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**Tribalism as urban planning:  
The role of non-state actors  
in governing Benghazi's  
peripheries**

**By Nada Elfeituri**

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# Tribalism as urban planning: The role of non-state actors in governing Benghazi's peripheries

By **Nada Elfeituri**

## Abstract

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The persistence of tribalism in countries of the Middle East and North Africa has posed a challenge to researchers and practitioners seeking to understand the political and social drivers of change in the region, particularly after the 2011 revolutions which saw the collapse of many governments and a resurgence in the prominence of tribal networks. The presence and role of tribal structures in cities – one of many non-state actors attempting to fill the governance gap – has increasingly become a key element in how they function today, particularly in planning, service delivery and security.

The accepted binary that places tribalism as a nomadic or rural practice – one which diminishes in settled and urban populations – is no longer adequate to understand developments occurring in the social, political and spatial arenas of these cities. Tribal networks have evolved and adapted over the years, both influencing and being affected by state policies and laws. Studies that attempt to understand tribal phenomena outside of anthropology tend to look at the relationship between tribe and state without examining how this relationship plays out in urban areas.

This research aims to reconceptualise the notion of tribalism in the MENA region in order to understand contemporary urban tribal practices, by looking at the tribe and the urban rather than the tribe and state alone. It will first establish a framework of understanding tribalism that builds on Ibn Khaldun's conception of the Arab tribe as a form of social solidarity, placing this within the notion of precarious urbanism. It will then look at the case of urban tribalism in Libya, analysing the relationship between tribalism, the state and the city, in order to understand why tribalism persists and what impact it has on city planning today. This will be explored in depth by analysing the current role of tribalism in Benghazi's peripheral areas.

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**This research  
attempts to  
understand tribalism  
as one aspect of  
a complex system  
governing cities in  
the region today**

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# 01. Introduction

Nine years after the revolutions that swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the region continues to witness rapid transformation catalysed in part by the political transitions that began in 2011. Cities have become the platform from which to make sense of these changes, because they are the sites from where uprisings, conflicts and other momentous events often begin. This has led to an increasing number of studies investigating the region from a social-spatial point of view (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz 2011, Allegra et al. 2013, Atia 2017).

In the face of these transitions, the roles of state and non-state actors have become blurred. There has been a resurgence in alternative forms of social and political governance due to state fragility, most notably a rise in tribal practices. While tribalism forms the historic basis of societies in the MENA region, it is taking on new roles beyond social life. Tribal networks are becoming entrenched in politics and influencing how cities function today, including in service delivery (Al-Mohammed, 2011), security (Dukhan, 2012) and planning (Abu-Hamdi 2016). This research is concerned with the latter point and seeks to understand how contemporary urban tribalism influences spatial planning.

As non-state actors become more involved in the management of cities, it is necessary to understand how this impacts urban life and city growth, especially as cities in the region become increasingly precarious due to political instability and military action. Issues such as housing crises, failing infrastructure and the rise in informal settlements are negatively impacting the quality of life in cities of the region, as well as mass displacement and the militarisation of urban spaces in cities witnessing armed conflict.

Many governments have attempted to address these issues through master planning and other urban development tools, but the fragility of – and internal conflicts among – state institutions has limited the effectiveness of these interventions, leading to this reliance on local non-state actors. The current research on state-building in the region often attributes state failure to the inherent tribal nature of MENA societies – echoing the popular trope of the ‘Arab’ states as a group of tribes with a flag (Cherstich, 2011) – but this analysis is simplistic and does not consider the multifaceted nature of these societies.

Tribal resurgence in the region is not well researched. Studies of tribal societies are primarily limited to historical anthropological analyses, while research into the politics of tribalism focuses on the relationship between tribes and state formation. The tribe is often portrayed as antagonistic to the state or utilised as a tool to consolidate power by authoritarian regimes. Research on the role of tribal identity and practices in everyday life often utilise reductionist and stereotypical language (Benkato, 2012). In most cases, the tribe is seen as antithetical to the urban and therefore not relevant in the study of cities.

And yet, tribalism persists in cities of the MENA region, and has always played a role in the lives of urban dwellers. Whether it is a minimal influence in solving interpersonal disputes or a key component in land management and local governance, the legacy of tribalism remains entrenched in societies of the region. It has affected and been affected by factors such as colonisation, authoritarianism and urbanisation. This research attempts to understand tribalism as one aspect of a complex system governing cities in the region today, and therefore utilises a multidisciplinary approach that bridges anthropology with governance and urban studies.

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**As non-state actors become more involved in the management of cities, it is necessary to understand how this impacts urban life and city growth, especially as cities in the MENA region become increasingly precarious due to political instability and military action.**

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### **Research objective and outline of the study**

Despite modernisation efforts by national governments, tribalism has not been entirely eradicated in the MENA region. Instead, it has transformed into a force that is intertwined with the growth of cities and societies. The accepted binary that places tribalism as a nomadic practice which diminishes in settled and urban populations is no longer an adequate framework to understand developments occurring in the social, political and spatial arenas of these cities (Khamaisi, 2012).

Why does this system continue to be relevant for cities today, and what role does it play as a force in shaping the urban? The purpose of this research is to investigate tribalism during periods of precarity, by focusing on how tribal networks connect with other systems in order to govern the city and looking specifically at urban planning practices. It will attempt to understand the intricate and ever-evolving relationship between tribalism, the state and the city. The findings of this research shed some light on the role that tribalism plays in the region today – focusing on the agency of the individuals rather than viewing tribalism as a homogenous monolith – and are relevant for policymaking and planning in these precarious times.

This research first calls for a reconceptualisation of the notion of tribalism. The current understanding of this concept is static and does not consider the temporal and spatial transformation of tribal societies. Tribalism is not just a means of social organisation but a set of practices and principles which can be understood as a system. By investigating tribalism in urban areas, this research will show that this system has remained relevant as a social and political tool of governance and planning, particularly in times of crisis.

The research will focus on Libya, a country in which this tribal role has become heightened in recent years, yet where there is a notable gap in studies. The country's isolation in the past few decades due to sanctions and policies of the Gadhafi regime is a contributing factor to its near absence in academic works. This research therefore uses Libya as a case study, not only due to its contextual factors that offer unique insights to the research, but in order to contribute to its limited scholarship.

Within the Libyan context, the research will center on Benghazi. The reason for this comes from the author's experience in witnessing firsthand the increasing utilisation of tribal discourse and social systems in the city after 2011. Tribalism has rapidly come to permeate every facet of life in the city, from the dependence on tribal connections for livelihoods to the mediation of tribal leaders in conflict resolution (Cherstich, 2014). What is striking about Benghazi today is how the city continues to grow even in the absence of the state, with local actors managing this growth.

The second section consists of a literature review on existing studies around tribalism in the MENA region, and from this review formulates a framework that reconceptualises contemporary tribalism in urban areas. The third section analyses the relationship between the tribe and state in the context of Libya, through a historic lens, in order to understand tribal systems on a national level. It then looks at the transformation of tribalism during the growth of Benghazi, investigating its role in the shaping of the urban through the overlap between systems of state and non-state governance. It will then conclude with recommendations for future pathways into social-spatial research on cities in the region.

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**This research attempts to understand tribalism as one aspect of a complex system governing cities in the region today, and therefore utilises a multidisciplinary approach that bridges anthropology with governance and urban studies.**

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**In order to differentiate between ‘traditional’ tribalism and its more contemporary urban manifestations, this thesis proposes the concept of ‘urban ‘asabiyya’ (العصبية المدنية), or urban tribal solidarity, as a mode of coping with precarious urbanism.**

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## 02. Reframing tribalism

### 2.1 Defining tribalism

There is no set definition of the term ‘tribalism’. It is a loaded term that today comes with a host of connotations, much of which negatively view tribalism as a primitive and regressive practice. This can be attributed in part to early colonial anthropological research, which focused on the conflictive and violent nature of tribal groups, and which utilised segmentary lineage theory to understand how these groups were ordered. Much of the scholarship in Western academia were built on these initial impressions of tribalism as disorderly savage groups (Sneath, 2016). These early works portray tribal societies as nomadic pastoralists who were bound by kinship relations.

Later studies rejected these simplistic definitions, attempting instead to understand the complex nature of tribal societies, particularly after the creation of nation-states in the region (Abu-Lughod, 1989) (Ahmida, 1994). This body of research also moved away from segmentation theory and attempted to approach tribalism through different theoretical conceptions. The most notable effort has been “Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East”, which called for a multi-disciplinary approach in the study of tribes and which merged anthropological theories with that of history and political science (Khoury and Kostiner, 1990).

