RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ruling in the Name of the Revolution: The Local Grounding of Non-State Armed Groups in Western Libya

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ABSTRACT

Since the fall of the Qadhafi regime, Libyan armed groups have emerged as the de facto power holders in many parts of the country. Much of the existing research on Libyan non-state armed groups has looked at the relation between the armed groups and the central authorities, or between the armed groups and other powerful actors. This article is based on fieldwork in four cities in Western Libya and shows that the armed groups should be understood as locally grounded actors. Several armed groups from local communities are seen as legitimate powerholders, because of their role during and after the revolution. Many of the armed groups also originate from the same ethnic and social group as the people they set out to rule, which creates a tacit social contract between the militias and the local population. I argue that the main factor which determines how the rule of armed groups in Libya plays out is the legacy of the Qhadafi regime and the revolution. This may have implications for the future organization of the Libyan state.

KEYWORDS: Libya; Informal governance; Armed groups; Revolution; Borderlands

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1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Qadhafi regime, Libyan armed groups have emerged as the de facto power holders in many parts of the country. Qadhafi was deposed by a coalition of Libyan revolutionaries and forces from NATO and regional powers. After the fall of Qadhafi, however, no new central authority has managed to hold on to power and unite the country. An important reason for this is that a plethora of new armed groups emerged in Libya during the revolution. These groups had different interests, different ideologies and different geographical origins. What may have seemed initially like a transitional period of instability, may appear to be a stable feature of Libya for years to come.

At the moment, Libya has two self-proclaimed governments. Political authority is contested and highly fragmented. The Government of National Accord (GNA) – formed following the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015 – has the backing of the UN and the majority of the international community. But the GNA has been unable to function as the unity government it was envisaged to be. The House of Representatives (HoR), elected in 2014 and based in the east of the country, has not recognized the GNA. The mandate of HoR has expired, although its members have voted to renew its term. Military power is equally fragmented, with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar holding a dominant position in Eastern and Southern Libya but lacking the capacity to control the whole country.

This creates a void in which local and regional armed groups can exercise power and authority. What happens outside the reach of the central authorities? How do the local and regional militias exercise their rule? These are vital questions for the future of the Libyan state. In this article, I look into a question which has not received much attention in the research on Libyan armed groups so far. What is the relationship between the armed groups and the local population? Are they seen as legitimate or illegitimate? To what degree are they grounded in the local societies they attempt to control? How does the legacy of the Qadhafi regime and the revolution affect current local governance? I answer these questions by relying on field-

work that I conducted in the borderlands of Western Libya in the summer months of 2017.

2. Previous Research on Armed Groups and Governance in Libya

I will briefly go through the research on the Libyan case that I draw on in my article. Following the fall of Qadhafi, several studies have looked into the role of armed groups in Libya, during and after the revolution. These studies have used different terms for denoting the armed groups in Libya – either militias, revolutionary brigades, rebels, or armed groups. In this article I will use the term non-state armed groups, as this term is the most neutral.

Several of these studies have emphasized that the non-state armed groups in Libya had a local or regional grounding when they were founded. In a report on armed groups operating in Misrata, McQuinn (2012) draws an overview of local armed groups, focusing on their formation history, their objectives and their leadership structures. He distinguishes between four types of armed groups: Revolutionary brigades emerged during the intense months of the regime's assault on cities like Benghazi and Misrata. They were connected to the local social structures and authorities that emerged during the revolution, like the local councils. Unregulated brigades are revolutionary brigades who broke away from the authority of the local military council and are operating outside its control. Post-revolutionary brigades are local forces that emerged at the end of the fighting to protect locals following the security vacuum. This was the case in cities which did not experience sustained fighting during the uprising, like the pro-Qhadafi cities. Militias are armed groups involved in criminal networks and violent extremism. They lack both the support of the local community and integration with local authorities and are politically and socially isolated.

Lacher (2011) did an influential study in which he analyzed the local players and power holders on the Libyan political landscape following the revolution. He showed that the revolutionary brigades that were formed in Western and Eastern Libya started competing for power and recognition following the liberation of

Tripoli. Revolutionary brigades with strong ties to tribes and local communities acquired military experience and wanted to get political power in the transitional period. The revolutionary brigades thus shifted from being primarily local fighters to becoming military forces who aimed to dominate the political landscape.

