Long-distance Nationalism and Belonging in the Libyan Diaspora (1969-2011)

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The article explores the significance of the Libyan diaspora for the politics of the homeland and for nation-building in Libya before the 2011 revolution. The focus is on the migratory flows of Libyan nationals from Libya that resulted in the formation of the Libyan diaspora between 1969 and 2011. The historical analysis of the migratory flows, with a focus on long-distance nationalism projects enacted by opposition groups in exile, is combined with the empirical analysis of the micro interactional social mechanisms at work in the diaspora that suffuse the everyday lives of individuals. The historical and empirical analysis of the case of the Libyan diaspora provides an opportunity to unpack the mutually constitutive relationship between concepts of nation, nation-state, nationalism and belonging in the context of transnational processes in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Libya; diaspora; nation; nationalism; belonging

Introduction

Libyan exiles and immigrants across the world, both first and second generations, took part in the 2011 Libyan revolution since the early days. During and after the eight-month conflict, they joined transitional political institutions as members or advisers, fought the war against the regime, contributed to the humanitarian efforts of international organisations and NGOs, coordinated financial and operational support for humanitarian purposes, advocated for the revolution through peaceful protests, online websites, social media and newly established media outlets. The revolution *de facto* brought to the forefront of Libyan politics the Libyan diaspora raising questions about its role, nature and the processes through which it came into being before 2011.

This article intends to answer these questions by exploring the significance of the diaspora for the politics of the homeland and for nation-building in Libya before 2011. To do so, it starts by examining the migratory flows of Libyan nationals from Libya that resulted in the formation of the Libyan diaspora during the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, between 1969 and 2011; a subject so far remained unexplored. The article, therefore, contributes to fill a gap in the literature by presenting a brief history of the formation of the Libyan diaspora.

Furthermore, on the wake of studies on long-distance nationalism and diaspora nationalism by Anderson,[1] Glick Shiller and Fouron,[2] Jaffrelot and Therwath,[3] Gal, Leoussi and Smith,[4] Conversi[5] and more recently by Callahan,[6] Alain Dieckhoff[7] and Bo Stråth[8], the

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, 1992).
[2] Nina Glick Shiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).
[3] Christophe Jaffrelot and Ingrid Therwath, 'The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What Kind of ''Long-Distance Nationalism''?', *International Political Sociology* (2007) 1, 278–295.
[4] Allon Gal, Athena S. Leoussi and Anthony D. Smith (eds), T*he Call of the Homeland, Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).
[5] Daniele Conversi, 'Irresponsible Radicalisation: Diasporas, Globalisation and Long-Distance Nationalism in the Digital Age', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38-9, 2012, 1357-1379.
[6] William Callahan, 'Dreaming as a critical discourse of national belonging: China Dream, American Dream and world dream', *Nations and Nationalism*, 23 (2), 2017, 248-270.
[7] Alan Dieckhoff, 'The Jewish Diaspora and Israel: Belonging at Distance?', *Nations and Nationalism*, 23 (2), 2017, 271-288.

article adds to the discussion on the relevance of and interplay between the concepts of nation, nationalism, nation-state, diaspora, and belonging. Through the empirical analysis of the case of the Libyan diaspora, following in the footsteps of the research agenda suggested by Eleanor Knott,[9] the article examines the mutually constitutive relationship between the concepts of belonging, nation and nationalism in the context of transnational processes. In so doing, it seeks to answer these questions: How is belonging conceived and constructed through the political projects of the Libyan opposition in exile and in the everyday life of individuals in the diaspora? How do such conceptions of belonging shape long-distance nationalism? How cohesive is long-distance nationalism and what is its impact on the politics of the homeland and on nation-building?

The article begins with a sketch of the key theoretical concepts and of the research methodology. A brief history of the migratory flows follows with a focus on four examples of long-distance nationalism enacted by political opposition groups in exile: the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), the Libyan Islamic Group and the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition. This section unveils the ways of conceiving of belonging and in turn constructing long-distance nationalist projects among these groups. A snapshot of the size, geography and nature of the diaspora at the onset of the 2011 revolution is included.

The following section shows how some practices in the diaspora, both within the communities of political dissidents but also in the a-political ones, fostered the reproduction of a Libyan social culture in the everyday life of individuals. In so doing, the article unveils the micro interactional social mechanisms[10] at work in political and a-political communities, in the family, Libyan schools and social gatherings that contributed to shape a sense of

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[8] Bo Stråth, 'Identity and social solidarity: an ignored connection. An historical perspecyive on the state of Euorpe and its nations', *Nations and Nationalism*, 23 (2), 2017, 227-247.
[9] Eleanor Knott, 'Nationalism and belonging: introduction', *Nations and Nationalism*, 23 (2), 2017, 220-226.
[10] Sinisa Malešević, 'The chimera of national identity', *Nations and Nationalism* (2011) 17: 276-282.

belonging to the Libyan nation and groupness across multiple generations in the Libyan diaspora.

The article provides an historical and empirical analysis of the mutually constitutive relationship between long-distance nationalism, belonging and the nation-state. It demonstrates how political projects and micro interactional social mechanisms generated a sense of belonging to the Libyan nation among individuals in the diaspora that crystallised in a sense of groupness based on a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality and relational connectedness. Furthermore, the article reveals an understanding of the Libyan nation in the diaspora primarily as an ethnic and cultural community beyond the borders of the Libyan nation-state and across multiple generations. This demonstrates how the experience of the diaspora can not only strengthen ethnic identity but it can also contribute to construct it. In so doing, the article reaffirms the relevance of the nation and of the nation-state in the twenty-first century.

