

Ethnic Conflict in Libya: Toubou



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I. Executive Summary

The fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in 2011 has sparked an escalation of ethnic tensions in Libya's southern province of Fezzan, where indigenous Toubous¹ have experienced recent violent clashes with local Arab tribes, particularly the Zwai. The towns of Sabha and Kufra remain under a tense ceasefire between the heavily-armed tribal militias, while upcoming national elections on July 7, 2012 threaten to trigger renewed fighting. Further escalation or diffusion of violence could destabilize Libya's fragile democratic transition and draw transnational actors into the conflict. To contain the outbreak of further violence and encourage the political inclusion of the Toubou into the new Libyan state, the Canadian Government should act in cooperation with UN allies to assist the Libyan transitional government restore a minimal capacity for security provision and policing within its territory, encourage dialogue to accommodate Toubou aspirations to equal citizenship and political participation, and promote exiting grassroots initiatives for inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation.

II. Organization

The substantive section of this report, which will examine characteristics, causes and consequence of the conflict, is based on original research from academic and news sources.² In addition to the substantive analysis, the report provides policy options and considerations from a Canadian Foreign Policy perspective, which are aligned with the Department of Foreign Affairs *Report on Plans and Priorities 2012-13*, Strategic outcome 1, "Canada's International Agenda," program activity 1.2 "Diplomacy and Advocacy."³ Annex I presents best, worst, and most likely future scenarios forecasting. Annex II provides a brief fact sheet on the Libyan Toubou, and Annex III provides geographical context with political and demographic maps of the region.

III. Chief Characteristics of the Conflict

The Toubou are an African ethnic minority who inhabit the Tibesti Mountain range and the southern Libyan towns of Sabha, Kufra, Murzuq and Qatrun. In Libya, they account for approximately 0.2% of the population with 12,000 to 15,000 members.⁴ Toubous also live in the northern regions of Chad, Niger and Sudan, with a total population of approximately 380,000. An estimated several thousand Chadian Toubou refugees fleeing Chad's civil wars settled in southern Libya between 1974 and 1994.⁵ However, the nomadic nature of Toubou society and the relatively porous borders of the Saharan region make accurate national identification difficult.⁶

While Libya's eastern region is oil rich, the south has few natural resources and is not well integrated into Libya's economy. Historically, the town of Kufra was a key trading post between central and northern Africa; however, Libya's southern border region is now a main smuggling route for arms and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ The Toubou, who are deeply engaged in the smuggling economy, are allegedly in competition with the Arab Zwai to control these routes.⁸ Neither group is better off economically than the other, save for the discriminatory state policies against non-Arab minorities under the Qaddafi regime, including the removal of their rights to citizenship, ration cards, healthcare and education in 2007.⁹

Intrastate conflict involving the Toubou began in December 2007 in Kufra. At the time, an armed militia, the Toubou Front for the Salvation of Libya (TFSL), began a series of low-level attacks resulting in the deaths of several Zwai members and government soldiers, but was immediately suppressed by Libyan security forces.¹⁰ From 2007 on, the Toubou experienced periodic repression and continued denial of basic public services. .. In early 2012, the Toubou and the Zwai tribes re-engaged in violent clashes, including a massacre of some 70 Toubou in the town of Sabha in February. In April, casualties were reported to have risen to 150 with renewed fighting in the city of Kufra, along with the re-emergence of the TFSL.¹¹

Peacekeeping forces under the command of the ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) have sustained a fragile cease-fire in Kufra since April 2012, but the capacity of the Council in the region remains weak. Current state security forces suffer from informal hierarchies, unclear command and control structures, and limited discipline.¹² Mustafa Allandi, a Toubou member of the NTC, in June called for stronger government action: "What is happening in Kufra now is not acceptable. The NTC should do its job and stop this."¹³

All sides are heavily armed with weapons procured from the Gaddafi regime's caches during the 2011 revolution.¹⁴ The TFSL leader, Issa Abdel Majid, who was previously tasked by the NTC to monitor Libya's southeastern border during the national uprising in 2011, has appealed to the international community for military intervention to prevent the "extermination" of the Toubou tribe, and has threatened to work towards the creation of a separate state in the south.¹⁵