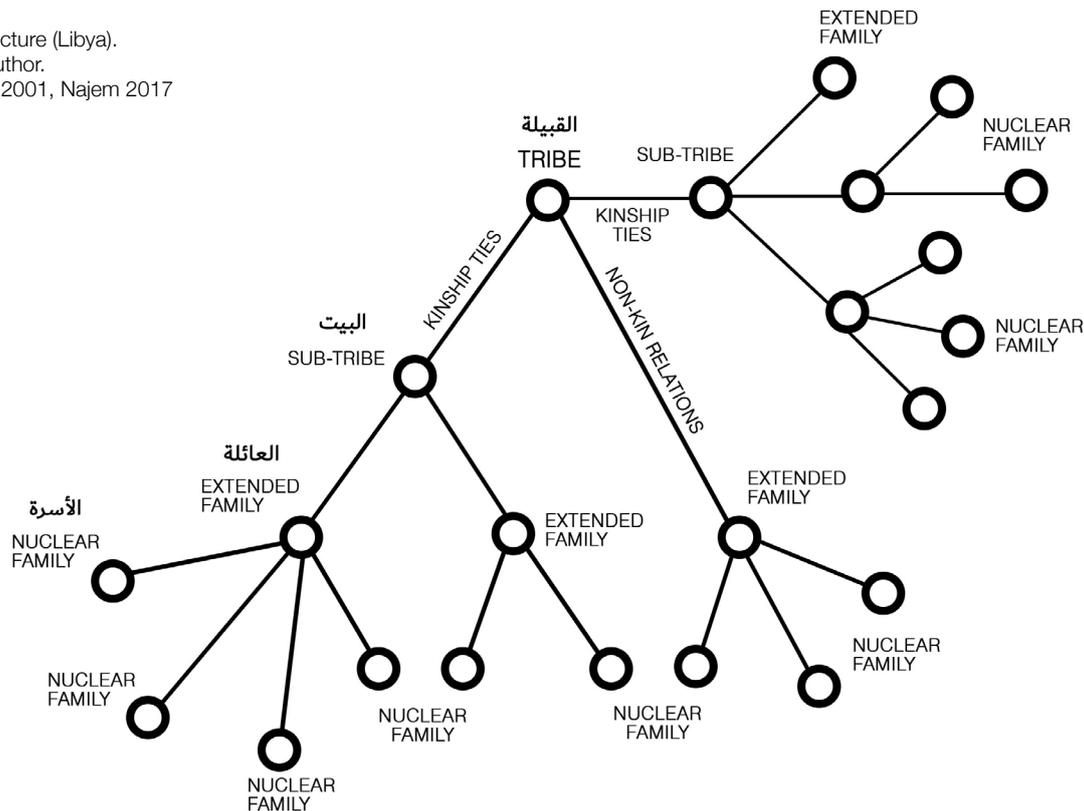
Among the most salient arguments in this collection of essays are Richard Tapper’s point that tribes are not necessarily linked to pastoral nomadism, since in some regions they are “settled cultivators who had little or no leaning to pastoralism or nomadism” (Khoury and Kostiner, 1990, p. 4), and Albert Hourani’s observation that tribes owe their solidarity to the “myth of common ancestry” rather than true blood ties (Khoury and Kostiner, 1990, p. 5).

Tribalism as a term is also being challenged by anthropologists due to its colonialist legacy and the problematic connotations that the term continues to carry (Sneath, 2016). Mafeje (1971) points out that the term did not exist in the native language of these groups and was created as part of a Western lens to understand societies in developing societies, and in many cases Western authorities were responsible for *creating* these tribal groupings. In the MENA region the term predates the colonial era. In Arabic, the word for tribalism is ‘al-qabila’ (القبيلة) and it is present in the historic works of Arabic scholars such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Khaldun.

It is important to note that tribalism is not one generic term that can be applied to any social group but rather part of a hierarchal structure that places immediate family as the nucleus of this structure (Obeidi, 2001). Figure 1.1 highlights this structure, which shows that the tribe ultimately can be understood as a system of extended family relationships, a description that former Libyan leader Muammer Gadhafi used to describe Libyan tribes (Martinez, 2007). Within a tribe there is a complex process of power negotiations among sub-tribes and families; the tribe is not a homogenous entity ruled only by a single leader (Hüsken, 2013). The size of a tribe can range from a few hundred members to over a million people.

**FIGURE 1.1**

Basic tribal structure (Libya).  
Produced by author.  
Source: Obeidi 2001, Najem 2017



The definition of tribalism often becomes tangled in the interchangeable use of key terminology (Maisel, 2014). Here it is important to clarify these different terms. Nomadism is a lifestyle linked to roving communities that do not settle in one place. In Arabic, nomads are referred to as 'bedouins' (البدو), nomads who lived in desert areas. Tribalism, on the other hand, is a social system of extended familial relations, although these relations are not always built on blood ties but also through different forms of cooperation and cohabitation (Najem, 2017). While nomads are tribal in order to survive the extreme environments where they live, tribes are not always nomadic (Khoury and Kostiner, 1990). In Faraj Najem's study of Libyan tribes, he describes the conditions needed for a tribe to exist as having a plot of land suitable for agriculture and pasture, defined with borders and called 'watan' (وطن) or homeland (Najem, 2017, p. 230).

Tribal societies define themselves by certain characteristics, such as loyalty to other tribal members (Elbendak, 2008), chivalry, hospitality and classlessness (Obeidi, 2001). Tribal structures are organised in such a way where there is a 'chief' representative of the entire tribe, and representatives on each level of the sub-tribes and families. Tribal systems also contain their own form of justice to resolve disputes, known as 'urf' (عرف), as well as to manage land and water rights (Hajjaji, 1967).

Tribal systems of governance revolve around the issue of territory and land ownership, and tribalism cannot be understood as a social system without

this spatial element. Many tribal societies were founded on agrarian and pastoral lifestyles where land was the central element for livelihoods and housing. For this reason, tribalism can be understood through what Robert Sack terms 'human territoriality' (Sack, 1989). He lists three elements that form the basis of this concept, namely a classification by area, a form of (physical) communication such as a boundary, and the exercise of control over the area (Sack, 1989, p.21-22). These elements are present in tribal systems.

## 2.2 Bedu – huthur divide

In the region there is a polarised approach to the topic of tribalism, reflected in the works of Arabic authors and academics. Many of these publications adopt the view of Western literature that perceives tribalism as a dangerous threat to modern civilisation, whose role should be limited to the social good it plays in solving inter-personal disputes (Elbabour, 2011a) (Al-Qassemi, 2012) (Alfagih, 2016). In their view, tribal societies are unable to innovate or develop away from traditional customs and are at odds with political and economic growth and development.

### NOTE 01

In Standard Arabic the term is 'hathar' (حضر) while in colloquial Libyan Arabic it is 'huthur' (حضور).

This view of tribalism is part of a general concept in the region which divides society generally as 'bedu' (بدو) or bedouin and 'huthur'<sup>1</sup> (حضور), meaning settled. Colonial forces used this divide to set the urban areas as being the opposite of rural. The urban was framed as the place where 'civilised' merchant elites lived and the rural was seen as being the domain of tribal communities. In order to control populations, this binary was used as a tool to "pit the countryside against the towns, and the nomadic and seminomadic tribes against the new, urban-based nationalist elites" (Khoury and Kostiner, 1990, p. 14). This created tensions between those who lived in the urban areas and those who lived in the peripheral countryside.

This binary is problematic because it assumes that those who live in urban areas have no tribal links, or that the lifestyles of those who live in rural areas has not been influenced by urban practices. However, studies of the region show that this is not the case (Khamaisi, 2012). Amal Obeidi rejects the bedu-huthur divide because she asserts that "tribalism can exist equally as a social organisation in cities as in rural areas or in the desert among nomadic tribes" (Obeidi, 2001, p. 117).

Halim Barakat proposed a third category in order to move away from what he calls the 'cliché' of the binary, by including the village or 'peasant life' as a third pattern of living (Barakat, 1993, p. 48). The emergence of a peasant class in the region can be traced to the formation of the modern state after independence and the emergence of patron-client relationships between citizens and the state (Anderson, 1990). This triad of nomadic – rural – urban life can also be used to understand the urbanisation process in the region away from the agonistic relationship between state and tribe, and where tribalism is an element that remains present but with different manifestations.

## 2.3 Tribalism and social solidarity

The most prominent theory on tribal societies comes from Ibn Khaldun, who developed the notion of 'asabiyya' (عصبية) (Ibn Khaldun, 1967), a theory that is frequently utilised in the study of Arab societies (Ladjal, 2016). 'Asabiyya is a concept which denotes group feeling or social solidarity, applied specifically to the tribes of the MENA region. It is the bond that keeps the tribe together in order to support one another in everyday life, including political and economic matters (Alatas, 2017). This social solidarity depends to some extent on kinship attachment, but its primary function was to ensure survival in the harsh desert environment that Bedouins once inhabited (Barakat, 1993).

The bedu-huthur divide forms the basis of Ibn Khaldun's research, but he understood them not as opposites but rather as a natural continuation. Bedouin tribal society is described as the first phase of the urbanisation process; once the basic needs of life are fulfilled (through agriculture, pastoralism, etc.) then social groups tend to settle (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p.164). In Ibn Khaldun's understanding of this transformation, social solidarity weakens as tribes move into the city and become sedentary.

The Khaldunian understanding of social solidarity is part of his work on the cycle in the rise and decay of civilisation and states, in which this solidarity decreases as communities become more urbanised and therefore conditioned to an easier life because they rely on leadership for protection and services, rather than on themselves (Alatas, 2017). This creates social stratification, which goes against the tribal character of classlessness. The lack of social solidarity in urban areas makes them susceptible to attack by non-urban tribal groups whose social solidarity remains strong.

