

# **POLITICS OF PREDATION: TRENDS AND OBSTACLES TO DEVELOPMENT IN LIBYA**

A commentary by Emadeddin Badi and Roberta Maggi



Part of Dossier

## **SECURITY SECTORS IN THE MENA: THE ECONOMICS OF GOVERNANCE IN CRISIS**

edited by Eleonora Ardemagni and Andrea Cellino

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# **Politics of Predation: Trends and Obstacles to Development in Libya**

by **Emadeddin Badi** and **Roberta Maggi** in

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## Introduction

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The summer of 2022 has – like many summers before – been a catalyst of the Libyan population’s fatigue. On 1-2 July 2022, [young Libyans took to the streets cross-country](#) in a show of raw popular frustration. While the political agendas of those protesting across the country aren’t necessarily convergent, some recurring themes include the dual executives’ inadequacy and inefficiency in service provision, which is especially exacerbated this time of year with up to 10-hour long electricity cuts in over forty degrees Celsius heat.

The Libyan population’s woes aren’t however the by-product of months of neglect, but rather of decades. A key source of discontent since 2011 remains the various governments’ inability to curb – and at times even their encouragement of – armed groups’ predatory behaviours and illicit economies. Libya’s economy remains that of a rentier state. Yet, the total lack of a social contract that determines how to distribute oil revenue is at the heart of the multiplication of revenue-generation mechanisms and predatory behaviours by armed groups whose sole objective is getting their “fair” share of the oil wealth.

## The proliferation of predation

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The current power cuts are only one side-effect of years of lack of infrastructure protection from the predation practices of armed groups, corruption, and intra-Libyan conflict.[i] This trend is widespread across all services that the population should have access to in Libya (not least, oil), and compounded with pervasive instability and insecurity, has made living conditions unsustainable for all. This of course combines with the looming global food crisis resulting from – among others – the war in Ukraine, the months-long oil blockade that curtails state revenue, and the stalled peace process.

In an unpredictable economy post-revolution, state-disbursed salaries sponsored by oil wealth became a graal of easily accessible stable revenue, leading several of Libya’s influential armed groups to entrench themselves into state institutions to access this source of funding[ii]. This was of course on the side of their active participation in Libya’s informal economy, as state and non-state affiliated armed actors are deeply intertwined with networks that use illegal means to generate revenue, such as money laundering, migrant smuggling, narcotics, or arms trafficking, as well as maritime crime.

Trafficking aside, the proliferation of predatory behaviour among groups embedded in institutional structures poses severe problems, not least in matters of accountability. As these groups’ functions within broader security institutions become “regularized” (e.g. policing functions, such as arrests), conflicts of interests grow, and groups go as far as to benefit from their newfound ‘state providers’ clout to carry out their illegal activities with impunity. While Libya’s immediate post-revolutionary phase has seen communal relations leveraged to allow certain factions to wield violence with impunity, armed groups’ involvement and penetration of the various cogs of the Libyan criminal justice sector has now diluted the very notion of justice in the country.

More broadly, patterns of predation in Libya have taken on an entirely new dimension in the last year. Armed groups’ manoeuvring has clearly become more political, betraying their intent to not only penetrate, but also establish full and unfettered control over ministries and state apparatuses.[iii] The ongoing Libyan legitimacy crisis, coupled with an enabling international environment, has been leveraged by armed groups, many of which are now key interlocutors in political negotiations over cabinet posts. Indeed, control over portfolios such as Libya’s Interior and Defence Ministries would afford armed groups unprecedented de-jure influence as well as lavish funding to shape the ecosystems of predation they have nurtured in years past. This shift in armed groups’ modus operandi and ambitions also augurs a change in their predatory practices’ impacts. More importantly, it is a dynamic that should be heeded by development practitioners operating in Libya.

## Towards development?

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The grim situation the country has been plunged in - and its root causes - are at the heart of the inability to properly complete several stalled years-long projects carried out by development agencies, let alone maintain long-term results that ease the Libyan population's day-to-day conditions. In the security sector and beyond, political instability and the fragmentation and duplication of state institutions made state oversight obsolete. Unfortunately, while many engagements in Libya have sought to emphasize the "local" over the "national" as a means to offset the political fragmentation, this approach has yielded mixed results. Without a conflict-sensitive approach applied prior to implementing these programs, well-meaning initiatives may inadvertently legitimize unsavoury local elites at the expense of bolstering state sovereignty, in turn perpetuating the very fragmented status quo limiting these initiatives' ability to be scaled.

More importantly, the aforementioned pattern of elitist self-interest naturally means that the "partners" of development programmes – which are still largely operated on through state institutions – will seek to cap progress made towards meaningful reform. They will also attempt to find a balance between using progress for their legitimacy and keeping the status quo just enough to continue reaping benefits. In the case of engagement on reforms in the security sector, this explains why train-and-equip programmes, largely sponsored by regional actors, have been more successful than holistic reform and development programmes sponsored by multilateral agencies<sup>[iv]</sup>. The latter, by virtue of their broader programmatic ambitions, would lessen the extent to which local elites would be able to wield their influence within armed groups to convert it into political clout. This, in turn, would limit their ability to leverage this position to siphon off state funds – explaining why ad-hoc targeted programs are more desirable, but also less constructive.

