

---

**After the Arab Spring: Civil War and Failed Efforts of Reconciliation in Libya**



---

**Mahnoor Chaudhry <sup>1</sup>**



---

**Abstract:** *In this article, I will briefly mention the events that led to the uprisings of the Arab Spring. My major focus will be on the causes that led to the civil war against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. I will mention all the major factors that contributed towards the civil war i.e the history of the regime, the international influences, the territoriality of the conflict, and the militarization of the two opposing forces. Then I will briefly describe the death event of Muammar Gaddafi. Once the objective of the revolutionists was obtained (the downfall of Gaddafi), the country fell apart. Instead of leading towards the state of democracy, the state was divided into much more opposing forces. Finally, I will discuss some causes that were the contributing causes towards the failure of the efforts of national reconciliation.*

---

---

**Key Words:** Arab Spring, Civil War, Libya, Muammar Gaddafi

---

## Introduction

The term Arab Spring is used for the pro-democracy protests that began in 2011 in the major Arab speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The first uprising began in December 2011 from the event when Muhammad Bouazizi, a street vendor stood himself in front of a government office and set himself on fire in order to protest against the seizure of his vegetable stand by police without any permit. This act of killing himself stirred a revolutionary uprising among the citizens against the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The protests spread through the Internet and social media like a fire. The government fell apart and Ben Ali fled from his country in January 2011. These successful results of the protests spread like a rapid-fire to the neighboring countries and stirred the civil uprisings against the authoritarian and dictatorship regimes. This movement reached Algeria, Jordan, and Oman by January. By January 15, the movement reached Egypt followed by Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and several other countries. The Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11 and by the end of the year, Yemen and Libya's government was also overthrown.

## Initial Uprisings in Libya

Referring specifically to the Libyan context, Muammar Gaddafi came to power in 1969 in a bloodless coup against King Idris. He established the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya that was based on his own philosophy of governance i.e. The Third Universal Theory. His political philosophy exercised absolute authority over individuals and banned all kinds of political powers. He was involved in imprisoning, exiling, and even executing the oppositions without any trials. There was very little development in any sector of society during his regime. In light of these scenarios, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, NUMS, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

first uprisings took place in Benghazi. Muammar Gaddafi addressed the uprisings by vowing to cleanse Libya house by house and launching punishing military campaigns.

He said, *“I’m going to march with the masses, to purify Libya inch by inch, house by house, room by room, street by street, one by one until the country is cleansed of filth.”*



Friday prayers in the main square of Benghazi, Libya, turned into an angry political rally against the Gadhafi regime on March 4, 2011. CHARLA JONES FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

### Factors Involved in Civil War against Gaddafi

Here I will discuss the factors that contributed to the status of ‘civil war’ in Libya against Gaddafi. I will discuss each factor in some detail.

- The nature of the current regimes plays a prominent role in the anti-regime protests. Gaddafi’s political party Jamahiriya was based on the philosophy of self-centered government and used the monopoly of processes within his own personality. He used large welfare programs to buy the loyalties of people. But this in fact resulted in the economic crises in the country which failed to get benefits from the oil reserves in the country. Gaddafi used all his powers to resist the uprisings of the National Transition Council (NTC, the anti-regime party). He considered the protesters in Benghazi as the stray dogs and rats that needed to be eradicated by all means. For this purpose, he resorted to a defensive attitude. He called on, *“Those who love Muammar Gaddafi to come out your homes, attack them in their dens. Withdraw your children from the streets. They are drugging your children, they are making your children drunk and sending them to hell.”* He even rejected the UN sanctions for his actions and denied all the accusations of human rights abuses. This attitude of repression, isolation from reality, and unwillingness to change magnified the grievance of the Libyan people. This thus resulted in a triggered backlash of violent and unwavering attacks from the rebel forces. Harsh responses from both sides and Gaddafi’s attitude of rejecting the negotiations and making no compromise led to an inevitable bloody civil war.
- The territoriality of the conflict plays a major role in lighting up the civil wars. The division of the state into loyalist or government-controlled territories and the rebel-controlled territories results in a clearly or loosely defined battleground. In Libya, the major loyalist controlled territories included Tripoli and Serti which had personal significance for Gaddafi himself and not for the loyalist troops. The NTC controlled territory included Benghazi. Along with this, they also incorporated tribal and rural areas. This helped NTC in mobilizing the military forces

nationwide. The popular support of NTC's agenda and Gaddafi's harsh attitude towards his own goals resulted in reduced efficacy of the loyalist troops. This led to loosely defined governmental front lines which contributed to magnifying the level of determined protests into civil war.