It is important to make a key point here. While Ibn Khaldun speaks of the decrease in social solidarity in the city, he does not mention the decrease in tribalism per se, merely that the ties between tribal members is weaker due to the reliance on another authority for services and protection, such as the state. 'Asabiyya and tribalism are often conflated and used interchangeably in the literature (Maisel, 2014), but it is crucial to make the distinction between the two phenomena. Tribalism is based on 'asabiyya, but this solidarity can occur even in groups not connected by blood relations (Obeidi, 2001). Therefore, social solidarity decreases in cities where there is strong leadership (i.e. the state), but the tribe – and the memory of kin networks – remains.

## 2.4 Tribalism as ideology

“...تستطيع الأيدولوجية أن تعيش في لغة الجماعة, من دون أن تلمس واقعها...”

الصادق النهوم, 1996, ص. 79<sup>2</sup>

**NOTE 02**  
 “...an ideology can exist in the language of a group without ever touching their reality...”  
 – Al-Sadeq Al-Naihoum, 1996, p. 79 (author's translation)

Another conceptualisation of tribalism that has emerged more recently frames it as an ideology, used to serve social and political ambitions (Alabed, 2017). In his argument against the dichotomy of tribalism and nationalism, Igor Cherstich proposes that both are ideologies which can be utilised depending on the need of the person (Cherstich, 2015). He states that ‘tribesmen’ have a host of narratives that they utilise and combine in various ways to negotiate social life. These narratives can be understood as ideologies, whether they are nationalism, religion, regionalism, or tribalism. It is “a language that tribesmen use to manipulate reality, rather than a static reality in itself” (Cherstich, 2015, p. 410). Therefore, in urban areas, the tribe is one of many ideologies held by city dwellers and constitutes one facet of a much more complex identity and mode of negotiating urban life.

Tribalism as an ideology applies in nomadic, rural and urban settings, one that is underpinned by human territoriality. This understanding accounts for the inclusion of ‘outside’ people and the flexibility of tribal rules, as well as the phenomenon of ‘identity-switching’ depending on the situation that individuals find themselves in (Hüsken, 2013, p.219). For example, in Benghazi many affluent families take up an anti-tribal stance as part of their ‘urban’ identity while still depending on extended family and tribal systems in times of emergency (Hüsken, 2013, p.219-220). It also counters the narrative that communities in the MENA region are ‘inherently’ tribal.

In Amal Obeidi’s study of political culture in Libya, she conducted a survey of 500 university students in Benghazi (Obeidi, 2001). The most pertinent results of her study showed the following:

- Almost 50% of the population had a strong or average attachment to their tribe, regardless of whether they were urban or rurally based.
- More than 50% of the Libyan population would be willing to see tribalism disappear from their society.
- Those who were least likely to feel attached to their tribe were Libyans who came from lower socio-economic classes (and received no support from their tribe) or whose mothers were educated to university level.

A similar study on social transformation by El-Fathaly and Palmer conducted almost two decades before Obeidi’s survey revealed similar results, namely that tribalism as an identity and social system persisted in urban areas, but that

Libyans would be willing to disassociate from a tribal system if they could entirely rely on the state (El-Fathaly and Palmer, 1980). They found that it was not the process of moving into a city which decreased tribal behaviour, but rather the access to education systems and mass media available in these urban areas. This can be interpreted as the of gaining knowledge and information which equips individuals to depend on alternative methods for their livelihood and navigation of everyday life, reducing their reliance on a family system.

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## **Tribal dependence ebbs and flows in the same way that religious or national sentiment does, and it persists because of its continued utility in the lives of urban dwellers.**

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These studies show that the individual's negotiation of their tribal identity is dependent on several external factors related to their everyday life. Tribal dependence ebbs and flows in the same way that religious or national sentiment does, and it persists because of its continued utility in the lives of urban dwellers. In the case of Libya, tribalism can be framed as a form of civil society (Obeidi, 2001).

If tribalism is understood as an ideological tool that is built on social solidarity, and if this ideology transforms as social groups move to or from rural areas to the city as solidarity decreases, then how can we understand this reversal of process, namely the growth of social solidarity in urban areas within the frame of tribal ties? It is here that we must position sociological and anthropological works into urban studies, to situate 'asabiyya into the city, to understand the dimensions of tribalism within larger urban systems and its effect on – and how it is affected by – urban politics and planning.

### **2.5 Tribalism in times of precarity**

In studies of contemporary urban tribalism in the region, the common pattern is that tribal solidarity emerges in times and places where the state is particularly weak or absent, especially during periods of conflict and political instability. This follows the general trend of a rise in the role of non-state actors to cover the gap left by the government. In the city, this context can be framed as precarious urbanism.

There is an emerging body of work which examines precarity in cities and how communities cope in situations marked by uncertainty in day to day life, primarily due to external influences (Philo et al., 2019). Neoliberal policies, climate-induced disasters and conflict are some of the factors that have led to instability in urban areas, although root causes of precariousness in many places can also be traced to the legacy of colonial and neocolonial practices. This precarity has been catalysed by rapid urbanisation and the growth of cities (Simone and Pieterse, 2017). The outcome is manifested in insecure employment, the proliferation of 'informal' settlements and mass displacement, among other consequences.

Conceptually, precarious urbanism has been defined as the state of not being securely fixed geographically, associated with risk or danger (Philo et al., 2019). But while precarity is conceived of as a condition, it can also be understood as a point of mobilisation that sparks social movements (Waite, 2009). Abdoumalig Simone has written on methods that urban communities in Africa and Asia use to cope with and navigate precarity, often through the emergence of 'informal' social networks (Simone 2004, Simone 2017). While these networks are based on historic formations and collaborations, they are 'remade' in the urban context. However, they are often relied upon out of necessity rather than the desire of the individual, because they put the individual under harm of exploitation and manipulation (Simone, 2004, p.11).

Urban areas in the MENA region can be considered as sites of protracted precarity (Razzaz, 1993), particularly those urban centers that have grown rapidly due to the oil boom of the 1960s, and whose survival depends on the value of this finite resource for maintenance of the built environment, the importing of foreign labour and subsidising imported goods. Janet Abu-Lughod refers to them as 'instant cities' (Abu-Lughod, 1996).

The contemporary planning of cities in the region began during the period of colonisation (Abu-Lughod 1976). The aim of this planning was to divide the city and create enclaves that privileged the rich merchant class and to entrench the presence of the colonising society. Many of the problems facing MENA cities – including the development of the capital cities at the expense of smaller cities and towns, the subsequent migration to these cities leading to urban sprawl, and the formation of enclaves in these cities – have stemmed from this urban planning legacy (Abu-Lughod 1976).

After gaining independence, the authoritarian regimes that came to power further exacerbated these conditions through a series of policies to consolidate their control. Planning was used as a tool to control land and people (Verdeil and Nasr, 2017). The corrupt nature of these regimes led to policies that created issues such as housing crises and urban design that favoured the elite and enhanced the securitisation of the city. The effect of poor urban planning policies in these cities – among other factors – culminated in mass revolutions across the region in 2011, many of which led to regime change (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz 2011, Allegra et al. 2013). This precarity is now taking on new forms in light of the struggles with the transition to 'democracy'.

The role of the state in MENA cities has been itself quite precarious, oscillating between absolute power and complete absence. Within this context, urban dwellers have become self-reliant on survival, forming what Simone terms 'social collaboration', in the form of extended systems based on family and social ties (Simone, 2004). Asif Bayat describes this phenomenon as the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary', whereby people utilise different tactics – what he calls 'non-movements' – to survive and achieve prosperity outside of the established system (Bayat, 2013, p. 14 -15). It is here that the notion of social tribal solidarity can be situated; collective acts built on shared practices and kinship ties. This tribalism is not the social system of the rural area, but rather one that has been configured to operate within the complexity of city life.

In what ways is this urban solidarity mobilised in precarious urban contexts? In Iraq, tribal ties are called upon for security purposes following the lawlessness that characterised the fall of Saddam Hussein, whether to resolve social issues or as protection from criminal gangs (Al-Mohammed, 2011). In Syria, tribes have supported armed resistance in times when the regime has used force against its people (Dukhan, 2012), and in Israel-Palestine the tribe acts as a network to help its members gain access to resources in a system that has disenfranchised them (Tamari et al., 2016).

It is pertinent here to mention that these processes – while built on kinship and social ties – are not separated from 'formal' state or other social processes. Oftentimes there exists a negotiation and cooperation with local authorities, the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), either through formal channels of governance or, more often, through networks of familiarity between individuals in these different institutions.

## **2.6 Analytical framework**

The previous section shows that tribalism can be understood as a flexible ideology based on kinship relations, utilised by communities as a mode of viable living and can occur in different forms of human settlement. Tribal relations foster a sense of social solidarity built on identity and self-organisation, and this solidarity wanes when the individuals depend on other sources of maintaining their livelihood and security. It re-emerges in situations of precarity when these other sources of survival become weak or absent.

In the case of the MENA region after 2011, tribal solidarity has seen a resurgence because of the weakness or complete collapse of the state. In cities, this solidarity has taken on its own dimensions, merging with other social, economic and political networks. In order to differentiate between 'traditional'

tribalism and its more contemporary urban manifestations, this thesis proposes the concept of 'urban 'asabiyya' (العصبية المدنية), or urban tribal solidarity, as a mode of coping with precarious urbanism. It is not tribalism per se that has been re-emerging in the region but rather social solidarity, built on – among other things – tribal kinship relations.

This concept has emerged from the need for more nuanced understandings of contemporary tribal practices in cities, which have been observed not only in Libya (Cherstich, 2015), but also in Iraq (Al-Mohammed, 2011), Syria (Dukhan, 2012), Jordan (Abu-Hamdi 2016), Saudi Arabia (Maisel, 2014) and Israel-Palestine (Tamari et al., 2016, Khamaisi, 2012). It responds to calls for the emergence of local theories from the region that move away from Eurocentrism (Abu-Kughod, 1996) (Hanafi, 2017), a move that is crucial when considering that previous conceptualisations of tribalism come mainly from Western ethnography.

However, studies of contemporary tribalism often employ a framework around the relationship between the state and tribe. While this is undoubtedly an important lens, it is no longer adequate in understanding the complexity of tribalism in urban areas. Instead, this research proposes an analysis that responds to calls by Ferguson and Gupta to look beyond state-society relations, into the roles that non-state actors play in different scales of governmentality, not as 'below the state' or in opposition to it but rather coexisting with it (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002, p. 994).

The scale of cooperation that will be investigated is the city. This will be done through Magnusson's notion of 'seeing like a city', acknowledging that authority exists not only with the state but also within urban practices that are by their nature political (Magnusson, 2010). The local practices of urban tribal solidarity will be analysed as they relate to the growth and planning of the city, which will allow an alternative understanding of planning to emerge beyond the accepted notion of planning as a bureaucratic tool of the state (Fawaz 2009, Verdeil and Nasr, 2017). This analysis will look at the overlapping roles between fragmented state government, local governance structures and non-state political powers, in order to investigate how the role of tribalism has transformed. This dual analysis of state/tribe and city/tribe will be analysed in the context of re-emerging tribalism in Benghazi during the period of Libya's political transition.

## **2.7 Methodology**

### **Methods of study**

The analysis is built on three main methods, namely a review of existing published literature and media reports, an overview of government policies, and the author's own personal experiences in working on socio-spatial issues in the country. The literature covers trends in social and urban changes in Libya generally and Benghazi specifically. Because literature on Libya is generally quite scarce, this gap has been supplemented with media reports, including news articles and opinion pieces.

Government laws and policies were accessed online, and focus was placed on legislation that covered issues related to both tribalism and urban planning. Along with these sources, the author also spent two years working on projects related to post-conflict reconstruction and planning in the city of Benghazi which involved working with state and non-state actors. Published reports from these projects are assessed, along with the author's personal observations during the project implementation. This information is analysed by looking at the impact that both urban and tribal-related policies and practices have had on one another throughout history, at the national, city and district level.

### **Limitations of the study**

Tribalism is at its core a social system, and like many social systems it is fluid and dynamic. As will be shown in the study, the prominence of tribal systems rises and falls over time. For this reason, this research acknowledges that the understanding of tribalism that has been depicted is relevant in the current context of the region today, but that it will likely change over time.

Tribal systems are often intertwined not only with political systems but also with religious ideology (Ibn Khaldun, 1967), the value of seniority and issues of gender. Because it is a broad topic of study, for the purpose of this research only the socio-political aspect of tribalism in everyday public life will be touched upon. However, the study acknowledges the role that religion, city identity and gender plays in perceptions and engagement with tribal practices in the lives of people in the region.

The research also recognises that tribalism encompasses a diverse range of practices and beliefs. While patterns of similarity can certainly be traced, it is acknowledged that tribal systems also carry specific features formed by local contexts and historic events. For example, tribalism in much of the Levant is compounded by sectarianism, while in sub-Saharan Africa is it also linked to ethnicity. The form of tribalism presented in this research is therefore specific to Eastern Libya.

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**The structure of Libyan society has historically been tribal, with the tribe playing important social, economic and political roles in conflict mediation, property management and the provision of basic services.**

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## 03. Libya and Benghazi

*“Libyans are attached to their tribe, each dragging it like an umbilical cord behind him.”*

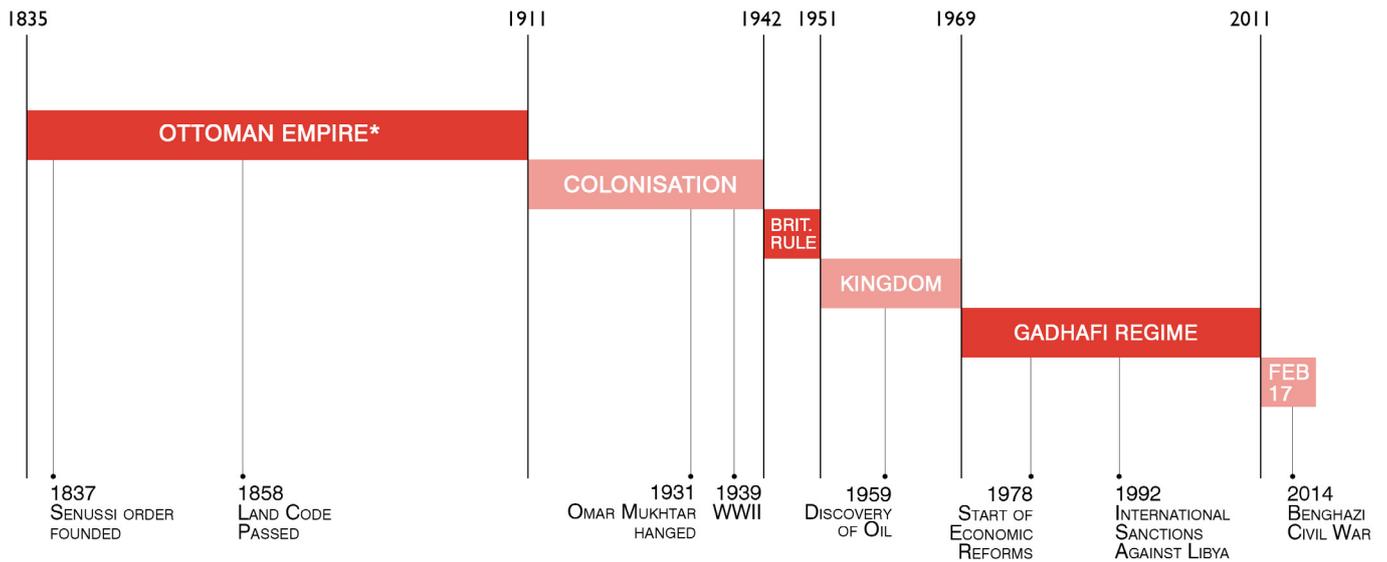
- Mansour Boushnaf, Chewing Gum

### 3.1 Context

Libya's location in the Southern Mediterranean at the intersection of Europe, Africa and West Asia has given it a unique geographical vantage point, one that has influenced its culture, society and politics. Its large territorial expanse covers desert, mountains and the sea, but contains a small population that are mainly concentrated along the coast. The country is comprised of three historic regions – Tripolitania (western Libya), Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) and Fezzan (southern Libya) – each with its own distinct cultural identity (Ahmida, 2005). This makes Libyan society quite diverse, with the unifying commonalities being religion (Islam), language (Arabic) and social organisation (tribe).

Libya's modern history is turbulent, with a brutal colonisation in the beginning of the 20th century that killed almost one third of the population (Anderson, 1990). A brief period of monarchial rule set the gears in motion for oil-led development, but the kingdom was overthrown by a military with socialist, pan-Arab ideals that devolved into a repressive dictatorship. 42 years of authoritarianism was brought to an end in 2011 by popular uprising, but this turned into a civil and proxy war that is ongoing today. Figure 3.1 depicts a timeline of Libya's modern history. In the midst of these transitions, Libyan cities rapidly grew as the population migrated to these urban centers (Abu-Lughod, 1976).

Libya is one of the most urbanised countries in Africa, with almost 80% of the population living in cities, and approximately one third of this population located in the two largest cities, Tripoli and Benghazi (LOOPS, 2016). To give an idea of how fast this growth occurred, only 20-30% of the population was urban in the 1950s (Abu-Lughod, 1996). It is a rentier state, as oil wealth is redistributed through a surplus of public sector jobs



\*AFTER THE END OF THE KARAMANLI DYNASTY AND START OF DIRECT OTTOMAN RULE

**FIGURE 3.1**

Timeline of Libya's Modern History.  
Produced by author.  
Sources: Kikhia, 1997, Martinez 2007

that employ much of the population (Kikhia, 1997). Libyan society has undergone a momentous transformation in the past 60 years, from a primarily rural agrarian and pastoral society to an urbanised population living off of this oil wealth.

After the 2011 revolution and overthrow of the Gadhafi regime, Libya was unable to establish a unified national government due to the failure of various elected bodies to hand over power. Coupled with a proliferation of armed groups that emerged from 2011 and a legacy of fragmented institutions from the Gadhafi era, Libya has been embroiled in a civil war fueled by international actors. This has led to an economic collapse and breakdown of governance in Libyan cities. The result has been an increased prominence in the role of non-state actors to fill these gaps, including civil society groups, international organisation and tribal networks.

The structure of Libyan society has historically been tribal, with the tribe playing important social, economic and political roles in conflict mediation, property management and the provision of basic services (Ben Lamma, 2017). Most cities in Libya have grown around tribal settlements, with the exceptions being Tripoli – the capital city – and Benghazi, which were developed due to their strategic coastal location<sup>3</sup>. These cities have grown due to internal migration from rural areas because of the opportunities they offered, and thus are made up of people with different tribal backgrounds. Different governments have had different approaches to dealing with the tribal nature of the society depending on their goals.

**NOTE 03**

Settlements in coastal areas were primarily built around trade and commerce, since the land is not suitable for agriculture.

**NOTE 04**

While this research defines 'state' based on the Westphalian notion of governance and sovereignty, I acknowledge that it is a term that should be further problematised.

### 3.2 Tribe and state

This section will explore the relationship between tribalism and the state, in order to analyse the ways in which tribal and state systems both work together and against one another, particularly during periods of political instability. The relatively limited studies that exist on Libya extensively analysed the relationship between tribe and state (Anderson 1990, Ladjal 2016, Ben Lamma 2017). For this reason, the focus will be on this relationship as it pertains to the spatial manifestations of tribalism, primarily the relationship between tribe, land and state.

Because of the multiple regime changes that Libya has witnessed in its short history as a nation state<sup>4</sup>, this section will only focus on three key eras; during Italian colonisation, the Gadhafi regime era and post-2011 revolution; eras that the author considers crucial in the shaping of Libya today. However, some events during the Kingdom of Libya era will be mentioned.

”ماني مرض غير دار العقيلة...وحبس القبيلة... وبعد الجيا من بلاد الوصيلة”<sup>5</sup>

- رجب بوحويش

**NOTE 05**

*“I have no illness but this place of Egaila, the imprisonment of my tribe, and separation from my kin’s abode.”*  
- Rajab Buhwaish (Translation by Khaled Mattawa, in Babour 2011b)

During the start of the Italian campaign to colonise Libya in September 1911, Libya was already ‘modernising’ under the Ottoman Empire (Anderson, 1990). During that time, tribal groups had largely settled in cities and villages in the Northern part of the country, while the Southern desert area still contained nomadic and semi-nomadic groups (Elbendak, 2008). The Senussia Order – a socio-religious movement that acted as a quasi-independent state under the Ottomans – had integrated tribalism into its structure in Cyrenaica (Ahmida, 2005). This movement developed a strong resistance to the Italians that lasted for 21 years. In order to quell this tribally-led dissent, Italian authorities developed several policies in order to weaken the resistance. Three of the most significant ones will be covered here.

The first policy was to create a divide between urban inhabitants and the hinterlands. The Italians had begun the occupation by taking control of the coastal cities, and so the opposition movement was based primarily in the rural areas. The Italians physically isolated these cities through checkpoints and promoted a narrative which depicted the conflict as between ‘civilised’ urban dwellers and ‘backwards’ village people. This division was built on the ambitions of the merchant class who lived in the city, and these urban dwellers were offered jobs and other means of securing their livelihoods (Ahmida, 2005), although it was also driven through scare tactics such as daily executions of ‘tribal rebels’ in public places. This divisive approach is notable considering that there is no divide between the city and countryside in Libya; cities were not isolated enclaves but rather interconnected with the surroundings countryside through trade and social ties (Ahmida, 2005) (Elbabour, 2011b). Indeed, studies of Eastern Libya have shown that the distinction between rural and urban can be difficult to make (Hüsken, 2013).

The second tactic was the appropriation of land from tribal groups for the creation of settlements dedicated to Italian families (Hajjaji 1967). A land coding system adopted from the Ottoman era was used to categorise land into private ownership, state land, cultural-religious land, land for public interest and dead wasteland not suitable for cultivation (Ahmida, 1994, p.35). Privately owned land had to be registered with the relevant authority, and collectively owned land was not recognised, despite being the most common mode of ownership. This was meant to fragment the land that was owned by tribal families and replace them with Italian settlers.

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**The aim of these camps was not just to control the population, but also to physically separate them from their ‘homeland’.**

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**NOTE 06**

The poem is about the Egaila camp, narrated by Rajab Buhwaish. (Babour, 2011b).

The third and most extreme tactic was adopted after the Italians had failed to end their war with Libyans in the countryside. Concentration camps were created for village dwellers in order to weaken the resistance and establish control across the region (Ahmida, 2005). The aim of these camps was not just to control the population, but also to physically separate them from their ‘homeland’. In the most famous poem<sup>6</sup> about these camps, one of the inmates laments this separation of tribe from its land, describing it as an illness. While the poem details the humiliation and brutality of their incarceration, it is a longing for the return to the pastures and places of the tribe, and the reclaiming of stolen property, which prominently emerges.

## September 1, 1969: The rise of the authoritarian nation

*“Africa is not like Europe. Europe is made up of nations. Africa is made up of tribes. The tribes were torn apart by the colonial countries. The ‘state’ in Africa cannot survive, since it is artificial.”*

– Muammer Gadhafi (in Martinez, 2007, p. 108)

By the end of Italian colonisation in 1947, Libya was one of the poorest countries in the world with no semblance of any national political authority (Anderson, 1990). While the period of colonisation saw major infrastructure and urban design developments in Benghazi (Salhin, 2010), the human cost was devastating. Eastern Libya saw its population almost halved, and the ruins of the economy saw a return to pastoralism (Anderson, 1990). The aftermath of World War II also left Benghazi with large scale destruction, a consequence of the fighting between Italian and British forces (Salhin, 2010). This phase in Libya's history strengthened the role of tribal solidarity as it became the only system that Libyans could rely on for social security.

Following the discovery of oil in 1959, Libya witnessed a rapid transformation. The growing economy saw the start of national scale development planning and the emergence of a new middle class which were based in the rapidly growing towns and cities. The state – under the rule of King Idris of the Senussia movement – was beginning to provide services and security, and younger people began holding the government responsible over issues that were once considered the responsibility of the tribe (Kikhia, 1997). During this time, the monarchy attempted to balance tribal governance with more ‘modern’ development models (Anderson, 1990).

But the kingdom was short-lived. On September 1st, 1969, a coup d'état by a group of young military soldiers led by Muammer Gadhafi overthrew the government. It was the start of a 42-year rule that was characterised by instability and uncertainty on all levels of governance. Gadhafi's initial vision was of a modern, socialist nation united with others in the region through a pan-Arab ideology. This initial vision led to a series of economic, political and social reforms which aimed to redistribute the oil wealth, develop both rural and urban areas, and ‘modernise’ the Libyan population. But this vision was never fully realised due to the failure of the regime to delegate power to its institutions. Control resided instead in the hands of Gadhafi and those closest to him.

The regime's policy towards tribalism during his rule can be characterised as schizophrenic. Gadhafi was initially hostile towards tribalism and saw it as counterintuitive to his socialist, pan-Arab vision for Libya and the region, due mainly to the previous regime's utilisation of tribalism in a way that had created a “tribal elite” (Anderson, 1990) (Kikhia, 1997). The regime utilised different policies to weaken tribal behaviour, such as redrawing Libya's administrative boundaries, since the previous ones were based on tribal boundaries (Kikhia, 1997), and through its branches of education, media and local administrative offices (El-Fathaly and Palmer, 1980).

Echoing the colonial policies, the regime also passed a law that would seize all tribal lands that were not officially registered, in order to weaken powerful tribes in East Libya that were still loyal to the previous regime (Ibrahim and Otto, 2017). Law 142 declared that all unregistered tribal lands and wells belonged to the state (Law No. 142, 1970), and Law 123 built on this expropriation by redistributing this land to new owners (Law No. 123, 1970). Most tribal land was not registered because it was not individually owned and thus considered the property of the state. While this law was framed as promoting social justice in Gadhafi's new socialist vision, it also worked to disempower tribal groups (Ibrahim and Otto, 2017).

The regime eventually grew chaotic due to the political differences of key revolutionary leaders, attempted coups, and the inability of the regime to delegate power to its institutions (Kikhia, 1997). Gadhafi began to manipulate the tribal system in order to further consolidate power and maintain stability, particularly after international sanctions were imposed in 1992. He surrounded himself with members of his own tribe and other allied tribes, and espoused the importance of blood ties and family, describing Libya as ‘a group of tribes’ (Cherstich, 2014).

He also manipulated tribal tensions between various groups, a notable example being the renaming of the town of Tokra to 'Al-Agouria', implying some degree of ownership of the town to the Al-Agouri tribe in order to win their favour, at the expense of other tribes in the area. The tribe was used as an instrument of social control and various state institutions were 'tribalised' in order for the regime to survive (Martinez, 2007) (Ben Lamma, 2017). Because urban life became increasingly precarious due to the sanctions and government policies, Libyans turned to their tribal affiliation and engaged with this 'tribalisation' of the state in order to manage their day to day lives (Kikhia, 1997).

### **February 17, 2011: Collapse of the state**

*"...Libyan people all over the liberated regions of the country are relentlessly and genuinely sounding their voice in their peaceful demonstrations nowadays that "Libya is one nation, one clan, one family" and that the myth of tribalism exists only in the mind of the dictator..."*

– Mansour Babour, 2011a, p.1

The Libyan uprising that occurred in 2011 was part of a larger regional revolution termed "The Arab Spring". Cities across Libya witnessed mass protests in the streets and plazas which initially demanded reforms and social justice. Benghazi was one of the first cities where peaceful street demonstrations began, which quickly escalated into conflict when the government ordered the use of violence against protesters. This grew into a nation-wide civil war that lasted nine months and involved military operations by the international community. During this time, the role of tribalism became heightened, as different tribal elders and councils across the country issues statements for or against the regime. Agreements were signed to deter conflict between different tribal groups, but some of these groups also took advantage of the chaos to take over land that they claimed was appropriated from them by the state (Asharq Alawsat, 2011).

The country was declared 'liberated' from the regime three days after Muammer Gadhafi was killed by the armed rebel groups. What is notable about this period is the divide in media channels between analysts who saw the tribe as a key factor in the conflict (Cherstich, 2011) (Benkato, 2011), and those who believed that it was a relic of the past which no longer played an important role in Libya, particularly among the new generation who were seen as leading the uprising (Elbabour 2011a, Maclean, 2011).

Regardless of the ambiguity of perceiving tribal importance in 2011, there is no question today that tribal solidarity in Libya plays a very large role on a social and political level (Cole and Mangan, 2016). The failure of the transitional committee to establish a national government in Libya and the ensuing political legitimacy crisis has left Libyans without much to fall back on except existing social networks – including their tribe. Various institutions such as the military, municipalities and even civil society organisations have worked with tribal groups in order to address the plethora of issues faced by Libyans today.

### **3.3 Tribe and city**

While the political relationship between tribe and state offers insight into the persistence of tribalism in urban areas, it is the relationship between tribe and city which highlights what role this social solidarity plays on an urban scale, and it is important to understand this role in the current absence of state in Libya. What exists today is a combination of different forms of governance, both 'official' governance systems such as municipal councils and ministries, and systems of 'self-government' (Magnusson, 2010) such as local councils and tribal groups. These systems have established mechanisms of cooperation on the city level in an effort to create a sense of order and functionality. The aim of this section is to analyse the relationship between tribalism and the urban level of governance, by looking specifically at planning practices in Benghazi.

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**Regardless of the ambiguity of perceiving tribal importance in 2011, there is no question today that tribal solidarity in Libya plays a very large role on a social and political level.**

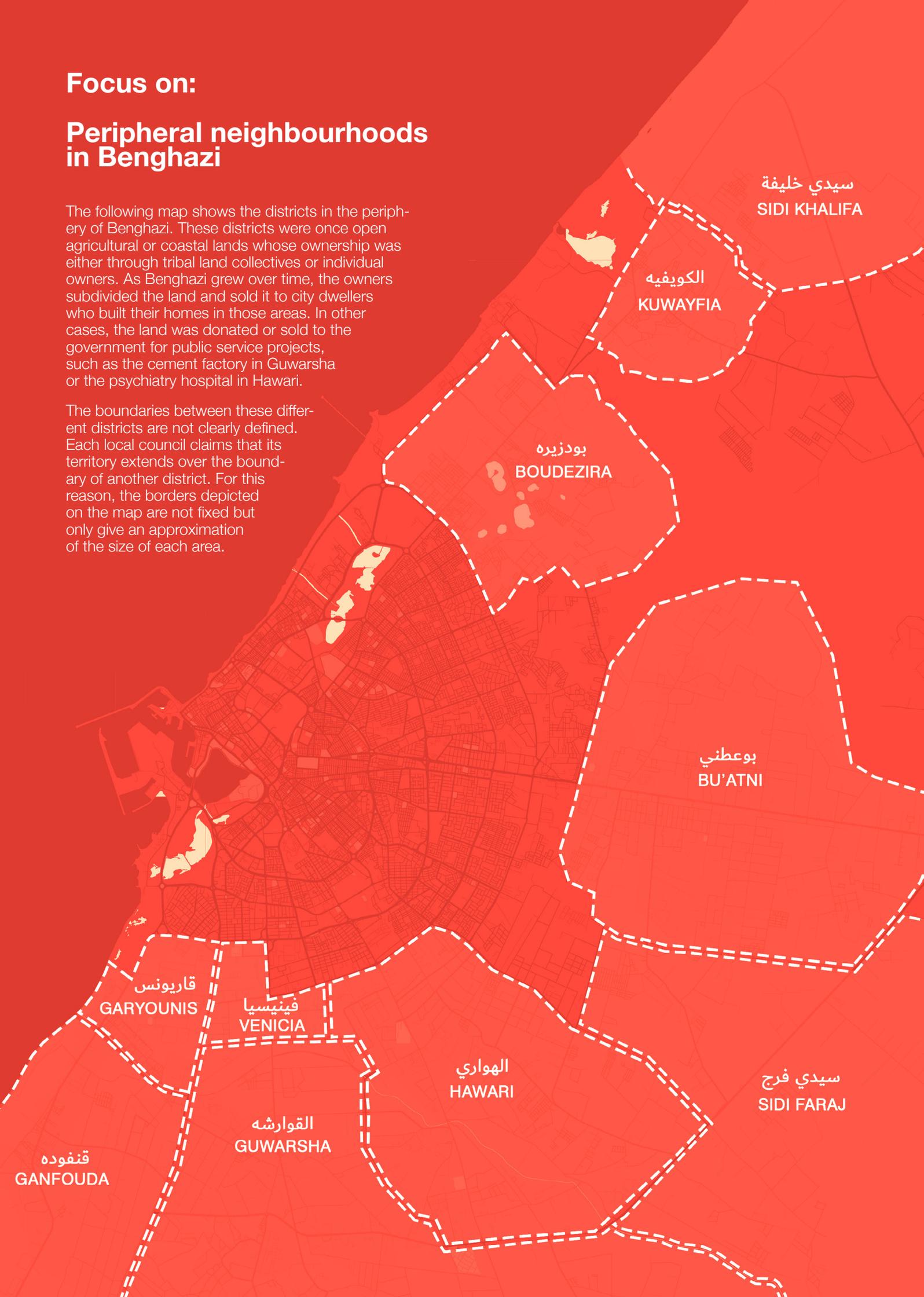
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## Focus on:

# Peripheral neighbourhoods in Benghazi

The following map shows the districts in the periphery of Benghazi. These districts were once open agricultural or coastal lands whose ownership was either through tribal land collectives or individual owners. As Benghazi grew over time, the owners subdivided the land and sold it to city dwellers who built their homes in those areas. In other cases, the land was donated or sold to the government for public service projects, such as the cement factory in Guwarsha or the psychiatry hospital in Hawari.

The boundaries between these different districts are not clearly defined. Each local council claims that its territory extends over the boundary of another district. For this reason, the borders depicted on the map are not fixed but only give an approximation of the size of each area.



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**While urban growth had to navigate around tribal land ownership, the tribes saw an opportunity in this growth.**

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### **Tribalism at the rural-urban interface**

Along with Tripoli, Benghazi was the focus of development planning by previous governments, at the expense of other cities in the country (Salhin, 2010). This increase in development led to mass internal migration from other parts of country – particularly those escaping famine or conflict – leading to Benghazi's colloquial nickname 'rabayat al-thayah' "رعاية الناح" (nurturer of wandering people) (Alomami, 2009). For this reason, Benghazi's population is highly diverse in terms of the tribal background of those who inhabit it.

Surrounding the city are fertile and semi-fertile lands that have historically belonged to tribal land collectives (Hajjaji, 1967). The rural areas are comprised of villages of various sizes, hamlets and nomadic encampments. Land and water conflicts were solved through tribal representatives, with bigger issues solved through the *Committees for Settlement of Disputes over Tribal Land* – chaired by tribesmen – which used a mix of civil and traditional tribal law related to land and water rights in order to resolve disputes (Hajjaji, 1967). Inhabitants of the city who practiced agriculture also owned land in the periphery of the city through individual ownership.

As the city expanded into tribally-owned lands, a process of negotiation between the tribes and the state was necessary. During the era of the kingdom, a study on land tenure in Eastern Libya was conducted by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) for a project on the development and settlement of tribal land (FAO, 1969). The increase in urban development projects in Eastern Libya during this time is attributed to the influence of tribal leaders in the government who would advocate to channel funds to their region or city (Kikhia, 1997, p. 35). The report concluded that the issue of land ownership between tribe and state was complex and needed to be addressed on a separate basis for each specific area of land before settlement projects were to begin. Tribal intermediaries emerged who negotiated between state authorities and the tribal members (Hüsken, 2013).

However, these 'unofficial' negotiations were not always successful. Hajjaji highlights an incident in which a highway linking Benghazi to a neighbouring town was vandalised by a tribal group whose land was taken from them by another tribe without proper compensation (Hajjaji, 1967, p. 336). Furthermore, in the urban planning policy documents for Benghazi no mention is made of these negotiations or how to conduct them. This may be because the land 'officially' belongs to the government since it is not registered, although this ownership is not recognised by the people who have lived there for generations before the state was formed.

While urban growth had to navigate around tribal land ownership, the tribes saw an opportunity in this growth. Groups would donate land for government projects such as roads and public buildings, in order to 'bring in' urban development and thus increase opportunities for tribal members. This process of land donation for both development as well as for social good is a practice that can be traced back to the Ottoman era, when tribes donated land for the construction of mosques or shrines, or to provide services for large cities (Ahmida, 1994).

