal violence was occurring in the country before the commencement of Operation Dignity. The start of Operation Dignity is important because it started a string of events which led to the creation of Libya Dawn, the Islamists' military response to Haftar's Dignity.³¹ At the beginning of 2014 Libya was governed by the GNC that had been established in 2012 after the country's first post-Gaddafi elections.³² General Haftar, as he tells it, grew outraged at the heavy-handed tactics of the Islamists and their respective militias, and was spurred to declare the GNC defunct and call for new elections.³³ To enforce his edict, the General launched Operation Dignity that routed many Islamist militias, mainly in Benghazi.³⁴ Once in control of Tripoli, new elections were held and Islamists lost considerably across the board.³⁵ Only at this point did the Islamists forces coalesce under Libya Dawn and actively take up arms against the state. They did so only when they truly felt the political system was shutting them out illegitimately, and that they could not succeed within the current governmental confines. These sentiments are clearly a grievance, not a greed. Indeed, a greed-based group would have no need to wait for that specific of a point to rebel against state.

In review, the motivations to rebel against the state and start a civil war are generally defined as either a "greed" or "grievance." In the case of the Second Libyan Civil War, the rebelling Islamists clearly took arms against the state out of political grievance. The groups had well defined ideologies and consistently sought political office, features that would be strange for a greed-based group. In addition, most Islamist factions like the Muslim Brotherhood, seemed little interested in Libya's lootable resources, namely its oil. This is clearly evident after the start of the civil war as Tripoli, not oil fields, were Dawn's first target. Most importantly, the Second Libyan Civil War only broke out into its recognized form *after* the Islamists were essentially run out of office, and felt excluded from the political process. These are all hallmarks of a grievance-based group, and bear little semblance to a greed-based campaign.

Effects of Oil

Scholars are very split of the role of resources, such as oil, in civil war. Many promote the idea that the presence of an easily extractable resource makes it easier to fund a rebellion and thus heightens the probability of civil war. Resources can incentivize state seizure in resource-dependent states, as the central government normally controls

³⁰ "That it Should Come to This," *The Economist*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21638123-four-year-descent-arab-spring-factional-chaos-it-should-come>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Anderson, "The Unraveling."

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "That it Should Come to This."

the resource and its revenue.³⁶ Furthermore, the central government provides the largest source of employment and wealth. This notion correlates strongly with the notion of civil wars being more “greed” based, and it is no coincidence that Collier along with his colleague Anke Hoeffler, a researcher at the University of Oxford, were amongst the first to suggest the link. The two found in their research an inverted-U relationship between civil war and resources, meaning that either a large or little amount of resources can have a stabilizing effect. This, as pointed out in a literature review of the resource-civil war nexus, effects potential conditional analyses, meaning that despite the presence of oil different results might occur in different states because of other factors.³⁷ This is further corroborated by the fact that a number of states that are largely dependent on hydrocarbons do not feature political instability or civil war as a counter-point to this theory.³⁸ While the presence of oil alone likely does not make a state fated for civil war, the “natural resource curse” and other factors do heighten the probability.

Normally when discussing the role of oil in a civil war, analysis would focus on how the presence of an extractable resource incentivizes a rebel group to size the resource and/or the state. In the case of Libya, however, the links between its current civil war and oil are indirect. Rather than directly motivating Libyan Dawn to war, the presence of oil long before made Libya into a petro-state. Often in states dominated by the hydrocarbon industry, there is little economic opportunity outside that sector. Libya was little different following the fall of Gaddafi. As there were few jobs and industry following the regime change, the many armed groups that managed the country on a local and regional level had little economic incentive to disarm. Being a part of a militia often guaranteed a job, steady income, and a level of prestige. This hydrocarbon-focused economic system allowed armed groups to exist in the country, and laid the structural ground work for the civil war. Indeed, the presence of militias was a strong component of Libya’s state of anocracy between 2011 and 2014.

If oil was a primary factor in the start of the Second Libyan Civil War, different behavior would be expected by the rebel Libyan Dawn forces. As mentioned earlier, the group struck Tripoli, a political target, before attempting to seize hydrocarbon infrastructure. Such infrastructure was attacked by armed groups before the start of the conflict, but such groups were acting individually and not representative of a larger movement of Dawn or Dignity. Both sides did clash over oil infrastructure in late 2014, but months after more political battles occurred, including the seizure of Tripoli and the elections that further shut out the Islamists.³⁹ It is clear that the presence of oil much more contributed to Libya’s economy being weak and undiversified following the fall of Gaddafi, which consequently led to Libya’s weak and anocratic government, than being the primary motive for the rebel groups at play in the Second Libyan Civil War.

Conclusion

When attempting to find a resolution to any conflict, understanding the causes of said conflict is both necessary and crucial. This piece has attempted to tease out the more immediate causes of the Second Libyan Civil War as well as some underlying factors. The civil war is very much a political war triggered by political grievances. The Islamists gathered under Libyan Dawn long attempted to operate within the state legally, and only rebelled once it was perceived that they were shut out of the political process.

³⁶ Benjamin Smith, “Exploring the Resource-Civil War Nexus,” in *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* eds. T. David Mason and Sarah McLaughlin Mitchell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 216–217.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Michael Ross, “Blood Barrels: Why Oil Wealth Fuels Conflicts,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2008-05-03/blood-barrels>.

³⁹ “That it Should Come to This.”

This grievance was the prime motivation of the civil war. However, for this grievance to matter it needed to exist within a state structure that permitted insurgency. Libya between 2011 and 2014 was an anocracy, a state with limited authority emanating from the central government. The central government was weak mainly due to the large presence of diverse armed groups that had little incentive to cooperate politically. Contributing to these essential factors, the presence of oil weakened the Libyan economy and contributed to the existence of militias.

All these factors must be given attention if a resolution is to be found in the country. The recent UN brokered deal between Libyan Dignity and Dawn holds some hope, but the conflict is still ongoing and the primary reasons for the conflict have not been addressed. As this conflict was motivated by political grievances, its resolution will be found once the various Islamist factions in the country are given a full seat at the table. Once that is accomplished, a strong state security apparatus must be established so that the state is not so vulnerable to civil strife again. Lastly, a move to diversify the economy away from its hydrocarbon base will give more varied opportunities for the Libyan people and reduce the power of the country's numerous militias. Without accomplishing these steps, Libya's future will be bleak for some time.

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