Key Concepts and Methodology

This article is based on an interpretivist, inductive and qualitative approach, informed by the grounded theory method (GTM),[11] to the study of nations, nationalism, belonging and diaspora. Following in the footsteps of the revisionists in social sciences who approach the study of groups in processual and relational terms,[12] the nation is understood as 'a process under continual re-construction constituted among the pressures of historical events including immigration and racial and ethnic contests for power or equality'.[13] Despite the salience of transnational migration among other transnational processes, the nation and the nation-state - understood as the territorial political unit whose borders correspond with the distribution in

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[11] Antony Bryant, 'The Grounded Theory Method', in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[12] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond Identity', *Theory and Society* (2000) 29, 1: 1-47.
[13] Virginia Yans, 'On Groupness', *Journal of American Ethnic History* (2006) 25, 4: 119-129.

that territory of a national group-[14] remain a central locus of belonging.[15] Even post-national forms of belonging such as long-distance nationalism retain links to the nation and to the nation-state.[16]

Belonging is understood in dynamic, relational and processual terms[17] as a concept 'actively lived', 'by being and doing',[18] while considering the impact and role of politics, distance, contingency and contestation.[19] The nation is a strong form of belonging that provides a sense of 'oneness' and groupness to its members. Described as the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded solidary group, groupness is generated by commonality - shared common attributes (categories) – and connectedness – relational ties that link people (networks) – that allow for the emotional sense of belonging to a group or the felt difference from or antipathy to specified outsiders to emerge.[20] By scrutinising the common attributes, both the civic and the ethnic ideas of nation, as well as the relational ties among people, one can observe how belonging is constructed 'at home' and in the diaspora through the political projects of the opposition in exile as well as in the everyday life of individuals. Therefore, the article combines an analysis of the work of political nation-builders in exile next to that of the social micro-processes of identification suffusing the life of individuals [21] that resulted in the sense of belonging to the Libyan nation in the diaspora.

A national diaspora is broadly defined as: 'a people with a common national origin who regard themselves, or are regarded by others, as members or potential members of the national community of their home nation, a status held regardless of their geographical

[14] Walker Connor, 'A nation is a nation, is a state, is an ethnic group is a ...', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1 (4), 1978, 382.

[15] Rogers Brubaker, 'Migration, membership, and the modern nation-state: internal and external dimensions of the politics of belonging', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 41 (1), 2010, 61–78, Knott, 'Nationalism and belonging'; Glick Shiller and Fouron, '*Georges Woke Up Laughing'*, 30.

[16] Knott, 'Nationalism and belonging'; Meyda Yeğenoğlu, 'Cosmopolitanism and nationalism in a globalized world', Ethnic and Racial Studies 28 (1), 2005, 103–131, 110.

[17] Brubaker and Cooper, 'Beyond Identity'.

[18] Vanessa May, *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[19] Knott, 'Nationalism and belonging'.

[20] Brubaker and Cooper ,'Beyond Identity', 19-20.

[21] Yves Déloye, 'National Identity and Everyday Life', in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 615.

location and citizenship status outside their national soil'.[22] This article, by focusing on the active participants in the diaspora, intends to explore the mutually constitutive relationship between nationalism - understood as 'a set of beliefs and practices that link together the people of a nation and its territory'[23] - and belonging. In particular, long-distance nationalism is a form of nationalism from abroad that 'binds together immigrants, their descendants, and those who have remained in their home-land into a single transborder citizenry'.[24] Benedict Anderson, who coined the term, linked long-distance nationalism to intense political radicalisation and to the strengthening of ethnic identity in the diaspora.[25] These hypotheses can be tested along the lines of studies undertaken by Dieckhoff and Conversi through an empirical study of long-distance nationalism in the Libyan diaspora.

The author's direct observation and participation in Libyan civil society between September 2013 and June 2014 provided an insight on the phenomenon of interest and a better view of what was relevant in that empirical area of study. During the following fieldwork in Cairo, Tunis and in the UK, between February and November 2016, thirty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted applying purposive sampling and snowballing techniques to identify the interviewees.[26] The main criterion in the selection of the interviewees was his/her active participation in politics or civil society before, during and/or after the revolution, 'at home' in Libya or in the diaspora, whether through political opposition in exile before 2011 or in transitional politics after 2011, through grassroots or online activism. In particular, by covering the period preceding the 2011 revolution, this article focuses on the political opposition to Muammar Gaddafi in the diaspora. The article

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[22] Yossi Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 50.
[23] Glick Shiller and Fouron, '*Georges Woke Up Laughing'*, 17-18
[24] Glick-Schiller and Fouron, '*Georges Woke Up Laughing'* , 20
[25] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalisms, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 74.
[26] Of these thirty-nine interviews, nine were with women. Four of them were members of the diaspora before 2011 and at the time of the interview; two were based in Libya; three had left Libya after 2014 and remained outside the country at the time of the interview. With regard to men, out of thirty interviews, thirteen were conducted with members of the diaspora before 2011 and at the time of the interview; seven with interviewees based in Libya; ten with interviewees who had left Libya after 2014 and remained outside the country at the time of the interview.

does not address the community of loyalists in the diaspora before or after 2011 or that of economic migrants *per se* but rather focuses on the active diaspora participants who engaged at some level with politics or civil society before and during the 2011 revolution.[27]

The face-to-face and phone interviews conducted in English with members of the Libyan diaspora were divided in two parts. The first set of questions were aimed to unveil the demographics of the interviewee while starting to engage him/her with questions of nationality and language, reasons for and conditions of the dispersal and return, and their engagement with political, social or cultural activities oriented at Libya before, during and/or after the revolution. This form of open-ended questioning allowed the interviewee to narrate the story of his/her civil and political engagement, while bringing up his/her sense of belonging, as well as practices of everyday nationalism. The second part of the interview concerned ideas around the Libyan nation, roots, home and collective memory, as well as the question of agency and role of media and technology in the process of nation-building. The first line of questioning presented an opportunity to fill a gap in the literature around the political opposition of the Libyan diaspora by providing a descriptive historical narrative of the formation of the diaspora through the accounts of its active participants that is presented below.