It is unclear whether Toubou have significant transnational support from Toubou minorities in neighbouring Chad and Niger. Yunus Zwai, spokesman for the Arab tribe in Kufra, stated in February 2012 that, "People from Toubou tribe are being helped by foreign elements from Chad and Sudan," and even claimed that several of these fighters had been captured and arrested.¹⁶ These allegations, however, have yet to be substantiated by independent sources. In March 2012 a joint border patrol force was established between Sudan, Chad and Libya to prevent the movement of arms, drugs, and rebel militias between the common borders of the three countries, although its deployment has been delayed by setbacks in operational planning.¹⁷

Against the backdrop of increasing ethnic tensions in Libya, the 130-person Higher National Election Commission, led by Chief Commissioner, Nuri Al-Abbar, has decided to postpone Libya's legislative elections from June 19 to July 7. Commissioner Al-Abbar explained that the lack of resources, as well as logistical and technical issues contributed to his decision. Potential candidates are still being vetted, and as such, election campaigns have not been launched. Despite the delays, 2.7 million voters, or 80 percent of eligible voters have registered.¹⁸ Security remains a foremost concern during the election process. Despite requests from the commission, no government security forces were present to monitor the integrity of the process or maintain security when voters were registering last May. For example, one registration centre at a school in Tripoli had to be shut down when "a group of militia turned up in pick-up trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns to demand more representation for militia men."¹⁹ In a country that has not had democratic elections since 1952, the security situation on July 7 will be strained.

IV. Causes, Consequences and Trajectory of the Conflict

A. Political Exclusion and Deprivation

The conflict is caused in part by the deprivation of Libyan Toubou of social recognition and full inclusion in the wider political and economic system, consistent with "grievance" and identity-based theories of ethnic conflict.²⁰ For decades, Qaddafi's regime pursued national policies of "Arabization" and sought to expel the Toubou, along with other minorities, from Arab Libya. The 1969 *Constitutional Declaration* defined the state of Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, as an "Arab nation and declared Arabic as the only official language."²¹ Subsequent policies deliberately denied basic human and political rights to non-Arab minorities in Libya, including the 2007 withdrawal of citizenship rights.²² Underdevelopment and lack of infrastructure persist in the region, but the greater issue and catalyst for conflict is lack of access to full citizenship rights and public services.

Ongoing political marginalization contributes to Toubou grievances and their reluctance to disarm. On the political front, the NTC is seen as maintaining the pro-Arab status quo and not making sufficient efforts to include Libya's ethnic minorities, many of whom supported the rebels in the uprising against Qaddafi during the 2011 revolution. With the Libyan election on the horizon, there is a sense that ethnic minorities will not make any gains in representation or rights. Barriers exist to full political participation: many ethnic minorities, who do not have citizenship cards or family books, cannot run for political office. Minorities who present alternative identification will be able to vote; however, this offers little consolation to ethnic groups affected by years of discrimination and who want full citizenship and rights.²³ The vice president of the National Toubou Congress, Mohammed Seed Ibrahim, spoke on the marginalization: "We led the fight against Gaddafi in the south so we could leave all these divisions behind and build a Libya where everyone gets their rights. But the new government has so far not offered us any help."²⁴

B. Weak State Institutions and Anarchy

The collapse of the Libyan state following the 2011 revolution has also created favorable conditions for ethnic mobilization and violence, including the rapid expansion of self-defense tribal militias. “Opportunity” theories of ethnic conflict predict that a decline in state capacity and legitimacy, or other politically destabilizing events render insurgencies more feasible and attractive.²⁵ Enabled by the collapse of state authority during the fall of Qaddafi’s central regime in 2011, Toubou militias have mobilized to provide communal security and to consolidate control over key economic resources in the region, particularly illicit smuggling routes across Libya’s southern borders.²⁶ As the transitional regime’s capacity and legitimacy remain weak in the South, state security forces are unable to ensure adequate public security and disarm the militias.

