

New Insights into Libyan History

Jason Pack

Anna Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile and the Emergence of a New Nation-State* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

With the fall of Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, his paranoid and largely successful attempts to close off contemporary Libyan history to academic inquiry have presumably also come to an end. Over the next several years, there is every reason to anticipate a flowering of scholarship utilizing Libya's untapped archival resources. The authors of these yet-to-be-written studies would be wise to root themselves in the work of the few Western scholars who were productively operating in Libya prior to the collapse of Qaddafi's regime.

Before the thaw in relations between Libya and the United States in 2003, the Italo-Libyan Joint Communiqué of July 1998 and the Sirte Agreement of August 1999 had already mandated certain forms of economic, cultural and academic cooperation between Libya and Italy. Yet even prior to these developments, a handful of Italian historians with personal connections inside the Jamahiriyya, such as Anna Baldinetti, had been engaged in scholarly work in Libya throughout the 1990s. As a result, Baldinetti was uniquely well positioned to participate in the renewal of scholarship on Libya occasioned by the end of the embargo and the concomitant archival inventory projects in Tripoli at the Libyan Studies Centre and in Italy at the Ministero dell' Africa Italiana and the Archivio Centrale dello Stato.

Anna Baldinetti's *The Origins of the Libyan Nation* is not just another overview of twentieth-century Libyan history, as some similarly named works are. Focusing on Libyan exile groups, Baldinetti attempts to unlock the emergence of distinct "Libyan versions" of Arab nationalism prior to Libyan independence in 1951. The central importance of emigration (*hijra*) and return for Cyrenaican and Tripolitanian politics between 1911 and 1951 has long been recognized. Majid Khadduri alludes to it in his 1963 work, *Modern Libya: A Study in Political Development*. Building on this and other mainstays of the literature (namely, the books of Ali Ahmida, Lisa Anderson, Ronald Bruce St. John and Dirk Vandewalle), Baldinetti documents in minute detail—but also in broad sweep—the history of the *hijra* of Libyans in response to their lands being conquered and reconquered (1911–1932). She further examines how Arab nationalism spread among these exiled populations in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, and then how Arab nationalist discourse and political organizational techniques were transplanted to the Libyan

homeland in the period of the British Military Administration (1943–1951). This core argument, an expansion of her 2003 *Journal of North African Studies* article, "Libya's Refugees, Their Places of Exile and the Shaping of Their National Idea," is Baldinetti's signature contribution to the field.

Her methodology comes directly from the discrete sub-discipline that chronicles the evolution of Arab nationalism. She explains her utilization of Israel Gershoni's approach thusly, "Arab nationalism is not analyzed by the visual angle of pan-Arabism, but nationalism is placed in the specific socio-political context of each Arab society individually." For her, this method ultimately derives from Benedict Anderson. Consequently, it sees Libyan exiles forging "the Libyan nation" as an "imagined community" in response to their new social situations in the diaspora.

Despite this attractive theoretical paradigm, the reader is left wondering at the end of the work to what extent, if at all, the political bonds forged in exile actually came to replace traditional tribal and regional attachments when the exiles came home. Baldinetti conclusively debunks the hypothesis that the political organizations forged in exile influenced—in any meaningful way—the form acquired by the Libyan state at independence in 1951. In so doing, she inadvertently demonstrates that Western geostrategic concerns and British "Orientalist" conceptions of what type of political order was best suited to "tribal Arabs" actually determined the key parameters of the Kingdom of Libya at its foundation.

Moreover, while *The Origins of the Libyan Nation* excellently chronicles the formation of Arab nationalist societies in the Libyan diaspora and the publication of their manifestos and propaganda, the precise content of these uniquely "Libyan versions of Arab nationalism" is not sufficiently analyzed. Lastly and most crucially, the inner logic of the competing versions of identity and political community—the regional and traditional—are nearly totally absent as they appear to be deemed outside of the scope of the work. This choice of treatment may stem from the lack of sources. Manifestos or newspaper articles calling for Cyrenaican separatism are less likely to have been preserved than those calling for Libyan unity. Therefore, despite vast research and strong theoretical grounding, it seems that it was impossible to recreate adequately the different sides in the debates about identity and political future that raged among Tripolitans and Cyrenaicans during the period under study.

As for Baldinetti's style, like a puppet master unabashedly revealing the puppeteer's craft, she shows her readers both the strings and how they are pulled. The attentive specialist will delight in learning how Italian secondary source literature on Libya is the go-to resource for many questions concerning the

post-Italian period; how some of E. E. Evans-Pritchard's assertions about Sanussi-Ottoman relations have become contested by more recent scholarship; and how contemporary Libyan historians systematically projected modern notions of Libyan identity upon the past because of the intellectual conformity demanded by the Jamahiriyya. Baldinetti's footnotes are highly professional and take up nearly a quarter of the book. Yet these joys of well-crafted academic writing are only a sideshow when it comes to Baldinetti's main contribution: on the one hand, documenting the waves of Libyan emigration and repatriation and, on the other, describing the evolution of the discourse, political organization and actions of the exile groups.

