A Nation at the Periphery: Libyan Regionalism Revisited

by Lucas Winter

Article Synopsis: This article places the current Libyan conflict in historical perspective by focusing on the dynamics between the country's two main regions (Tripolitania and Cyrenaica) during key moments of the 20th century. Particular attention is given to the different way each of the two regions approached the early period of Italian colonialism, from 1911 to 1923. The paper shows that historical relations between the two regions are characterized by both independence and interdependence and that this pattern is reemerging as the country transitions to a new era.

When protests first broke out in Libya in mid-February it seemed longtime leader Muammar Qaddafi might follow in the footsteps of his Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts and be forced to "resign"[1] by the power of peaceful popular opposition. Yet there were reasons to think otherwise. "Libya is not Tunisia or Egypt," Qaddafi's son Saif al-Islam quipped in the early days of the protests, explaining that unlike its neighbors Libya was heavily armed and tribal.[2] Chaos would ensue, he warned, unless the protests stopped immediately. Within a couple days, rebels in Benghazi had overrun Qaddafi's main military base in the city and the protests quickly spiraled into armed conflict.

The Libyan uprising was focused on getting rid of Qaddafi by force rather than numbers. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, where overthrowing the ruler was the first step toward achieving a more representative political system, in Libya the focus has remained primarily in forcing out the "brother leader." Assuming this can be achieved, the country faces a future even more uncertain than its neighbors. As Lisa Anderson notes, "The challenge for Libya is both simpler and more vexing than those facing Tunisia and Egypt: Libya confronts the complexity not of democratization but of state formation."[3]

Qaddafi has remained in power for over 40 years by keeping tight control of the country's purse strings and ruthlessly going after anyone who questioned this policy. Libya's somewhat bizarre institutions were, with irregular frequency, revamped and transformed to suit his whims. That the protesters are rallying around Libya's pre-1969 flag is a testament to Qaddafi's deep imprint on all national symbols and institutions. That the flag represents the former Kingdom of Libya is indicative of aspirations less focused on democracy or a new future than on erasing the Qaddafi era from history.

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[1] He has no "official position" to resign from.

[2] "Libya protests: Gaddafi's son warns of civil war," *BBC*, 21 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12520586> (16 June 2011).

[3] Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011): 6-7.

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Putting Libya (back) together will be a major task, especially given the degree to which Qaddafi"s policies have undermined national institutions. The military – crucial to the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian overthrows – is in Libya more akin to "a military club" than an actual fighting force,"[4] an obvious way for Qaddafi to prevent the type of coup that had brought him to power. That being said, much of what makes Libya a "weak" state has deeper roots that run as a constant through much of the country"s history. Foremost among them is its regionalism.

Because of this, an overview of Libya"s pre-Qaddafi history is crucial to understanding the country"s current dynamics. The period of transition into Italian colonial rule, between 1911 and 1923, is particularly instructive for two main reasons. The first is that it took place on the margins of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, a major historical turning point that could potentially be matched in importance by the current "Arab Spring." The second is that the early colonial period has much to tell us about the relationship between Libya"s two main regions, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Without at least a basic understanding of these dynamics it is difficult to make sense of the current conflict in Libya.

Libyan regions

Libya has a major geographical fault line represented by what was formerly known as "Sirtica," a 300-mile wide stretch of Saharan desert that spills into the Mediterranean at the eponymous Gulf of Sirte (Sidra). This vast desert separates Libya"s main coastal population centers. Historically, the country"s northwestern region was known as Tripolitania while its eastern region was called Cyrenaica. The bulk of Libya"s population is concentrated along the coasts of these two regions. To the south and southwest is Libya"s third distinct region, former Phasania (*Arabized* as Fezzan), a sparsely populated stretch of desert centered around a few oases settlements. [SEE FIGURES 1, 2 and 3]

John Davis captures it well when he calls Libya "geographically an agglomeration of the fringes of other areas."[5] Fezzan is, for one, culturally closer to the African Sahel than to Libya"s coastal settlements. Tripolitania represents the eastern edge of the Arabic "Maghreb" (West), sharing much in common with Tunisia and Algeria, while Cyrenaica may be considered the western boundary of Egypt"s sphere of influence. Prior to the region"s Arabization, these two areas (Tripolitania and Cyrenaica) represented the borders of Punic and Greek culture respectively.