C. The Ethnic Security Dilemma

Third, security dilemma theories predict that ethnic mobilization in the context of collapsed and ethnically intermixed states will create perceptions of vulnerability among other groups, initiating a spiral of conflict escalation.²⁷ Mobilization of the Toubou has triggered fears among other ethnic groups – particularly the Zwai, who are the primary contenders for control of the smuggling routes – of potential Toubou predominance in the region. Fuelled by a surfeit of arms and a prior history of inter-ethnic hostilities, these conditions have set in motion an ethnic security dilemma between communities in intermixed areas such as Sabha. In the absence of a central authority to arbitrate between the parties, each ethnic group has taken to self-defense by way of armed militias, which in turn fuels hostilities and suspicions of adversaries’ aggressive motives.

The consequences of this security dilemma include ethnic un-mixing in urban areas such as Sabha, where the majority of the Toubou population have fled the city.²⁸ Reports also indicate that militant Toubou youth from peripheral areas are relocating to Sabha and Kufra in order to “support fellow Toubou fighters,”²⁹ suggesting the diffusion of the conflict outside of urban areas to larger sections of the population. These trends suggest a growing polarization of ethnic relations across southern Libya, contributing to a wider Arab/African identity cleavage in the region.

D. Risks of Transnational Intervention and Conflict Diffusion

The possibility of a transnational ethnic alliance between Libyan Toubous and kin groups in neighbouring countries poses the risk of conflict escalation, since support from ethnic Toubous across state boundaries would make a bid for separatism more viable.³⁰ However, the risk of protracted secessionist war or the creation of an ethnic Toubou state is low. The small population of Libyan Toubous, their dispersion across southern Libya, and their low concentration in large urban centres mean the Toubou have neither the capacity nor the legitimacy needed to effectively mobilize for independence.³¹ Moreover, neighbouring states such as Chad are unlikely to intervene or support irredentist goals given the risks of supporting such a small minority and the heterogeneous ethnic composition of Chad itself.³² However, Chad’s status as a “fragile state” poses the risk of future conflict and refugee flows of Chadian Toubous into Libya, an event which could trigger greater aggression by Arab tribes.³³

Public demands for secession, voiced by militant Toubou leaders like Majid, are more likely being used as a bargaining strategy to extract concessions from the central state. The 2011 revolution instigated a shift in the balance of power between minority groups and the centre, creating incentives to employ more radical demands as Toubou elites seek to leverage political concessions and a favorable distribution of resources.³⁴ However, since no powerful external patron exists to support a Toubou separatist bid, these demands can likely be satisfied with moderate concessions.³⁵

V. Policy Considerations

The following policy considerations and options are in line with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade *Report on Plans and Priorities 2012-13*, Strategic Outcome 1, “Canada’s International Agenda,” program activity 1.2 (Diplomacy and Advocacy). Program Activity 1.2 makes explicit Canada’s

continued diplomatic role in Arab States, particularly under subsection *Promoting Democracy, Human Rights, Security and the Rule of Law*:

“The department will support democratic transitions and respect for human rights following the Arab Awakening through bilateral and multilateral advocacy, capacity-building initiatives, and other Canadian programming. DFAIT will continue to address international security challenges such as transnational crime, terrorism, WMD proliferation, and illegal migration through targeted and effective use of programs and the provision of whole-of-government and international leadership in bilateral, regional and multilateral forums.”³⁶

Policy options and considerations are also aligned with Program Activity 1.2, subsection *Advancing Regional Interests – Middle East*:

“The department will enhance support for democratic transitions and the stability of fragile and vulnerable states following the Arab Awakening through bilateral and multilateral advocacy initiatives, capacity-building initiatives, and other Canadian programming.”³⁷

Short Term: Re-establish Security Institutions

The first priority of the Canadian Government should be to assist in the re-establishment of minimally capable security institutions for the Libyan state. A neutral military and police force with sufficient operational capability to regulate disputes between Toubou and Zwai militias would deter aggressive behaviour, mitigate the ethnic security dilemma, and decrease the ability of ethnic chauvinists to mobilize militias through appeals to communal self-defense. Canadian civilian experts can be deployed to provide training, capacity-building and advisory functions under the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), which is mandated to restore public security and the rule of law. This deployment can be facilitated through the CPA (Canadian Police Arrangement) under the Global Peace and Security Fund of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START).