Starting with the 1911 Italian invasion, the flow of emigration and repatriation was continual. Heavy outflows started immediately. When violence died down after World War I, more than 100,000 Tripolitarians returned home. Next, a significant proportion of Cyrenaica's population was driven into exile or re-exile as a result of the Fascist policy of reconquest in the early 1920s. After pacification was declared, the mid- to late 1930s saw the return of most Cyrenaicans who had fled to Egypt. Yet Tripolitarians who had been in exile in Tunisia were less likely to return home, because of economic opportunities in the Tunisian mines. Fascinatingly, Baldinetti shows that throughout these different episodes of exile, the émigrés remained attached to their homeland, partly because the authorities in Egypt and Tunisia were asked by the Italians in the 1910s to classify the refugees as Italian colonial subjects. This strategy was chosen to prevent the migrants' assimilation to their new societies—in an attempt to lure them home, where they would serve as productive laborers. In a variation on that theme, Italian colonial documents reveal that from the 1920s onward Fascist policy sought to effectuate a return of the exiles by bribing tribal sheikhs to summon their kinfolk home. This pro-repatriation policy could be seen as revealing a dim Italian awareness that certain groups in exile could be more effective in undermining Italian rule than those militarily resisting inside Libya.

The history of the evolution of the exiles' political activities begins in the 1910s with certain newly emigrated groups sending remittances home to fund the resistance. In the 1920s, the exiles were increasingly influenced by intellectual currents in Syria and political connections in Egypt. In this period, a primary aim of the politically active diaspora was to appeal to international and Arab opinion to support the resistance inside Libya. Baldinetti presents in detail the first propaganda book of Bashir al-Sa'dawi (*The Black and Red Atrocities*, published in Damascus in 1931), which accuses Italian soldiers of systematic mass rape in 1911. Curiously, she does not comment on the veracity of al-Sa'dawi's claim. Later in the 1930s, a subtle shift occurred as certain exile groups began combining denunciation of Italian colonial policy with articulation of a concrete political vision for Libya, which was culled from the contemporary Arab nationalist discourse prevalent in the Levant.

The last and most complex part of *The Origins of the Libyan Nation* addresses the political circumstances in which

the British Military Administration gave way to, first, the return of the exiles and, second, Libyan independence. Here, the non-specialist reader might expect to find a heroic narrative detailing how the exiled groups returned to Libya as converted Libyan Arab nationalist firebrands and were then instrumental in the struggle to liberate Libya from colonial rule and to determine the form of the Libyan nation-state. The reality is far more complex. While relatively united in exile, Libyan Arab nationalist groupings promptly fractured upon their return to their homeland based on disputes concerning the pressing questions of the British Military Administration period: the need for separate or unified Cyrenaican or Tripolitanian political entities; the desirability of a Sanussi emirate; and the ideal structure of an independent Libya state—federated or unitary. In detailing the ensuing esoteric political fragmentation, Baldinetti offers little concrete explanation as to exactly which social actors supported which political positions. The book merely implies that personal, traditional, regional, generational and tribal considerations may have been paramount in determining specific political loyalties, but that at certain unifying moments nationalist actors were popular enough to cut across these divides and organize massive street demonstrations and strikes.

In the final appraisal, Baldinetti's distinct focus on exiles in presenting the story of how the Libyan nation-state was born—rather than the traditional exclusive focus on the high diplomacy of the Great Powers—reveals many themes that need to be followed up by further scholarship on the Kingdom period (1951–1969) and the Qaddafi period (1969–2011). Unfortunately for aspiring scholars hoping to ride on Baldinetti's coattails into Libya's new post-Qaddafi archival openness, she does not hint at or foreshadow the political importance of returned Libyan exiles for the trajectory of post-independence Libyan history. One might conjecture that once Libyan nationalism was firmly tied to the Arab nationalist discourse it proceeded to progressively destabilize Idris' kingdom, and that returned exiles increasingly challenged the British connection, advocating closer ties to Nasser's Egypt. Presumably, Baldinetti deems such speculation outside the scope of her work.

In line with her laudable trait of academic modesty, she avoids succumbing to the current fad among historians of attributing too much agency to previously overlooked local actors. She writes: "Although the exile associations were the first associations to imagine the future of their country in terms of a modern nation that was in need of the construction of a national identity based on common territoriality and a shared language and culture, they failed to have an impact on the formation of the new Libyan state at the moment of independence." This judgment may be too harsh, however, as Baldinetti herself demonstrates that it was the vanguard of returnee Arab nationalist agitators who staged the large protests in 1949 that derailed the Bevin-Sforza pact and prevented Libya from being carved up into three separate trusteeships. ■