Migratory flows and long-distance nationalism under the Gaddafi regime (1969-2011)

The Libyan diaspora in its pre-2011 configuration emerged from the political, economic and cultural revolution imposed on the Libyan people by the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The 1969 revolution resulted on the firm control of the regime over the country's economic, political and social life and led to migratory flows and to the establishment of diverse Libyan

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[27] Out of the seventeen diaspora individuals interviewed, five were first generation migrants born in Libya; five were 1.5 generation migrants who were born in Libya but emigrated before or during their early teens; and seven were second generation migrants born outside Libya - for the definition of 1.5 generation migrants see Curt Asher and Emerson Case, 'A generation in transition: A study of the usage and attitudes toward public libraries by generation 1.5 composition students', *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 47(3), 2008, 274-279.

communities across North America, Europe and the MENA region.[28] Political dissidents across the entire political spectrum and citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds such as students in higher education, businessmen, and professionals came to constitute the Libyan diaspora. By the end of the 1970s, around 100,000 Libyans well educated and with degrees from western universities had left the country out of a population of about three million.[29]

As numbers of Libyan citizens abroad increased throughout the 1970s, so did the organization of the political opposition in exile. A dozen of political groups emerged that reflected diverse ideological leanings and the extreme fragmentation of the opposition.[30] The National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), established on 6 October 1981, was the main opposition group in exile until it lost political and military traction as well as external backing in the 1990s.[31] The Libyan ambassador to India, Mohamed Yusuf al-Magariaf defected in the summer of 1980 and recruited more than a thousand members in Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Iraq, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Tunisia, and inside Libya as well.

The founding declaration of the NFSL and the interviews with the members illustrate the relevance of nationalism as the dominant thin-centred ideology[32] of the group in several instances. A member of the NFSL described the ideological agenda of the group in these terms:

It was nationalist but nationalist in the Libyan context. Basically, we are just Libyans, we believe in our country, we are proud of our history, we are proud of our

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[28] Vandewalle, *A history of modern Libya,* 83-84.
[29] Ibid., 112; The World Bank, Libya-Population, total, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LY (accessed July 14, 2018).
[30] Saskia Van Genugten, *Libya in Western Foreign Policies, 1911-2011,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111.
[31] Ibid., 112.
[32] Michael Freeden, 'Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?', *Political Studies*, XLVI, 748-765.

grandfathers and what they did. We talk about how they fought colonialism. So it is

that sense of patriotism and nationalism, these are the sentiments that motivated us.

The nation, the Libyan nation and not the Arab one as the interviewee seems to imply in the

first line, is the defining framework of the NFSL action combined with pride in the anti-

colonial struggle, observed in the nationalist ideology of other post-colonial nation-states, and

the pre-Gaddafi history.

In the founding declaration, the NFSL is described as 'a body to encourage and unite

all Libyan national forces to further expose the destructive reality of Gaddafi's rule, to restore

the national will', a body belonging 'to all Libyans regardless of their age, social status or

outlook'.[33] Therefore, belonging to the nation is understood as inclusive and pluralistic, at

least in principle. 'Outlook' is interpreted to include different ethnic, political or ideological

leanings but also different ways of practicing Islam. The daughter of a member of the NFSL

observed that within the NFSL what mattered was being Libyan above membership to a

minority ethnic group or provenance from a region:[34]

> I mean the variety of Libyans that we knew were Berbers [Amazigh], people from the
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> West and people from the East. We were simply Libyans in [city X]. So we stayed
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> together, we had a lot of different interactions with one another.

In describing the difference between the Libyan Islamic Group, an associate of the Muslim

Brotherhood, and the NFSL a member of the NFSL said:[35]

> The MB [Muslim Brotherhood] are very ideological. They would only recruit and
>
> allow people to join them if they were religious and followed the same code of
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> practice but we said: 'No, we are not going to do that at all'. We are open to every
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> patriotic Libyan who is a nationalist, who loves their country, and wants to fight
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> dictatorship in Libya.

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[33] National Front for the Salvation of Libya, *Libya Under Gaddafi and the NFSL Challenge: An Anthology of the NFSL Newsreport 1989-1992*, 1992, 291-292.
[34] Anonymous interviewee.
[35] Anonymous interviewee.

Indeed, the NFSL committed:[36]

> [...] to work through all sections of the Libyan nation and call for the setting-up of a national, democratic and constitutional rule imbued with and inspired by, the beliefs and ideas of the Libyan people and by their history, civilisation and heritage.

The declaration and the members of the NFSL presented their nationalist project in cohesive terms. However, reconciling the different thick ideologies present inside the country and abroad, as well as the demands of the ethnic groups, Amazigh and Tebu, that have a history, civilisation and heritage different from the majority of the population which identifies with Arab ethnicity, is not a political project of easy realisation.

While the NFSL grew through the political, military and financial support of foreign governments in the 1980s, the means of communication at the time, a radio station and a bi-monthly paper newsletter, *Al Inqadh* (Salvation), remained limited in their ability to reach Libyans across the world and inside the country. The final objective of the group was regime change to be achieved by military means. Although the coups d'état led by the NFSL failed or never materialised, they led to the establishment of Libyan opposition communities around the world, particularly in the US. Ultimately, the NFSL was unable to catalyse support among the population or within the Libyan diaspora at large and stalled and shrunk in the 1990s. This was at least in part due to the Gaddafi regime's response to the growing political opposition abroad in the 1980s.

