

Alvaro Arguelles

Universidad Autonoma de Madrid

Meret Jacob-Lakrimdi

Free University of Berlin

BELONGING IN LIBYA. HOW STATE POLITICS IMPACT LIBYAN KINSHIP RELATIONS AND DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES

This work is the result of an attempt to bridge two apparently different research interests: the study of the Libyan communities in Tunis and Europe; and the experience of Libyan migrants in Tripoli from the 1950s onwards. We believe this fragmentation in the field of study is already something to highlight; it shows that the difficulties of carrying out fieldwork in the country has forced many scholars to focus on Libyans abroad. The study of the ‘homeland’ has therefore been neglected, and is now mainly the domain of security studies and analyses that deal with Libya only as a part of a larger geopolitical competition in the Arab World and in the Mediterranean.

The literature on the Libyan communities abroad is, in any case, scarce. This was the starting point of our discussions. From a comparative perspective (Tsourapas, Seeberg), Libyans internationally appear to be disunified, with different communities or individuals that are selective when mingling with fellow nationals abroad. Drawing a parallel with Baathist Syria (Moss), this apparent atomization is explained as the result of the policies of ‘transnational repression’ enacted during the rule of Muammar Gaddafi. In its political dimension, this violence results in diasporic organizations that oppose the Libyan regime but that are weak and marginal, most notably, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL).

Our starting point was to problematize the emphasis of ‘repression’ as the only relevant explanatory factor. We note that there’s a tendency to represent the Libyan *Jamahiriyah* as a highly violent regime, often obscuring other elements of the analysis. On a second note, we raise attention to the complex effects of ‘repression’ at the societal level. We focus on particular on the well-documented practice of ‘*proxy punishment*’, whereby political dissidents are not punished directly but through their family members back in the homeland. Far from resulting in the atomization of Libyans abroad, we theorize that this practice can have the opposite results, reinforcing the idea of kinship and of collective responsibility for one’s own actions – what I do has consequences for my family, and vice versa –. In the case of the repression against the NFSL, the violence exerted by the regime forced its members to self-isolate, clustering in a small and predominantly White town in the United States. Repression, therefore, segregates and aggregates its victims in particular ways.

Thirdly, we question the idea that the fringe nature of organizations like the Salvation Front can be explained only as a consequence of repression. In spite of its international backing by Western powers, the National Front Party – the political successor of the NFSL – performed poorly in the 2012 elections, which were free and competitive and saw a significant turnout of 61%. While it is true that the passing of the Political Isolation Law

in 2013, which de facto targeted figures from the diaspora like Mohammed Magariaf and Mahmud Jibril, took place in a context of armed violence, it is also clear that for many in Libya this represented a victory of the real *thumar* against the machinations of opportunist exiles.

Crucially, we seek to add some complexity to the idea of repression. We believe that, beyond centralized violence by the State, what Libyans have experienced – and continue to do so – is a very controlling social environment. This is reflected in the common-held idea that ‘Libya is a small country’ where ‘everyone knows one another’. We believe that, rather than a reflection of the population’s size, this is result of the highly informal nature of the State, where access to even the most basic services – for instance, buying plane tickets to visit the country (Tayeb) – require having the *right* contacts on the ground. This applies in very different contexts, including access to public employment or to housing in the case of internal migrants. Personal networks are key to navigate existence in Libya, forcing everyone to carefully manage their public persona.

In this line of thought, we believe that, inasmuch as the Libyans abroad seek to remain connected to their own country, they cannot forego this network-oriented logic. Even us as researchers have experienced this kind of societal pressure. However, we also hypothesize that these networks are not just a consequence of the embeddedness of Libyans abroad, since they can be usefully rearticulated to be useful for those living outside of the country. This idea connects with the wide body of literature of ethnic identity as an essential instrument for migrants to cope with new and difficult situations. And so, what unites Libyans in Manchester and the newcomers to the Tripoli in the second half of the 20th century would be the need of ‘traditional’ connections to navigate the absence of an efficient welfare state.

At this point, we go back to square one of the discussion. We believe that the idea of the Libyan communities abroad as atomized and fragmented has to be nuanced. While it is true that they do not constitute a strong diaspora, especially not in the political sense, and that Libyans are very selective in choosing who to interact with, this must not be equated to a complete absence of relations among Libyans at all. The everyday practices of international Libyans closely resemble those we witness at home.