Pack and Barfi (2012, p. 5-9) also discussed the local grounding of the groups who rebelled against Qadhafi, using the term militias. They claim that the rebellion had long-standing historical roots. The tribes in the periphery had a long history of contesting the power of the central authorities, all the way back to Ottoman and Italian rule, and also under Qadhafi. After the revolution the Western cities were outside the reach of transitional bodies like the national transitional council. Because they lacked protection from central institutions, the local communities assigned the responsibility over political affairs to the militias. The local militias had acquired the status as heroes and were given power because of their role in defeating the regime. Unlike in the Eastern cities, where power was split between the military and political authorities, political and military power was united under the banner of the militias in the Western cities.

Quesnay (2013) did an empirical study of the local dynamics surrounding those he called insurgents, based on fieldwork in the key revolutionary cities Misrata, Benghazi and Zintan. He focused on the perception and objectives of the individuals who were engaged in fighting against the regime, and their interaction with other social groups. According to him the decentralized nature of the revolution shifted power to the local level because the communities in the revolutionary cities could not rely on the central regime. Alternative types of local management emerged. As the local actors adopted local decision-making processes, the transitional authorities could not penetrate the local level. They therefore transferred judicial, political and military responsibilities to the local structures. Quesnay shows that the even though the local authorities could manage areas like social aid and security, they were not able to do deal with economic shortages and the lack of many public services.

Other studies have looked at the power relations between the non-state armed groups and political actors on the national scene. In the anthology 'The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath' several scholars looked at how Libya's revolution and international intervention not only put an end to the Qhadafi regime, but removed key decisions makers and put an end to the governance system that was in place under Qadhafi (Cole & McQuinn 2015). In the article Libya's Militia Menace (Wehrey 2012) Frederic Wehrey looks into the relations between the transitional political authorities and the militias. The transitional authorities adopted a double standard when dealing with armed groups in Libya. On the one hand, the authorities considered armed groups as a threat to the stabilization of the country and adopted programs aiming to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate the "country's countless revolutionary brigades". On the other hand, the transitional authorities relied on the military capacity of the militias to gain authority, because formal security services were weak and associated with the old regime. Mundy (2018) discusses the role of militias as spoilers in the political disorder in the aftermath of the revolution. He considers the revolutionary militias as the main powerholders in post-Qhadafi Libya. He considers the proliferation of the militias not as a mere symptom of the country's political dysfunction, but as a key reason for the chaos. His view is that local militias, who represent weak and marginalized communities, seized control over transitional institutions and held vital economic infrastructure hostage.

In addition to the scholars who focus on the involvement of militias in the political process, other scholars have focused on how the armed groups use access to resources to maintain their power. Other studies have focused on the involvement of militias in the illicit economy and what is becoming a warfare economy in Libya. Shaw and Mangan (2014) provide an overview of the involvement of armed groups in acquiring resources for holding power. The armed groups in Libya compete for resources like illicit trafficking and criminal activities to reinforce their power on the local and national level. According to the authors, illicit trafficking among certain social groups in Libya existed under the Qadhafi regime and took other directions following the revolution. Certain social groups like tribes, trans-

border communities and individuals close to the Qhadaffi regime benefited from droit de passage. But after the revolution, control over illicit trafficking has decentralized and liberalized. A panoply of actors has penetrated the illicit trafficking market and created an illicit economy based on four interconnected markets: weapons, migrants, drugs and smuggling. The dynamics of the illicit economy affects the political process in Libya, and actors involved in it may be against political authorities who try to constrain their activities. A similar picture can be found in a study by Toaldo (2015).

Micallef and Reitano (2017) largely confirm this picture. But they also point out a new phenomenon, which is the involvement of some militia leaders in anti-smuggling activities. The authors attribute this shift in strategy to pressure from European states, who allegedly provide financial aid to militia leaders who cooperate with them and crack down on smuggling. Lacher and al-Idrissi (2018) also emphasize that militias have become involved in economic activities – but claim this involvement goes beyond the illicit economy, and even extends to important institutions such as the banks.

What I aim to do in this study is to extend these studies and focus in particular on the local grounding of the non-state armed groups in Western Libya. How do they interact with the local population, and the communities under their rule?

3. Theoretical Framework

I take my theoretical approach from studies that have been done in other conflict zones, particularly the research on governance in "ungoverned spaces" - which looks into how armed non-state actors create new forms of governance in the absence of a functioning state. Several studies from recent years have looked into how armed groups engage in governance in conflict zones (Reno 2002; Bøås & Dunn 2007; Menkhaus 2007; Clunan & Trinkunas 2010; Arjona et al. 2015; Idler & Forest 2015).