Short to Medium Term: Civil Society Capacity-Building

A secondary priority is to encourage the development of grassroots peacemaking initiatives, such as the recent ‘Committee of Wise Men for Negotiation,’ which is a small group of local representatives and government officials convened by the transitional government to mediate tribal hostilities in Libya’s peripheral regions.³⁸ The removal of Qaddafi’s regime opens space for such civil society organizations to foster communication and reciprocity between ethnic communities, an important mechanism for containing communal violence.³⁹ Financial support and conflict-mediation training services could be provided under UNAMIL’s civilian peacebuilding operations.

Short to Medium term: Full Citizenship Rights for Minorities

Whereas some minorities have been afforded the right to vote in the elections, voting is only one aspect of wider political participation. Canada, along with the international community should ensure that the new government of Libya drafts a constitution which includes full minority rights and participation in Libya, and does not recreate Qaddafi’s Arab-only state model. This entails providing minorities with citizenship documents held by Arab Libyans.⁴⁰

Medium to Long Term: Multilateral Engagement and Human Rights Protection

A long term solution to mitigate ethnic tensions in southern Libya will depend on the state’s ability to uphold human and political rights for all Libyan citizens. This will empower moderate ethnic leaders and encourage reconciliation, rather than further violent resistance. It is recommended that Canada pursue a medium to long term policy of multi-lateral engagement with Libya to encourage it to respect its treaty obligations for the *International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*, and its two optional protocols. Whereas Libya acceded to these multilateral treaties in 2004, it has pursued policies which are contrary to its international law obligations, including the violation of certain non-derogable human rights, provided for in the ICCPR.⁴¹

Endnotes

¹ Also referred to as “Tibu,” “Tebu” and “Tubu.” Hereinafter referred to as Toubou.

² Note to the reader: very few academic and journalistic sources exist on this conflict. As such, the report seeks to provide an analysis, while providing directions for further policy research on the conflict moving forward.

³ Refer to Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada *Report on Plans and Priorities* 2012-13 at www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2012-2013/inst/ext/ext-eng.pdf.

⁴ David Cutler, “Factbox: Who are the Tebu?” *Reuters* (April 8, 2012), www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/08/us-libya-violence-tibu-idUSBRE83704O20120408. The Toubou do not have enough representation to be considered in the minorities at risk database.

⁵ Sylvie Bredeloup and Olivier Pliez, “The Libyan Migration Corridor,” Research Report Case Study, EU-US Immigration Systems (2011), accessed online at: www.eui.eu/Projects/TransatlanticProject/Documents/CaseStudies/EU-USImmigrationSystems-Security-CS.pdf

⁶ See, for example, Emanuel Marx, “The Political Economy of Middle Eastern and North African Pastoral Nomads,” in *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century*, ed. Dawn Chatty (Brill: 2006), 78-97.

⁷ Wyre Davies, “Battles over Libya’s dangerous migrant smuggling routes,” *BBC News* (23 March 2012), www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17481181.

⁸ Wyre Davies, “Battles over Libya’s dangerous migrant smuggling routes.”

⁹ UN Human Rights Council, “Summary prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in accordance with paragraph 15 (c) of the annex to Human rights Council resolution 5/1. Libyan Arab Jamahiriya,” A/HRC/WG.6/9/LBY/3 at 7.

¹⁰ “Tribal Violence in Kufra,” *The Telegraph* (January 31, 2011), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/libya-wikileaks/>

¹¹ International Crisis Group, “Crisis Watch No. 105,” (14 December 2011), www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya.aspx.

¹² Florence Gaub, “Libya in Limbo: How to Fill the Security Vacuum,” Research Report, NATO Defense College (September 2011).

¹³ “Officials: 13 killed in southeast Libya clashes,” *Egypt News* (June 10, 2012), <http://eg4.me/en/?p=11935>

¹⁴ *Reliefweb* reported in February that fighting in Kufra involved light arms, rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft guns. Agence France-Press, “New Clashes Rock Libyan desert town,” *Reliefweb* (15 February 2012), <http://reliefweb.int/node/476734>.

