STUDY

Asma Khalifa
2025

Libya's Imazighen

Identity Formation During Conflict

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Asma Khalifa
2025

Libya's Imazighen:

Identity Formation During Conflict

About the author

Asma Khalifa is feminist researcher, who is currently preparing her doctoral dissertation in political science, examining the impact of civil wars on gender relations in politics. She has conducted several studies and researches in the Middle East and North Africa, focusing on the status of women in conflicts and gender-based violence. Asma also has practical experience in designing and implementing development projects focused on supporting civil society capacities, particularly in building gender knowledge, women's participation in politics, and integrating gender analysis into conflict resolution. She is also a co-founder of the Khalifa Ihler Institute and was a co-founder of the Tamazight Women's Movement, a think tank working on gender equality and researching indigenous women's issues in Libya and North Africa.

Contents

Introduction

Up until 2011, the priorities of indigenous[1] communities remained unchanged, centering on the recognition of their rights and safeguarding their languages and cultural heritage. The security situation in Libya began to deteriorate in 2011 and since then the country has become more fragmented than ever, teetering on the brink of potential violence. As one of the Indigenous communities in Libya, the Imazighen[2] are now facing even greater challenges in asserting their cultural and linguistic rights, despite the fact that they joined the uprising calling for more justice and rights in 2011.

The historical documentation of the Imazighen's efforts to preserve their identity and heritage is sparse, although the complex politics surrounding it can be traced back several centuries to the Islamic conquest of North Africa. Modern accounts from the colonial era depict a multifaceted experience in which the Amazigh fought colonial Italy and contributed to the formation of the Tripolitanian Republic in 1922.[3] It was also an experience of conflict involving Arabs seizing Indigenous land around Zuwara and the Nafusa Mountains throughout the 1930s.[4] However, the decolonization project persisted and was one of the main driving forces behind the Amazigh elders—along with other social groups—participating in the unification of Libya under the leadership of King Idris I.

Despite Arab nationalism being a dominant ideology in 1950s and 1960s, King Idris's policies on the "Islamic character of the nation" [5] as well as his policies focused on assimilating non-Arab peoples, particularly the Amazigh, by making Arabic the sole official language within a mandatory educational system and altering the demographic composition in Amazigh majority regions through land redistribution, displacement policies and large- scale naturalisation of Arabs. These experiences began to shape the collective identity of the Imazighen and influenced their interactions with the nation-state.

The coup led by Gaddafi in 1969 was deeply rooted in Arab nationalist ideology. The coup marked the end of Libya's monarchy and ushered in a new era of revolutionary politics under Gaddafi.[6] Structural and cultural violence continued; Gaddafi's "Third Theory" of populist socialism and the Cultural Revolution were launched to indoctrinate and forcefully homogenize Libyan communities. This involved policies removing Amazigh identity from the Libya's official history and culture. These practices and policies can be classified as structural violence defined by Johan Galtung (1969) as any form of violence embedded in social structures that prevents individuals from meeting their basic needs.[7]

The erasure of the Imazighen's identity was met with resistance, with some groups being more politically vocal in their opposition. Many members of the Imazighen community, however, have adopted a more discreet approach, focusing on the preservation of their cultural heritage. They have sought to achieve this through the continued use of their language and by maintaining traditional customs within their communities. The strategy of cultural preservation has resulted in the development of dual identities among the Imazighen. They cultivate a public persona that aligns with societal expectations, while simultaneously nurturing a private identity that remains deeply rooted in Imazighen culture and language. Identity and identity politics is the focus of the discussion in the following section.

In addition to the structural violence the Amazigh suffered at the hands of Gaddafi his regime brutally suppressed them including by publicly hanging dissenters.

---

1 Indigenous Peoples refers to a community known to comprise the earliest inhabitants of a place that was later colonised by a dominant group. IPACC. About the Indigenous Peoples of Africa. https://www.ipacc.org.za/north-africa/ (last accessed 14 July 2022).

2 The term Amazigh originates from the plural form Imazighen, meaning "free people." The Imazighen are one of the Indigenous groups of North Africa. They are also referred to as Berbers, a colonial label that the Imazighen themselves reject. This group occupies extensive regions of North Africa, including the Siwa oasis in Egypt, Zuwara, the Nafusa Mountains and large parts of southern Libya, as well as smaller areas in eastern and southern Tunisia. Algeria and Morocco have notably larger Amazigh populations. Members of the group also reside in the Canary Islands and parts of Niger and Mali. The Amazigh identity is highly varied, with Imazighen spread across wide geographical areas, exhibiting unique cultural traditions and speaking various dialects that are not widely understood throughout the region. Although the Tuareg in the south and the Amazigh in the north share a common ancestry, they possess distinct identities and cultures. Minority Rights Group (2018). Imazighen in Libya. https://minorityrights.org/minorities/imazighen/ (last accessed 14 July 2022).

3 Anderson, Lisa (1982). The Tripoli Republic, 1918–1922. In Social and Economic Development of Libya, E. Joffe and K. McLachlan, eds. London, pp. 43–65.

4 From an Amazigh elder, documented as part of the Azday project in 2021.

5 Morone, Antonio (2017). Idrīs' Libya and the Role of Islam: International Confrontation and Social Transformation. Oriente Moderno, vol. 97, 111–132. 10.1163/22138617-12340141.

6 Dawn, C. E. (1988). The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology in the Interwar Years. International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 20, no. 1, 67–91. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743800057512

7 It is characterized by systematic ways in which social arrangements harm or disadvantage certain groups of people, often through poverty, social inequality and discrimination. Cultural violence, also conceptualized by Galtung, is defined as any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural forms. These concepts are interconnected and often reinforce one another. For instance, cultural violence can be used to justify structural violence, and vice versa. See: Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural Violence. Journal of Peace Research, vol. 27, no. 3, 291–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005

Gaddafi also enacted a policy according to which law enforcement in Amazigh towns had to be led by Arabs. The suppression of the Imazighen by Gaddafi's regime was one of the main motivating forces behind their involvement in the 2011 armed uprising, calling for more freedom, human rights and social justice, as well as opposing tyranny, which led to various shifts in their political identity. These shifts can be categorised as follows:

1. Military mobilisation and the Imazighen revolution—the first armed mobilisation of its kind and also noteworthy because of the initial ties with the Amazigh political organisation.

2. The creation of new political structures. The Imazighen established elected bodies to champion their cultural and linguistic rights.

3. Self-determination. Driven by the country's social and political dynamics, this shift has led to the formation of various political factions. The move towards self-determination is evident in legal disputes over the constitutional process, the resurgence of violent conflict, alliance-building and efforts to achieve political autonomy.

Against this backdrop, a valuable endeavour is to explore the evolution and persistence of Imazighen identity through the lens of structural violence, legal discourse and the preservation of cultural heritage. In the current literature, the Imazighen's struggle for political representation is frequently overlooked or overshadowed by other issues.[8] This leads us to the following research question: How has Amazigh identity evolved during conflict?