Fezzan is isolated from the coastal areas by sheer distance. Its sparse settlements are centered on oases and its economy supported by agriculture, trade, and military garrisons. The region prospered from the slave trade in the 18th century and has done so more recently as a military bulwark for Qaddafi"s regime. Fezzan has normally been at the periphery of crucial events in Libya and thus will receive less treatment here than the country"s two other constituent regions.

Tripolitania, meanwhile, is home to most of Libya"s population and two of the country"s most important cities (Tripoli and Misratah). Its population is concentrated on the coast and the adjacent plains, although a cluster of towns is also found some 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of

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[4] *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya, Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report No. 107, 6 June 2011, p. 5*
[5] John Davis, *Libyan Politics: Tribe and Revolution: An Account of the Zuwaya and their Government* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 25.

the capital in the Nafusa Mountains (also known as Jabal al-Gharbi). Historically, the mountain settlements have retained varying degrees of independence from the coastal areas and are considered Libya"s main Berber (Amazigh) region.

Cyrenaica"s population is also largely coastal, mostly concentrated in Benghazi, Libya"s third major city. Libya"s greatest concentration of oil resources is found in the Sirte Basin, largely in Cyrenaica [See FIGURE 4]. Overlooking Cyrenaica"s coast is the Jabal al-Akhdar, a mountain range with the country"s greatest share of rainfall and ecological diversity, which in the past was a target for Saif al-Islam Qaddafi"s eco-development projects. It is the country"s best terrain for guerrilla fighting, most famously put to use as such by Umar al-Mukhtar against the Italians in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The Libyan uprising has played out differently in each region. Fezzan remains quiet and out of the spotlight. Cyrenaica largely fell out of Qaddafi"s hands early on and was quick to set up a transitional government that has received increasing levels of international recognition. Tripolitania has been more divided. Residents took over several cities after they were abandoned by security forces early in the protests. Some were retaken by Qaddafi forces after heavy fighting (e.g. Zawiyya), while others have been held by rebels despite continuous regime offensives (e.g. Misratah).

1911-1923

The current dynamics in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the first with divided loyalties and the second united in opposition, resemble those of a century earlier, at the twilight of Ottoman influence in the country. Much of North Africa – Libya included – had been under some form of Ottoman control since the 16th century. Beginning in 1711, the Tripoli-based Karamanli dynasty established a semi-independent Ottoman province that eventually comprised much of contemporary Libya. By 1835, civil war threatened to bring down the dynasty and the Ottomans once again reasserted direct control over the province.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ottoman rule in North African was limited to Libya, following French seizure of Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1883. Around the same time, the new republic of Italy – largely excluded from the race to colonize Africa –received French *carte blanche* for operating in Libya. "Italy"s Fourth Shore," as they called the country, began seeing an influx of Italian commercial interests though no attempt at direct control. This changed in 1911, when Italy declared war on the Ottoman Empire to "recover" the territory. Within a year, the Ottomans – preoccupied with the Empire"s pending disintegration – *de facto* recognized Italy"s unilateral annexation of the territories by granting it autonomy.

Libyan reactions to the Italian occupation were initially mixed. Particularly in Tripolitania, a number of urban merchant families or groups excluded from the Ottoman power structure welcomed the Italian presence.[6] Although many opposed it for various reasons, opposition was never unified enough to mount a serious challenge. Along the coast, the flat and open terrain limited the potential for mounting an insurgency. The response in Cyrenaica was more uniform in its rejection, in part because the region was largely unified under the loose rule

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[6] Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization and Resistance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 126.

of the Sanussi religious order.[7] Sanussi presence ran deep in the region's rural areas and was also significant in coastal urban centers, representing a quasi-government led by the Sanussi leader.

It did not take long for Italian policies to create enemies of most Libyans. Their exclusionary administration put decision-making into the hands of Italian bureaucrats with little interest in or knowledge of local culture. For its part, the Sublime Porte[8] continued to maintain influence in the country through alliances with various notables, making Italian control difficult and especially so after Italy entered World War I. Some local leaders had from the outset opposed Italian presence, such as Sulayman al-Baruni, a former Ottoman parliamentarian from the Nafusa Mountains. Others were like Ramadan al-Suwayhli, who initially supported the Italians but later switched sides and made his stronghold of Misratah an important resistance base.

By 1914, Italy was entrenched along the coast and began moving south. Italian troops met stiff resistance in the Nafusa Mountains but were able to overpower the rebels and continue their southward march toward Fezzan's garrisons and oases towns.[9] Stretched thin and barely able to form an adequate supply chain, the Italians were chased out of Sabha in November 1914. All other Fezzan garrisons fell soon thereafter. The Nafusa villages would soon follow and Italian rule once again contracted to the coastal cities.

Italy officially entered World War I in May 1915. One month prior, after retreating from Fezzan, the Italians had tried to quell a growing resistance in Libya's center, near Sirte. Col. Antonio Miani recruited an army led by Tripolitanian allies, many of whom planned to defect to the winning side.[10] In the April 1915 Battle of Qasr bu Hadi (Battle of Ghardabiya) the Italians were routed in part after their erstwhile ally from Misratah, Ramadan al-Suwayhli, turned against them. After this defeat, Tripolitania rose up against the Italians. Italy abandoned most of its remaining military outposts and its control was limited to Tripoli and al-Khums in Tripolitania, and Benghazi, Darnah and Tobruk in Cyrenaica.[11]

With the outbreak of World War I, Italian resources were diverted from Libya. Covert Ottoman support for the growing Libyan resistance movement increased in turn. Initially focusing on Cyrenaica, the Ottomans persuaded Sanussi fighters to attack British positions in Egypt. Routed by the British and their Egyptian allies, the Sanussis opted to forge what would become a strategic relationship with Britain.[12] This new alliance helped Sanussi leadership negotiate with Italy on favorable terms, obtaining in the 1917 'Akrama Treaty *de facto* autonomy over Libya's east in exchange for a promise to disarm its tribes. Not surprisingly, this pledge was never fulfilled.[13]

The October 1918 armistice ended Ottoman presence in Libya, creating a temporary power vacuum in Tripolitania, where the Ottomans had been more successful in regaining influence during the war. Local leaders quickly stepped in to fill this vacuum, holding a regional conference that elected four Tripolitanian notables to lead the new "Tripolitanian Republic."

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[7] Ronald Bruce St John, *Libya from Colony to Independence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 62.

[8] This term is used to refer to the Ottoman Empire. The name comes from a main gate at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.

[9] Their move south was also meant to prevent French encroachment given that the borders here were somewhat uncertain. See Angelo del Boca, *Mohamed Fekini and the Fight to Free Libya,* trans. Anthony Shugaar (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 45.

[10] Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya,* 120-121.

[11] St John, *Libya from Colony to Independence,* 63.

[12] Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya,* 122.

[13] Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya,* 123.

Selection of conference members and the elected leaders was all carefully undertaken to best ensure that the region"s many interests were properly balanced.[14]

In April 1919, with the „Akrama Treaty already in place, the fledgling republic negotiated an agreement with the Italians that established the *Legge Fondamentale* (*Qanun al-Asasi*), more liberal and inclusive than most other colonial arrangements of the time. Eventually expanded to comprise relations between all of Libya and Italy (that is, to also include Cyrenaica), it provided a unique Libyan-Italian citizenship to the colony"s citizens, created democratically elected local parliaments and generally expanded local representation in government. Yet while the Italians saw the treaty as granting rights to an Italian possession, the Tripolitanians saw it as the result of bilateral negotiations between sovereign states.[15] The following year, the Tripolitanian Republic began to unravel. In August 1920 Ramadan al-Suwayhli was killed and the following months saw civil war break out in the Nafusa Mountains.

The Republic"s remaining leaders tried to salvage what little remained of it by calling for a unified Libya ruled by a Muslim. In 1922, the Tripolitanian representatives asked that the Sanussi leader Idris assume this role. Although fearful that he would lose his special status with the Italians, conflict with them by this point seemed unavoidable.[16] Idris agreed and promptly fled to exile in Egypt. It was at this point, a time when Libyans themselves had been closer than ever to agreeing on a unified state, that the Italians began their bloody *riconquista,* a violent campaign to forcibly pacify Libya that proved especially brutal in rebellious Cyrenaica, where resistance lasted until 1932.

Fast forwarding past the remaining interwar years and World War II itself, it is worth pausing momentarily amidst negotiations over what to do with the former Italian colony. Cyrenaica had before the war bet on an Allied victory and in 1942 received a British pledge that it would prevent Italy from once again ruling over the region. As in the early colonial era, Tripolitania had been more divided on which side to support.[17] As the war drew to an end, with France occupying much of the Fezzan, a compromise plan balancing regional autonomy and the desire for national independence was concocted. Called the Bevin-Sforza Plan, it proposed independence after a ten-year trusteeship for each of Libya"s three regions, administered as follows: Tripolitania by Italy, Cyrenaica by Britain, Fezzan by France. Not surprisingly, the plan proved to be enormously unpopular in Libya, where most favored independence and unification.

With Cold War politics infusing the negotiations, the great powers reached a deadlock and the issue was eventually submitted to the United Nations General Assembly. In the summer of 1949, King Idris proclaimed an independent Cyrenaica. A few months later, the General Assembly by one vote rejected a resolution modeled after the Bevin-Sforza Plan and Libya was granted its independence as a single country.[18] The newly independent United Kingdom of Libya was to be set up as a constitutional monarchy led by Idris al-Sanussi, with its capital rotating yearly between Benghazi and Tripoli. Each of the three regions was given significant autonomy,

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14 They were Ramadan al-Suwayhli, from Misratah, Sulayman al-Baruni from the Nafusa Mountains, Ahmad al-Murayyid from the Tarhuna tribe, and „Abd al-Nabi Bilkhayr representing the Warfallah and parts of Fezzan.
15 Lisa Anderson, The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 206. Ahmida, The Making of Modern Libya, 126.
16 Anderson, The State and Social Transformation, 212.
17 See Anderson, The State and Social Transformation, 252-256.
18 It was by a single vote margin, with Haiti casting the deciding vote in a surprise move. Some of the most significant lobbying to achieve this improbable result was done by Libyan exiles.

more in line with Cyrenaican wishes than with those of Tripolitania, where the majority supported a more centralized state.[19]

While the logistical and bureaucratic tangle of the federal model may have prevented Libya from emerging as a modern state, the exigencies of modern statehood became too strong when oil wealth made it vital to have unified national administrative policies.[20] Thus, in 1963 power became centralized and the word "united" was dropped from the country's name. The central government, though, remained sclerotic and corrupt, a tangle of personal alliances and patronage structures rather than an effective bureaucratic mechanism. The 1969 coup, carried out in the name of Arab nationalism by officers from less prominent tribes and a variety of rural areas, thus had a strong element of egalitarianism and representativeness and was called a revolution by its leaders. This revolution's lifecycle appears to have ended.

Regionalism Revisited

Setting aside the obvious differences between the colonial era and the present, certain analogies may be drawn. Regarding Cyrenaica, its unity in rebellion against the Italians provides a precedent to its uprising against Qaddafi in 2011. The region's ability to maintain a semblance of unified rule without comprising the independence of its constituent parts goes some way toward explaining the Libyan Transitional Council's ability to fill the vacuum after Qaddafi's regional strongmen either switched sides, fled, or were killed. Another element in the region's favor has been the continuity of its alliance with the British. Indeed, Britain has been one of the uprising's most active supporters. Some of their key actions include British Foreign Secretary William Hague's public declarations that Qaddafi had fled to Venezuela, which played an important role in encouraging the uprising, and the country's active and direct involvement in the NATO military strikes.

Similarly, Tripolitania exhibits the complexity and localized divisions that characterized the region's initial encounters with Italian colonialism. While public opinion is virtually impossible to ascertain, there is presumably still a significant amount of popular backing for the Qaddafi regime. Although the rebels have an important western foothold in Misratah, many areas of Tripolitania remain firmly under Qaddafi control and will not simply switch sides. In 1918 external events created a brief power vacuum that was temporarily filled by the Tripolitanian Republic. Were the end of the Qaddafi era to create similar circumstances, one can expect Tripolitanian leaders to quickly step in. The issue, of course, will be whether there is enough room for all of them.

Control of the Fezzan will have an impact on Tripolitania's future. Lying on the long, porous border with Algeria and Niger, the region is an asset that may be difficult to wrest from Qaddafi or his allies and would be nearly impossible to control from afar. Italy's inability to hold the Fezzan in 1914 largely made possible the Libyan victory at Qasr bu Hadi. A similar pattern of events may unfold if the Qaddafi regime's hold on the Fezzan begins to falter.

With Cyrenaica firmly backed by Western powers and possessing most of the country's oil reserves, it will once again have a strong bargaining position on Libya's future political framework. This, along with the region's historical fears of Tripolitanian hegemony, will make

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[19] Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya,* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 38. St John, *Libya from Colony to Independence,* 95.
[20] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 48.

the region favor a federal system that grants it some degree of provincial autonomy. In order to avoid past mistakes, they are likely to support a government largely staffed by technocrats focused on administering the country's oil wealth. It would remain to be seen how this would be received in the more nationalist-minded Tripolitania.

The 1911 Libyan War (the Italo-Turkish War) took place as the Ottoman Empire was dissolving and the world headed toward global war. The 2011 Libyan War comes in a different context, one of regional upheaval occurring within national borders. Libya, though, marks the transition of these upheavals from the internal domestic to the open international arena, albeit on a limited scale. In 1911, those vying for influence in Libya were located across the Mediterranean. Libya was a peripheral area within this larger conflict. The center of gravity has shifted in 2011: although it all began with Libya's western neighbor Tunisia, the important changes and realignments are taking place to the east, thus far in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. The core of this somewhat turbulent system, one might say, lies somewhere between Riyadh, Jerusalem and Tehran.

Although these realignments may not be headed toward international conflict, the emergence of regional alliances is nonetheless worthy of note. One easily identifiable bloc is the new royal club, intent on minimizing the spread of revolutionary fervor and consisting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) plus Morocco and Jordan. The Cyrenaican government is an obvious ally to this group. On the other side is what some have called the "resistance" bloc: Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas.[21] Joining Syria in opposition to the Arab League endorsement of international intervention in Libya – each for their own particular reason – were Algeria, Mauritania and Sudan.[22]

The Libyan uprising can be seen as a liberal rather than a democratic revolt. It is in part led by reformers appointed by Saif al-Islam Qaddafi during Libya's international rehabilitation, when the country undertook a series of economic reforms that were enthusiastically blessed by western theorists of liberalism and free market development gurus. This is likely the model that will be sought in Cyrenaica. It could work well for the region and may be no worse than other political arrangements of the past one hundred years. Whether it can be extended to the country as a whole is still not clear.

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[21] Michael Scott Doran, "The Heirs of Nasser," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011): 17-26.
[22] Only 11 members voted on the resolution, with the GCC countries leading the "yes" vote and only Syria and Algeria opposing. Mauritania and Sudan are said to have expressed reservations but, along with other members, abstained from voting.

FIGURE 1

Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/libya_pol93.jpg

FIGURE 2

Source: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/libya/geography-1.htm
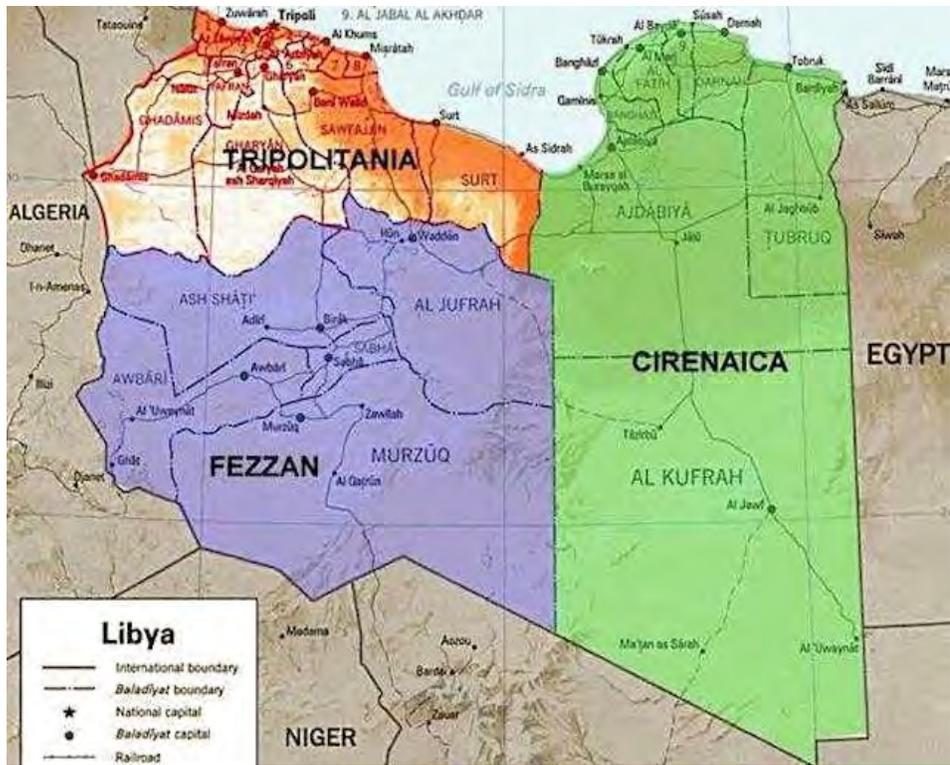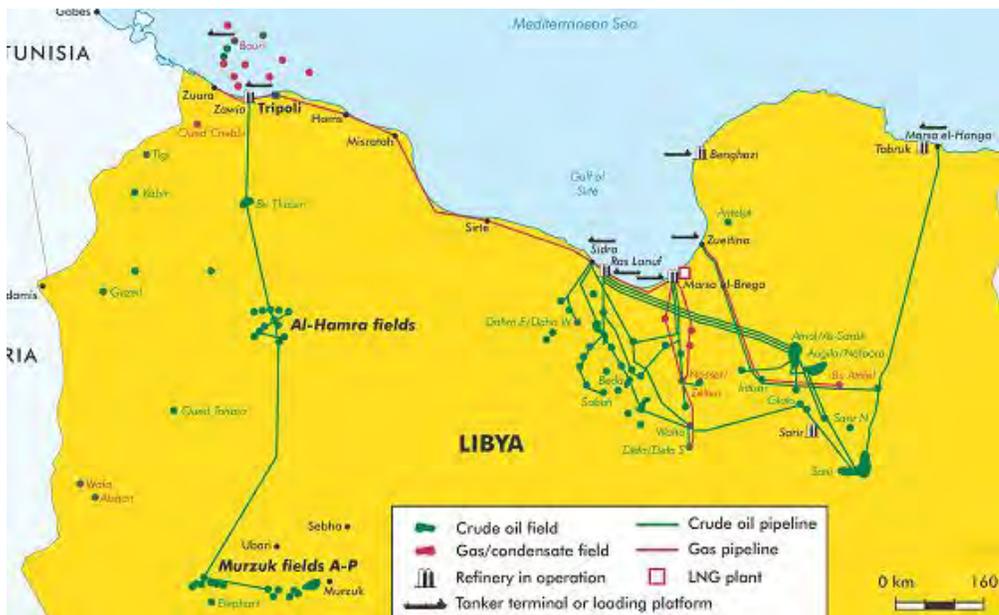
FIGURE 3

Source: http://www.iea.org/files/facts_libya.pdf

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