Indeed, from the very beginning, Gaddafi called for the 'physical liquidation' of Libyan dissidents abroad. In 1980, ten Libyan exiles were assassinated in Europe.[37] These events resulted in isolation and suspiciousness among Libyans abroad and in limited interactions and shared intents between the political exiles and Libyans in the diaspora and inside the country, limiting the potential cohesiveness of the NFSL's long-distance nationalism vis-à-vis the diaspora and at home. Yet the project and work of the NFSL in exile

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[36] National Front for the Salvation of Libya, Libya Under Gaddafi and the NFSL Challenge, 291-292.
[37] Yonah Alexander and Kenneth Myers, *Terrorism in Europe*, (London: Routledge, 2015).

had a great impact on the everyday lives of its members and on their long-distance everyday nationalism, as the next section will demonstrate.

The lack of interaction between the diaspora and the homeland was not limited to the political field but it also extended to the economic one. After 1973, the oil revenues provided the funds to implement a revolutionary economic plan that resulted in the elimination of the private sector by the end of the 1970s, making business in Libya impossible.[38] As a result, several businessmen and doctors relocated to Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Europe and the US.[39] Some of them engaged more or less overtly in supporting when not financing political opposition groups such as the NFSL.[40] When in the 1980s oil prices fell and oil revenues plummeted, an economic crisis hit the country and the regime found itself economically, politically and diplomatically isolated. The imposition of economic sanctions on the regime led to a further flow of professionals working in the aviation and petro-chemical sectors towards the Gulf States in the 1990s.[41]

The diaspora ranks were further expanded between the end of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s mainly with members of the Islamist opposition. Small groups of *jihadists* emerged in Libya in the early 1980s around religious leaders who opposed the regime. Between 800 and 1,000 Libyan jihadists joined the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan where the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), known as *al-Muqatila*, was formed in 1990. When they started to return to Libya in the early 1990s, much of the leadership was forced to remain in exile in Afghanistan, Sudan and in the UK. Those who managed to return set up cells in Cyrenaica. By 1995 the LIFG had 300 members inside Libya.[42] When they were discovered that year, the group had infiltrated the country and issued its first statement announcing its existence and declaring in the London based and Libya focused *al-Fajr* magazine that the

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[38] Vandewalle, *A history of modern Libya,* 106-108.
[39] Maghur, 'Highly-skilled Migration (Libya) - Legal aspects', 4.
[40] Anonymous interviewee.
[41] Maghur, 'Highly-skilled Migration (Libya) - Legal aspects', 4.
[42] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', in *Libya since 1969. Gaddafi's Revolution Revisited,* ed. Dirk Vandewalle (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 92-97.

overthrow of the regime was 'the foremost duty after faith in God'.[43] The regime responded with a brutal repression in the east of the country. By the end of the 1990s the LIFG had lost its base in Cyrenaica. Hundreds were jailed; several fled the country and took up residence in the West, especially in the UK, but also in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Sudan and Afghanistan.[44] These militant networks were essential in mobilising fighters in 2011 among former members and their families.

Although the group officially adopted the discourse and the principles of the global revolutionary *jihad* and of the *umma*, 'One Muslim Nation',[45] as Noman Benotman, a former member of the LIFG's shura council, stated in a 2005 interview:[46]

The LIFG has always been wholly focused on Libya. Our ultimate objective was the creation of an Islamic state in Libya.

The LIFG can be defined as a 'country-first' *jihadi* group, that is a group with a nationalist rhetoric and commitment to nationalist politics.[47] Their focus is on the establishment of institutions within local communities although they maintain fluid relations with the global Salafi-Jihadi movements.

With respect to the moderate Islamist opposition, the Libyan Islamic Group was established in the US and in the UK in 1979 as the Libyan branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood. Security operations against high-level Brotherhood members in Libya begun in the 1970s.[48] This led to a first wave of members leaving Libya and to the official dismantling

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[43] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', 96-97.
[44] Maghur, 'Highly-skilled Migration (Libya) - Legal aspects', 4.; International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: Making Sense of Libya*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°107 – 6 June 2011, 21.
[45] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', 95; Noman Benotman, Jason Pack and James Brandon, 'Islamists', in *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Gaddafi Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Camille al-Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: Al-Qai'da and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi Press, 2010).
[46] Aaron Y. Zelin and Andrew Lebovich, 'Assessing Al-Qa`ida's Presence in the New Libya', *CTC Sentinel*, March 2012, Volume 5, Issue 3. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/assessing-al-qaidas-presence-in-the-new-libya/ (accessed on October 28, 2018).
[47] United States Institute of Peace and Wilson Centre (2017), The Jihadi Threat. ISIS, al-Qaeda and Beyond, 5-6. Available at: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf (accessed on October 28, 2018).
[48] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', 86-87.

of the organisation inside the country.[49] While the elimination of the leadership reduced the ability of the organisation to operate in Libya, it did not succeed in eradicating its followers abroad or in Libya. Indeed, as students and exiles mainly in the UK, the US and Canada, Libyan members of the Muslim Brotherhood developed from the 1970s onwards the network that is at the basis of today's Libyan Brotherhood organisational structure.[50] An internal power struggle emerged in the early stages of the foundation of the group. The divisions were linked to the establishment of the NFSL whose backbone was represented by the Libyan Islamic Movement of Ashur Shamis. Shamis was among the Libyan *ikhwan* who broke away from the Brotherhood to refocus its attention on Libya and on the NFSL.[51] Other *ikhwan* maintained their links to the Egyptian organisation under the banner of the Libyan Islamic Group. The split reflected the rising tension between nationalism and Islamism at the time.

Although throughout the 1980s Brotherhood figures remained inside the country, due to the regime's oppression of any form of civil society, the Libyan Brotherhood had no civil society organisations nor was it able to draw support to the movement through charitable work preventing it from getting a strong foothold in the country.[52] When in 1998 the regime discovered some Brotherhood cells, it launched a mass arrest campaign that led to over one hundred members of the organisation detained and the rest forced to flee.[53] From their main outposts in the UK, Switzerland, Canada, Ireland, and the United States,[54] facilitated by the

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[49] Massimiliano Cricco, 'L'Islam in Libia', in *Libia: Fine o Rinascita di una Nazione?* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2012), 52-55.