This study leverages existing scholarly works, decrees and resolutions from the Amazigh Supreme Council (ASC) to achieve this goal. It also incorporates insights from eight semi-structured interviews with key figures in civic organisations, including the ASC and armed groups in the Nafusa Mountains and Zuwara. I also drew on notes and memos compiled during my time working as a volunteer with the ASC from 2016 to 2018, as well as my observations.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section describes the development of Amazigh identity politics under Gaddafi's regime to clearly outline how this influenced mobilisation in 2011. This section is followed by a description of the mobilisation itself, the alliances the Imazighen formed with other social groups and political activism. I then go on to look at how political activism developed into political organisation, the formation of political bodies and how issues of representation relate to military factions. Finally, I discuss how external pressures are reflected in the continuous armed conflicts, actual and perceived threats and persistent marginalisation of the Imazighen.

8 Previous research on Libya's political culture focused on analysing the Jamahiriya system and the tribes. The research is also framed within Arab discourses which excluded the experiences of Indigenous peoples. See Obeidi, A.S. (2001). Political culture in Libya. Vandewalle, Dirk (2006). A History of Modern Libya. A History of Modern Libya, vol. 14, no. 4, 1–246.

The Gaddafi Era: Structural Violence and the Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Owing to the absence of accurate national statistical data and the continuing erasure of the Imazighen by successive Libyan governments, which have denied that the group exists since the country's inception, the true population count remains unknown. Some estimates suggest that the Imazighen make up approximately 10 per cent of the total population, although this is likely an underestimate.[9] Alongside the Imazighen, there are also other Indigenous groups. The Tuareg are nomadic pastoralist groups found throughout the Saharan areas of Libya. Estimates regarding the Tuareg population vary significantly, ranging from 17,000 to 560,000. The Libyan Tuaregs predominantly reside in the western and southwestern parts of the country, especially in the cities of Ghat, Awbari and Ghadames. They communicate using Tamasheq, which is in the same language family as Tamazight.[10], [11] The Tebu are also traditionally nomadic, black tribes but no official statistics are available on their numbers. The Tebu live in the Tibesti Mountains and the southern towns of Sabha, Kufra, Murzuq and Qatrun.

The Imazighen in Libya form a clear majority in the coastal municipality of Zuwara and several municipalities in the Nafusa Mountains, with a significant presence in the Tripoli metropolitan area. They belong to a broader cultural and linguistic community spread across North Africa. This study focuses on the specific experiences of the Imazighen in Libya, especially on how structural violence and conflict since 2011 have influenced Amazigh identity politics in the country.

Identity is an ever-evolving concept shaped by its relationship with heritage and its position within power structures. While each person possesses multiple distinct identities, these are intrinsically linked to a shared sense of community and belonging.[12] Over the years and centuries, the identities of the Imazighen have transformed and developed, yet they continue to be linked by the "cultural trauma" stemming from the suppression, erasure and assimilation of their heritage and culture.

Identity politics is defined here as a form of political action and organisation centred on collective group identities that are malleable and often intersectional. It emphasises shared characteristics, such as gender, race, sexuality and other social identities, as the basis for political mobilisation and advocacy.[13] Identity politics involves complex relationships between individual experiences, cultural factors and power dynamics. It can manifest in many ways, from social movements organised around specific identities to the influence of group membership on individual political attitudes and behaviours. For the Imazighen in Libya, these political positions were adopted under oppressive conditions, which had social and political implications for their interactions with both the state and society. The response to the regime's violence was to main forms of resistance. First, the Imazighen continued practising their culture in secret. The second response was to join the broader Amazigh identity movement.

The Amazigh movement has consistently transcended the colonial notion of national borders that separate North Africa, fuelled by cultural activism in reaction to the Arab nationalist policies of North African states. Heavily influenced by the Algerian and Moroccan Amazigh diasporas, the movement evolved into a significant social and political force in both countries. Although it originated in Algeria and Morocco, the movement also inspired Amazigh activists from Libya, who participated in gatherings and festivals, uniting Imazighen across North Africa. A crucial element of the movement has been its emphasis on the Tamazight language as a vital tool for shaping Amazigh group identity.[14] The remnants of Amazigh cultural heritage often take the form of oral tradition conveyed through their native tongue. Efforts to revive and safeguard the language through more active use led to the reintroduction of the Tifinagh script, an alphabet derived from ancient Libyc inscriptions found in numerous carvings across the region.

9 Cramer, Marissa (2014). The Amazigh Question in Post-Gadhafi Libya. Unpublished. https://www.academia.edu/10806852/The_Amazigh_Question_in_Post_Gadhafi_Libya_April_2014_.

10 Tamazight is the language of the Imazighen and is part of a larger language family spoken by around 14 million people today.

11 Minority Rights Group (2018). Tuareg in Libya. https://minorityrights.org/communities/tuareg-3/

12 Palmater, P. (2011). Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity. University of British Columbia Press. https://doi.org/10.59962/9781895830736

13 Brunila, K., and L.-M. Rossi (2017). Identity politics, the ethos of vulnerability, and education. Educational Philosophy and Theory, vol. 50, no. 3, 287–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1343115

14 Lakiotis, Mena (2013). Multilingualism, Multimodality, and Identity Construction on French-Based Amazigh (Berber) Websites. Revue Francaise de Linguistique Appliquee, vol. 18, no. 2, 135–151.

Tifinagh literacy is regarded as essential to the struggle across countries.[15]

In Libya, the Amazigh movement positioned itself in opposition to the policies of Gaddafi's regime, which dismissed Amazigh heritage, history and language. For over 40 years, the structural and cultural oppression of the Amazigh under Gaddafi influenced the formation of the group's identity in the country. The Cultural Revolution, which Gaddafi announced in Zuwara in 1973, was based on Arab supremacy and nationalism, drawing inspiration from Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Libya was proclaimed an Arab nation and all Libyans were labelled Arab. The languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples were neither acknowledged nor mentioned. Books that referenced Tamazight and Amazigh history were banned. The language was indirectly suppressed by prohibiting the teaching of all "foreign" languages—which referred to all languages except Arabic—until the late 1990s. Even after the ban on foreign language teaching was lifted, Tamazight was still banned in schools. The only law specifically concerning Indigenous groups prohibits the registration of non-Arabic names and this regulation remains in force to this day.[16]

Gaddafi's regime labelled the transnational nature of the Amazigh identity movement a national security threat. Consequently, it was deemed necessary to eliminate Amazigh identity from "Arab Libya."[17] Research funded by the regime falsely claims that the Imazighen originated in Yemen, making them as Arabs, and asserts that Amazigh identity is a by-product of colonialism. It was claimed that colonial France had introduced a different language for certain groups to create divisions and incite conflict among the Libyans. This is a claim that Pan-Arabists continue to make in today's Libya.[18]

The effects of this on the Imazighen are significant and extensive, with some cultural traditions disappearing and spiritual ties to ancestors all but forgotten, leading to a weakened and fragmented collective cultural identity. The full consequences of this will only become apparent in the future. The struggle for Amazigh cultural rights persisted throughout the four decades of Gaddafi's dictatorship, often operating in secrecy and sparking spontaneous acts of defiance. Some Amazigh families have opted to use and teach the language exclusively within the confines of their homes. Activist parents had to devise clever Arabic interpretations of Amazigh words to secure permits from various government bodies to give their children Amazigh names.