¹⁵ Agence France-Press, “More than 100 killed in south Libya clashes: tribes,” *Reliefweb* (21 February 2012), <http://reliefweb.int/node/478161>.

¹⁶ Agence France-Press, “More than 100 killed in south Libya clashes: tribes,” *Reliefweb* (21 February 2012), <http://reliefweb.int/node/478161>.

¹⁷ “Sudan, Chad and Libya establish joint patrols to control common border,” *Sudan Tribune* (9 March, 2012), <http://www.sudantribune.com/Sudan-Chad-and-Libya-establish,41850>.

¹⁸ Hadeel Al Shalchi and Ali Shuaib, “Bureaucracy clogs Libya’s road to democracy,” *Reuters* (11 June, 2012), www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/11/us-libya-vote-preparations-idUSBRE85A12J20120611.

¹⁹ Al Shalchi and Shuaib, “Bureaucracy clogs Libya’s road to democracy.”

²⁰ On identity/grievance theories, see Edward Azar, “Protracted International Conflicts: Ten Propositions,” in *International Conflict Resolution*, ed. Edward E. Azar and John W. Burton (Lynne Rienner, 1986); Ted Robert Gurr, “Peoples Against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System,” *International Studies Quarterly* 38 (1994): 347-377.

²¹ UN Human Rights Council, “Summary prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in accordance with paragraph 15 (c) of the annex to Human rights Council resolution 5/1. Libyan Arab Jamahiriya,” 7.

²² UN Human Rights Council, 7.

²³ IRIN, “Analysis: Libyan minority rights at a crossroads,” *IRIN News* (24 May 2012) www.irinnews.org/Report/95524/Analysis-Libyan-minority-rights-at-a-crossroads.

²⁴ Tracey Shelton, “Libya’s ‘Committee of Wise Men for Negotiation,’” *Globalpost* (May 19, 2012), www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/120518/libya-tribes-tuareg-peace-unity-wise-men-negotiation.

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- ²⁵ On “opportunity” theories, see James Fearon and David Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004): 563-95.
- ²⁶ Marie-Louise Gumuchian, “Libya struggles to contain tribal conflicts,” *Reuters* (April 8, 2012), www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/08/us-libya-violence-idUSBRE83702Z20120408. See also Wyre Davies, “Battles over Libya’s dangerous migrant smuggling routes.”
- ²⁷ Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 27-47; Chaim Kauffman, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1996): 136-75.
- ²⁸ Shelton, “Libya’s ‘Committee of Wise Men for Negotiation’.”
- ²⁹ Gumuchian, “Libya struggles to contain tribal conflicts.”
- ³⁰ David R. Davis and Will H. Moore, “Ethnicity Matters: Transnational Ethnic Alliances and Foreign Policy Behavior,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 171-184; Lars-Erik Cederman, Luc Girardin and Kristian Gleditsch, “Ethnonationalist triads: Assessing the influence of kin groups on civil wars,” *World Politics* 61, no. 3 (July 2009): 403-47.
- ³¹ On the importance of geographic settlement patterns for capability and legitimacy in separatist movements, see Monica Duffy Toft, “Indivisible Territory, Geographic Concentration, and Ethnic War,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002/3): 89-90.
- ³² Cederman, Girardin and Gleditsch, “Ethnonationalist triads,” 404. Likewise, an irredentist bid for unification with a bordering state would be unlikely, since the Toubou constitute only small minorities in neighboring Chad, Niger, and Sudan.
- ³³ The Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) Country Ranking Table 2007, for instance, ranked Chad as 16th worldwide on its ‘Fragility Index’. See CIFP Website, http://www4.carleton.ca/cifp/app/ffs_ranking.php.
- ³⁴ See Erin Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 10-11.
- ³⁵ Fred Abrahams, a regional advisor with Human Rights Watch, similarly dismissed Toubou aspirations for a regional homeland: “At this point I think they are posturing. They are divided themselves and this is not a serious option.” Rebecca Murray, “Libya: Peace Lost in the Desert,” *Inter Press Service* (28 April 2012), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201204290209.html>.
- ³⁶ Foreign Affairs, *Report on Plans and Priorities* 2012-13 at www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2012-2013/inst/ext/ext-eng.pdf, 12-13.
- ³⁷ Foreign Affairs *Report on Plans and Priorities* 2012-13 at www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2012-2013/inst/ext/ext-eng.pdf, 14.
- ³⁸ Tracey Shelton, “Libya’s ‘Committee of Wise Men for Negotiation’,” *Globalpost* (May 19, 2012), www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/120518/libya-tribes-tuareg-peace-unity-wise-men-negotiation
- ³⁹ Ashtosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Yale University Press, 2002).
- ⁴⁰ IRIN “Analysis: Libyan minority rights at a crossroads.”
- ⁴¹ See *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 23 March 1976, Can. T.S. 1976 No. 47, (1966), 999 UNTS.