[50] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', 86; Mary Fitzgerald, 'Finding Their Place: Libya's Islamists During and After the Revolution', in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 178.

[51] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', 87; Benotman, Pack and Brandon, 'Islamists', 195-196.

[52] Alison Pargeter, 'Gaddafi and Political Islam in Libya', 88-90.

[53] Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: from Opposition to Power* (London: Saqi, 2013), 320-321; International Crisis Group, 'Popular Protest in North Africa', 20.

[54] Mary Fitzgerald, 'Introducing the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Policy*, November 2, 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/02/introducing-the-libyan-muslim-brotherhood/ (accessed July 16, 2018).

reach and availability of new means of communication such as the Internet and satellite TV, members of the Libyan Islamic Group became vocal against the regime in the early 2000s.[55]

As an Islamist movement and branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Libyan Islamic Group and its members understood Islam as 'the solution', an 'all-encompassing religion', 'a comprehensive order for human existence' that overrides foreign ideologies such as socialism, nationalism, communism and capitalism and provides an inclusive system that extends to politics, economics, society and culture, 'a program for everyday life'.[56] The same is true with respect to the LIFG that was committed to the global *jihadist* ideology and to the belief in the *jihad* as the only viable tool of change.[57] Therefore, both the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and the LIFG, in contrast with the thin nationalism of the NFSL, embraced a thick ideology that provided the direction and methods to be adopted to build a political community according to the Islamic principles and tenets.

These Islamist ideologies are what determine membership to the group next to belonging to the Libyan nation-state. As Zubaida observed, as 'the territorial nation-state is the only concrete political reality - as nation and state',[58] this was ultimately reflected in the orientation of the political activities and patterns of socialisation of the two groups in exile that ultimately referred to the Libyan nation-state as the defining framework of the group's political initiatives and of the members' social life. Their long-distance nationalism, therefore, is less cohesive compared to that of the NFSL as it is combined with a thick ideology that members must share to be part of the group automatically excluding those who do not.

Meanwhile, the non-Islamist opposition in exile convened in June 2005 the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition in London. The conference was an umbrella organisation that brought together a number of non-Islamist groups among which the NFSL,

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[55] George Joffé, 'Civil Activism and the Roots of the 2011 Uprisings', in *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Gaddafi Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 41.
[56] Khalil al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood: Religion, Identity, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 56-65.
[57] Benotman, Pack and Brandon, 'Islamists', 201.
[58] Sami Zubaida, *Beyond Islam: a New Understanding of the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011)*,* 183.

the Libyan Constitutional Union and the Libyan League for Human Rights, as well as individuals who belonged to opposition groups by then dissolved.[59] Asked about the political agenda of the conference, a participant responded:

> It was purely nationalist, transcending all ideological forces, which was a sign of the times because in the 1980s we were divided by ideologies. Now [in 2005] we are post ideology but nationalist, definitely, one hundred percent.

Although the interviewee does not consider nationalism as an ideology, it is exactly the nature of nationalism as a thin-centred ideology that allows different actors across the political spectrum to embrace it. As a long-distance nationalist project, the conference prioritised belonging to the nation over other forms of belonging, along the lines of the NFSL's long-distance nationalism. Yet the absence of the Islamist groups suggests that the rift between nationalists and Islamists was still vivid in the 2000s. Ultimately, the conference did not succeed in rallying the opposition to the regime behind the objectives of regime change and the establishment of a constitutional and democratic state.[60]

Nevertheless, the London conference was a good combination of smart use of old diasporic non-Islamist political networks, new technologies, the media and the regime's inability to entirely control those but, nevertheless, trying to react to external threats. A participant described the conference in these terms:

> Our media played on two concepts: we asked to go back to the 1951 constitution and we started by singing the national anthem of 1951, and [raising] the old regime flag. With our relationship and contacts with BBC and al-Jazeera, the conference appeared as a conference that demanded the return to the old kingdom of Libya. That inflamed the dreams of tribes and young people. Gaddafi felt the pressure and reacted in a very stupid way. He started to run demonstrations on the streets in Libya condemning the

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[59] International Crisis Group, 'Popular Protests in North Africa' 19.
[60] The National Conference of the Libyan Opposition, The National Accord, London, 26 June 2005. No longer available on the organisation official website but still accessible on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Conference_for_the_Libyan_Opposition (accessed on October 28, 2016).

London Conference and so all the people that had never heard of the London Conference in Libya, heard of it. The people who never heard about the constitution started to talk about the constitution. The image of the flag was everywhere in social media.

Satellite television and the Internet enhanced the interaction within the diaspora and between the diaspora and the Libyan people 'at home' through an unprecedented circulation of ideas and images. The conference was successful in fostering the national imaginary of the Libyan independence by bringing back the Kingdom's flag and the 1951 national anthem that became the image and soundtrack during and after the 2011 revolution. The London Conference is one clear example of the ability of the opposition abroad to influence the politics of the homeland by penetrating Libya from outside through new technologies, forcing the regime to come to terms with the discourse of the opposition in exile and to open up but also to search for new allies.

Indeed, reconciling with the opposition abroad became one of the main objectives for Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, one of the sons of the leader that in the struggle for the succession to his father tried to position himself vis-à-vis the international community and the opposition abroad and at home. Saif al-Islam's *Libya al-Ghad* initiative that year came in response to the London Conference as an attempt to engage the country's intellectual elite, the businessmen and the professional community at home and in the diaspora in a process of political and economic reforms. He also opened a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2006 and with the LIFG in 2007 which in both cases resulted in the release of most members from prison and in some of them returning to Libya. Both organisations remained officially banned in Libya limiting the ability of Islamist ideology to take root beyond the intelligentsia.[61] Although these timid attempts at political reforms and reconciliation were reverted by the end of the 2000s, that decade left a legacy of political and civil society networks within the

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[61] International Crisis Group, *Popular Protests in North Africa,* 20; [61] Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood,* 320-321.

diaspora, between the diaspora and the civil rights movement in Libya, as well as online,[62] that were mobilised in 2011.