Grandparents shared stories, legends and myths. Activists secretly brought Tamazight-language literature, poetry, political writings and music albums into the country using cassettes. Music has emerged as a symbol of defiance.[19] In Libya, musicians frequently performed songs in Tamazight, often with political themes encouraging resistance, leading to repeated arrests. This was especially true for renowned singer from Zuwara, Abdullah Achini.[20]

Nonetheless, not every instance of political activism by Libya's Imazighen was tied to the identity of the Amazigh people or their struggle against cultural erasure. Among the Amazigh dissenters were individuals from the Muslim Brotherhood and those who had defected from the Libyan military.

The ban on public expressions of Amazigh culture led the Imazighen to celebrate their heritage in safe, private settings, resulting in distinct Amazigh identities across different towns.[21] In Tripoli, however, the Imazighen from various towns in the Nafusa Mountains and Zuwara often reside together, facilitating the sharing of information about the diverse ways in which they observe the same traditions. During public holidays and Amazigh cultural events, they would return to their hometowns. My neighbourhood in Tripoli was one such place, and I remember the interactions and sharing of specific customs that fostered a more interconnected Amazigh identity there.

The complex history of Imazighen communities contributes to their multifaceted identity. For some, being Amazigh is a comprehensive identity with many dimensions, extending beyond mere ethnicity or cultural affiliation. It embodies a rich tapestry of historical, linguistic and social elements that have shaped the Amazigh people over millennia. The Amazigh identity is characterised by a strong connection to the land, unique artistic expression seen in traditional crafts and music, and a complex social organisation. It also includes a shared historical narrative of resistance and resilience, as the Amazigh people have maintained their cultural distinctiveness throughout the various periods of conquest and colonisation in the region.

While some members of the community express their cultural roots primarily through language, others use political and religious ideologies. These also differ among the Amazigh people, but what all members of the community do share are experiences of structural violence due to Arabisation, land confiscation by the regime and suppression of their cultural heritage. These shared experiences influenced the position the Imazighen adopted in 2011 and played a direct role in their involvement in the armed uprising.[22]

15 Maddy-Weitzman, Bruce (2011). The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States, 292. https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/madber (last accessed 6 January 2022).

16 Law no. 24 banning the use of non-Arabic in all communications. https://aladel.gov.ly/home/?p=1244

17 Khalifa, Asma (2020). Living in the Shadows of Authoritarianism. Sadeq Institute. https://shorturl.at/gznEI (last accessed 10 January 2022).

18 Omar, Ehab (2020). -ram ,enuJ ,(elpoep hgizamA eht detaerc ecnarF woH ;srebreB eht fo noitaerc ehT) 71 ,المرصد. "ابتكار البربر.. كيف صنعت فرنسا قومية الأمازيغ" إيهاب عمر. .(5202 lirpA 52 dessecca tsal) ./51923/ge.moc.ssce.das

19 Almasude, Amar (2001). Protest Music and Poetry in the Rif: A Study of Identity as It Is Reflected in the Poetry and Music of the Imazighen in the Modern Era Author. Race, Gender & Class, no. 8, vol. 3, 114–34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41674986 (last accessed 10 June 2022).

20 Maghribia, Aswat (2023). عشيني: القذافي أجبرني على كتابة تعهد بعدم الحديث أو الغناء بالأمازيغية. 3202 yluJ 32 ,aibirhgaM tawsA. عشيني: القذافي أجبرني على كتابة تعهد بعدم الحديث أو الغناء بالأمازيغية | seciovberhgaM

21 Notes from a meeting with Amazigh activists from Zuwara and the Nafusa Mountains conducted on 17 May 2022.

22 AY. Personal communication. 30 November 2021. Please unify the citation of interviews or meetings…etc..you need to say with whome, e.g. with VV, a member of amazig community in XX (all

Revolution and Military Mobilisation (2011–2014)

Following the 2011 uprisings that swept through the Middle East and North Africa, calls for demonstrations intensified in Libya. In response, Gaddafi's regime sought to suppress any signs of civil unrest. However, the arrest of a human rights lawyer advocating for the victims of Abu Salim prison sparked protests, which began with a group of women gathering in front of the Benghazi courthouse on 15 February 2011. This demonstration escalated into violent clashes with the police, which then spread quickly, igniting protests nationwide. In Benghazi, citizens and defectors from Gaddafi's regime then united to form an opposition group, going on to establish the National Transitional Council on 27 February 2011. By March 2011, the United Nations Security Council had passed resolutions 1970–1973 to protect Libyan civilians. In accordance with these resolutions, NATO commenced airstrikes against Gaddafi's regime.[23]

As a result of their experiences, the Imazighen were politically opposed to the regime, which had repressed their rights and identity. In February 2011, when protests erupted throughout Libya, the Imazighen demonstrated in the Nafusa Mountains and Zuwara, proudly displaying an Amazigh flag. The Amazigh-speaking community expressed dissent in their native language through chants and songs. This was a powerful moment for those whose language had been prohibited and who had faced persecution for seeking to embrace their cultural heritage. Similar to other regions, in the Nafusa Mountains, too, Amazigh protesters removed the green Libyan Arab Jamahiriya flag, which symbolised Gaddafi's Cultural Revolution, and destroyed or closed down the headquarters of the Revolutionary Committees.[24] The regime's violent crackdown on these protests encouraged more people to join the uprising and take to the streets.

The regime's heavy-handed use of force against the demonstrators eventually provoked a violent response.[25] Cities that had joined the uprising sought to force the government to address their demands, initially to implement reforms and later to remove Gaddafi from power, by taking control of state institutions in the capital. In this context, on 26 February, protesters took over Zuwara.[26] They established two groups to acquire weapons and organise the defence of the town.[27] With the help of army officers, the rebels raided a military base and seized weapons. A few individuals in Zuwara—primarily high-ranking civil servants and their families—remained loyal to the regime or at least questioned the decision to oppose the government. When the regime forces overpowered the rebels in Zuwara in early March, the survivors retreated to the Amazigh stronghold in the Nafusa Mountains.

This pivotal advancement marked the beginning of military cooperation between the rebels in Zuwara and Nafusa Mountains. In the rebel-controlled towns of the Nafusa Mountains, revolutionary brigades were formed, comprising both soldiers and civilians, many of whom lacked previous military experience. Experienced combatants trained new recruits. The training and engagement in combat helped forge connections among the revolutionaries, establishing a basis for future alliances. Although it was relatively easy for the regime to seize Zuwara, they struggled to regain control of the Nafusa Mountains from Zintan westward because of the challenging terrain and strategic support the rebels had received from neighbouring Tunisia. This situation increased Zintan's importance in military efforts to counter the regime's advances. Zintan is an Arab town situated in the Nafusa Mountains.