International and regional actors have also both been culprits of supporting Libya's political elites and their vying for power, not least at the occasion of Libya's recent protests, where the protection of governments in place was prioritised over citizens' right to protest in several official statements. In international policymaking circles, predatory behaviour is often thought of as the purview of unruly armed actors, with analytical focus primarily placed on hybrid militias' mechanisms of enrichment. In practice however, Libya's political circles are where abuses of authority and positions of power are primarily concentrated. In fact, this is one of the main reasons why armed groups are now seeking to penetrate these spaces. This reality is one that should be recognized and reckoned with by policymakers, as cursory understandings of Libya's political economy will yield incomplete – or worse, flawed – approaches to remedying the country's ills.

## The way forward

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It is now high time to rethink development work in the Libyan context to not only reckon with, but also contribute to curb, predatory behaviours by state and non-state actors. At the macro-level, two main steps are needed for this to happen. On the one hand, the UN-led process must work to streamline the thematic focuses of negotiations in the economic, political, security and human rights tracks to ensure that overdue institutional oversight is restored across the board. This would require a dedicated effort to harmonize the sequencing and integration of these different tracks to guarantee they are self-reinforcing and enable collective progress. As the past year has illustrated, prioritizing one track over the others is a self-defeating policy. Moreover, the second tenet that will enable development work to be rethought is to recognize and adapt developmental programming to the fact that predatory behaviours exist within Libyan political circles. Engagement with an official internationally recognized (or otherwise) ministry, municipality or even local civil society organization does not guarantee conflict-sensitive implementation. This can be ensured through a programmatic emphasis on research, planning and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of programmes, which can help overcome the default assumption engagements with civil structures will not necessarily benefit predatory ecosystems.

On the other hand, a real emphasis should also be placed on Libya's economic growth. A momentum to diversify Libya's economy away from rentierism over the next decade must be kickstarted, with active support by development agencies. Rebuilding economic centres cross-country is a crucial step in providing alternatives to institutional entrenchment for stable revenue. This would also be a key cog for pushing forward disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs, as adequate (and attractive) economic alternatives are a prerequisite for this programmatic area's success. As a matter of priority, development agencies should also focus on providing demobilization incentives for groups that were integrated "wholesale" within institutions, as these are often responsible for saddling these entities due to their limited capacity.

Safeguards for the long-term stability of projects must also be integrated into the design of development assistance for its onset, and not be relegated to a mere afterthought. This means planning for the decrease of development assistance in the long-term, and financing it by building local capacity to design, implement and monitor the sustainability of development projects financed by the Libyan state. The creation of more coherent governance structures and mechanisms to build such local capacity remains of course the pre-requisite for any of these policies' implementation. Not only will this ultimately contribute to a fairer distribution of state revenue across communities nationwide (notably if funds are allocated for disbursement in an equitable way between municipalities), but it will also create opportunities for long-term professional development of Libya's youth. This will also have to be done through substantive investments in high-quality higher education, including scholarships to increase access to higher education in a socio-economic context which will remain fragile for years to come.

## References

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[i] For more on this topic, see T. Megerisi, “A Holistic Approach: Restoring Electricity and Water Services in Post-conflict Libya” in E. Badi, A. Gallet and R. Maggi, eds. *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya* (DCAF: Geneva, 2021)

[ii] For more on this topic, see E. Badi, *Exploring Armed Groups: Perspectives on Security Sector Reform in a Hybrid Environment* (DCAF: Geneva, 2020)

[iii] For more on this topic, see E. Badi, *Armed Groups No Longer: Libya’s Competitive Political Militias* (Commentary, in ISPI Dossier, 2022)

[iv] For more on this topic, see R. Maggi, *Building Security: How Europeans can help reform Libya* (ECFR, 2022) & F. Wehrey, “The Lost Decade: DDR and SSR Lessons in Libya since 2011” in E. Badi, A. Gallet and R. Maggi, eds. *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya* (DCAF: Geneva, 2021).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the sustainability of security sectors is increasingly affected by economic and financial challenges. After protracted conflicts and multiple economic crises, this trend encompasses both fractured states and relatively-stable countries. In some cases, budgets are reduced or more dependent on international or regional support; in others, salaries are low or even intermittent; too often, good financial governance is threatened by old and new dynamics.

As MENA countries are still affected by mismanagement and corruption amidst difficult financial contexts, it is becoming increasingly clear that the policies towards the MENA region – including in terms of security assistance – do not support the resilience of security forces and their good governance. Through a number of case-studies, this joint Dossier between ISPI and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) thus seeks to trace the most pressing security sectors' economic and financial issues, shedding light on trends and outlooks and trying to devise alternative blueprints for security assistance in the MENA region.

For full dossier, please find: "[Security Sectors in the MENA: The Economics of Governance in Crisis](https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/security-sectors-mena-economics-governance-crisis-35920)"  
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