Annex I. – Future Scenario Forecasts

A. Best Case

Peacekeeping forces from the NTC are successful in containing major outbreaks of further violence. The legislative elections in June are viewed as sufficiently legitimate and fair to continue political dialogue within the framework of the official transitional council. The TFSL agrees to demobilization and integration into a reformed Libyan military, along with fighters from the Zwai self-defense militias. Remedial policies are implemented by the new Libyan regime to enhance Toubou political participation and redress discriminatory citizenship requirements.

B. Worst Case

Further escalation in violent clashes between militias in heavily populated urban centres, with potential diffusion to other ethnic groups in the region or across Libya's southern borders with involvement of Chadian or Sudanese Toubou fighters. Severe setbacks or a breakdown in the democratic transition in Tripoli impede the ability of the central state to provide effective conflict management, resulting in the growth of self-defense militias and loss of political influence among moderate ethnic leaders. Protracted violence conflict/insurgency impedes stability, political reform, or economic reconstruction.

C. Most Likely

Maintenance of low-level clashes with a minor risk of conflict diffusion across borders. Toubou leaders continue to express grievances against pro-Arab discrimination and exclusion from the central political process, where attention will remain focused on security sector reform and national elections. Over time, the state is able to provide minimal policing services, while the Toubou are offered moderate political concessions in the form of devolution and autonomy.

Annex II. – Toubou Fact Sheet

Population	12,000-15,000 (Libya), 120,000-380,000 regionally
Religion	Sunni Muslim
Language	Tedaga
Social System	Clan Structure
Economic Activities	Nomadic herding, agriculture, trading
Settlement Patterns	Largely rural and small settlements
Military Capabilities (TFSL)	Ready access to armaments, low organizational, communications and intelligence capacity

Source: Authors

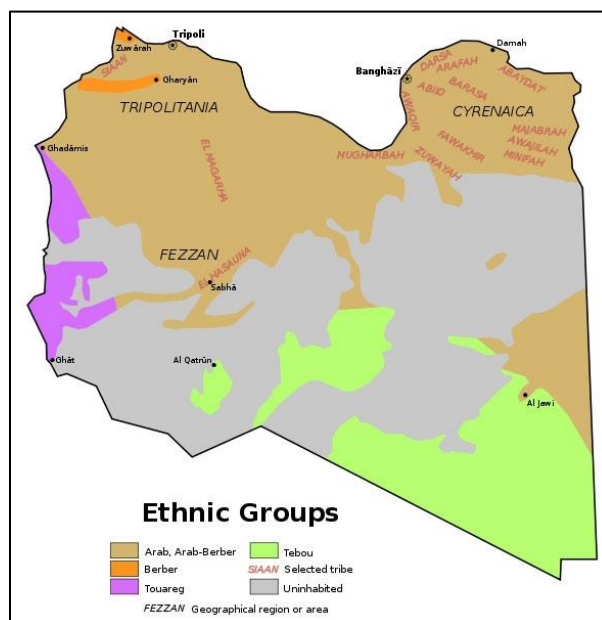
Annex III. – Political and Demographic Maps of Libya

Political Map of Libya 2011 (to scale)



Source: www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia11/libya_sm_2011.gif

Demographic Map of Libya



Source: www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/libya_ethnic_1974.jpg