Over time, individuals with the requisite leadership skills became field commanders, working with the joint operation centres to launch assaults on the regime forces.[28] Amazigh towns such as Jadu and Nalut developed substantial forces, while Yefren and al-Qal'a were persistently encircled by regime troops reclaiming territories. The struggle to take back these towns therefore prevented the formation of larger forces. Although fighters from Zuwara were mobilised in the Nafusa Mountains, their ability to smuggle weapons and their access to the sea enabled them to amass arms and military equipment, allowing them to become a formidable force upon their return to Zuwara.[29]

personal communications are interviews with Amazigh activists or members of armed groups depending on topic but I will not be adding details to maintain the communicated anonymity.)

23 Garland, Landen (2012). 2011 Libyan Civil War. 1st edition. White Word Publications.

24 For more details on the Revolutionary Committees, see Vandewalle D. A History of Modern Libya. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press; 2012.

25 Black, Ian (2011). Gaddafi Urges Violent Showdown and Tells Libya 'I'll Die a Martyr.' The Guardian, 22 February. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/22/muammar-gaddafi-urges-violent-showdown (last accessed 18 September 2022).

26 HRW, Libya (2011). Fewer Police Abuses in Zuwara, Under Control of Anti-Government Forces. https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/27/libya-fewer-police-abuses-zuwara-under-control-anti-government-forces (last accessed 10 June 2022).

27 KU. Personal communication. 4 February 2022.

28 AY. Personal communication. 30 November 2021.

29 RN. Personal communication. 14 July 2022.

Military mobilisation among the revolutionary brigades in Amazigh communities led to the formation of new alliances and divisions that continued into the period after the revolution. In their efforts to defend the mountain, Amazigh communities joined forces with groups from Arab towns.[30] Their shared struggle against the regime laid the groundwork for enduring alliances between the Amazigh revolutionary forces and those from the cities of Zawiya and Misrata. As they transitioned to an offensive strategy, forces from Amazigh towns, along with their Zintani allies, launched attacks on neighbouring communities that they accused of being loyal to the regime.

The military strategy of the Amazigh forces from 2011 onwards can be described as defensive. This is evident from the reaction of the Amazigh armed groups to neighbouring conflicts, which saw the Amazigh forces asserting their position in the mountains as a defensive area but going no further.[31] Some of these conflicts were also fed by historical grievances over Imazighen land which had been seized to host Arab communities as part of the policy of Arabisation of the mountain region in recent decades. For instance, Tiji and Badr, which are predominantly Arab towns, were engaged in long-standing disputes with the Amazigh towns of Nalut and Kabaw, whose forces had attacked them on several occasions between 2012 and 2019 in an effort to reclaim land. Another ongoing conflict is between the "Mashashiya" and neighbouring Arab communities. In this case, the narrative of a divide between loyalists and revolutionaries concealed tensions over land and administrative borders.[32]

The aftermath of the revolution saw a tendency among the victorious faction to seek retribution against individuals perceived as loyal to the former regime. Notably, Amazigh communities played a pivotal role in the defeat of Gaddafi, positioning themselves as integral members of the triumphant revolutionary coalition. This involvement in the revolution bestowed the Amazigh with newfound military influence. Leveraging this heightened position, the Amazigh were able to openly manifest their cultural identity and engage in political activism with increased autonomy. The increased sense of security this gave them facilitated the overt practice of cultural traditions and the formation of political entities dedicated to advocating for their interests.

During and after the conflict that led to the fall of the Gaddafi regime, alliances were formed in Amazigh-populated areas of Libya. This era saw increased collaboration between military groups and political or civil organisations within the Amazigh community. The partnership that developed enabled the groups to coordinate their efforts throughout the campaign against Gaddafi's rule. The deepening of relationship among the various factions within the Amazigh community stemmed from their shared goal of opposing the existing regime.

This collaboration was a crucial factor in the Imazighen's participation in the revolution. Political and civil organisations lent their support to Amazigh insurgents by emphasising the importance of their contribution to the uprising. Amazigh journalists and bloggers either reported on their military achievements or helped international journalists access mountainous regions. Those involved in crisis committees secured backing by facilitating communication with the National Transitional Council to ensure that their demands were met. When local and military councils were established in autumn 2011, strong connections of rebel forces were maintained. These initiatives linked various Amazigh factions and conveyed a message of unity and solidarity to the broader Imazighen community. This was vital for them to advocate for the recognition of their cultural rights.

Political Organisation

The immediate post-revolutionary period saw a powerful cultural revival and political activism among the Imazighen. However, as unity among revolutionaries gave way to political struggles over the new order, Amazigh activists soon experienced pushback against their demands from their former allies. In disputes over the constitutional process, Amazigh aspirations for the recognition of their cultural rights gradually yielded to disillusionment over the persistence of pan-Arabist sentiment, the legacy of four decades of indoctrination and cultural violence under Gaddafi. With the return of armed conflict from 2014 onwards, the self-perception of the Imazighen as victorious revolutionaries was supplanted by a growing sense of being under attack by hostile forces.

In the aftermath of the regime's downfall, Amazigh activists began to organise themselves to express their demands for cultural rights, which had not previously been codified owing to the absence of a constitution. The constitution remains a key topic in ongoing debates about the division of power and allocation of resources. The Interim Constitutional Declaration, issued on 3 August 2011, proclaimed that "the state shall (...) guarantee the cultural rights for all sectors of Libyan society and their languages shall be deemed national ones." Nevertheless, Arabic remains the sole official language. As a result, the Amazigh movement's initial demands were focused on having Tamazight recognised as an official language alongside Arabic and incorporating it into the

30 Lacher, Wolfram (2020). Libya's Fragmentation. I.B. Tauris.

31 RN. Personal communication. 14 July 2022.

32 ReliefWeb (2013). Thousands of Libyan Families Displaced in the Nafusa Mountains. https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/thousands-libyan-families-displaced-nafusa-mountains (last accessed 6 January 2022).

school curriculum in Amazigh areas.[33] However, efforts to promote Tamazight education received only limited support from the Ministry of Education under the transitional government led by Abd al-Rahim al-Kib (November 2011–November 2012).

In autumn 2011, Amazigh activists organised a series of gatherings and demonstrations to articulate and advance their demands. The Tripoli Symposium[34] held on 26 September 2011 saw, for the first time, Amazigh political activists engage in discussion on establishing a political entity to represent their interests. Advocates for cultural rights emphasise the importance of constitutional measures to protect Tamazight—and, by extension, Amazigh identity—from the ongoing risk of being erased. The day after the symposium, a significant rally was held at Martyrs' Square to voice these demands. In the weeks and months that followed, the absence of Amazigh representation in the Kib government and the government's failure to support Tamazight education led to repeated protests by the Imazighen in Tripoli and other cities. These demonstrations were largely met with silence from the transitional government.[35]

The ineffectiveness of the central government and the lack of regulatory pressure afforded Amazigh communities the autonomy they needed to implement their cultural rights, resulting in a significant cultural resurgence. Following a prolonged period of prohibition, voluntary Tamazight instruction was initiatedby Amazigh activists. Tifinagh literacy rates have increased thanks to the language being incorporated in public signage, commercial establishments and cultural events. Subsequently, educational curricula were also developed, leading to Tamazight being introduced in academic institutions. Although the Ministry of Education retains authority over the assessment of Tamazight examinations, this aspect remains a point of contention because the Education Office at the Ministry of Education has decided that Tamazight should not be be classifed as a main subject in terms of scoring, essentially making it an extracurricular topic.