### **Benghazi's precarious growth**

Between 1966 and 1973, Benghazi grew from a population of 160,000 to 264,500 due to rural-urban migration (Abu-Lughod, 1976) and this rapid urbanisation created a major strain on the bureaucratic processes of the government (El-Fathaly and Palmer, 1980). Table 3.1 highlights the population size of the Benghazi and Tripoli areas compared to other cities in the country. As the city expanded, the government struggled to provide new areas with infrastructure and other services. The redistribution of oil wealth by the Gadhafi regime also meant that the agriculture sector decreased dramatically, as citizens moved into urban areas and became dependant on public sector wages (Zuhri, 1978). Most agricultural tribal land was sub-divided and sold primarily for housing projects. Figure 3.2 shows the growth of Benghazi over time.

During this urbanisation process, tribal practices and principles became integrated with urban life. For example, those seeking employment in government institutions would rely on tribal connections inside the institution (Ladjal, 2016).

Settlement	Population			Average annual growth rate	Average annual growth rate
	1954	1966	1978*	1954 – 1966	1966 - 1978
Tripoli	129,728	300,000	697,700	6.7	6.7
Benghazi	69,718	160,000	363,360	6.7	6.5
Al Bayda		15,500	54,700		10.2
Zawiya	8,000	19,700	51,000	7.2	7.6
Derna	15,890	22,700	48,000	2.8	5.9
Tajura		12,00	42,500		10.2
Ejdabiya	16,300	18,000	41,000	0.8	6.5
Tobrug	5,000	16,350	40,000	9.5	7.1
Sebha		13,600	37,500		8.1
Almarj	10,000	11,200	34,000	0.8	8.9
Misurata	9,000	10,500	28,000	1.2	7.8
Zliten		5,000	27,700		14.0
Zanzur		10,000	25,170		7.3
Sirte		3,500	12,000		12.0
Al Abiar		3,400	17,000		13.2
Zuwarah		14,600	16,800		1.0
Homs		5,000	15,000		8.8
Gharyan		4,700	12,900		8.0
Tarhuna		2,400	11,600		12.9
Sorman		2,000	10,000		13.2
Yefren			9,050		
Bengashir		2,640	8,000		9.0
Brak			8,000		
Nalut		6,560	7,900		1.4
Algemel			7,700		
El Gusbat		3,200	7,000		6.2
Shahat		2,330	6,900		8.8
Hon		3,800	6,600		4.3
Al Gubba			6,250		
Wadan			6,200		
Kufra		3,500	6,200		
Sabratha		2,300	6,000		7.6
Murzug			5,500		
Tokra			5,250		
Aubari			5,250		
Masah			5,050		
<b>Total*</b>	<b>263,636</b>	<b>693,766</b>	<b>1,657,780</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>7.0</b>

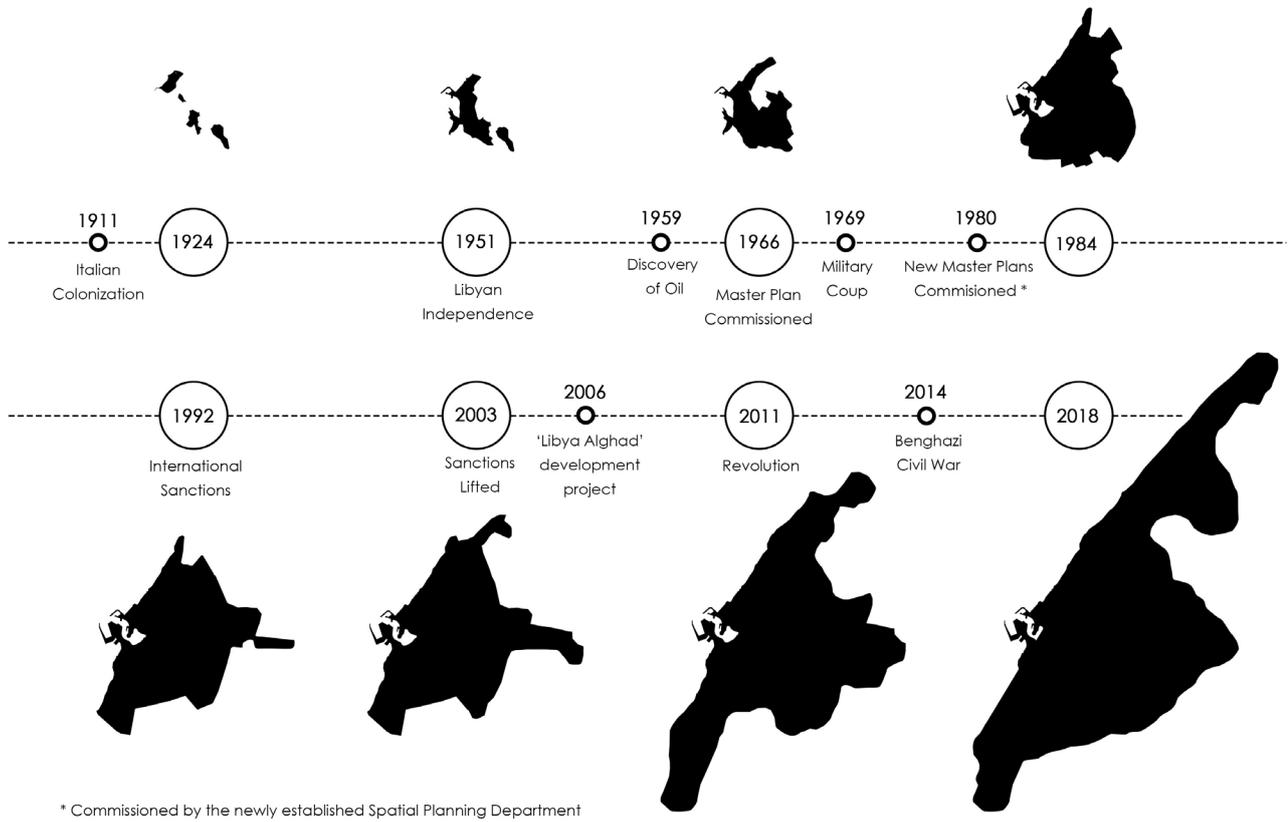
**TABLE 3.1**

Population Growth in Libyan Cities.

Source: Attir, 1987.

The practice of the 'tribal collective fund' also continued in city life. This fund comprises of small financial donations from tribal members, and the amount would be used to cover costs such as funeral expenses for those who could not afford it, or compensation money in cases of manslaughter (Alazraq, 2017). The urban fabric itself was also influenced by tribal principles relating to religion, land ownership and privacy (Dabaiba, 1988). In Benghazi, houses are surrounded by high walls for privacy; a mosque is present in almost every neighbourhood and is often built by the community; and extended families tend to live nearby one another, although this latter phenomenon has decreased due to land and housing shortages.

Tribal connections were called upon in the mediation of land and property disputes. This was crucial after the passing of Law 4, popularly known as 'the house is for those who inhabit it' (البيت لساكنه), which – among other things – limited land ownership to one house or a plot of land of a certain size (Law No.4, 1978). Those who were renting property from a landlord automatically owned that property. The aim of this law was to ensure that all Libyans owned a home rather than renting it. This law had one of the most profound impacts on the urban fabric in Libya's cities and led to mass chaos and confusion, the legacy of which Libya is still grappling with today despite efforts in 2006 by the regime to compensate those whose property was seized. One of the most effective mechanisms of arbitration over these disputes has been through tribal/



\* Commissioned by the newly established Spatial Planning Department

**FIGURE 3.2**  
Growth of Benghazi's built up area.  
Produced by author. Source: Zuhri 1978, Google Maps.

family representatives, so much so that Law 29 on transitional justice (Law No. 29, 2013) includes seeking recourse of tribal leaders and 'wise men' in dealing with these issues (Ibrahim and Otto, 2017).

By 2011, the city had outgrown the third-generation master plan which was initially set for the period of 2000 – 2025 (Salhin, 2010). Figure 3.3 shows the limits of the third-generation plans in black overlaid by further growth of the city in red. Rural villages such as Guwarsha or Kuwayfia became part of the city of Benghazi. Residents were increasingly buying agricultural land at the periphery of the city, where it was cheaper to build, although this came at the expense of not having infrastructure and services (Salhin, 2010). Tribal groups who owned this land – and no longer relied on agriculture for their livelihoods – would subdivide it into plots, sell them and distribute the amount earned to members of the tribe.

**FIGURE 3.3**  
Benghazi's growth outside of the 3rd generation master plan in 2011.  
Produced by author.  
Source: Google maps.

By 2011 Benghazi's urban nature was precarious, mainly due to a housing and unemployment crisis and a decay of the urban fabric. The lack of development planning in Benghazi – despite its growth – is attributed to deliberate marginalisation by the regime due to perceived antagonism from the city towards the government (Benkato, 2012), as well as fragility following sanctions. Not even tribal solidarity was able to address these crises due to their magnitude. While it has not been analysed extensively, this pressure on the growing urban centers may have contributed to the uprisings of 2011. This can be seen in a series of incidents in both Tripoli and Benghazi, where people took over housing projects that were under a prolonged period of construction by the government (Aljazeera, 2011) (France 24, 2011).



