Abstract: The Middle East and North Africa have experienced mass protests and political changes since the end of 2010. Indeed, the uprisings were a decisive turning point in the history of the Arab world. Although the leading causes of the revolts appear to be similar, as they result from political repression and socioeconomic grievances, their outcomes were highly different, and thus each state has developed a distinct state-building process. This article aims to explain one of the main factors that led to these divergences by comparing the role of “social cohesion” in Tunisia’s and Libya’s uprisings. The study concludes that, while the strength of social cohesion in Tunisia has fostered the role of civil society and thus explains to a certain degree the relative success of democratic transition in the country, the weakness of social cohesion in Libya has damaged the social fabric and therefore increased the emergence of tribal conflicts in the post-transition era.

Keywords: social cohesion, democratic transition, Arab uprising, state-building, Tunisia, Libya

Introduction

Since the outbreak of Arab Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa at the end of 2010, the doctrine of “Arab exceptionalism,” which Western governments used to defend their support for dictatorships, has appeared to be considerably weaker. For many Middle East experts, those revolts offered a golden opportunity for the Arab people to topple authoritarian regimes and the hope of building a democratic developmental state.

However, the path of transition was significantly different from one country to another, despite the common features that they share. This evidence was clarified through the different outcomes and trajectories that have identified the Tunisian and Libyan uprisings.

When identifying the main factors that have driven the Tunisian model to relative success, social cohesion was in the foreground; it was a bulwark against tribal
fragments that had characterized Tunisian society in the past. Conversely, the lack of a cohesive society in Libya due to the previous regime’s policies has led tribal hostilities to exacerbate, which has negatively impacted state-building process.

Despite the repressive practices of the previous regimes in Tunisia, they were able to achieve a certain degree of social cohesion; notably, through the modernization programs led by the former President Bourguiba and later Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, this strategy has successfully integrated different tribes into a unified society and subsequently has strengthened the role of civil society, that was able to absorb some of the tribal tensions of the post-uprising period.

By contrast, the policy of former President Muammar Gaddafi weakened the cohesiveness of Libyan society by utilizing tribal rivalries and manipulating them in order to control the country and combat his adversaries. Consequently, it was evident that tribal conflicts came to the surface soon after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, which undermined the state-building process.

The aim of the present research is to understand how and why the Tunisian society was more cohesive and interconnected after the revolution than the Libyan society. Certainly, and because of historical reasons, in Libya, society has a more complex tribal structure than in Tunisia. However, it is important to note that the Libyan tribes have been known for their compatibilities more than their differences because the components that bind them together were always powerful, notably, religion. In fact, Islam is the dominant religion in the country, with most adherents belonging to the Sunni branch, which means there are no sectarian divisions such as already exist between Shiites and Sunnis in many countries in the Middle East that can be exploited to foment unrest and violence. Therefore, there must be other factors that may have contributed to alter tribalism attitudes and, ultimately, have driven society to severe fragmentation after the uprising.

Finally, the study uses the constructivist approach to explain the way in which a state’s strategy may construct or deconstruct social cohesion within a community or society.

Social Cohesion and Constructivism: Demystifying the Relationship

Social cohesion is a complex, multidimensional, and multi-layered concept that has different definitions, depending on the field and the area of the study, and this explains the variety of approaches to social cohesion. However, in this article, the focus will be more on the political dimension. In political science, the concept has been studied mainly with conflicts and civil wars. Indeed, social cohesion has piqued the interest of international governmental organizations and policymakers. This has frequently occurred in reaction to societal divides and cleavages.
caused by economic depression, migration-related tensions, and ethnic or cultural conflict. In this context, social cohesion reflects the willing collaboration throughout a wide range of social interactions, usually characterized by the lack of inter-communal violence even in multiethnic societies.4

Several studies have stressed the importance of social cohesion as a critical factor in post-conflict resolution and argued that states would work better if they were structured around cohesive population groups that capitalize on their common interests and affinities.5 Indeed, social cohesion can overcome fragility, counter violence, extremism by staving off polarization, political radicalism, and identity-based differences.6 By contrast, the lack of cohesiveness between groups in society contributes to general insecurity, lack of trust horizontally across groups and vertically with the state, and instability of state institutions.7 Additionally, social cohesion contributes to state stability by boosting trust in its institutions and representatives and improving the capacity for collective action. On the contrary, the lack of social cohesion may weaken the mechanisms of promoting social nonviolence, and societies can become fragmented and exclusionary, leading to violent conflict.8 One of the useful definitions of social cohesion is cited by the Canadian government’s Social Cohesion Research Network:

"Social cohesion appears to be based on the willingness of people in a society to cooperate with each other in the diversity of collective enterprises that members of a society must do in order to survive and prosper. Willingness to cooperate means they can and do freely choose to form partnerships and have a reasonable chance of realizing them because others are willing to cooperate as well. This, of course, implies a capacity to cooperate.9"

This definition was inspired by Judith Maxwell, who was the first scholar to give an approximate definition of the concept; for instance, she refers to social cohesion as:

"Processes of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.10"

In particular, the definitions above stress two main intertwined characteristics related to social cohesion:

- First, the absence of internal conflict in the form of income/wealth inequality; racial/ethnic tensions; disparities in political participation; or other forms of polarization.
Secondly, possessing strong social ties measured by levels of trust and rules of reciprocity; the existence of civil society organizations, institutions capable of managing internal conflict in society, include effective democratic institutions, such as responsive democracy, an independent judiciary, and independent media.  

The importance of social cohesion has also been implicitly the focus of the constructivist works when this approach highlighted the role of common identity in creating social consensus inside the state. In fact, the significant contribution of constructivism stems from its capacity to understand and analyze the causes of ethnic conflicts that characterize the post-Cold War world. This new approach has proven its explanatory power against traditional paradigms, which have found themselves unable to explain and conceive the new agenda and multiple challenges that have emerged recently in global politics.

In fact, if the mainstream paradigms (realism and liberalism) emphasize physical factors to explain social and political phenomena, constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas and cultural factors. In particular, constructivism gives ontological substance to ideas and discourses that can have the same effect as physical forces.

Accordingly, while identity, race, culture, religion received less attention in conventional paradigms of international relations such as realism and liberalism, constructivism promises to deal with these issues because they are potentially part of the constitutive practices of the state and are so productive of its actions domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, the primary concern of constructivists is to understand how identities are produced, what norms and practices accompany their reproduction, and how they construct each other. Likewise, how social cohesiveness is built via the actor’s (state) behavior.

It is essential to point out that constructivism did not explicitly stress the importance of social cohesion in consolidating state power. However, when it emphasizes the role of identity in uniting people and strengthening the state, it then highlights the importance of social cohesion and how its fragility can lead to potential conflicts. To put it another way, social cohesion is a social construct produced by the actors, whether they are individuals, leaders, or governments.

More importantly, Alexander Wendt stressed the importance of social cohesiveness when he addressed the relationship between states and societies; he explained that states and societies seem to be conceptually interdependent in the same way that masters and slaves are, or teachers and students; the nature of each is a function of its relation to the other.

The constructivist conceptualization of conflict suggests that each society has a historically constructed “master cleavage”—for instance, Protestant against Catholic
in Northern Ireland, Hindu against Muslim in India, Shiites against Sunnis in Iraq. Political leaders can easily exploit these cleavages by inserting local, often trivial, incidents, events, and rumors into the “master narrative,” fueling deep hostilities and instigating ethnic violence.\(^1\) For example, as will be discussed in the following sections, the former President Gaddafi utilized tribal cleavages of the past and manipulated them to strengthen his grip on power; most of his discourses were full of hostility, as he revived historical feuds, using the language of incitement to confront tribes who did not support his policy.

Consequently, the lack of a cohesive society in Libya was not merely the result of historical antagonism among tribal groups but the product (construction) of the socio-political dynamics of the postcolonial state. By contrast, tribal divisions inside Tunisian society have merely disappeared during the post-independence period. Former Tunisian leaders were able to promote and reconstruct a unified identity. This strategy increased society’s cohesion and reportedly hampered any fragmentation after the regime’s fall in 2011.

Those facts lead to an important conclusion about the role of social cohesion in the evolution of conflicts; when social cohesion is weak, conflicts are usually expected and even more violent. However, the strength of social cohesion does not necessarily lead to the absence of conflicts within the state; they will continue but are likely to be managed effectively.\(^1\)

The Role of Social Cohesion in Post-Uprising Tunisia

Although the traditional tribal structures in Tunisia had already experienced a concrete disintegration due to the modernization processes after independence in 1956, they still attached to some psychological and symbolic dimensions, especially in some local regions that had difficulties integrating completely into modern societies.

In order to understand the status of the tribe in Tunisian society, it is necessary to demystify the socio-cultural and economic structures that distinguished Tunisian society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, tribal structure in Tunisia results from a combination of social and geographical factors that interact together and create a complex dualism, a wealthy coastal region in the north and poor inner regions with some exceptions in the south. The coastline historically represented the areas of urbanization, stability, and political centers, while the interior of the country remained subject to underdeveloped social and economic structures, and most of the tribal groups inhabited this region until the nineteenth century.\(^1\)

Despite the rapid integration of tribal groups into Tunisian society in the post-independence years, some difficulties and tensions have hindered political and social construction over the past six decades. Indeed, the nation-state has made
enormous efforts to integrate the various tribes into a common identity. However, this path has encountered some difficulties due to rapid urbanization in rural areas. To escape from this critical situation, people tend to identify with their tribal heritage. In fact, some of these contradictions manifested in the form of confrontations after the uprising in 2010.19

Since the Tunisian uprising in 2010, the country has experienced sporadic clashes between inhabitants in different villages and cities. Moreover, these incidents seemed to reveal a return to internal clashes between ethnic groups that the former President Bourguiba worked hard to overcome, developing solid plans to integrate tribal groups into the modern state.

Most importantly, these confrontations were in the mining areas, such as the cities of Gafsa, Al-Mitlawi, and Madhya, and caused loss of human life, as occurred in the region of Al-Houd, where the fighters from the tribes of “Al-Jaradiyah” and “AwladBouyahi” used rifles and sharp weapons. In addition, these incidents have destroyed many public and private properties, killing 13 victims, and more than 100 people were wounded.20

Similarly, in 2016, the cities of Kasserine, El Kef, and Medenine witnessed violent clashes. Historically, these hotspots have been considered the most disadvantaged and marginalized regions in Tunisia, as they were the most resistant to the modernization and integration processes adopted in the past by President Bourguiba and later President Ben Ali. Indeed, the internal areas in Tunisia have been known for their strong attachment to tribal identity. For these reasons, the uprising of 2010 resulted from high unemployment rates and economic deprivation in peripheral cities, which have frequently been excluded from participating in political life that was dominated by the elite in the center.21

Several factors have dramatically contributed to this situation; most are linked to dire conditions that characterized the inner regions during the previous regimes. Most inner cities were underdeveloped and more neglected than the wealthier coastal towns and cities. Indeed, this unbalanced regional development stems from Bourguiba’s state conception. The former President was greatly influenced by Western culture. He dreamed of modernizing Tunisia and building a state similar to the European model. However, while the coastal regions were smoothly integrated into modernization, many interior areas opposed the process because they believed modernization threatened their identity and cultural traditions. This resistance led Bourguiba to neglect these regions unconsciously and then exclude them from development programs. However, the impact of tribalism in Tunisia remains minimal. Even though the country has experienced some confrontations in certain areas, they still do not represent an explicit threat to its stability since they did not develop into military conflicts or demands for independent territory. Thus, the real reasons behind those clashes are mostly linked to social and economic conditions. People are revolting to improve
their living conditions and social status rather than following separatist demands of specific groups or minorities.

Another factor that has mitigated the effects of tribalism in Tunisia after the uprising and thus has increased the strength of social cohesion was the role played by civil society, which evolved under the regime of former President Bourguiba.

Accordingly, many scholars related the success of the Tunisian uprising to the active role of civil society organizations, which did not just contribute to maintaining the peacefulness of the uprising but also played a decisive role in shaping the path of the transitional period. For instance, although the popular uprisings started from the poor rural areas, they quickly spread to the big cities through the support of the Tunisian General Labour Union. This organization formed the first cornerstone in the emergence of a robust civil society and had powerfully created a new contract between power and society. Historically, there have been three leading indicators that demonstrate the development of civil society in Tunisia:

1. A large middle class. The middle class in Tunisia is considered to be the largest class in society. This class contributed enormously to state formation after independence. Furthermore, the free education system and public health increased its growth.

2. A higher level of political awareness. Compared to other Maghreb nations, Tunisians are the most interested in politics and public affairs and are open to accepting others’ opinions without being fanatical or intolerant. More interestingly, Tunisians did not enjoy belonging to any political party. This resulted from their lack of political freedom during the rule of the authoritarian regime after independence and because they gained deep experience through their involvement in civil and voluntary work.

3. The power of civil society organizations. Most of Tunisia’s well-known civil society organizations gained experience during the colonial era. As a result, they were, surprisingly, older than political parties. This may explain why all Tunisian political leaders were active in NGOs and syndicates at the beginning of their political careers.

As has been demonstrated, the role of civil society was prominent during the outbreak of widespread protests on December 17, 2010. For civil society actors, the uprising was like a historical opportunity they had been waiting for to express their rejection of all forms of oppression and tyranny. Even though the most prominent civil society organizations in Tunisia did not lead the uprisings (such as the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Tunisian League of Human Rights, the Tunisian Judges Association, the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women), they framed and directed the revolution because of their
pervasiveness in society. Thus, civil society has protected the social fabric from divisions and fragmentation.

The presence of social cohesion in Tunisian society in the post-uprising era has reinforced conflict resilience by encouraging relationships and areas of cooperation across potential fracture lines that existed in poor areas. Thus, building resilience can build social cohesion, which in turn helps to strengthen the ability to resist and recover from conflict.

Roots of Libya’s Social Cohesion Disintegration

Unlike the other Maghreb countries, Libya was not born out of a national liberation movement; it is perhaps the less successful state in the North of Africa. Over the last two centuries, the tribe has been a major alternative to the state in terms of organization and membership. The state developed at the expense of the tribes. And thus, the social, political, and economic life in Libya can be understood entirely through kinship networks.

There are more than 100 tribes in Libya, divided into three main ethnicities: Arab, African, and Berber. However, despite this large number, a few of them control the political and social scene in the country. The most influential tribes in Libya can be identified in the following tribal groups:

- Al-Warfalla: the largest tribe in the country, as it covers various Libyan cities, but its main base is concentrated especially in an area in Bani Walid;
- Al-Magarha: the second largest Libyan tribe in terms of population inhabits the southern regions of Wadi Al-Shati and the city of Sebha;
- Zintan: based in the Nafusa Mountains region in the western part of Libya, most of its members belong to the Berber minority;
- Obeidat: located in the northeastern cities;
- Zawiya: located in the oil-rich southeast;
- The Qadhadhfa: the tribe of Gaddafi, located in the regions of Sirte and Sabha.

The tribal structure represents one of the fundamental pillars of Libyan society; this fact explains to a certain degree why all the previous Libyan leaders attempted to win the loyalty of the most influential tribes to maintain their power and rule. For instance, King Sanusi relied on the Saadi tribes located in the east, whose nobles formed an essential part of the government, serving as advisors and confidants.

From 1952 to 1969, the ruling political elite in Libya was a mixture of noble tribes, religious family members, and university degree holders. Before the military coup in 1969, these groups dominated the high and key positions in the government.
However, President Gaddafi was not just planning to win the powerful tribes to his side; he utilized all his power and authority to weaken his opponents from other tribes. As a result, this strategy has fostered antagonism among different tribes and degraded social cohesion in the country over time.

In this regard, two significant periods illustrate Gaddafi’s attitude toward tribalism and tribes in Libya. After taking power in 1969, Gaddafi planned to alienate powerful tribes from the political domain for two main reasons. First, once the new system was established, its first plan was to demolish the tribal system, notably in the political sector, starting by excluding the influential tribes surrounding king Idris Senussi and seizing the political dominance that privileged tribes residing in the coastal areas. Before the revolution, the political leaders came mainly from families with traditionally higher religious and literary educational standards, such as the Sanusi, Baruni, Ghirbi, and Sharif.29

Accordingly, in June 1970, the local bureaucracy was reorganized; administrative officials replaced tribal sheikhs, and the administrative boundaries were changed to differentiate them from tribal boundaries. The influence of the tribesmen continued to decline with the restructuring of the administration and after the establishment of the People’s Committees and People’s Congresses in 1973 and 1975.30

Secondly, the objective of Gaddafi in undermining any political role of the tribe was linked to Gaddafi’s convictions, which are mentioned in his Green Book. In fact, Gaddafi believed that the tribe performed social and educational functions, such as providing social security for its members. Consequently, any political role played by the tribe could create political unrest. In addition, he saw tribal engagement in politics as a severe threat to the ideology of Pan-Arabism since Gaddafi was ambitious and eager to lead the Arab region.

The second period started in the late 1980s when Gaddafi altered his strategy toward tribes for tactical and political reasons. It was clear that he wanted to use the tribes as a tool to enforce his regime and weaken his adversaries after confronting disputes over political orientations within the Revolutionary Command Council, the supreme executive and legislative body that governed Libya after the 1969 coup and during the 1970s.31

The employment of tribalism in Gaddafi’s policy was most noticeable in 1993, after the coup attempt led by a group of army officers in Misurata city. This accident drove Gaddafi to arrest a member of the armed forces and employing his relatives from other tribes to confront the growing insurgencies within the armed forces.32

Furthermore, because Gaddafi belonged to a minor tribe, he formed strategic alliances with larger and more powerful tribes, such as the Warfalla and Maquraha, by appointing their nobles to crucial positions in his cabinet. More importantly, he armed the tribes whom he thoroughly trusted. Conversely, Gaddafi’s treatment of rebellious tribes was severe; he did not hesitate to put their sons in prison and
expel their leaders to other countries. In addition, he forced the tribes who were frequently hostile to his rule to fight in the war against Chad in 1980.33

To ensure the loyalty of all tribes, in 1995, Gaddafi issued the so-called “Certificate of Honor,” a document that emphasized the concept of collective punishment for all tribes whose members betrayed the state. It meant that tribal leaders had to punish their disaffected members, or the whole tribe would be punished. For instance, the Warfalla tribe was punished by the regime because it failed to capture some Islamist activists in the eastern part of Libya, known for their hostility to Colonel Muammar El-Gaddafi.34

Nonetheless, both during the revolution and later, the tribes continued to play a significant informal role. First and foremost, the administration needed to preserve the revolution by forging new tribal alliances against the numerous tribes in Cyrenaica that had supported the Sanusi monarchy and opposed the revolution. Gaddafi valued alliance policy since he was descended from a minor tribe, the Qaddafi of the Sirt area.35

It is important to realize that the regime’s legitimacy was primarily built on a single ideology that remained unaltered until the late 1980s. Since then, it has become progressively attached to the social dimension centered on tribes. Tribalism had become a significant factor and source of legitimacy and elite recruitment in the regime’s final period, reflecting the expanding importance of tribes in Libyan politics.36

As a result, Gaddafi’s discriminatory policies toward the tribes have created profound fractures within Libyan society, eroding its social fabric. It was clear that the state’s strategy after 1969 exacerbated tribal and ethnic clashes. Not surprisingly, after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, each ethnic group returned to their traditional loyalty because it was the only form that provided them with protection and support in the absence of the state.

By contrast to Tunisia, the absence of civil society in Libya was one of the leading causes of the weakness of social cohesion. A small number of civil society organizations were dependent politically and financially on the regime, which meant they had to make significant concessions and demonstrate their loyalty to the regime to obtain a license to operate as a civil society organization.

During Gaddafi’s rule, the regime tried to suppress and prevent almost any growing form of civil society. Accordingly, the uprising in Libya was not a response to civil society demands, but it was likely the result of a domino effect from Tunisia and Egypt; in other words, it was just a reaction to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In Libya, civil society organizations did not play any role in toppling Gaddafi’s regime because they did not exist. Perhaps if NATO had not intervened in Libya, Gaddafi would have been able to suppress the revolt. Although political oppositions arose after the uprising, they were fragmented, ragtag militias competing for power, not solid civil society organizations focused on democratization.37
In fact, there are several factors that can explain the lack of civil society in Libya. One of them is the absence of women from political life and leadership positions, as Gaddafi’s regime marginalized their role and undermined their potential contribution to society. Further, the lack of education among youth, the largest category in society, increased their ignorance of political and civil rights and democratic practices.38

One of the critical challenges that the new elites in Libya will face during the state-building period is reconstructing the social cohesion of Libyan society far from the previous regime practices, which produced a distorted social identity structure in Libya. Additionally, the birth of a new civil society after the uprising reveals critical concerns about its ability to work and survive under an unstable environment characterized by a complete absence of state structures and institutions that can establish and enforce rules and thus protect the social fabric.

To summarize, the Gaddafi regime’s behavior toward Libyan society has revealed how the regime’s practices have eroded social cohesion through polarization and division, thus increasing vulnerabilities to violent conflict and undermining state-building efforts after the “revolution” of 2011.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, there is a substantial difference between the status of the tribe in Libya and Tunisia, whether before or after the uprising. If the “tribes” in Libya have always been considered a prominent actor in making political decisions, conversely, the tribe in Tunisia had no more than a cultural and psychological effect.39

The impact of tribalism in both countries is related to how the political elites perceive the status and role of tribalism within the state. For decades, Tunisian society has successfully managed the problem of tribalism and was able to demolish and dismantle the traditional structures implemented by the state and its elites. Moreover, the process of modernism led by former president Bourguiba had almost completely transformed the old social structures and replaced them with solid civil structures. However, the lack of development programs in specific regions, usually known for their attachment to tribal identities, worsened over time. In other words, the real reasons behind those confrontations did not reflect a desire from specific groups to recognize their traditional structures, such as tribal identity, but, indeed, it was a demand to improve their social and economic conditions. Thus, the recurrence of the old tribal conflicts in Tunisia, which might obstruct the future state-building process, is beyond the purview of this study.40

Unlike Tunisia, the traditional tribal structures in Libya were more powerful. Therefore, the impact of tribalism was a critical factor in defining the political system regardless of the different phases that marked the history of Libya.
Accordingly, Gaddafi utilized tribalism as an instrument to defeat his opponents by investing in tribal cleavages. After the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and with the vacuum of the state, the rise of tribal clashes was predictable, as each group saw violence as the only way to protect itself and preserve its existence in the absence of the state.

Furthermore, compared to other Arab societies, Tunisian society is a distinct model in terms of social and cultural integration. For instance, ethnic divisions are not visible except in small marginal areas or during a few incidents. The social structure does not reveal any possibility or risk of fragmentations.

Both countries have been experiencing the rise of regionalism simultaneously. However, the principal causes of regionalism in Tunisia are markedly different, resulting from poor economic and social conditions. Thus, the uprising in Tunisia appears to have a social and economic dimension, unlike Libya, where it had a political dimension.41

Another difference between the two cases is the way in which the previous governments handled the problem of tribalism. In Libya, the political polarization of tribes was more present after the uprising, while in Tunisia, the state took a firm position on the issue by containing tribal divisions through solid programs and policy planning that led to the dismantling of their structures.

Although the former President Zine El Abidine was, like the leaders of other Arab countries, a dictator who ruled the country with an iron fist and tightly restricted free expression and political parties by suppressing all forms of civil liberties, he cultivated an excellent image of Tunisia internationally, presenting the country as a modern civil state through favoring tourism and strengthening his relations with Europe.42 By contrast, Gaddafi worked hard to dismantle social cohesion internally and cultivated a lousy image of Libya internationally through a hostile and provocative policy towards other countries, which isolated Libya and its citizens from the outside world.

Therefore, the modernization processes initiated by former President Bourguiba and recently Zine El-Din El-Abidine minimized the impact of tribalism that characterized Tunisian society over the last centuries. Tribal groups were incorporated into modern society.

Likewise, even though the previous regimes in Tunisia adopted a politics of exclusion towards the southern regions, they did not pit tribes against each other. The real cause behind tribal clashes is the miserable conditions of the vulnerable groups. In other words, the poor socioeconomic conditions of marginalized regions can drive certain groups to express their needs using violence and cling to their tribal affiliation. Nonetheless, the risk from fragmented areas cannot be underestimated because the prolonged disconnect between the state and marginalized regions in Tunisia could plunge the country into violence, leading the country to
be likely captured again by an authoritarian regime. Therefore, the existing government should accelerate the development programs in poor regions and address the maldistribution of wealth between the interior and coastal regions, which is the product of previous regimes.43

Unlike Tunisia, the limited modernization programs in Libya could not reduce the influence of tribes within Libyan society. Moreover, Gaddafi’s attitudes towards tribals exacerbated the conditions that gave rise to violent conflict and, consequently, the growth of tribal fragmentations just after the fall of the old regime and the vacuum of state in 2011.

Libya’s post-uprising period has proved that the idea of the state has not yet taken root within Libyan society, which still rules over tribal and clan relations. That is to say, the tribe can destroy the state whenever it plays a political role that prioritizes tribal interests over state interests, and thus state-building in Libya needs to deal with the tribal factor with a degree of caution, not in order to eliminate it because it remains a key component of Libya’s stability, but at least to diminish its political role.44

In other words, tribalism in Libya is a social fact. It will always remain at the center of any political system, as no party can ignore it in its calculations; thus, there is always an interactive relationship between the tribe and the political system. Consequently, nothing seems to be achievable without considering this peculiarity.45

Constructivism has a lot to say about the possibility of rebuilding social cohesion in fragmented societies. Indeed, from a constructivist perspective, just as identity can be reconstructed, social cohesion can also be reconstructed; building social cohesion can be a valuable asset in conflict prevention. For instance, since the revolution in 2011, social cohesion in Tunisia has reinforced resilience by encouraging relationships and areas of cooperation across fracture lines in marginalized areas. Additionally, building resilience can build social cohesion, which in turn helps to strengthen the ability to resist and recover from conflict.46

Rebuilding social cohesion in Libya requires transforming the hostile relations between the tribes inherited from the Gaddafi era into more positive and constructive ones. They should be incorporated into political, economic, and other dimensions of state-building. Actions and processes must be designed to break down, rather than enhance, the dynamics of hostilities and divisions among tribal groups. This often needs to highlight the importance of the shared values that bring all tribes together and reinforce solidarity, rather than focusing on the substantive aspects of fragmentation. In other words, new leaders in Libya should integrate new practices to rebuild the social cohesion dismantled under the Gaddafi regime.

Historically, even in many situations of violent conflict, there has been a long history of coexistence between Libyan tribes, which indicates that the current
confrontations were created and politicized by the Gaddafi regime rather than being inherent. Then, there is a strong potential to transform those relationships by creating sustained interactions across divisions and renewing trust and cooperation across tribal groups.47

On the other side, focusing on establishing institutions and neglecting social cohesion in Libya can hinder state-building. It is important to realize that, if legitimacy gaps occur even in unified states, fragile states often lack the social cohesion that elites need to build and maintain the basic building blocks of the state: political settlement.48

In this context, Lemay-Hébert demonstrates two different theoretical debates to approach state-building: the Weberian approach focuses first on institutions and the Durkheim approach gives a greater focus to society. The latter advocates the importance of social cohesion as a prerequisite for effective state formation and consolidation,49 stimulating social cohesion and community capabilities to promote reconciliation and reweave the social fabric.50

To put it another way, if the physical infrastructure could take months or years to rebuild, repairing the harm to the social fabric might take generations. Consequently, restoring trust and cohesion is crucial in preventing new cycles of violence.51

In essence, state-building efforts in Libya must work on both approaches, as long as the absence of social cohesion and the lack of a set of shared productive institutions prevent states from forming a solid system of state-level governance, leading instead to a host of chronic problems ranging from state illegitimacy to rising costs transactions to corruption.52

Most compellingly, the state is not primarily determined by the possession of a fixed territorial area nor by the density of population, but by the act of “coming together,” as Alexander Wendt pointed out: “it seems impossible to define the state apart from ‘society.’”53

To summarize, this study has highlighted the importance of social cohesion in Libya and Tunisia and concluded that the denser the degree of social cohesion, the greater the likelihood that civil society or local networks exist that can cooperate effectively to prevent the escalation of conflicts and thus create an appropriate environment for promoting state-building processes.

On the theoretical level, the study attempted to emphasize the central underlying assumption of constructivism and connect it to the concept of social cohesion. Indeed, constructivists highlighted the relationship between the actor and the structure in shaping our world. For instance, Bourguiba’s policies forged a common identity that overcame the tribal conflicts of the past and consequently increased the strength of social cohesion. In the same way, Gaddafi’s practices have produced conflicting identities that have undermined the fabric of social cohesion over time.
Hence, rebuilding social cohesion and reducing the influence of tribalism in Libya requires building new practices to foster the social cohesion that has been dismantled under the former Gaddafi regime.

Notes

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