LIBYA'S PREDICAMENT

Lacher W. Libya's Fragmentation Structure and Process in Violent Conflict. – London: I.B.Tauris, 2020. 304 p.

Wolfram Lacher's *"Libya's Fragmentation Structure and Process in Violent Conflict"* is undoubtedly the most comprehensive analysis of the political developments that have been underway over the last decade in Libya. In his work, Lacher seeks to create a new framework useful for understanding violent conflicts. The author's extensive fieldwork, with 300 field interviews held during 11 trips, helps to shape a clearer depiction the underlying dynamics of Libya's conflict.

Libya represents a remarkable case study of violent conflict fragmentation due to the difficulty of centralization of control over cities and regions and the endless splintering at the local level. The author criticizes the two main approaches to civil wars that see fragmentation as either driven by armed groups' response to external threats and incentives, or by the pre-existing social structures. These approaches focus on the state as the main actor around which armed groups revolve. Both approaches fail to explain fragmentation in Libya where key armed groups claim to represent state legitimacy exhibiting a very low degree of formalization and organizational continuity. The author claims that developments in Libya can be understood through an analysis of the fragmentation and cohesion of *social groups* in which political and military actors are embedded. The study sees as the main actor not armed groups *per se*, but the social networks in which group members are embedded. Lacher does not see communities as monolithic actors that respond to external stimuli cohesively – instead, he sees violence as the main driver of social structures. It is violence that "draws rifts through the social fabric" by strengthening groups or fragmenting them. It is violence that "redefines political communities and creates new ones". Armed groups are seen as both agents and objects of social transformation, being constrained by the social boundaries of their embedded communities. When armed groups' social ties diverge from strategic considerations, fragmentation happens. In communities where social cohesion is high, actors see themselves as constrained in their strategic choices, which leads to political fragmentation. Where social cohesion was not strengthened by conflict, armed groups find fertile ground in centralization. It is with this argument that Lacher focuses on four different case studies and traces their evolution through civil wars, from 2011 until 2019. Three of the case studies are located in the east (in Nafusa Mountains, Bani Walid, and Misrata) and one in the West (in Tobruk).

During the last decade, the main distinction between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica was due to the different trajectories these two Libyan regions took at the onset of the civil wars. In 2011, due as much to the historical differences as to the dynamics of violence in Tripolitania, communities were divided by support of the regime and rejection of it, which spurred localism. In contrast, in the east, regime control lost ground early on spurring growing regionalism. In such an uncertain situation as the initial phases of the first civil war, individual actions taken by local actors were crucial in triggering the other party's alignment. Larcher underlines how Muammar Gaddafi's system of holding communities collectively responsible for acts of individuals made those communities in which protests sparked quickly align with rebels in fear of reprisals from the regime.

Indeed, it was the civil war that contributed to the creation of new communities and the rise of their leaders. An armed group's social embeddedness with its community determined the command structure of the group: the more an armed group is embedded in the society – the less unitary and centralized structure it develops. Social ties constrain individuals and narrow their strategic choices, making political fragmentation more lasting and detrimental for socially cohesive communities.

The emergence of a figure such as Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar was possible in Cirenaica due to the low embeddedness of armed groups and low cohesion of communities. In the west, a higher level of community cohesion developed in the context of the first civil war.

The scramble for the General National Congress's funds for security services jobs created further conflicts among armed groups. Also, foreign support of different factions, each claiming its own status, contributed to the ever changing dynamics of the conflicts.

When the political landscape polarized in 2011, 2014, and 2019 into two main broad factions, it forced actors to take sides creating local rifts among communities and leading to civil war. Central to the book's thesis is the fact that the rise of Haftar since 2016 was not due to a solid tribal backing around his figure – instead, it was the lack of internal cohesion of communities and consistent foreign support from Egypt and the UAE. The difficulties faced by the UN in the formation of a unitary government were also due to the fact that the UN envoys dealt with representatives that were often dismissed by their own communities.

In conclusion, the author suggests that, due to the constant changes of factions within communities, the latter lost their unity, which increased the potential for consolidating a centralized form of government. After all, the central authority is where Libya's economic revenues come from, and its re-establishment through patronage networks that erode community's power would be essential to the country's stabilization. One criticism that can be made to the author is the over-abundance of individuals and details mentioned in the book, which sometimes makes the reader loose sight of the big picture. However, the human capital extensively narrated in the book is what makes the latter an invaluable guide for future fieldworkers in Libya. The approach to analyze civil wars offered by Lacher is of great value both in relation to ongoing conflicts and in the future, as splintering and fragmentation of rebel groups represent a growing trend in contemporary violent conflicts. While a brief overview of the Libya conflict is provided in the first chapter, the readers are recommended to gain some prior knowledge of the events of the conflict and the region's geography.

Pietro Seccia (Italy)
Libera Università Internazionale
degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli
(LUISS), Rome
ORCID: 0000-0001-9066-3358