## Governing Benghazi's peripheries

The years following the revolution in Benghazi were marked by both rapid economic growth and increasing violence between different factions in the city, which culminated in a civil war in 2014 that profoundly impacted the city. The war played out at the edges of the city<sup>7</sup>, because of the presence of military barracks in those neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods – formerly agricultural land – are mixed between built-up neighbourhoods and farm land.

### NOTE 07

The only exception was the fighting that occurred in the city center, most likely due to the presence of the port which allowed fighters to receive aid via boats.

After the start of the conflict, several forms of official and non-state councils were tasked to handle issues in the city. These include the Benghazi Crisis Committee, military councils, reconciliation committees, tribal councils, IDP (internally displaced people) unions and local neighbourhood councils (EU Delegation to Libya 2017, UNHCR 2012). These groups were responsible for a range of tasks, including assisting families displaced by the fighting, addressing the humanitarian crises in the city and mediating between the warring factions. It marked the emergence of a new urban politics that occurred in cities across the country.

As the fighting abated, these various councils began working towards recovery. The neighbourhood councils of these affected districts began to mobilise their resources to facilitate the return of displaced families by reviving services and infrastructure. These councils were created by the neighbourhood residents in order to unify their efforts in managing their district. They are comprised of different tribal representatives, primarily of those tribes who have historically owned much of the land in that area. These members are normally employed by government institutions and these connections are utilised to provide services for the neighbourhood. An example of this is the direct coordination between the Garyounis local council and the damage assessment unit of the Ministry of Housing and Utilities (Libyas Channel, 2017). Local councils also play the role of mediator, such as the efforts of the Bu'Atni local council to ensure that the properties of those families who are aligned with one side of the conflict are not ransacked or taken over by citizens from the other side of the conflict.

As these neighbourhoods continue to stabilise, these local councils are increasingly playing a role not just in short-term crisis management but also in long-term planning. The author was part of a project that worked with the Guwarsha local council. During the assessment process, the council detailed both the short-term and long-term needs of the area, such as water pumps, public building renovations and recreational areas (ACTED, 2017). Occasionally the council would consult the tribal elders in the neighbourhood for advice, and they succeeded in negotiating with several international NGOs to install water pumps and repair a damaged school and clinic. The council also offered to donate land for developmental projects such as recreational spaces for children.

These councils act as political entities and are part of a new 'transnational governmentality' (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002, p. 994) that has overlaid the state in Libya. Notably, the dynamics of the various actors in the system eschew formal policies and bylaws in favour of achievable results on the ground. However, while non-state actors facilitate governance, they are also players in local conflicts. For example, the lack of state regulation on property ownership has led to an increase in cases where tribal groups 'take back' land that was once donated or sold to the government – along with whatever public service project was built on that land – demanding further compensation.

While the city continues to stabilise, the national government crisis in Libya seems to be at a stalemate, and it is likely that the local councils will continue to remain a key player in the city due to their local knowledge, social solidarity and sense of ownership. The municipality has already begun to officially recognise the local councils and integrate them into the governance structure. As the city continues to grow into these peripheral areas, the role of the council in urban planning will continue, particularly since the role of municipal councils in urban planning is weak and relies on non-state actors in managing city growth (EU Delegation to Libya, 2017). As shown in the previous sections, the tribal nature of the peripheral areas makes the local councils best equipped to handle negotiation and planning processes.

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**The years following the revolution in Benghazi were marked by both rapid economic growth and increasing violence between different factions in the city.**

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**It is therefore not enough to ‘see like a city’ as Magnusson posits but instead to understand how socio-political networks cross-cut through different scales.**

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### **3.4 Discussion**

As shown in the previous sections there is a strong relationship between tribe, state and city. While the analysis attempted to separate the state and city levels, these two scales are intricately linked, particularly as they relate to tribalism. It is therefore not enough to ‘see like a city’ as Magnusson posits but instead to understand how socio-political networks cross-cut through different scales. The past regimes that ruled over Libya recognised the potency of tribal solidarity and employed various tools and tactics to manipulate and control it on the level of the city and the ‘homeland’. However, the failure of these governments in planning for and managing the growth of these cities strengthened the bonds of solidarity between urban dwellers who relied on one another to navigate city life.

This longitudinal analysis has also shown that social solidarity does decrease with an increase in the state’s capacity to provide for its citizens, in keeping with Ibn Khaldun’s theories. Urban solidarity was at its lowest in Benghazi under the Kingdom and in the early phase of Gadhafi’s rule, when urban development projects were underway. But the rapid growth of the city and fragility of the state saw it rise, most notably during sanctions and after the revolution. This form of solidarity in urban areas is different from that of the countryside. As shown in Benghazi’s peripheries, councils are formed around bonds of kinship but also neighbourly coexistence, and are dynamic in their cooperation with various state and non-state groups.

But people will still prefer a reliable state system over social solidarity. As Simone described it, family systems can impact the individual negatively due to the burden of obligation they have to that community (Simone, 2004), a pressure which is more manageable when the responsibility is to the state. This explains why citizens would prefer the state to the tribal system. The most recent survey, conducted by USIP (United States Institute for Peace) in 2016, revealed that while 86% of people in East Libya identified with a tribe and felt that the tribe played an important role in managing the instability, the majority did not want to see tribalism embedded in state institutions (Cole and Mangan, 2016). Tribal solidarity is only utilised when necessary (Cherstich, 2014).

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**People will still prefer a reliable state system over social solidarity.**

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This preference for a state can be also explained through the analysis of urban planning practices of the tribe. While tribal groups and councils are able to engage in small scale planning, such as land subdivision for housing, donation of land for infrastructure and service projects, and lobbying state and international actors for further development, it is not enough to manage the high level of growth that Benghazi is witnessing. Long-term, large scale planning is needed to cope with the demands of the city and to resolve the legacy of dispossession, one that cannot be achieved by social solidarity alone. But this does not mean that the master plans for Benghazi – led by a top-down, Western-influenced process of planning – is a better alternative. Planning in Benghazi today requires an integration of local processes and tribal systems but needs a strong central authority to lead it. This will be the challenge for the city in the coming years.

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**Long-term, large scale planning is needed to cope with the demands of the city and to resolve the legacy of dispossession, one that cannot be achieved by social solidarity alone.**

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**Tribalism is, among many things, an ideology rooted in the collective memory of a community, one facet of a complex urban identity on which social solidarity is built.**

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## **04. Conclusion and future research pathways**

This research has attempted to analyse the role of tribalism as it relates to urban areas. Tribalism is, among many things, an ideology rooted in the collective memory of a community, one facet of a complex urban identity on which social solidarity is built. It operates as a social system and incorporates different forms of social security to those who are unable to obtain them from the state. It also acts as a political system of governance, through mediating disputes, providing security, and delivering services. Tribal practices are not performed independently but inside are fluidly integrated with other systems, such as neighbourhood groups, NGOs and municipal councils.

The persistence of tribal systems in cities is the result of two main drivers; the first is the role of nation-states in utilising tribal discourse as a form of control and organisation. State policies that manipulate tribal practices foster an antagonistic relationship with its citizens regardless of their tribal sentiment, because it affects the bonds of solidarity between different groups and paves the way for conflict that entrenches tribal rivalries. The second – and more influential – driver comes from the reliance on tribalism due to situations of precarity in urban areas. When the state is unable to provide services and protection for its citizens, they revert to their tribal/family connections. These connections are often part of wider social networks which includes neighbours, friends and colleagues.

In the absence of the state, these local actors and networks fill the governance gap. They take the form of councils, organisations and committees, and the line between what is considered 'state', and what is 'non-state' is no longer clear. In the case of the local councils in Benghazi's peripheral neighbourhoods, they utilise both tribal solidarity and formal state practices interchangeably, in order to govern their neighbourhoods. This extends to cooperation with transnational actors to provide services.

As cities such as Benghazi continue to grow despite the weakness of the state, urban planning is largely in the hands of the people. The buying and selling of land, determination of land uses, and provision of basic services is conducted through complex negotiations between land owners, local councils, municipal service offices and international organisation. Relationships based on mutually beneficial solidarity underpin these negotiations and are shaping the city.

There is still a large gap in research on the role of tribalism and other non-state actors in urban areas of the MENA region, particularly from a theoretical point of view. The current political transitions and processes of reconstruction offer a unique opportunity to formulate new theories on urban tribal solidarity which should be developed from a local level, particularly as it relates to the notion of statehood and the new forms of governance that are emerging in the MENA region. It can also help address the questions around collective versus individual Libyan identities, and what implications this has in determining the future of the country.

It is also necessary to further investigate the multiple relationships that occur on different scales between various actors, how these scales connect and how forms of cooperation and conflict play out spatially in the city and beyond in the rest of the country. A key issue that deserves further attention is what forms of social solidarity exist in smaller towns, in relation to that of urban solidarity in larger cities, and what role it plays in addressing the imbalance of development between the urban and the rural. This research has attempted to start the discussion, but further work is needed along these pathways in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the region and its people that can inform future urban development policies.

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**As cities such as Benghazi continue to grow despite the weakness of the state, urban planning is largely in the hands of the people.**

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