- One of the major factors that result in strengthening the rebel forces is their militarization. The militarization of rebel forces either by internal or external forces and the loss of monopoly of force by the government leads to a defined civil war situation. The intervention of NATO under the UN Security Council's approval provided NTC with weapons, arms access, airstrikes, military training for its troops. This helped in strengthening the rebel forces. The allied forces of NTC that included Qatar facilitated them with arms trade and mercenaries that shifted the balance from peaceful protests to armed civil war. This also resulted in the loss of monopoly of force by the government and the spirit of NTC with armed and trained rebels (revolutionary brigades) also heightened the violence instead of peace.
- The influence of international organizations, NGOs, foreign aids, media coverage, and support plays a major role in strengthening one of the two forces in the country. This influence was a key cause of the Libyan civil war. The international media recognized Gaddafi's rule as suppressing and with a negative image. Even the famous rhetoric recognized the governmental repression as the legitimate cause of NTC's violence and called it a civil war in early February. This rhetoric led to UN action through Resolution 1973 to establish a no-fly zone over Libya. The responsibility to protect allowed the UN intervention to 'prevent the widespread and systemic attacks against the civilian population'. This provided NATO with the ground bases to intervene in the conflict region. France and European ties to Libya allowed the US government policy and rhetoric in favor of NTC and to prevent the regime-led mass massacres of the public. This strong international involvement clearly codifying NTC's actions as legitimate and Gaddafi's regime as illegitimate, the NATO military support towards NTC raised the Libyan conflicts to the level of civil war.
- The regional forces in Libya also inclined towards NTC's agenda due to the constant isolation of Qaddafi from reality. Gaddafi's support of despots, his general disrepute among the Arab and African states, the bizarre foreign policies caused the regional leaders of Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia to support liberalization with little political risk. The geographical location of Libya, balanced between the Middle East and Africa favored Qatar and other Gulf states to provide arms to NTC and support the anti-regime agenda. The combined political and military regional influence increased violent clashes between loyalist and opposition forces and spiraled heightened conflict into defined civil war.

## **Death of Muammar Gaddafi**

After the NATO intervention, Muammar Gaddafi and his inner circle isolated themselves in Sirte that was his hometown. They kept moving between the abandoned homes to avoid fierce and indiscriminate shelling from the anti-regime militias from the Misrata, Benghazi, and the surrounding areas. On October 20th, 2011, Mustassim Gaddafi, the son of Muammar Gaddafi, ordered the inner circle and the remaining loyalists to abandon District 2 of Sirte in a heavily armed convoy of 50 vehicles. But unfortunately, they were unable to escape. Their convoy was attacked by a drone missile from NATO, destroying one vehicle as reported by witnesses. Upon traveling a few more hundred meters westwards, they confronted with the Misrata-based militia. There they were attacked by airburst bombs from NATO warplane, that killed dozens of Gaddafi fighters. During the fight between some of the survivors and the Misrata militias, Muammar Gaddafi and some of the men of his inner circle fled to a nearby walled villa compound. They tried to escape through the fields and drainage pipes underneath a major road nearby. But before escaping, Misrata militias found Gaddafi

and his men hiding in the drainage pipe. One of Gaddafi's bodyguards threw a hand grenade on them but it bounced off the concrete wall and resulted in killing Abu Bakar Younis, Gaddafi's Defense Minister. The spraying shrapnel wounded Gaddafi and others nearby him. Gaddafi was taken out from the tunnel and was wounded by a bayonet in buttocks, also attacked with kicks and blows. The videos captured at that time also show a gun pointed at his abdomen. Until the last moment, it looked like he doesn't believe that what he did was wrong. He kept on saying "what did I do to you?". When he was shifted in an ambulance and transported to Misrata, his body seemed was lifeless, he was dead. It was not clear whether he died from violence, or the wounds of shrapnel, or from being shot.



*Muammar Gaddafi: How he died.* (2011, October 31). BBC News.

The same day in the afternoon his son Mustassim was also found dead. The survivors of the loyalist group were captured and their dead bodies were found at the nearby Mahari Hotel the next day.

### Factors Preventing the National Reconciliation Efforts in Libya

The death of Muammar Gaddafi left the country in a state of chaos. The collapse of the Libyan state created a power vacuum that was filled by the transitional governments, revolutionaries, political parties, and non-governmental organizations. These organized had agendas that were competing with each other and they had no history of cooperating with each other. In the initial stages, NTC took some steps towards the national reconciliation efforts. The law "Laying a Foundation for National Reconciliation and Transitional Justice" was introduced. Ministry for the Affairs of the Families of the Martyrs and Missing was also established by NTC in November 2011. General National Congress (GNC), Libya's first freely elected parliament of 200 members came into power in August 2012. Libya also started the constitution-building process in September 2015, but it had to make progress on a national level in order to seek a truth-seeking dialogue, reparations, or institutional reforms. But overall it was clear that NTC and GNC were more dedicated to protecting the revolutionaries and punishing the supporters of the previous regimes. Less effort and dedication was seen towards the national reconciliation efforts. I will mention some of the problems that were involved in seeking a reconciliation attitude.