Ultimately, the quest for cultural rights pursued by various Amazigh communities was facilitated not only by the impotence of the central government but also by support from armed groups within these communities. These groups saw themselves as the triumphant forces of 2011 and thus believed they had earned the right to protect their cultural identity. The weakness of the central authority stemmed from numerous challenges, including the aftermath of a civil war that led to the emergence and proliferation of armed factions. These factions engaged in violent confrontations, which exacerbated the ongoing humanitarian crisis and saw them wield considerable influence and power. Consequently, cities and towns far from the capital were eventually outside the political reach of the central government.[36]

Each Amazigh community has its own distinct armed group. The Imazighen felt confident in the safety of their towns and cities, allowing them to freely express their culture without fear of oppression. However, similar to other armed factions in Libya, Amazigh groups received their funding from successive Tripoli governments, which deterred them from adopting political stances that might threaten their ties with the government. The relationship between armed factions and civil entities in Amazigh towns was characterised by cooperation with both local and subsequently elected municipal councils. This collaboration was even more pronounced among councils of elders, who frequently served as mediators and coordinators among Amazigh towns. The armed groups responsible for community security are often deeply integrated into these communities and are concerned about how they are perceived by the members of their community.[37]

The conclusion of a treaty among Amazigh towns and their armed factions in the Nafusa Mountain region which banned the use and display of weapons in non-emergency situations was also attributed to the integration of these factions in the local social fabric. Conversely, other armed groups, such as those in Tripoli, had more complex connections with their political leaders and the government affiliations of those leaders. The relationship between Amazigh armed groups and the ASC varied; some groups aligned themselves with the ASC and were dedicated to advocating for Amazigh rights, while others had no connection with the council.

The evolving national security landscape and shifting political dynamics, coupled with a decline in external pressure concerning Imazighen cultural rights, have facilitated a temporary convergence of objectives between armed factions and civil society organisations. Both advocated for the cultural rights of the Imazighen population. However, this alignment is transient. The emergence of internal conflicts led to the formation of distinct factions within these groups, resulting in a divergence of their respective goals and modes of action.

33 Kohl, Ines (2014). Libya's 'Major Minorities'. Berber, Tuareg and Tebu: Multiple Narratives of Citizenship, Language and Border Control. Middle East Critique, vol. 23, no. 4, 423–438.

34 The Tripoli Symposium was the first Amazigh conference to be organised in Tripoli in 2011.

35 IB. Personal communication. 20 July 2021.

36 Eaton, T., A. R. Alageli, E. Badi, M. Eljarh, and V. Stocker (2020). Introduction: The Development of Armed Groups Since 2014. In The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/development-libyan-armed-groups-2014/1-introduction-development-armed-groups-2014

37 Eaton, T. (2023). Armed group–community relations. In Security actors in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan since 2011. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/security-actors-misrata-zawiya-and-zintan-2011/04-armed-group-community-relations

Civil War (2014–2019)

Legal Discourse and Constitutional Conflict

In the aftermath of Gaddafi's regime, establishing a constitution in Libya became a contentious topic for various social groups, including the Imazighen, whose aim was to secure their cultural rights in the new Libya. The groundwork for the constitution was laid by the Interim Constitutional Declaration finalised by the National Transitional Council in August 2011. The Declaration acted as a provisional framework until a permanent constitution was adopted. Subsequently, elections for the General National Congress (GNC) were held in 2012, which then passed a resolution to initiate the constitutional drafting process by electing the 60th Constitutional Drafting Assembly in 2014. From the outset, Amazigh activists endeavoured, albeit unsuccessfully, to sway discussions within the GNC regarding the allocation of seats and decision-making procedures for the forthcoming Constitutional Drafting Assembly.

The Constitutional Declaration and election law established a 60-member Constitutional Drafting Assembly, allocating 20 seats to each of the three regions, along with six seats designated for the Amazigh, Tebu and Tuareg communities. This regional seat distribution was influenced by historical factors. Since it does not take population differences into account, the importance of each vote varies by region. The description of the seat allocation process set out in the law was ambiguous, with the potential for misinterpretations.[38]

The government implemented a policy with the purported aim of enhancing diversity and representation in elections through designated seat allocations, which it called "cultural components." However, this approach has had a number of negative consequences. First, it has increased the complexity of the electoral process. Second, it inadvertently undermined the original objective of inclusivity. Third, it established two distinct categories of electoral contest: one for general seats and another for "cultural components." In regions inhabited by Indigenous groups such as the Tebu and Tuareg, voters faced the dilemma of whether to prioritise their national or their cultural identity when casting their votes. Ultimately, the implementation of this policy created challenges inconsistent with the aim of improving representation.[39]

The breakdown of talks regarding the process led to demonstrations throughout Amazigh towns. In August 2013, armed Amazigh groups invaded the GNC and obstructed oil and gas facilities, causing intermittent power failures in Tripoli and interrupting gas delivery to Italy.[40] These actions marked the first instance of Amazigh armed factions advocating for Imazighen cultural rights. Although they placed pressure on the GNC, no concessions were made.

"The participation of the Imazighen in the elections to the Drafting Assembly would give the process legitimacy while failing to give Amazigh representatives sufficient influence on its outcomes."[41]

The ASC urged a boycott of the Constitutional Drafting Committee elections scheduled for February 2014, referring to it as a "day of mourning." In response, Amazigh communities refrained from participating, whether as voters or candidates. Amazigh politicians linked to Ali Zeidan's government (November 2012–March 2014) attempted to counteract the boycott, while the GNC circumvented it by establishing an election centre for Zuwara in Zawiya. This was intended to encourage the Imazighen to register and vote, as they were unable to do so in their own towns.[42] These efforts were in vain, however.

After the elections, the ASC continued discussions with the GNC, ultimately resulting in the modification of the Interim Constitutional Declaration. This amendment, which was incorporated into the CDA's decision-making process, stipulated that "it is necessary to come to an agreement with the distinct linguistic and cultural components of Libyan society on provisions that concern them."[43] The Tuareg and Tebu found these changes satisfactory and participated in the supplementary elections, while the Amazigh continued their boycott.[44]

Amazigh activists argued that the amendments to the Interim Constitutional Declaration were inadequate to address fundamental issues such as the use of the Amazigh flag, the name of the state, the official language and the national anthem. Attempts to amend Article 30 of the Interim Consti-

38 Constitutional Committee Draft Election Law (Libya). https://peacemaker.un.org/fr/node/81

39 For a more in-depth assessment of the constitutional process, see The Carter Center (2014). Libya: Final Report, Constitutional Drafting Assembly Elections. www.carter-center.org (last accessed 26 July 2022).

40 Cramer, Marissa (2014). The Amazigh Question in Post Qaddafi Libya. University of Paris.

41 KH. Personal communication. 16 July 2022.

42 AY. Personal communication. 30 November 2021.

43 "Cultural components" is the term the Libyan government uses to describe the Indigenous groups. The term is rejected by the Amazigh and the Tebu.