By the end of the 2010s, the UN estimated that out of a national population of around 6 million a total of 127,168 people born in Libya were living outside the country.[63] Compared with estimates that set the number of Libyans living abroad at the end of the 1970s at about 100,000,[64] this statistics gives a sense of how the migratory phenomenon from Libya remained an elite phenomenon, regarding a small and select group of individuals mostly educated, relatively wealthy, and skilled, some of them politically invested.[65] The UK is the country that since the 1990s has been consistently hosting the largest Libyan diaspora.[66] According to the UK 2011 census, 16,452 residents were born in Libya.[67] This number is half the estimate provided by members of the community interviewed in 2016 who suggested that between 35,000 and 40,000 Libyans were living in the UK.[68] Their estimate is likely to include the second and thirds generations born outside Libya who may still self-identify or be identified as Libyans but are not included in the census data as Libyans.

To sum up, the political opposition groups in exile maintained small networks during the Gaddafi regime. Their ability to have an impact on the politics of the homeland remained limited to failed coups d'état, violent Islamist militancy and demands for reforms and change

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[62] Claudia Gazzini, 'Talking back: Exiled Libyans use the Web to push for change', *Arab Media & Society*, March 2, 2007, https://www.arabmediasociety.com/talking-back-exiled-libyans-use-the-web-to-push-for-change/ (accessed July 16, 2018).

[63] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2017). Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 revision (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2017).

[64] Dirk Vandewalle, *A history of modern Libya* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112.

[65] Giuma Gamaty, 'Management of the brain drain and its relationship with democratisation and human development in Libya' (PhD diss., University of Westminster, 2012), 12-16.

[66] As studies by Jean-Christophe Dumont, 'Immigration from Arab Countries to the OECD: From the Past to the Future' (paper presented at the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in The Arab Region, Beirut, Lebanon - May 2006), and Giuma Gamaty (see reference above) pointed out, the numbers reported by Israel and Italy of residents born in Libya - 16,748 and 36,216 respectively - refer to people of Jewish and Italian origin born in Libya between 1911 and 1970 who left the country or were expelled by the Gaddafi regime totalling over 40,000 people. Their membership to the Libyan nation is contested. This issue is not addressed in this paper.

[67] These data were obtained online via the Nomis website for England and Wales and via e-mail from the Statistics Customer Service of the National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

[68] Anonymous interviewees.

from abroad. The contribution to nation-building at home was null as the regime maintained a firm control over the country, its media and the public discourse on the nation. However, the advent of the internet and the regime's internal reshuffling in the 2000s resulted in the end of Libya's isolation from the world and in new opportunities for communication and collaboration between the diaspora and Libyans inside the country. The London Conference and the reconciliation between the Islamist groups and the regime were major contributions to the politics of the homeland that based on preexisting diasporic political networks initiated a process culminated in the 2011 revolution. The political projects of the opposition in the the diaspora cemented connectedness among political dissidents that in turn generated a strong sense of belonging to Libya as a nation. Although these groups shared an anti-Gaddafi and anti-regime attitude combined with the aspiration to return to Libya and represent it in its entirety, their interests and political agendas were divergent and their cooperation and effectiveness throughout the years precarious. Nevertheless, it was around these political networks that the opposition to the regime was fostered abroad until 2011 and it was on the basis of these networks that the diaspora mobilised in 2011.

Life in the diaspora and the reproduction of Libyan social culture in everyday life

The nature of the migration from Libya, whether determined by political reasons or by the search for better education and work opportunities, together with the persecutions and assassinations of political exiles by the regime had an impact on the way relational ties developed among individuals and communities in the diaspora. This section explores the micro interactional social mechanisms at work in the diaspora with a focus on the everyday life of individuals and how it contributed to construct a sense of belonging to the Libyan nation.[69] When analysing the way in which Libyan social culture was reproduced in the diaspora two dichotomies can be drawn for the purpose of the analysis: one between political

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[69] Yves Déloye, 'National Identity and Everyday Life', 615-617.

and a-political communities and the other between first generation migrants and 1.5/second generation migrants.[70]

To start with, the communities of political exiles tended to be small in size, geographically concentrated around few main cities - e.g. London, Manchester and Lexington (Kentucky, USA) - and mostly isolated from the a-political communities. They could reach a few dozens, in some cases hundreds, including men, women and children. For instance, in 1990, after the failure of the NFSL to invade Libya from Chad, members of the group were evacuated and relocated with their families in Lexington, Kentucky (US), where the NFSL community was composed of around 200 individuals.[71] The daughter of a member of the NFSL raised in the US observed:[72]

> We did not go back for twenty-five, thirty years. We were frozen in time and because we could not go back, we were always waiting for that opportunity to go back. The community of political dissidents is a very different kind of community. You know, the NFSL was really a community. It was not just the main members. We had several families and grew up in a very close community.

Unable to return but always longing to return, members of the political opposition in exile and their families tended to congregate among themselves and to build closed communities with minimal interaction beyond the trusted political networks. An interviewee involved with the activities of the Libya Islamic Group recalled:[73]

> It was tough, because of the mistrust between people. So those who were from the same political view they met. And remember, there were some who were with the regime and were trying to infiltrate the community and worked as spies.

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[70] Asher and Emerson Case, 'A generation in transition: A study of the usage and attitudes toward public libraries by generation 1.5 composition students', Reference & User Services Quarterly, 47(3), 2008, 274-279.
[71] Anonymous interviewees.
[72] Anonymous interviewee.
[73] Anonymous interviewee.