## **Culture of Victor**

The culture of the victors refers to the polarizing forces in a post-war area. The Libyans were also divided into two rigid polarizing groups i.e. azlams who were the Gaddafi loyalists, and the thuwar who were the anti-Gaddafi revolutionaries. Different towns and tribes were divided into these groups. Misrata, Zentan, Souq al Jumma were labeled as thuwars. The rest of the generalized population was labeled as azlams. Thuwars were treated with honor and dignity but the azlams were punished, shamed, defeated, and made guilty. This strict area or tribe distributions were unfair in many regards and also hindered in the way towards reconciliation. For example, the Warfalla tribe was labeled as azlams. It was a tribe of over one million people out of which one a few dozens were the supports of Gaddafi. It is thus unfair to label and punish the inhabitants of the whole tribe. This culture of victor must end if a democratic and peaceful state of Libya is to be built.

## **Disarmament of Militias**

In a post-conflict area, reconciliation can never be achieved when the state is divided into more than one form of government or when the environment is controlled by militias. To create a peaceful situation after the war, the sovereignty of the state must be restored. National reconciliations can be attained by demilitarizing and demobilizing the ex-combatant forces. These forces need to be integrated into society. This requires sufficient funding, detailed planning, and strategies for reintegration. After the two years of the death of Gaddafi, it was evident in Tripoli that Libya was being ruled by two regimes. These two regimes, the official government (GNC and cabinet) and the revolutionary militias, were running parallel to each other. There were also further divisions in the militias based on the pieces of land they were ruling. As a result of this, Libya was no longer divided into just two states but in dozens of fiefdoms. Thus Libya officially had two governments and two parliaments for performing two major functions that were Operation Dignity and Libya Dawn. But when the state is itself divided into different organizations, it is impossible to achieve national reconciliation.

## **Civil War**

This diverse prevalence of military bodies in Libya along with the declining authority of the central government, lead to the creation of vacuum spaces that were filled by the emergence of even more militias. A vicious cycle was created where these security vacuum spaces encouraged the formation of additional militias. Instead of filling the security gaps by raising the state sovereignty and restoring the monopoly of the use of force, the revolutionaries exploited and widened them. The revolutionaries kept on fighting with each other to gain power and authority. The reasons behind this were that the revolutionaries found more benefit in joining militias than the government jobs. This was because the military jobs provided the highest amount of privileges, incomes, authority, power, and prestige. These privileges were far higher than in governmental jobs. This is one of the factors that divide the state and leads to failed attempts towards reconciliation.

## **Internationally Displaced People and Refugees**

The displaced people in Libya include both, the ones that left Libya in the 2011 uprisings or the ones who fled from the homes as a result of violence. Reconciliation can never be achieved when the majority of the population is living in refugee or concentration camps. It has been estimated by UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that over one million people fled from the country, including 660,000 that fled during the initial 2011 uprisings. These people lived in special camps. Many of the IDPs and refugees were able to return back, but then again due to the situation in 2014, a new wave of displacement was reported. More than 394,000 people were displaced from their

homes due to the fighting in eastern, south-eastern, and south Libya. In a country with this great amount of displaced people and never-ending troubles, it is nearly impossible to achieve a state of peace or national reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the above discussion, it is evident that a state cannot achieve national reconciliation in the aforementioned circumstances. It is necessary to create a legal framework that would deal with all the parties fairly. A state of transitional justice must be ensured and implemented in order to obtain peaceful conditions. But here the role of the state goes beyond the framework of laws. The state must ensure secure conditions that would facilitate the IDPs to return back to their country. It is the duty of the state to make efforts to repair the damages caused by war and to achieve national reconciliation.

## References

- Fraihat, I. (2020). *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring* by Ibrahim Fraihat (2016-04-19). Yale University Press.
- Bhardwaj, M. (2012). "Development of Conflict in Arab Spring Libya and Syria: From Revolution to Civil War," Washington University International Review 1 76- 94
- Death of a Dictator*. (2020, November 3). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/10/16/death-dictator/bloody-vengeance-sirte>
- Muammar G. (2011, October 31). *How he died*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15390980>
- Al Jazeera. (2018, November 5). *The Death of Gaddafi*. Arab Spring News | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-big-picture/2018/11/5/the-death-of-gaddafi>
- BBC News. (2011, February 23). *Libya protests: Defiant Gaddafi refuses to quit*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12544624>