44 Cherif, Nedra (2021). Libya's Constitution: Between Conflict and Compromise. www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/ (last accessed 26 July 2022).

tutional Declaration, which designates Arabic as the country's official language, were rejected by the GNC. As a result, negotiations came to a halt because neither side was willing to compromise on their demands.

"GNC members were careless. They would often use the argument that they were representing the 'majority' as an excuse to ignore Amazigh conditions.[45]

Consequently, the constitutional drafting process moved forward without the participation of the Imazighen, causing them to become inward-looking. The exclusion of Amazigh politicians led the Imazighen to feel that they were no longer seen as partners in Libya's progress, despite their efforts to change the regime and transform Libya into a democratic state in 2011. In late 2014 and early 2015, amid a renewed outbreak of violent conflict, which I will elaborate on in the following sections, plans were set in motion to conduct elections for the Amazigh Supreme Council. The ASC was charged with representing the Imazighen's interests and advocating for their cultural and political rights within various national political structures.

The ASC collaborated with local councils to form an autonomous organisation referred to as the Tasmylt n Istayen or "electoral preparatory committee."[46] Over 100 volunteers contributed to this committee. Financial support for elections was provided by local councils and affluent members of the community. Media outlets, including Ebraren TV—a national Tamazight channel supportive of the ASC, established, financed and backed by the Amazigh community—helped raise awareness about the process. Despite challenging security conditions and tenuous ceasefires, the election was successfully conducted in August 2015. Each Amazigh town, as well as Tripoli, which has the largest Amazigh population, was allocated two seats, with the seats being equally divided between men and women. The newly elected council commenced its duties in October 2015.

In the autumn of 2015, the ASC stood firm on its demands regarding the constitutional process. Mediators from the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and a development consultancy reached out to the ASC to create a channel for communication with the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. These interactions were not direct.[47] The ASC insisted that the Assembly retract the initial draft of the constitution to negotiate changes that would enable Imazighen participation in the Assembly. However, the Drafting Assembly also rejected this proposal, effectively stalling the process.

In 2016, another attempt at mediation was made, with discussions organised by the Sultan of Oman and facilitated by UNSMIL.[48] Initially, the ASC was willing to participate in these talks, but communication regarding Article 30[49] of the Interim Constitutional Draft was obstructed. This article was a significant point of dispute for the Imazighen, resulting in the ASC refusing to participate in the meeting. Subsequently, UNSMIL held meetings in the Nafusa Mountains with Amazigh political leaders seeking political recognition from the government. The government asserted that all Imazighen had agreed to Article 30 and expressed a desire to be part of the constitutional process.[50]

The ASC's unyielding position did not enjoy unanimous support within the Amazigh community. Over the years, the ASC's position has made certain political Amazigh factions feel excluded from a crucial process that would eventually harm Imazighen interests.[51] As a result, some Amazigh political and civil society activists suggested that the Imazighen engage with the Assembly instead of remaining on the sidelines. They believed that the boycott had not produced any positive outcomes and that it might be more beneficial to cooperate and make compromises than to continue the boycott. They attended meetings with the government, organised workshops for the public and attempted to mediate with their communities.[52]

The contestation over the ASC's approach presented two perspectives on the efficacy of boycotts. According to the first viewpoint, change is more effectively achieved through engagement with the existing system or process. Conversely, based on the second perspective, boycotting or abstaining from participation is counterproductive, as it may further marginalise or exclude the Imazighen population. ASC members and other Amazigh representatives held occasional informal meetings with the Assembly. These did not produce any meaningful outcomes, however.[53]

45 IB. Personal communication with a negotiator from the ASC. 20 July 2021.

46 AY. Personal communication. 30 November 2021.

47 IB. Personal communication. 20 July 2021.

48 Massouri, Hussien (2015). اليوم تنتهي مهلة «تأسيسية الدستور . (Today is the deadline for the "Constitutional Founding Committee"). Alwasat. http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/93810 (last accessed 27 July 2022).

49 Article 30 stipulates the division of seats on the committee between the three regions, which the Amazigh have opposed from the outset and sought to negotiate its amendment.

50 Notes from a CSO meeting, 2016–2017.

51 KH. Personal communication. 16 July 2022.

52 IB. Personal communication. 20 July 2021.

53 Ibid.

Renewed Conflict, Internal Disputes and Collaboration

Once the shared opposition to Gaddafi dissipated, different narratives about the ongoing conflict emerged.[54] Following the June 2014 election, rising tensions among rival political factions in Tripoli sparked a new civil war. Accounts of that summer frequently depict a simplistic division into two opposing factions. However, alliances are complex and transient, formed based on shared interests in specific local disputes.[55]

On 16 May 2014, Khalifa Haftar, a former officer in Gaddafi's military who had defected during the Chad War in the 1970s and returned in 2011, initiated Operation Libya Dignity in Benghazi to curb the widespread violence in the city. Shortly after he had launched the operation, Haftar extended it beyond Benghazi to the capital to consolidate more power. Haftar's allies, particularly the Zintani forces, stormed the parliament in Tripoli. In response to the post-election violence of June 2014, a counter-offensive known as Libya Dawn was launched.[56]

The Imazighen community experienced internal divisions over whether or not to align with the Libya Dawn coalition in its conflict against Zintani armed factions. Some political groups affiliated with the ASC and certain local council members called for neutrality. In contrast, other political factions, particularly those supporting the GNC president from Zuwara Nuri Abu Sahmain, strongly supported Libya Dawn. This division extends to armed factions. Forces from al-Qal'a and Nalut sought to establish a defensive line against the Zintanis. Zuwara's armed groups eventually joined Libya Dawn, influenced by their alliance with Misrata, despite initially opposing Abu Sahmain's stance to the point of preventing him from returning to his hometown. Other Amazigh armed groups from Nalut and Al-Qa'la, however, refrained from becoming involved in the conflict.[57]

There are several reasons certain groups supported Libya Dawn. Some armed factions viewed it as a campaign against loyalists of the former regime attempting a counter-revolution to restore a regime similar to Gaddafi's. Others were ideologically linked to Islamist movements; although they did not have their own armed groups, they were part of several other groups.

Moreover, some groups opposed the Zintani-led factions because of the latter's alliance with Khalifa Haftar, who they perceived as a self-proclaimed leader of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces and an Arab nationalist figure, posing a fundamental threat to the newly established space for Libya's Indigenous communities to assert their identity.

Although opinions on Libya Dawn and its conflict with the Zintani forces varied, direct assaults on Amazigh communities were seen as a fundamental threat, prompting a unified reaction. This resulted in the creation of a moral agreement among Amazigh armed groups in the spring of 2015,[58] which declared that an attack on any Amazigh town would be treated as an attack on all Imazighen: "An enemy of one Amazigh town is an enemy of all Imazighen."[59] In May of the same year, a dispute arose over the Ras Jdir border crossing with Tunisia, near Zuwara. Zintani forces tried to seize control of the border, leading to skirmishes and the capture of prisoners from both sides. Forces from Jadu, al-Qal'a, Kabaw and Nalut were mobilised, with each group responsible for a frontline in the defence of Zuwara. The dispute was swiftly resolved through mediation and the exchange of hostages with the assistance of the Libyan Red Crescent.[60]

Collaboration in the face of perceived existential threats is a recurring theme. In 2018, Usama al-Juwaili, a Zintani military officer appointed as the commander of the western military region by the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), attempted to seize control of the Ras Jdir border crossing.[61] In response, forces from Jadu mobilised to obstruct the road near the al-Wutiya airbase, located south of Zuwara. Subsequently, representatives of armed groups and municipalities across Amazigh towns convened and issued a warning of retaliation if Zuwara came under attack.