This resulted in the establishment of small communities, disconnected by the majority of Libyans inside the country and in the diaspora that tended to reproduce their ideologies and vision of Libya in isolation, with rare exception. As suggested by another interviewee who spent most of his life between the US and Canada, in some cases these communities and their individuals 'calcified' to re-emerge in 2011 unchanged if not crystallized in their ideologies and beliefs.[74]

The a-political communities, those composed of individuals who left Libya in search of better education and work opportunities and did not engage in political activities, tended to develop their networks around family and friendships previously established in Libya with minimal interactions with the political opposition. A man raised in the UK whose family was not involved in the political opposition but got himself involved in the 2011 revolution, described the nature of his community and the relation with that of political dissidents in these terms:[75]

> A lot of [Libyan] doctors came to the UK. Within my family, my parents' social group, there were a lot of doctors and our family friends tended to be doctors, the people we socialised with. Still, we mixed every now and then with the political opponents but not so much.

The a-political communities and their members were keen not to jeopardise their relation with the homeland as they used to travel to visit families or because they depended on government-sponsored scholarships for their income and life abroad.[76] In turn, the a-political communities did not form the organisations and structures secretly developed by the political opposition abroad. Gatherings of a social and cultural nature mainly took place within the known familial and friendship networks.

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[74] Anonymous interviewee.
[75] Anonymous interviewee.
[76] Anonymous interviewees.

Therefore, the mistrust and suspiciousness among Libyans abroad resulted in relatively isolated and small networks of people tied by political ideology and/or kinship. This prevented the establishment of a diasporic public space where all Libyans could come together in the host countries to openly and freely 'imagine' their nation and discuss its characters collectively, something that should be facilitated by the experience of migration and the ability to communicate more easily and freely.[77] However, in the case of Libya the reach of the regime went so far that Libyans in the diaspora were unable to create an all-Libyan diasporic public space until the advent of the Internet.[78]

Nevertheless, Libyans in the diaspora from both communities developed a sense of belonging to the nation through micro interactional social mechanisms at work in the familial private space, Libyan schools and social gatherings. Indeed, while the activities and networks of the political opposition in exile remained the domain of the fathers, the young generations came in touch with and reproduced a Libyan social culture within these spaces. It was there that a sense of commonality based on a shared culture and blood emerged contributing to generate groupness in the diaspora.

The family is the primary space of reproduction of social culture among Libyans in the diaspora. It is in the family that parents narrate their memories of Libya and enact cultural practices related to language, gender and marriage. A woman observed in this respect:[79]

> My parents, my father especially, promoted the love for the nation, an attachment for the fact that this is who we are, a bond and a love for it. The story telling, the returns [to Libya], when we could, making sure that we interacted with my grandparents and cousins and that they came to visit us very regularly, [all this] ensured that a bond was created and strengthened.

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[77] Appadurai, *Modernity al Large*.
[78] Carola Richter, 'Libyan Broadcasting under al- Gaddafi: The Politics of Pseudo-Liberalization', in *National Broadcasting and State Policy in Arab Countries,* ed. Tourya Guaaybess (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 156.
[79] Anonymous interviewee.

While Libyanness is an innate identifier for first generation Libyans, 1.5 and second generations were at the receiving end of the process and referred to their parents as their main source of Libyanness. A young man raised in the UK said:[80]

> I consider myself a member of the Libyan nation first and foremost because of my lineage, my history, the place I was born, the country that my parents are from and the family hails from Libya.

The importance of family relations, indeed, was a recurrent feature across the lives of most interviewees and ultimately what tied 1.5 and second generations to Libya. Moreover, Libyan dialect, being the language spoken within the family and the language of the 'Libyan memories' was described by 1.5 and second generation interviewees as what contributed to 'instil a sense of identity and attachment to Libya'.[81]

The family is also the space where gender relations are challenged or become calcified reflecting the social and cultural upbringing of individuals. The daughter of a member of the NFSL was keen to emphasize how gender norms that she identified as proper of the 'Libyan patriarchal and tribal society' influenced the role of women in the Libyan diaspora communities. Women were excluded from politics but acted as 'social glue' within the family and between Libyan families.[82] However, women of 1.5 and second generations today are challenging these gender relations particularly so during and after 2011.

While first generation migrants tended to bring their families with them to the host-country, it is interesting to observe how young generations in the diaspora choose to reproduce Libyan family environments. Described as a way to 'maintain the community', intra-marriage among people of Libyan origin is a dominant practice in Libya and in the diaspora. A second-generation Libyan-British man stressed that:[83]

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[80] Anonymous interviewee.
[81] Anonymous interviewees.
[82] Anonymous interviewee.
[83] Anonymous interviewee.

The girl that I am married to was born and raised in the US from Libyan parents and had been to Libya very few times but still I chose to go for somebody from Libyan heritage because I felt that at some stage I would like to return to Libya and because I have a lot in common with that person even if she was born and raised in the US.

The opinion expressed by this young man echoes that of a Libyan Mancunian peer who observed:[84]

I'm 25 years old and I would like to get married to a Libyan because I am a Libyan man. Actually, I don't have a preference but we have this thing where it would be more comfortable, I would say, if she were a Libyan.

Kinship is a key determinant of people's roots and a marker of a unique Libyan culture and identity. The way in which 1.5 and second generation interviewees considered being of Libyan origin an important factor in the choice of a spouse is in itself a reflection of the importance of this feature for their own identity. Even young generations who spent most of their lives abroad and have dual citizenship, chose to comply with this long-lasting practice that not only is functional to reproduce the Libyan community but, in turn, solidifies the understanding of Libya as a nation based on ethnicity and blood, a nation that one 'naturally' belongs to.[85] 'Libyan ethnicity', in this way, is at the core of the national community and the main frame of reference of this ethnicity is the Libyan nation within the borders of the Libyan nation-state.

Outside the family, Libyan schools were one of the tools at parents' disposal to establish and maintain a connection between their children and Libya, foster Libyan networks and a sense of belonging to the 'homeland'. A woman who attended the Libyan school in London observed:[86]

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[84] Anonymous interviewee.
[85] Anonymous interviewees.
[86] Anonymous interviewee.

In the Libyan school in London there were Libyans from different parts of Libya. So they were from the South, from the East, from the West, and we all actually had to make the different cuisines, the cooking and all that stuff, so it was kind of a united presentation of whole Libya, in terms of food and traditional clothes.

From the stories of the 1.5 and second generations, in Libyan schools 'Libyanness' overcomes other differences. Regional diversity in terms of food, music and traditional clothing were celebrated as part of a common Libyan heritage and tradition.[87]

Beyond Libyan schools, Libyans tended to congregate within the known social and political networks for gatherings such as picnics, dinners, lunches, camping, religious festivities and youth camps. These gatherings went beyond one's city, region or ethnicity and were rather based on the trust established among people on the basis of familial and/or political networks. The interviewees presented these as important occasions to reproduce Libyan social culture in the diaspora and to strengthen a sense of community, cultural heritage and knowledge of Libyan history while eating Libyan food and listening to Libyan music. In these gatherings the political exiles flew the 1951 flag and sang the 1951 national anthem. While 1.5 and second generations were at the receiving end of these activities, for the parents the activities were a way to reproduce their culture and raise the children in a Libyan environment by introducing them to Libyan history, language and culture. A member of the NFSL recalled:[88]

So, to keep kids within a Libyan atmosphere we had a lot of socialising activities like picnics and events like camps where we had regular camp activities, history sessions for the younger generations, language sessions. [...] Even though we were a small number there was a sense of community.

These young generations, raised in these Libyan diasporic spaces, however, grew up in countries that in most cases acknowledged them citizenship rights. And yet, some observed

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[87] Anonymous interviewees.
[88] Anonymous interviewee.

how they never fully felt considered by their fellow citizens as members of the host-country national community.[89] A second generation Libyan Mancunian said:[90]

> British people will remind you that you are not one of them. As a child I went to a white school but you are not wanted, you are not 100% part of them. There are times you are subtly reminded that you are not British.

One interviewee explained that the feeling of being 'the other' and the hostility towards Muslims and Arabs in western countries is what explains his desire to return to Libya one day:[91]

> I think that the level of hostility towards Arabs, Muslims, the other, in the West has only really increased since, even before, September 11 but you can say that September 11 was the watershed moment. And so even for someone like me who has spent the majority of my life here [UK], you are always going to be considered the other here.

It is probably as a result of this that even the ones who were more critical about their right to define themselves as Libyans ultimately observed that their allegiance goes to Libya and even more so if compared with the allegiance to the host-country.[92] It was this sense of loyalty, allegiance, and duty towards the family and the 'homeland' that motivated many of them to contribute to the 2011 revolution.

Commonality was established among Libyans in the diaspora on the basis of these shared social practices. Whether performed within the political communities of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood or the NFSL or outside such political spaces, these social gatherings aimed at maintaining a sense of commonality along national lines. This is a political act that strengthens groupness and crystallises the sense of belonging to the Libyan nation-state as a frame of reference in the everyday life of individuals.

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[89] Anonymous interviewees.
[90] Anonymous interviewee.
[91] Anonymous interviewee.
[92] Anonymous interviewees.

Conclusions

This article unveiled the formation and evolution of the Libyan diaspora between 1969 and 2011, its relevance for the politics of the homeland and for nation-building and for the mutually constitutive relationship between concepts of nation, nationalism, diaspora and belonging. First of all, the analysis of the political projects of the political opposition in exile during the Gaddafi regime demonstrated that these projects had the nation at the centre of their defining framework for political action. Whether cohesive and inclusive in principle because characterised by a thin-centred nationalism or somehow more exclusive because combining thicker ideologies with nationalism, these projects fostered a form of long-distance nationalism among those involved in the political opposition and within their political communities. Although these projects had little impact on the politics of the homeland and on nation-building 'at home' until the second half of the 2000s, they enhanced the connectedness among political dissidents within the respective groups and strengthened their sense of belonging to Libya as a political community.

Secondly, the analysis of the micro interactional social mechanisms at work in the diaspora suggests that belonging to Libya is primarily conceived as the result of deeply entrenched kinship relations developed in the family and semi-private diasporic spaces such as Libyan schools and social gatherings that ultimately contribute to create the idea of Libya as an ethnic nation composed by individuals related by blood and sharing common heritage, language and ancestry, therefore confirming Benedict Anderson's hypothesis concerning the strengthening of ethnic identity in the diaspora. It was through these mechanisms that groupness and a sense of belonging to the Libyan nation developed in the diaspora together with a sense of loyalty, allegiance, and duty towards the family and the 'homeland'. The main limitation of this conception of nation, however, lays in the ability to transform it into a greater project of Libyan citizenship capable of cutting across ethnic, religious and ideological diversity. Indeed, while in the diaspora the nation is imagined as inclusive and

pluralistic, a community where unity overcome divisions based on ethnicity, region or city, the same is not necessarily the case 'at home'.

Political and ideological divisions in the diaspora together with the regime's policies at home and persecutions abroad were overall detrimental to the establishment of an all-Libyan diasporic public space. The ability of the social and cultural practices described above to aggregate Libyans against other forms of political divisions remains doubtful. And yet, a sense of commonality and connectedness allowed for an emotional sense of belonging to Libya to emerge which can help contextualise the involvement of the diaspora in the 2011 revolution and its aftermath for the benefit of future research while reaffirming the relevance of the nation-state as a locus of belonging in the twenty-first century.