Clunan and Harold (2010) provide an overview of the phenomenon of un-governed spaces or state-less areas. When state authority is absent or contested, informal governance will often take root. They provide different examples on how this has played out in different areas, like the tribal zone between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Niger, Lebanon, and the borderland areas between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In all of these areas informal governance emerged as a response to local needs and realities. Other studies have looked in depth on specific areas. Menkhaus (2010) did a study of ungoverned spaces in several areas. He showed that local actors, both armed and non-armed, engage in informal governance, even though there is no state authority. This is particularly evident in areas where state authority had been absent for a long time. Those who engage in informal governance are often from the same local groups as those who were being governed. To cope with the situation, local communities forge systems of security and conflict resolution, and even provide basic services.

For understanding my own data, I will mainly rely on the conceptual work Börzel and Risse (2010) have done on governance without a state. They asked how governance can be possible without a state. In governance with a state they claim that one of the main mechanisms is the shadow of hierarchy. Even though the state typically will not reinforce norms all the time, the mere possibility of intervention from state authorities have a stabilizing effect on social life. So, what happens when there is no state? They claim that governance without a state often happens because of two different factors. One factor is the fear of anarchy. Local actors – like non-state armed groups, companies or civilian leaders – will usually think that anarchy is not in their own interest. They will therefore attempt to institute forms of governance even though the state is not there to control it. But fear of anarchy is not the only factor which may lead to governance without a state. What they call a logic of appropriateness may also be at play. What they mean by this is that local actors are not solely motivated by self-interest, in the short-term at least. They may also be motivated by social and ethical norms about what they regard as the right thing to

do. Local actors may feel a duty to provide security and governance for the local population.

In addition to Börzel and Risse's framework, I will also rely on the general concept of historical legacies. Research on governance and political regimes has shown that historical legacies seem to play a large role for how regime change plays out, even though it may sometimes be unclear what the exact mechanisms are (Wittenberg 2013).

4. Data and Methods

This paper is based on fieldwork data from Western Libya, which was collected from May to August 2017. Zuwara served as the primary field site but research was also conducted in other cities Dirj, Nalut, and Ghadames. Prior to going into the field, I had some general notions of what I was looking for: Who holds political authority? How is security provided? How does the economy interact with security and political authority? During my fieldwork, more precise questions arose. When being in the field, it became clear to me that the local grounding of the militias was an important issue which had not been sufficiently covered in the existing research on Western Libya.

The data collection was based on a combination of participant observation, formal semi-structured interviews and loose informal interviews. I lived with a local family in Zuwara, Dirj and Ghadames, and at the premises of a hospital in Nalut. In total, I conducted 15 formal interviews, and about 50 informal interviews – with locals, smugglers, militias members, NGO activists and public officials. I also attended many social gatherings, and some formal meetings. This gave me a good overview over the situation in each of these sites.

My access to these sites became possible because I speak the north African Arabic dialect, and Amazigh/Berber. It was therefore possible for me to gain the trust of some of the locals, even though I am not Libyan and was perceived as a foreigner. The initial contact happened through Libyans in Zuwara I got acquainted with on social media. After I came to Zuwara, a snowballing method led me to in-

crease my network. But I also encountered locals who were skeptical towards me and did not want to share any information. During the fieldwork I had to navigate carefully between different identities in order to be able to get access to people. When interacting with the locals I made an effort to appear open and emphasized that I was only there to listen to what they had to say.

5. The Borderlands of Western Libya

Before continuing, I will give an overview of the borderlands of Western Libya and the cities I visited. Figure 1 is a map which shows the four cities where I conducted fieldwork: Zuwara, Dirj, Nalut and Ghadames.

Figure 1. A map of the Libyan Western borderlands.

Source: Google maps

5.1. Zuwara

The first city I visited was Zuwara. This is a port city in north-western Libya, which is the main entry point between Tunisia and North Libya. Because it is both a port and border city, is has been important for the local smuggling networks. The port of the city has been regarded as one of the most significant departure points of migrants heading to Europe (Porsia 2014). The city is populated by around 33.000 inhabitants, mostly Amazigh/Berbers. During the Qadhafi era, the inhabitants were strongly opposed to the regime. As Baldinetti (2018, p. 424) shows, Qadhafi had a policy of Arabisation which was strongly discriminatory towards the Berber minority in Libya, who may account for 10 percent of the population:

> "The list of discriminatory measures is long: place names were systematically Arabised, books in Berber and about Berbers were burned, Berbers were not mentioned in textbooks and not represented in the media. In the public administration employees from the Berber areas were moved from their native areas to others. Thus, the Berber component was effaced, and the Libyan linguistic panorama was represented having an exclusively Arab identity".

When visiting Zuwara, the locals I spoke to confirmed this, and explained that they had been very critical to Qadhafi because of his discriminatory policies. They took an active part in the revolution against Qadhafi. After the revolution, they asked for the right to express their cultural heritage (Lane 2011). The city has been ruled by a local revolutionary brigade which came into being during the revolution.

5.2. Nalut

The second city I visited was Nalut. It is located in a mountainous area and is an entry point between Libya and South Tunisia. Smuggling of fuel and goods has become a cornerstone of the local economy. Like in Zuwara, the majority of the population is Berber/Amazigh, estimated at 27.000. Outside the main city there are villages which are populated by Arabs. According to the Berber informants I spoke to in the city, the Arab villagers had been placed there as Arab colonizers by Qadhafi, in order to watch what the Berbers were doing, and serve as the eyes of Qadhafi.

During the revolution, Nalut also took an active part (Lacher 2011). In Western Libya, it was the main hub for the armed resistance against Qadhafi. Both Qadhafi forces and the rebels wanted to control Nalut, because of its central location. Several large battles therefore took place here. After the revolution, Nalut has been ruled by a Berber militia. This militia has ruled both over the main city and the Arab villages in the outskirts.

5.3. Dirj

The third city I visited was Dirj. This is a small oasis town in South Western Libya. It has an estimated population of about 6.000. The inhabitants have mixed ethnic background and consist mostly of Tuaregs and Arabs. During the Qadhafi era, most of the locals were supportive of the regime. During the revolution, men and women took up arms to protect the old regime. When I visited the city, I would often hear people referring to Qadhafi as the brotherly leader, which was one of Qadhafi's unofficial titles.

Following the revolution, Dirj became ruled by an Arab revolutionary group from Zintan. This militia didn't originate in Dirj, however, but in the city of Zintan, which is located further north about five hours by car from Dirj. During the revolution, the revolutionary groups from Zintan invaded Dirj and several other areas outside of Zintan which are populated by pro-Qhadafi communities. After the revolution, this armed groups have maintained their rule over Dirj and other areas in Western and Southern Libya.

5.4. Ghadames

The last city I visited was Ghadames. This city is situated in the South West, bordering both Tunisia and Algeria. It has historically known as an economic hub. It has mainly been populated by Berbers, with an estimated population of 10.000. A part of the population consisted of Tuaregs, who are a group of nomadic Berbers who have maintained a separate identity. During the Qadhafi era, the Tuaregs were friendly towards the Qadhafi regime, and many worked in Qadhafi's

security apparatus. The non-Tuareg local Berbers were mostly opposed to the regime. During the revolution, the local Tuaregs took up arms in order to defend Qadhafi's regime. After the revolution, the other locals took revenge, after the capture of the city by the anti-Qadhafi revolutionaries (Murray 2012). The Tuaregs were forced to flee following acts of violence.

Following the revolution, local revolutionaries from Ghadames have controlled the city. Ghadames didn't have a strong pro-revolutionary local militia during the uprising and was liberated by militias from Tripolitania. The revolutionary brigades in Ghadames are members of the military council of Ghadames, but the armed forces are not visible on the ground like in other places. I will nevertheless include some examples from Ghadames in the article, since it serves as a useful contrast to the other cases.

6. The Local Grounding of the Militias

These four cities are central economic and political hubs in Western Libya. How are they governed? A basic finding from my fieldwork in all of these cities is in line with Ana Arjona's poignant observation:
"Far from being chaotic and anarchic, war zones are often orderly. Although fear and violence exist, chaos is seldom the norm. In many places there is even a sense of normality – even if different from that of peacetime – and people have expectations about what might happen" (Arjona 2016, p. 2).

Even though these cities were not war zones when I visited them, they had fairly recently experienced armed conflict. But all of these places I was in relative security, as long as I stuck to certain rules, and kept myself in the company of locals. A few years earlier, however, the situation had been chaotic. The relative peace I was witnessing was the result of renegotiation of a social contract, in which both militias and other actors took part.

6.1. Fear of Anarchy, and Ethical Norms: The Renegotiation of a Social Contract

In all of the cities I visited, the locals told me about widespread chaos and insecurity in the period following the revolution. A large number of people had access to arms. They used them when they had conflicts with other people, or just to intimidate others. An example is an employee in the educational sector that I interviewed in Zuwara. During the Qadhafi era, powerful people often found ways for their children to cheat at exams. After the revolution, this employee decided that she wanted to change this, and create a new system which it would be more difficult to cheat. When powerful locals found about this, they threatened this employee at gunpoint: "They told me that they would kill me if I changed the system. They also told me that they would burn down the school. For many months after that, I could not move around without armed protection".[1]

A more dramatic example can be given from the Dirj area. Following the revolution, a local man from an Arab tribe had a personal conflict with a member of the Zintan armed groups, who had just begun to rule the area. When this happened, the Zintan armed group decided to punish the whole tribe collectively. They went to the area where tribe lived and burnt down all the houses. I saw myself the remains of the burnt houses. A member of the tribe told me that this had deep consequences for them. They had moved out into the Sahara desert but they were still afraid of the militia: "We were victims of collective punishment. The militia even killed one of our elders, who was handicapped, and who had been against Qadhafi. But they didn't make any distinctions between people".[2]

Both of these examples point to the lack of a proper social order. Many of those I spoke to, used the term social contract, and meant by this an agreement between the members of the community about how to interact with each other. The example in Zuwara shows that norms and laws had broken down between inhabitants. Similar happenings had occurred in Nalut and Ghadames. The example from Dirj shows a lack of a social contract between the armed groups and the people

[1] Interview in Zuwara, May 2017.
[2] Interview in Dirj, July 2017.

they ruled, given that the militias saw the need to employ such excessive violence. But in all of the cities, a stable social order emerged after a period of chaos. In Zuwara, Nalut and Ghadames, this social order partly grew up from below, with deep involvement of the local inhabitants. The armed power-holders were locals, and there was therefore a sense of trust between the militias and the inhabitants. In Dirj, on the other hand, the local population simply decided to give up, and to accept completely the rule of the Zintan militia, which didn't have any local grounding.

In Zuwara and Nalut, the renegotiation of the social was very explicit. After a period of chaos, several of the main actors in society got together in order to create a stable order. The elders, the revolutionary militias, the elected politicians and the public employees met each other. They decided to create an informal justice system which would create security and stability. Even under Qadhafi, conflicts had often been solved outside of the formal judicial system. Now, this system became entrenched. The solution that emerged was that a person who trespassed against the norms would formally lose the protection of his family or tribe. Because of this, all the inhabitants of society knew that there could be dangerous consequences if they trespassed against others. There emerged an informal civilian system of "police" in 2013: persons who were in charge of maintaining law and order. They called themselves the masked men. They were an anti-crime unit composed of approximately 150 local civilians, with kinship or friendship ties, who decided to take matters into their hands in order to tackle the local security issues. They would for example take action if they saw somebody under the influence of alcohol or drugs, as they assumed that drugged people could easily commit crimes. They also took actions against local smugglers because the Zuwara shores were covered by bodies of dead illicit migrants.

This renegotiation of a social contract largely fits with Börzel and Risse's theory about governance in the absence of a state. In the cases I studied, both the fear of anarchy and ethical or social norms seemed to play a role. Ethical and social norms often figured in the narratives of the people I spoke to. Several of my inter-

viewees told me that part of the reason why the elders and the community representatives had agreed to create the Masked Men in Zuwara, was because Zuwara had become an open graveyard for migrants after the revolution. One of the tasks of the Masked Men therefore became to control the smuggling of migrants. I interviewed one of those who had taken part in the negotiations which led to the creation of the Masked Men, who was explicit about this: "Dead bodies of illicit migrants covered the shores every day. We had to take action. Locals were choked and decided to not be responsible for the death of these innocents. They decided to support the Masked Men in their efforts against local smuggling. We started asking volunteers from the red crescent to pick up the bodies and reported to the international organization for migration in Tunis. We also created a cemetery and buried the dead migrants".[3]

Concern about norms and identity – and how they were viewed from the outside – also seemed to play a role when the people of Zuwara decided to institute law and order and to control the smuggling. One interviewee who worked in the municipality told me this: "We did not want to go from being seen as a revolutionary city to being seen mainly as a city of smugglers. This was bad for our image. So we needed to take action".[4] This doesn't mean that people in Zuwara stopped smuggling – they didn't – but they tried to get the smuggling of migrants under control, and to reduce the human toll as much as possible. This was at least partly driven by what Börzel and Risse call a logic of appropriateness – doing what they think is right or appropriate.

The topic of anarchy also figured heavily in many of the interviews I did, in all of the cities I visited. Several local inhabitants appreciated that the local informal security forces provided them with security. A person from a civil society organization in Zuwara said this about the masked men: "The militia brought back security. After the revolution we suffered some negative impacts. Some people didn't understand the concept of freedom and thought that freedom was to do whatever

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[3] Interview with a local civil society activist, Zuwara, May 2017.
[4] Interview with an employee of the municipality, Zuwara, May 2017.

they wanted, without thinking about the consequences. The militia have punished people rather severely, but this has been necessary to bring back order".[5] Even though the cities I visited ended up with different kinds of governance, they had all experienced the period after the revolution as a period of anarchy, and many people therefore decided to renegotiate the social order, with the aim of achieving security and stability.

6.2. Ruling in the Name of the Revolution: The Legacy of Qadhafi and the Revolution

In addition to the role of the militias in guaranteeing security and a renewed social contract after the revolution, they can also gain legitimacy and local grounding because of their role during the revolution. This can be understood through the notion of historical legacies (Wittenberg 2013). The experience of living under repression under the rule of Qadhafi seems to have forged strong bonds among the Berber inhabitants of Western Libya. In Zuwara and Nalut, the revolutionary brigades command strong respect because of how they fought against Qadhafi. I will refer to this as revolutionary legitimacy. In Nalut, I interviewed one of the elders, who had traditionally had much influence in the city. He was full of praise when speaking about the militias: "The revolutionaries sacrificed their life for our dignity and freedom. They could not accept anymore the oppression of local Berbers and the denial of our rights. The revolution symbolizes the last battle of our historical combat against the Qadafi regime".[6]

The legitimacy of the armed rulers is thus seen as connected to what they did during the revolution, which lends them continued legitimacy in the period after. But this kind of legitimacy is also intimately connected to the ethnic status of the militias and the population, and their shared history of oppression under Qadhafi. The revolutionary legitimacy is therefore connected to an ethnic legitimacy. This sentiment could be found among most of the Berbers I spoke to in Nalut and Zuwara. A woman in Zuwara told me that her brother had taken part in the uprising, and she was visibly proud of this: "Young local men, among them my broth-

[5] Interview in Zuwara, May 2017.
[6] Interview in Nalut, July 2017.

er who was under eighteen years old, wore symbols of our ethnic group and took arms to combat the regime forces in the different checkpoints. The regime forces used extreme violence and wanted to exterminate us. Because we have never supported the Qadhafi regime. But thanks to God our people stood against the regime".[7]

I could also witness this revolutionary legitimacy directly in the observations I did during my fieldwork. In many public squares, there are huge pictures of rebels who died during combat. The locals in Nalut and Zuwara refer to the local militias as revolutionaries or thuwar. They do not use the word militia, which they use to refer to other armed groups in the region – but not their own people.

Ghadames displays a similar pattern, even though they are not currently ruled by a revolutionary brigade on the ground. Ghadames had never had a history of open conflict with the Qhadafi regime, unlike Nalut and Zuwara, even though they were Berbers. Qhadafi had employed the local Tuaregs in his security service (Wehrey 2017). The other local Berbers often had an acceptable standard of living, compared to people in other cities, because Ghadames played such an important role in the trans-border trade. During the revolution, there didn't arise any local anti-Qadhafi militia. Some of the local Berbers joined anti-Qadhafi militias in other cities, while some of the local Tuaregs took arms to defend the Qadhafi regime. After the conquest of the city by pro-revolutionary forces, the Tuaregs were forced to flee by the other locals, after acts of violence against them. The locals I spoke to referred to this as an act of revenge for what they had suffered from the Tuaregs. Tuareg informants, however, told me that the locals had engaged in indiscriminate violence against their group, with no distinction between the ones who had fought for Qadhafi and those who had not. This inter-ethnic pattern of conflict and violence is also a legacy of the Qadhafi regime: It was Qadhafi's differential treatment of different groups that laid the ground for the hostility and enmity which would flare up after the revolution.

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[7] Interview in Zuwara, May 2017.

The rulers who emerged in Ghadames after the revolution are therefore different from the rulers in Nalut and Zuwara. They had not been active as armed militias during the revolution because they were under control of loyal forces inside the city. What they had done, however, was to take action after the fall of the regime and expel the Tuaregs. After the revolution, they continued to rule over the people who were left in the city. They also have a level of revolutionary legitimacy, but this is not as strong as in Nalut and Zuwara. The rulers also have a civilian character. In Nalut and Zuwara I would frequently see people with arms at the checkpoints around the cities. In Ghadames I did not see people with arms at all. The sense of ethnic solidarity and ethnic legitimacy, however, was almost as strong in Ghadames as in Nalut and Zuwara.

Dirj also provides an interesting example of the powerful legacy Qhadafi's regime and the subsequent revolution left behind. Dirj is ruled by the Zintan, an armed group that fought against Qadhafi. But the population in Dirj mostly supported Qadhafi during the revolution. When I visited the city, I witnessed that several of the inhabitants still keep portraits of him, even though they hide them from the Zintan. Because of this difference between the rulers and the ruled, harking back to the days of Qadhafi, the Zintan have resorted to the use of brute force in order to control the population.

6.3. Economic ties Between Militias and Civilians: "Business is Business"

In addition to the revolutionary and ethnic legitimacy of several of the militias, they are also locally grounded through the economic ties that they have tied with the local population. Members of the militias in Nalut, Zuwara and the Zintan-militia in Dirj were heavily involved in licit or illicit economic activities. Because these activities also involve large parts of the local populations, this creates additional ties between the militias and the locals (Chiodelli et al. 2017).

Most of the economy in Western Libya is based on cross-border trade or illicit trafficking. During the Qhadafi regime the local economy was based on illicit trafficking. Borders were considered as sources of revenue for the borderland popu-

lations (Meddeb 2016). It was also a way to gain social peace and guarantee border control, by involving the local populations in the management of borders.

All over Western Libya, it is the armed groups – and not the official security services – who control the checkpoints and the borders (Eaton 2018). At the two main checkpoints between Tunisia and Libya, it is militia members from Zuwara and Nalut who manage the borders. When I visited the checkpoints, I could observe Tunisian soldiers in uniforms standing on the Tunisian side of the border. The Libyan side of the border was mainly staffed by members of the armed groups in civilian clothing, along with a very few officials in uniform.

At the Wazan checkpoint, which is close to Nalut, I interviewed one of the brigade's members who staffed the checkpoint. He confirmed that it was the armed groups who took the ultimate decisions at the border. "We control vehicles and goods at the borders. When we face difficult situations, which has to do with custom law, we ask custom agents who worked under Qadhafi for advice. Then we take decisions by discussing the case with our leader".[8]

This gives the militias the opportunity to collect a border tax – either formal or informal – from people who cross the border, and to impose customs on people who want to bring goods in or out of Libya. This was confirmed to me by several people, both official representatives in the public institutions, and people who staffed the checkpoints themselves. In addition, the illicit trafficking is a large source of income for the armed groups, either directly or indirectly. Some of the members of the armed groups are themselves engaged in illicit trafficking. They will also receive bribes from illicit traffickers who are not members of the armed groups, in exchange for protection or letting them through the border.

Because of this, it becomes of paramount importance for the local inhabitants to be on good terms with the armed groups, or at very least to cooperate with them. One local man who frequently travelled across the border to Tunisia from Zuwara, told me about the relations he enjoyed with the members of the armed groups at the check-point: "Usually nobody controls me because I am a local. We

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[8] Interview at Wazan checkpoint, August 2017.

are from the same group. We have a relation based on trust. But if you travelled across the border, they would probably check you, because you are a foreigner".[9]

As can be seen here, it becomes important for the locals to be on good terms with the armed groups. This makes it possible to cross the border without hassle, which is of central importance in the borderlands. For the armed groups in Zuwara and Nalut, these economic ties created an "extra" level of local grounding, in addition to the ethnic and social ties they enjoyed with the locals. For the Zintan militia in Dirj, however, these economic ties were even more essential, given that they didn't enjoy any social legitimacy. In Dirj, the Zintan militia is the main economic player. All of the illicit trafficking is completely under the control of the Zintan. I interviewed several smugglers who cooperated with the Zintan. Many of them had fought for Qadhafi and had been treated very badly by the anti-Qadhafi Zintan militia during the revolution. But at some point, after the revolution they felt that they needed to cooperate economically with the Zintan.

A smuggler I spoke with in Dirj detailed how this change had happened. "I lost everything after the revolution. The Zintan took my camels and tortured me. I also lost my business, because they insisted that I work for them for free in the beginning. But at some point, I decided to take up paid work for them. I started to smuggle for them and use my knowledge of the desert. These militias have power, but they don't know the desert like I do. So, I started to work for them and make money. Even though I like Qadhafi and I'm against their rule. But who cares about politics? Business is business". The story of this man shows that even in the case of a man who had been tortured, the economic realities of the post-Qadhafi era created ties between the militia and the locals.

7. Conclusion: What are the Implications for State-Building in Libya?

How do my findings relate to the literature on governance in "ungoverned spaces", and the literature on militias in Libya? The findings from my fieldwork extend and enrich the existing literature. A basic finding is in line with other studies

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[9] Interview in Zuwara, May 2017.

on governance in "ungoverned spaces": The spaces in Western Libya are actually not ungoverned, even though the central authorities don't have any authority there. At the same time, the rule in these cities is very different from each other. The rule in Dirj is to a large degree based on brute force, while the rule in Nalut and Zuwara is based on an implicit social contract between the rulers and the ruled. This may imply that we need concepts for armed rule in the Libyan case that are fine-tuned enough to be able to account for these differences.

My fieldwork implies that the main factor which determines how militia rule in Libya plays out may be the legacy of the Qadhafi regime and the revolution. Militias and local populations who were on the same side during the revolution will be able to create a social governance system more smoothly than militias and local populations who were on different sides during the revolution.

When it comes to generalizing to Libyan areas beyond the cities I visited, an obvious limitation of my study is that most of the areas I visited were dominated by Berber/Amazigh populations. In both Nalut and Zuwara, the experience and history of being oppressed during the Qadhafi regime had profound implications for the legitimacy of the new rulers. Still, the ethnic and tribal ties – and demarcating lines – seem so strong in Libya that we may speculate that governance among co-ethnics can be relatively smooth even in non-Berber areas. To determine whether this is indeed the case, more research will be needed. Given that fieldwork in Libya obviously is a risky endeavor, one can perhaps try to collect data through social media or interviews over phone or skype.

So, what are the implications of these local forms of governance for the future of the Libyan state? In his review of the topic, Menkhaus states that three broad answers have been given to the question of how significant informal non-state governance can be said to be (Menkhaus 2010, p. 183-84). Some claim that local informal governance is insignificant – that is a passing matter that often pales into insignificance after a while. Another answer is that informal local governance matters, but that it's actively harmful, since it can impede the formation of stable formal governance systems. The last answer is that informal local governance mat-

ters and is positive – that it is vital for people's security, and can serve as a stepping stone to more formalized governance structures.

In the borderlands of Western Libya, the first answer does not seem convincing. The non-state armed groups are by now firmly rooted and grounded in local society – through ethnic and social ties, aided by their revolutionary legitimacy, and increasingly through their involvement in the formal and informal economy. They are not a passing matter. On the question on whether these forms of governance are harmful or not, it is difficult to give a definitive answer. At the moment, it is clear that the borderlands of Western Libya have a void of formal authority that is lasting and deep. Without the non-state armed groups, it is probable that these areas would have been far more chaotic than they are today. One public official in Nalut was very explicit about this when I interviewed him: "Without the local non-state armed groups, we wouldn't have any means at all. We have the most important border check point between South Tunisia and Libya. Without the non-state armed groups, we would not be able to staff it. As a public official, I don't have fuel to get to work. And I have not been paid for a long time. Since the revolution, no one from the central authorities have visited us. No one. The non-state armed groups are the only ones who have means and who can control the border".[10]

At the same time, it does seem reasonable to expect that the non-state armed groups have become so powerful that they may challenge future attempts at creating centralized authorities. A large part of their income is due to their role in illicit trafficking and the management of borders. If central authorities were to challenge this, it is likely that they would face opposition from the non-state armed groups. Furthermore, at the moment the non-state armed groups are the law. Formalizing institutions which would reduce their freedom at conducting their affairs as they want, could perhaps be seen as undesirable from their perspective. But at the moment, these questions remain hypothetical, given that a powerful centralized authority has yet to emerge in Libya. For now, the non-state armed groups in Western Libya remain the only powerful players in an area outside the reach of the state.

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[10] Interview in Nalut, July 2017.

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