54 Khalifa (2020).

55 Gartenstein-Ross, D., & Barr, N. (2015). Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT. https://icct.nl/publication/dignity-and-dawn-libyas-escalating-civil-war

56 Ibid.

57 Personal memos, 2014.

58 Notes from a meeting on National Reconciliation, facilitated by UNSMIL. Malta, 2016.

59 Ibid.

60 Al Wasat (2015) .(2202 yluJ 92 dessecca tsal) 54596/aybil/swen/yl.tasawla//:ptth .(natniZ dna arawuZ neewteb segatsoh 81 fo egnahcxE) تبادل 81 محتجزًا بين الزنتان وزوارة.

61 BT. Personal communication. 29 November 2021.

Building Alliances and Renewed Threats (2019–2021)

The dashed hopes of achieving cultural rights in 2011, coupled with disappointment over a constitutional process that ended without the involvement of the Amazigh, along with renewed threats, meant Amazigh political figures faced a difficult decision. In this context, political figures include those associated with the ASC, municipal councils and independent activists. Individuals affiliated with the government often hold views aligned with both the central government and their personal political beliefs.

One approach was to create partnerships and foster unity with other groups. This was exemplified by the Tuareg, Tebu and Amazigh representatives' decision to boycott the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. These representatives also established a coordination unit to enhance communication and consolidate their efforts. A former ASC member remarked that this was possibly one of their most effective steps to date. They also sought to gain support and forge ties with the international community. The ASC participated in meetings and sent delegations to various international entities, such as the European Parliament.[62]

Initially, Tebu and Tuareg delegates participated in the Constitutional Drafting Assembly but later withdrew, claiming that their opinions had been ignored.[63] In 2016, they reached out to the ASC and suggested a partnership. In 2018, together with the ASC, they released a joint statement regarding the constitutional process, emphasising their continued boycott, refusal to accept any draft and warning that the persistent imposition of the Arab majority's agenda could result in the creation of separate regions within the state.[64] Initially, their collaboration centred on constitutional matters. Over time, however, political coordination intensified, especially between the ASC and certain Tebu representatives who shared the common goal of seeking recognition that their communities were indigenous to Libya. Representatives of the ASC and the Tebu also began conducting joint meetings with the US, EU member states and various UN organisations.

This alliance became crucial when conflict erupted again in 2019, as the ASC, along with Tebu factions opposing Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces, condemned Haftar's justification of the attacks on Tripoli and Tebu in Marzuq, stating: "Joining forces made our voices stronger."[65]

In 2017, the Libu Party was formed as another effort to forge political alliances beyond the northern Libyan Amazigh community. The party was established by Fathi Ben Khalifa, an Amazigh activist who also served as the president of the World Amazigh Congress and happens to be the author's cousin. With a secular and civic approach to inclusive politics, the party adopted the slogan "Libya first." It successfully attracted members of the Amazigh, Tuareg, Tebu and Arab communities.[66] In Libya, political parties are still grappling with inadequate legislation, a series of interim governments and the unchecked presence of armed factions. These elements have obstructed progress in establishing a democratic political environment in the country.

In the period leading up to Khalifa Haftar's 2019 offensive in Tripoli, the Amazigh community felt increasingly threatened, particularly as a result of Haftar's actions which they perceived as posing a danger. This perception was fuelled by the increasing hostility of hardline Salafists linked to Haftar, who opposed Ibadism, a branch of Islam practiced by the Libyan Amazigh. Haftar was also seen as a supporter of groups such as Si'aan and al-Nuwail, which armed Salafist factions in various communities across Libya. In both 2017 and 2019, the office responsible for religious rulings that was part of the eastern government issued decrees against Ibadi Muslims, labelling Ibadism as "a lost and deviant sect, they are *khawarij [apostates], they have beliefs that are blasphemous (...) There can therefore be no praying with them, nor any relations."*[67] These decrees sparked widespread campaigns promoting hate speech.[68] In 2024, Dar El Iftaa in Tripoli issued a similar fatwa.

62 ASC delegation in Brussels, from ASC Facebook page 2016. https://www.facebook.com/AmazighSC/photos/a.1655045648116074/1865686433718660/

63 Ibid.

64 The joint statement, issued in Arabic and shared on Facebook, can be accessed here: https://www.facebook.com/orapi/posts/294209057875630/

65 Ibid.

66 Portal Amazigh (2017). Libu Party. http://www.portail-amazigh.com/2021/05/Libu-Party.html (accessed 10 January 2022).

67 Dar-el Iftaa shared the 2017 edict on their Facebook page and website. It has now been taken down as the site was redesigned. An image of the edict can be found in: ليبيا المستقبل | جدل في ليبيا إثر فتوى لـ»أوقاف المؤقتة» بتكفير الأباضية والتحذير من الصلاة خلفهم .7102 .lebkatsoM-la aybiL .sptth :/:www.labkatsom-la-aybil.gro/01/18862/جدل-في-ليبيا-إثر-فتوى-لـ-أوقاف-المؤقتة-بتكفير-الأباضية-والتحذير-من-الصلاة-خلفهم.lmth) dessecca tsal 92 yluJ 2202).

68 Ghanmmi, Lamine (2017). Fatwa against Ibadi Muslims in Libya Risks Igniting Sectarian Strife. The Arab Weekly, 13 August. https://www.thearabweekly.com/fatwa-against-ibadi-muslims-libya-risks-igniting-sectarian-strife (last accessed 29 July 2022).

In April 2019, when Haftar initiated his assault on Tripoli, Amazigh communities, regardless of their political stance towards the central government, united against what they saw as a significant threat to their rights and the potential resurgence of oppressive authoritarianism. Nevertheless, their involvement was mainly defensive, with most military groups prepared to monitor the areas surrounding their territories. This approach was influenced by two factors: the geographical layout of the Amazigh regions, which makes defence a priority, and a persistent distrust of the central government in Tripoli, despite their interests aligning with those of the Tripoli government at the time due to the position the government had adopted towards the Amazigh in the past.

Towards Political Autonomy?

The 2019 offensive concluded with a ceasefire agreed in May 2020 and formalised in October of the same year.[69] Political discussions, spearheaded by UNSMIL, commenced in earnest but did not include the Imazighen.[70] This political process successfully established the Government of National Accord in 2021, which was intended to set the stage for legislative and executive elections on 24 December 2021—elections which ultimately did not take place.

Ongoing power struggles and armed conflicts saw Amazigh social groups gradually distance themselves from their political elites and those involved in the conflicts. This caused a shift in social dynamics, with Amazigh groups redefining their identity in response to the changing political landscape. Some Amazigh activists perceived Imazighen who took on governmental roles as undermining the Amazigh cause. As one activist told me: *"Certain Amazigh politicians are corrupt, within a corrupt system, and still believe that Arabs possess the same power and resources to dominate the Imazighen as they did in the past, even though this is no longer true."*

The strategy adopted by successive administrations in Tripoli towards the Imazighen prompted political groups aligned with the ASC and local governments to conclude that genuine inclusion was lacking in such a setting. This understanding set the stage for the 2021 agreement among Amazigh municipalities, the ASC and civil society organisation representatives to establish a "fourth region."

The initiative for the fourth region emerged as a result of widespread Libyan dissatisfaction with excessive centralisation and the Imazighen's perception of ongoing discrimination against them.[71] In January 2021, representatives from Amazigh municipalities gathered in the Nafusa Mountains and unanimously decided to establish a fourth administrative region with its own constitution, marking what was subsequently referred to as a "historic moment."[72] The aim was to secure both administrative and political independence for the Imazighen. The move was also linked to potential upcoming elections, representing an effort to achieve a more equitable distribution of parliamentary seats. Representatives from the ASC and Tebu collaborated to send joint communications regarding electoral districts to the High National Elections Commission (HNEC).

A preparatory committee was appointed in February and March 2021, which was required to hold extensive dialogue meetings in the Nafusa Mountains and with members of the political factions in Tripoli.[73] This committee was charged with the key responsibility of engaging in extensive and in-depth consultations with diverse stakeholders from two key regions: the strategically important Nafusa Mountain area and the politically significant capital city, Tripoli.

The Nafusa Mountain region, known for its distinct cultural and historical significance, represented a critical demographic that had to be included in the discussions. The committee recognised the importance of understanding and addressing the unique perspectives and concerns of the inhabitants of this mountainous region.

In Tripoli, the committee sought to engage with a wide spectrum of political factions and interest groups to gain legitimacy. This included established political parties, emerging political movements, civil society organisations and influential community leaders. The aim was to ensure comprehensive representation of the various political ideologies and interests in the capital.

However, the committee's efforts were significantly hampered by three formidable challenges that plagued the nation.

69 United Nations (2020). UN Salutes New Libya Ceasefire Agreement That Points to 'a Better, Safer, and More Peaceful Future'. https://www.un.org/en/globalceasefire/un-salutes-new-libya-ceasefire-agreement-points- '-better-safer-and-more-peaceful (last accessed 18 September 2022).

70 Libya, Mohammed (2020). Libya's Amazigh Council Rejects UNSMIL-Sponsored Dialogue. Libya Observer. https://libyaobserver.ly/news/libyas-amazigh-council-rejects-unsmil-sponsored-dialogue (last accessed 18 September 2022).

71 For more background on the fourth region, see BT Transformation Index (2022). Libya Country Report. https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LBY (last accessed 29 July 2022).

72 BT. Personal communication. 29 November 2021.

73 Artema, Mohamed. 1202 #6767212/الدول-العربية/أمازيغ-ليبيا-يتفقون-على-إنشاء-إقليم-رابع-بالبلاد/ra/rt.moc.aa.www//:sptth .luodanA أمازيغ ليبيا يتفقون على إنشاء 'إقليم رابع' بالبلاد. (2202 yluJ 92 dessecca tsal).

First, the pervasive political instability that has characterised Libya for years continues to pose a substantial obstacle. The lack of a unified government, frequent power struggles and shifting alliances have made it difficult to establish consistent dialogue and build trust among the various stakeholders.

Second, the ever-present threat of armed conflict casts a long shadow over the committee's work. The fragile security situation, with multiple armed groups vying for control and influence, has created an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty. This volatile environment not only made physical meetings and travel hazardous but also affected the willingness of some parties to engage in open and constructive dialogue on the issue.

Third, the central government in Tripoli and political elites in the capital frequently interfered in the work of and attempted to infiltrate not only the committee but also the ASC, perceiving the autonomy of the Imazighen as a threat. These challenges seriously impeded the committee's ability to function effectively and make substantial progress. Political instability meant that agreements reached one day could become obsolete the next as the balance of power shifted. Meanwhile, the looming threat of violence made long-term planning and commitment to the process difficult, as immediate security concerns often took precedence over long-term governance objectives.

Conclusion

This paper delves into the evolution of Amazigh identity in Libya during times of conflict, focusing on the experiences of the Imazighen people. The analysis highlights several key elements that illustrate the complex interplay between historical oppression, political activism and the ongoing challenges faced by the Amazigh community in its quest for recognition and self-determination. The identity of the Amazigh people in Libya has been significantly influenced by their experiences of conflict and resistance, resulting in increased political organisation and efforts to secure cultural rights and autonomy. Under the oppressive Gaddafi regime, the Amazigh endured structural violence that hindered their ability to express and practice their culture, thereby impacting their identity.

The 2011 uprising offered a chance to break free from repression and incorporate Amazigh identity into a new democratic and participatory framework. Consequently, the Amazigh were actively involved in this uprising. During this time, their identity was prominently showcased in what some scholars have referred to as the Amazigh Renaissance. This development is part of a broader trend of identity politics in post-revolution Libya, where various groups negotiate their roles within the national framework of the state. The Imazighen's situation underscores the challenges and opportunities that Indigenous groups encounter in transitional societies, highlighting the importance of inclusive governance and respect for cultural diversity in building a stable, democratic state. Looking forward, the future of Amazigh rights and identity in Libya will depend on several factors, including resolving the country's broader political conflicts, establishing a truly inclusive constitutional framework and maintaining the mobilisation and unity of Amazigh communities. The ongoing pursuit of recognition and autonomy among the Imazighen offers a crucial perspective for understanding the complexities of nation building and identity formation in conflict societies.

Imprint

Publisher
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
4, rue Bachar Ibn Bord
2078 La Marsa, Tunisia
info.libya@fes.de

Publishing department
The Libya Office

Responsible for content:
Dr. Salam Said | Director of The Libya Office
Salam.said@fes.de

Proof-reading :
Carla Welch

Review :
Dr. Maria Kastrinou (Brunel University)
Dr. Salam Said (FES)

Design/Layout
Mehdi Jelliti | Magma-studio.tn

June 2025

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:
↗ https://libya.fes.de/publications.html

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Libya's Imazighen: Identity Formation During Conflict

This paper explores the trajectory of Libya's Amazigh population from systemic repression under the Gaddafi regime to their cultural and political resurgence following the 2011 uprising. It examines the deliberate erasure of Amazigh identity through state policies and the subsequent reassertion of their cultural and political presence during the post-revolutionary period, commonly referred to as the "Amazigh Renaissance." Despite notable advancements, Amazigh communities continue to face exclusion within a fragmented and volatile political environment. The study argues that meaningful recognition and autonomy for the Amazigh are contingent upon an inclusive constitutional framework, resolution of national conflicts, and internal community cohesion. Their inclusion is presented as crucial for sustainable peacebuilding and the broader democratic transformation of Libya.

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:
↗ **https://libya.fes.de/publications.html**

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung