

HOW ARMED GROUPS SURVIVE IN FAILED STATES: EVIDENCE FROM LIBYA

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Abstract. Armed groups generally emerge in failed states that do not have a monopoly on the use of force. These states with more than one power center can be characterized as anarchic systems. In such an environment, a shift in the balance of power in favor of an armed group poses an existential threat to the security of others. This study examines how armed groups respond to shifts in the balance of power to maintain their security in an anarchic system. By examining the case of Libya, the study argues that armed groups tend to employ strategies for deterring the aggressor to restore the balance of power.

Keywords: failed states, anarchy, strategies for survival, armed groups, Libya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2024.2.02>

Received 6 February 2024, accepted 9 May 2024, printed and available online 20 June 2024

1. Introduction

Failed states provide a conducive environment for the emergence and proliferation of armed groups. These states fail to fulfill the most basic functions of a sovereign nation-state, particularly in safeguarding their territories, peoples, and borders. The loss of state sovereignty and its replacement by multiple centers of power bring about a structural change in these territories. In a territory with multiple sovereigns, hierarchical order is replaced by anarchic order, defined as the absence of a higher authority. Anarchy has a number of additional structural consequences for the actors interacting with each other in the system. Armed groups fear each other and regard each other with suspicion because they inherently possess some offensive military

capability. This increases security concerns and ultimately triggers power struggles. In such an environment, a shift in the balance of power in favor of an armed group poses an existential threat to the security of others (Vinci 2008, 2009, Waltz 1979: 116).

Drawing on these structural dynamics that emerge as a result of the authority vacuum in failed states, this study seeks to answer the question of how armed groups survive in power struggles with their rivals. In other words, what strategies do armed groups employ when faced with dangerous enemies? This is an important question because uncovering the general patterns of survival strategies of armed groups reveals the behavioral logic of this increasingly prevalent type of actor. Moreover, survival strategies employed by armed groups show us why the problem of anarchy in failed states is not easily overcome. Since the problem of anarchy continues to exist as long as armed groups survive, it is important to identify patterns in the strategic behaviors that enable it.

The structural dynamics involved in failed states are similar to the dynamics with which great powers interact in the international system, due to the assumption of anarchy. Assuming that the motivation for survival is a structural factor induced by anarchy is tantamount to saying that the strategical logic of both types of actors is similar. This study, therefore, borrows the patterns of survival strategies of great powers and puts forward two interrelated arguments based on them (Mearsheimer 2001: 414, Posen 1993). First, when faced with an aggressor, armed groups employ strategies for deterring it and maintain the balance of power between them. In order to deter the aggressor, armed groups either balance it by taking direct responsibility or pass the buck to others, while they remain on the sidelines. In both cases, the aim is to prevent the aggressor from upsetting the balance of power. In this way, they try to increase their probability of survival (Mearsheimer 2001: 155). Second, armed groups do not employ the strategy of bandwagoning, which implies acquiescence to a shift in the balance of power in favor of aggressive rivals. Rather, bandwagoning is the strategy of actors who are too weak to deter the aggressor (Walt 1987: 19-21, Levy 1989: 231). Peer powers avoid this strategy because they challenge shifts in the balance of power.

The arguments based on the analogy between failed states and the international system have been widely discussed in the civil war literature in the context of alliances between armed groups. Existing literature sheds light on the strategic behavior of actors by examining the question of why and with whom armed groups form alliances (balancing and bandwagoning) through two different paradigms. The first paradigm emphasizes identity politics and argues that ethnic and ideological factors are determinant in the alliance choices of armed groups (Gade et al. 2019, Bencherif and Campana 2017, Balcells et al. 2022, Maynard 2019). This argument ignores the causality of strategic behaviors that give rise to alliances, changes in alliances, and armed group rivalries that emerge in homogeneous societal structures in terms of identity. The second paradigm highlights power politics and argues that the balance of power logic operates in the alliance choices of armed groups (Christia 2012). This argument fails to identify the motivation behind the strategic behavior of armed groups and the existence of non-alliance strategies. Unlike these

two paradigms, this study, through the arguments it puts forward, reveals both the causality of competition between armed groups and an alternative strategy, including the choice to remain outside an alliance (buck-passing).

This study tests the arguments about the survival strategies of armed groups through the case of Libya. In 2011, with the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the collapse of state authority, numerous armed groups emerged. Instead of handing over their sovereignty to a higher authority, these groups engaged in power struggles that resulted in two different civil wars. The struggle for control of territory, oil facilities and strategic bases led to multiparty civil wars in 2014 and 2019. The fact that armed groups, despite fighting together against the Gaddafi regime, engaged in intense power struggles with each other in the immediate post-revolutionary period and that most of them have managed to survive for over a decade is worth examining in terms of the causality of competition and the patterns of the survival strategies.

2. Strategies for survival: balancing, buck-passing, and bandwagoning

In an anarchic system, actors have three types of strategic options against an aggressor who tries to shift the balance of power in its favor. The first is balancing. Balancing means that threatened actors seriously commit themselves to containing their dangerous opponent. They are willing to shoulder the burden of deterring the aggressor to restore the balance of power (Mearsheimer 2001: 156). Threatened actors can employ two measures to make balancing effective. First, threatened armed groups can balance against the aggressor by mobilizing its own military and economic power. In this case, armed groups resort to the direct use of force to the extent of their capacity against the aggressor who seeks to shift the balance of power in its favor. Second, threatened groups band together to contain their dangerous opponent. They can form alliances that enable them to share the costs of deterring the aggressor (Waltz 1979: 118, 163, Walt 1987: 18). In this context, armed groups may choose to balance their aggressive opponent by forming a symmetrical alliance with peer groups or an asymmetrical alliance with states. In both cases, the main objective is to deter a dangerous enemy with the help of other actors.

The second is buck-passing. Buck-passers seek to ensure that another armed groups deter or possibly shoulder the burden of fighting an aggressor, while they remain on the sidelines. The delicate point here is that groups pursuing this strategy are concerned about the aggressor's attempts to shift the balance of power in its favor, but seek to have undertaken this difficult task by another group (Olson and Zeckhauser 1966, Christensen and Snyder 1990). Armed groups can take four different measures to facilitate buck-passing. First, buck-passers can seek good diplomatic relations with the aggressor in order to get rid of its crosshairs. By doing so, they hope that "it will concentrate its attention on the intended buck-catcher" (Mearsheimer 2001: 158). Second, buck-passers can seek distant relations with the intended buck-catcher. For the buck-passer, the aim here is not only to maintain

good relations with the aggressor, but also to avoid being dragged into a war on the side of the buck-catcher. Third, armed groups can resort to measures to increase their own capabilities to avoid being targeted by an aggressor. By strengthening their own defenses, they appear more formidable to the aggressor and thus allow it to divert its attention to other groups. Fourth, sometimes buck-passers can allow or even contribute to the growth in power of the intended buck-catcher. By doing so, they ensure that “burden-bearer would then have a better chance of containing the aggressor, which would increase the buck passer’s prospects of remaining on the sidelines” (Mearsheimer 2001: 159).

The third is bandwagoning. It means that the threatened armed groups give up hope of preventing the aggressor from shifting the balance of power in its favor. Instead of deterring the aggressor, they join forces with their dangerous opponent to get at least some small portion of the spoils or to throw themselves to its mercy (Labs 1992, Walt 1987: 263). Since this strategy would undermine the will to survive, it is not expected to be preferred by peer competitors. Rather, it is expected to be pursued by actors who are too weak to compete with the aggressor (Mearsheimer 2001: 162-163). In order to identify the tendency for the strategy to be employed among armed groups, it is important to distinguish between great and small power. In the international system, this distinction is usually made by measuring the relative military and economic power of states in terms of certain parameters, which define some states as great powers. Such a measurement is very difficult and often misleading for armed groups because it is difficult to find objective data on their military and economic power. Sometimes armed groups tend to overestimate their capabilities in order to gain international legitimacy. It is also one of their characteristics to build economic and military capacity through illegal and informal means.

Despite these constraints, it is possible to detect the difference in power between them through their expansionist behavior. Some armed groups, similar to the great powers in the international system, have a power projection beyond their own territory, while some of them are unable to expand due to the limitations of their capabilities. Since the difference stems from their relative capabilities, a distinction can be made between armed groups as great and small power. Therefore, bandwagoning, a strategy for the weak, is more often pursued by groups with a limited sphere of influence compared to other groups in the system.

3. Literature on alliance strategies of armed groups

Balance-of-power theory establishes the causality of competition between actors interacting in anarchic systems through their pursuit of security. According to its logic, the existence of roughly power equality within the system is the only mechanism to ensure security for all actors. If one actor engages in aggressive behavior that upsets the balance in its favor, apart from passing the buck to one another in the face of a deadly threat, others seek to provide security through alliances (balancing). Therefore, balance-of-power theory provides a clear answer to the questions of why

and with whom actors form alliances; with others against the aggressors in order to survive (Waltz 1979: 163, Walt 1985).

These two questions are answered based on two different paradigms in the existing literature on the alliance preferences of armed groups. The first is identity politics, which assumes identity as a determining factor in alliance choices and argues that the similar ideological and ethnic origins of armed groups make them natural allies (Bencherif and Campana 2017, Gade et al. 2019). According to its logic, shared identity values facilitate cohesion and organizational cooperation among actors. When two groups are ideologically coherent, their shared ideals and values foster mutual trust (Blair et al 2022, Bapat and Bond 2012). A shared ideology not only determines with whom actors can ally, but also who is a threat. The greater the ideological differences between them, the more likely they are to see each other as threats, because they are likely to engage in conflict and competition as the common goals set by ideology differ (Maynard 2019). On the other hand, recent studies on identity politics make a clear distinction between common ethnicity and ideological affinity, arguing that the latter is decisive in alliance preferences of armed groups. According to Balcells et al. (2022: 13) ‘while organizations sharing an ideological constituency are drawn to in-depth cooperation, alliances among co-ethnic organizations often are more superficial.’ Similarly, Blair et al. (2022: 3) argue that alliance formation is less likely between co-ethnic organizations than between groups with a shared ideology, and that shared religion is particularly powerful motivator for alliance formation.

In sum, scholars who argue that identity politics is a determining factor in the behavior of armed groups see alliance formation patterns as a natural outcome of having shared ideological values. This point of view poses two main problems for understanding competition and alliances between armed groups. First, this paradigm seeks to answer the question of with whom armed groups form alliances rather than explaining the causality of alliances (Corradi 2023: 252). Examining the causality of alliances is crucial for explaining changes in these patterns because identifying why alliances are formed makes it possible to identify why they break down. Therefore, a shared ideology, as a constant variable, cannot be expected to explain fragile or shifting alliances between actors. Second, identity politics ignores the alliance preferences and competition between armed groups that arise in ideologically homogeneous societies. Every society that experiences civil war is not subject to ethnic, religious, sectarian or political polarizations. For example, Libya, the case of this study, has a 95% Arab and Sunni Muslim population, but there is also consensus among armed groups on the role of religion in the public sphere. Although some groups called themselves Islamist, in Wehrey’s words (2018: 78), ‘there were no literal secularists; all of Libya’s factions agreed that Islam should play a prominent role in political and social life’. Therefore, identity politics cannot offer a coherent explanation for the alliance preferences of armed groups emerging in homogeneous societies, as in Libya. Moreover, this paradigm is known to be unable to explain the alliance patterns of armed groups in cases where different identities are represented, such as the Lebanese and the Bosnian civil war (Christia 2012: 4).

The second paradigm is power politics, which assumes that power calculations are

determining factor in the alliance choices of armed groups and is partly in line with the logic of balance-of-power theory. According to this paradigm, which explains why and with whom actors in an anarchic system form alliances, armed groups come together to maximize their relative gains during and after wartime. As Christia (2012: 33) puts it, ‘each group wants to be part of a coalition that is large enough to win the war but also small enough to maximize the group’s share of postwar power’. Each group seeks to form a minimum winning coalition by focusing carefully on the distribution of power. In other words, groups tend to ally with the side that can win the war, but over time, if the distribution of power within the alliance goes against them, they come together with the weaker side to restore the balance of power (Christia 2012: 33). Armed groups therefore follow the logic of the balancing strategy in their alliance preferences. On the other hand, balancing is not necessarily the dominant strategic tendency vis-à-vis bandwagoning. Balancing coalitions persist if the war seems likely to end in a negotiated settlement or to continue without a foreseeable victory for either side. If it appears that a decisive military victory for one of the warring factions is the likely outcome, the other groups will bandwagon with the stronger one (Christia 2012: 53).

The arguments of the paradigm, which consider alliances as means in the struggle between actors, as in the logic of the balance-of-power theory, contain two contradictory assumptions in terms of the strategic behavior of armed groups. The first is the contradiction of what motivates actors to form alliances. According to Christia, armed groups are motivated by both the pursuit of power and security, which are often intertwined during civil conflict (Christia 2012: 52). This confusion about motivation inevitably leads to conflicting arguments about common patterns in the alliance preferences of armed groups. If actors are motivated by power, they are expected to align with the most powerful group during and after wartime. As Schweller (1994: 74) notes ‘bandwagoning is driven by the opportunity for gain.’ On the other hand, if armed groups are motivated by the pursuit of security, the opposite outcome occurs and balancing is expected to be prevalent strategy (Walt 1987).

Uncertainty about actors’ motivation produces contradictory answers not only to the question of why alliances are formed but also to the question of with whom they form alliances. At this point, Christia assesses the possible outcomes of the war, suggesting that if military victory for one side seems likely, others will ally with most powerful, that is, bandwagoning (Christia 2012: 52). This strategy can, of course, be expected if groups are motivated by power. However, assuming that they are security-seeking, in any case, groups must pursue a balancing strategy by allying with the weaker side. Therefore, saying that both motivations exist at the same time creates confusion in terms of their alliance preferences and strategies.

The second flawed assumption is that actors have no choice but to form alliances to achieve what they are motivated by (power or security). Christia explicitly argues that the strategy of buck-passing, as an alternative to balancing against dangerous enemies in multipolar systems, is not applicable. She justifies it by saying that (2012: 52) “In civil wars, the threats to a group’s survival are immediate and ‘buck-catchers’ (groups willing to take on the balancing burden unilaterally) are generally in short

supply.” Although she has studied multi-party civil wars, her argument is based on the assumption that conflicts are immediate and the only source of threat for actors. However, in civil wars, like wars in the international system, the conditions that give rise to conflict evolve over time and actors may have to fight multiple enemies at the same time. Especially given the multipolarity of the system, the option to remain outside an alliance allows groups to struggle with different threats (Mearsheimer 2001: 161). For example, in Libya between 2014 and 2016, Misratan militias were able to successfully counter threats from the west by staying out of the conflict and alliances in the east. Similarly, despite the presence of dangerous enemies, Tripoli’s militias did not join any alliance in the 2014 war and became the dominant force in the post-war system. As both cases show, multipolar systems inherently make alternative strategies possible. In the lead-up to war, actors observe shifts in the distribution of power, alliance relations and the behavior of their rivals, and make choices between balancing and buck-passing.

4. Structural transformation and Libya’s great and small powers

The Libyan revolution resulted in the fall of the Gaddafi regime and brought about a structural transformation in the security sector. The army, deliberately weakened by Gaddafi, was split in two during the revolution and one part of it joined the revolutionary brigades led by civilians. In addition, numerous armed groups organized on urban, tribal and ideological grounds emerged as autonomous units with the power they gained during the revolution. Although the Supreme Security Committee under the Ministry of Interior and the Libya Shield Force under the Ministry of Defense were established to put an end to this chaotic situation after the revolution, armed groups used these apparatuses to expand their economic and military power and remained independent units. On the other hand, none of these groups had the capability to dominate the others and establish a hierarchical order. According to Wehrey (2014: 4), “no single entity can compel others to act purely through coercion, but every entity is strong enough to veto the others”. Thus, the Libyan security sector has transformed into an anarchic structure where the monopoly of using force was dispersed among more than one autonomous actor.

Following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, an intense power struggle erupted between armed groups for control of strategic locations such as military bases, oil facilities and state institutions. In this rivalry, which has been going on for nearly a decade, five different armed groups have come to the fore in terms of their military and economic power.

The first was Zintani militias, which were the most powerful actor in the west of the country until the civil war in 2014. These groups were militarily prominent as their leaders and human resources were largely composed of individuals with military experience and high combat capability (Lacher and Labnouj 2015: 265-72). In addition to human resources, they built up a significant military capability by capturing regime military bases and arms depots in the west. This also allowed them

to receive the largest share of the UAE and Qatar's military aid to the opposition groups (Cole and Khan 2015). Its military capability allowed Zintan to expand its sphere of influence while transforming it into an effective power center in the west of the country. Apart from the city of Zintan, these groups fought intensely with their rivals for control over the vast area between Tripoli in the north and Sabha in the South (Lacher 2020a).

The second was Misratan militias, backed by the city of Misrata's businessmen. Although these groups, established by a few army officers, were militarily weak at the beginning of the revolution, they soon became a major power center by mobilizing economic resources. With military equipment purchased from the revolutionaries in Benghazi and with the support of Qatar and Sudan, they rapidly increased their military power (Lacher 2016: 96). As their power expanded, these groups struggled with rivals for control of strategic areas outside Misrata, such as Tripoli in the west, Sabha in the south and the Gulf of Sirte in the east (Wehrey 2015). The third was the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by retired army officers who supported the revolution. Its military capability consisted of both weapons and ammunition from the Gaddafi regime's arsenals and military aid from international actors such as the UAE, Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia and Russia (Delalande 2019). The LNA, like other major powers, began a serious expansion program, as its power increased. The strategic areas that the LNA sought to dominate were Benghazi and the Gulf of Sirte in the east, Sabha in the south and Tripoli in the West (Lacher 2020b).

The fourth was the Islamists that had organized against the regime in eastern Libya since the early 1990s and re-emerged with the revolution. Most of their members had considerable combat experience, and had fought in Afghanistan as well as Chechnya and Iraq (Wehrey 2018: 51-53). The group, called the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries, increased its power with military aid from Qatar and Sudan (United Nations Security Council 2012: 26). To the extent of its military capability, the group struggled with its rivals for control of Benghazi and the Gulf of Sirte, where the oil facilities are located. The fifth was the Tripoli militias, which came to the fore much later than their rivals in the struggle for power. These groups took advantage of the power vacuum in the capital Tripoli in 2015 to increase their influence over institutions and build a strong military and economic power by utilizing state resources (Lacher and Idrisi 2018). They benefited from exhausting struggles between powerful rivals to expand their sphere of influence within the capital.

Apart from these prominent actors in the power struggle between armed groups in Libya, there were many other armed groups that had no power projection beyond the territory under their control. In this context, the most prominent actors were the tribal groups in the south of the country, the pro-federalists in the east and armed groups with limited capability and aims established in various towns. Almost all of them have derived their limited military power from local allies, smuggling and raids on arms depots (Mezran and Eljarh 2014, International Crisis Group 2017). The territories controlled by these small groups were more often the scene of the competition for power between five major armed groups.

5. Libya's rising powers and strategies for survival

From the early months of the revolution, it was the general tendency of almost every armed group to seek to control cities, institutions and facilities that were strategic in terms of dominating the local distribution of power. They were expansionist whenever they could and sought to gain an advantage over their rivals in this struggle. In response to this tendency, peer competitors tried to survive by preventing their rivals through direct (balancing) or indirect (buck-passing) measures, and small powers tried to survive by giving in to the demands of aggressor (bandwagoning).

In the struggle in western Libya between 2011 and 2014, the Zintani militias were the rising power threatening the security of their rivals. In the first months of the revolution, Zintan was highly supportive in the defense of Jabal al-Nafusa against the regime and in the arming of opposition groups, but it abandoned this approach from August 2011 onwards, when the regime was close to defeat. First, Zintan ended its alliance with the Amazigh towns in the region and occupied what it considered its natural sphere of influence up to Nalut (Lacher and Labnouj 2015: 273-74). Around this time, the Zintani militias that had joined the Tripoli resistance extended their sphere of influence to the southwestern part of the capital. On August 21, a Zintani unit led by Colonel Mukhtar al-Akhdar captured Tripoli airport and its surroundings (Lacher and Labnouj 2015: 277-78).

During the first six months of the transition period, the Zintani groups continued their expansion in the southwest of the country. In November 2011, a group led by Colonel Ujmi al-Utayri moved into Wadi al-Ajel (the area between Ghat and Sabha, where rich mineral deposits are located) and a government decree was issued that gave the control of the Elephant oil field in Murzuk to this group. The appointment of Usama al-Juwaili from Zintan as defense minister in November 2011 played a major role in this decision. This appointment gave all militias, from the border lines to the Zintani groups in the capital, access to state resources by linking them to the ministry. By paying their salaries from state resources and providing military support, the Zintani militias subordinated other smaller groups to their the sphere of influence. The most concrete example was that these groups' control of strategic points in the region until 2014 through alliances with the Tebu and Tuareg tribes in the South (International Crisis Group 2017: 17).

Zintan's efforts to shift the balance of power in its favor gained momentum in 2013. It was intensified in May 2013 when other groups, threatened by the influence of Zintani militias over Tripoli and state institutions, introduced a formula to remove Zintan-backed politicians from parliament. In response, the Zintani militias declared the dissolution of the parliament and surrounded some ministries. The incident, which raised tensions in Tripoli, led to small-scale clashes, prompting the mobilization of Misratan militias, Zintan's main rival in the west of the country (Lacher 2016: 69-73). In July 2014, Misrata launched an attack on Zintan's bases in the capital and was supported by many armed groups in the region. An alliance called Libyan Dawn was formed under the leadership of Misrata, including armed groups from Amazigh towns such as Nalut, Jefren and Jadu, which perceived threats from Zintan's domination

of Jabal al-Nafusa during and after the revolution (Lacher 2016: 69-73). There were two phases of war between the parties. In the first phase, the coalition put an end to Zintan's expansion by driving them out of the capital, and in the second phase, they directly targeted its checkpoints in Jabal al-Nafusa. As fighting intensified in and around Zintan in October, the Zintani militias withdrew from the capital and launched a pre-emptive attack on Kikla and Ghiryan. In November, the alliance targeted the strategic al-Watiya air base in the region, but the Zintani militias managed to repel the attack, eventually creating a balance between the sides (United Nations Security Council 2015: 17-8).

The position of the Tripoli militias during the war, which pitted many rivals against each other, was noteworthy. Because they were relatively weaker than their rivals, they were not only concerned about the expansion of Zintan, but also feared that they would be directly involved in the war and crushed between the two sides. These groups, which declared their support for Libya Dawn, did not take any action during the war, apart from providing military and logistical support (Lacher and Idrisi 2018: 5-7). After the defeat of Zintan, Tripoli militias who getting rid of an aggressor, began to look for opportunity to dominate the capital. Taking advantage of the Misratan militias' struggle against the growing threat of ISIS, these groups eliminated local components of the Libyan Dawn and managed to control the city from March 2016 onwards (Lacher and Idrisi 2018: 7-9).

The rise of the Islamists in the east until 2014 had a similar outcome to that of Zintan in the west. Benghazi, at the center of the competition, has a strategic importance for armed groups as it is the second largest city in the country and home to various institutions and companies. In addition, the fact that it is the capital of Cyrenaica, one of the three federal regions in history, also increased the level of competition. The Islamists, the most powerful actor in the east, began to expand their influence in the region after the revolution, with the support of transitional governments (Fitzgerald 2015: 97-8). Especially in 2012, the rise of demands for federalism forced the Tripoli administrations, which lacked the means to intervene in the region, to cooperate with the Islamists. At that time, these groups were the only organized force to oppose the demands for federalism. In this context, they were incorporated into official security institutions and received additional military and financial aid (Wehrey 2018: 110).

The Islamists, backed by central governments, have intimidated federalists and members of the army with assassination teams since mid-2012 and greatly weakened the idea of establishing a federal administration in which Benghazi would be the capital. In July 2012, 13 ranking members of the army were killed in assassinations carried out by these teams. Over time, assassinations of different figures, including journalists, activists, tribal leaders and members of the judiciary, continued intensively until early 2014. In addition, some small groups opposed to the rise of Islamists were forced to flee the city after losing battles (Lacher 2020a: 33).

The rise of Islamist groups led many other armed groups to flock around the LNA, which was founded by members of the military marginalized by Tripoli's government. In May 2014, the LNA launched an attack called Operation Dignity,

which turned into an alliance with the participation of pro-federalists and tribal groups against the Islamists in Benghazi (Pack 2019: 10-5). For two years, Operation Dignity made no tangible progress in its offensive for control of the city, but in 2016 a new factor emerged that changed the balance between them. The UAE, which plays a key role in the LNA's military power, directly participated in the operation with drones and jets deployed to the al-Qadim military base near Benghazi. Around the same time, France sent its special forces to the region to assist the LNA in urban operations (Libya Herald 2017). These developments, which changed the military balance, took effect in a short time and the Islamists were forced to withdraw from Benghazi, rapidly losing ground.

The international support to the LNA brought about fundamental changes not only in the course of the war but also in the Operation Dignity alliance (Lacher 2021). Having significantly increased its military power compared to its allies, the LNA intimidated tribal groups claiming Benghazi and, in September 2016, seized oil facilities in the Gulf of Sirte controlled by the pro-federalists. As a result of these developments, the weaker components of the Operation Dignity formed a new alliance with their old enemies against the aggressor (Lacher 2020b: 18, 23). This new alliance, called the Benghazi Defense Brigades, comprised of Islamists, federalists and tribal groups, launched attacks on areas outside Benghazi, particularly in the oil crescent, in December 2016, but failed to break the LNA's resistance. In the clashes that lasted until June 2017, the LNA outmaneuvered its rivals with the help of airstrikes of Egypt and UAE and became the dominant power in the east of the country.

The course of the struggle for control of strategic points in the east was of vital importance for Misrata due to its proximity to the region. Given their claims to control of the oil crescent, a triumph of one of these groups over the others would not have been a desirable outcome for Misratans. In fact, Misrata's main objective was to keep the LNA, which was an imminent threat, at war as much as possible and to maintain the balance of power in the east (Schaap and Keilberth 2019). As part of this strategy, Misrata became a supplier of arms and ammunition to Islamist groups, as well as a center for training Islamist volunteers from different parts of the country and treating the wounded. According to UN reports and various sources, until mid-2016, the facilities of the Libyan Iron and Steel Company near the port of Misrata were used for the delivery of military aid. Weapons and ammunition were transported by sea to the port of Benghazi, controlled by Islamist groups, and wounded fighters were treated in the same facilities (United Nations Security Council 2017: 99-100, Lacher 2020a: 157). Thanks to Misrata's military aid to the Islamist groups that took responsibility for fighting the aggressor, the war in the east turned into a two-years of stalemate.

Despite balancing coalitions and Misrata's military support for its rivals, the LNA won the war in the east and became the new rising power in the system. After its absolute victory in 2017, it quickly began to expand into the south and west of the country. In February 2018, it attempted to control the strategic southern city of Sabha by forming asymmetric alliances with southern tribal groups, but failed in its first

attempt. In January 2019, the LNA launched a new attack with more professional and armored troops than before, breaking the resistance of weak factions in the region (Clingendael 2020). After controlling military bases and oil fields in the south, it continued to expand into the west of the country. Taking advantage of the competition between armed groups in the west, the LNA reached an agreement with small groups that had been overshadowed by Misrata, Tripoli and Zintan and settled in Tarhuna, near the capital.

In the face of the growing threat of the LNA, Misratan and Tripoli militias sought to find ways to negotiate with the rising power and tried to pass the buck to other armed groups to get them to balance against the aggressor. The main topic of the negotiations held in March 2019 at the headquarters of the LNA in Benghazi was the position that Misrata and Tripoli militias would take in the war and the gains they would make in return of it. In this context, the negotiators demanded ministerial and military command appointments in the post-war government in exchange for guarantees that they would not interfere with the LNA's control of Tripoli (Lacher 2019: 6). When the LNA, realizing the mistrust among armed groups in the west, rejected their demands, they had no choice but to surrender or form a balancing coalition against it. The LNA's call for unconditional surrender to all armed groups yield no results and a new civil war erupted in April 2019.

The armed groups tried to pass the buck among themselves before the war, but when they failed, they had to form a balancing alliance called the Volcano of Rage. The alliance, which was dominated by Misratan militias, eventually included all western actors, with the participation of forces in Zintan and Tripoli. In terms of motivations, the main objective of each power was to check the aggressor (Middle East Monitor 2019). However, it was militarily far from this goal, as the LNA received military aid from Russia, the UAE and Egypt, in addition to the local components. In order to restore the balance of power, a Memorandum of Understanding on Security and Military Cooperation was signed between Turkey and the GNA, which is supported by armed groups in the west. Drones and air defense systems deployed under this agreement played a decisive role in the success of the Volcano of Rage to contain the aggressor (Lacher 2019: 6-9). This military support enabled the alliance to take control of the city of Gharyan in June 2019, which is strategically important for the delivery of weapons and ammunition to the LNA's front lines, and changed the course of the war. In the following months, the alliance forces advanced along the southwestern axis, and by June 2020, they controlled the entire region up to the Sirte line (Al-Jazeera 2020). Although clashes continued in and around Sirte for some time, neither side was able to gain a tangible advantage and eventually the balance of power between the parties was restored.

In their competition for power in Libya, the powerful armed groups have always tried to prevent, directly or indirectly, the expansion of their rivals rather than giving in to it. Small groups who had no other choice were forced to tolerate shifts in the balance of power. In this context, the strategic behavior of the tribal groups controlling strategic points in southern Libya that were subject to competition between Zintan, Misrata and the LNA was particularly noteworthy. From the revolution until the civil

Table 1. The patterns of survival strategies of armed groups

Strategies for survival			
Rising powers	Balancing (4)	Buck-passing (4)	Bandwagoning
Zintani militias (201–2014)	The Libya Dawn (Misratan militias and other western militias)	Tripoli militias	Tebu Tuareg
BRSC (2011–2014)	Operation Dignity (LNA, the federalists and other Benghazi militias)	Misratan militias	
LNA (2016–2019)	The Benghazi Defense Brigades (2016–2017) (Islamists, the federalists and other Benghazi militias) Volcano of Anger (2019–2020) (Zintani militias, Misratan militias, Tripoli militias)	Misratan militias Tripoli militias	Awlad al-Suleiman Magharba Tuareg Tebu

war in 2014, the Zintani militias, seeking to control the region’s oil fields, negotiated with the Tebu and Tuareg to join their ranks in August 2011. In exchange for military and economic support to tribal groups, they controlled strategic points in the region for the next three years (Lacher 2015: 278).

When the Zintan-Misrata war erupted in Tripoli in 2014, the struggle between the two groups expanded to the southern cities in a much more complicated way. Tuareg and Awlad al-Suleiman, who had been concerned about Tebu-Zintan cooperation in the region for some time, took advantage of the rise of Misrata to form an alliance with it against Zintan. As a result of fighting that lasted until November 2015, Misrata and its local allies managed to oust Zintan from the region, while they defeated Tebu was in both Ubari and Sabha. With the support of the Tuareg and Awlad al-Suleiman, Misrata took control of strategic locations and was the dominant power for two years (International Crisis Group 2015: 16-17). A new process of shifting asymmetrical alliances emerged in the south, when the LNA began to engage in the region as a rising power in May 2017. Having been promised economic and military aid in exchange for attacking the Tamanhint military base controlled by the Misrata militias, Awlad al-Suleiman and other groups sided with the rising power, which quickly altered the balance of power in favor of the LNA (Micallef et al. 2019: 64-65). Misrata was unable to resist the new conditions and had to withdraw from the region.

Between 2017 and 2019, the LNA dominated the region through asymmetric alliances with local groups, and it launched a military operation for direct control

in January 2019. However, it was unclear how the weaker groups outside its allies, Awlad al-Suleiman and Magharba, would respond to this operation. When LNA forces reached Sabha, Tebu negotiated to surrender the bases under its control and retreated to the southwestern city of Murzuk (Lacher 2020b: 25-27). In Ubari, on the other hand, Tuareg agreed to hand over the Sharara oil fields to the LNA without any fighting. In Murzuk, it encountered resistance of Tebu, but after a brief fighting, Tebu could not avoid giving in to the LNA (Lacher 2020b: 25-27). As a result, this strategy against an aggressor was the only viable way to ensure the survival of the armed groups in the south. As powerful actors in the north, such as Zintan, Misrata and the LNA, engaged in the region, other groups either remained unresponsive in the hope that their expansion would stop at some point, or bandwagoned with them to outmaneuver their local rivals. The following statement by a Tebu commander about the behavior of weaker groups in the south is similar to the Melian dialogue that captures the essence of bandwagoning: “We are like a trailer, we follow the North’s truck” (Tubiana and Gramizzi 2018: 28).

6. Conclusion

In post-revolution Libya, three different armed groups (Zintani militias, BRSC, LNA) threatened the security of their rivals by shifting the balance of power in their favor at different times and regions. In response to these threats, other major groups have either taken direct responsibility for fighting them and formed balancing coalitions or attempted to get another group to bear the burden of fighting the aggressors, while they watched from the sidelines. In terms of balancing, four different alliances were formed against rising powers, three of which were successful in deterring the aggressor. In the 2014 civil war, Misrata against Zintan in the west and the LNA against the BRSC in the east managed to form balancing coalitions that checked the aggressors. Similarly, the coalition of armed groups in the west against the LNA, which was close to dominating the local distribution of power in 2019, was able to restore the balance of power. On the other hand, although the rise of the LNA in 2016 brought together its former allies and enemies in the alliance of BDB, the coalition failed to balance against the rising power. As the number of countries providing it with military and economic support increased, the LNA was able to put its rivals out of the power struggle in the east and in the following years began to expand into the west of the country.

In terms of the balancing strategy, the patterns in the behavior of armed groups clearly indicates that they are constantly seeking a balance of power. A roughly equal the distribution of power among actors is crucial because the balance has a security-enhancing effect in the absence of a higher authority (Waltz 1979: 126-127, Mearsheimer 2001: 338-343). Recognizing this, armed groups have repeatedly positioned themselves against the rising power, carefully monitoring shifts in the balance of power in order to survive (Vinci 2009: 52-54). Major actors such as the LNA, Zintan, Misrata, BRSC and Tripoli have engaged in two different forms of

balancing by mobilizing their own resources and forming alliances. In doing so, they did not hesitate to ally with their former enemies or challenge their former friends. In the wars against the LNA in Benghazi and Tripoli, the former enemies came together under the roof of new alliances (the BDB and the Volcano of Rage) against it.

Another strategy pursued by armed groups in Libya to deter a rising power was buck-passing. In three different competitions, they employed two different forms of the strategy. When war broke out between their powerful rivals in 2014, the Tripoli militias remained on the sidelines, preserving themselves for the post-war period, besides to provide military equipment to the coalition that shouldered the burden of deterring the rising power. Misrata followed a similar approach during the war in the east. By providing military and logistical support to the alliances formed against the rising LNA, it was able to keep the two rivals in a war of attrition. In 2019, on the other hand, Misratan and Tripoli militias tried to put another form of that strategy in action. By improving relations with the rising LNA and negotiating the post-war period, these groups aimed to avoid being targeted by the aggressor. However, when they failed, they opted to deter the aggressor as part of a balancing coalition.

In cases where buck-passing has been successfully employed, it has been effective both in terms of deterring the rising power and the relative power position of actors employing the strategy. In 2014, Tripoli militias took advantage of remaining on the sidelines of the war to expand their influence in the capital in the following years. In this way they not only got rid of a dangerous opponent, but also increased their relative power, which enhanced their prospects for survival. Similarly, Misrata's military support for the BRSC by remaining on the sidelines allowed it to maintain its position within the system and also delay the LNA's westward expansion for a while. This strategy also enabled it to gain victory over ISIS, which had captured Sirte, near the city of Misrata, in 2015 and posed a growing threat to its security.

The finding reveals the cyclical relationship between the existence of armed groups and the phenomenon of failed states. The most general characteristic of armed groups is that they challenge state authority over its territory. As long as these groups survive, states that lose their sovereignty either in total or limited territory, i.e. failed states, continue to exist. What is circular here is that, like states in the international system, the strategies employed by armed groups to survive contribute to the problematic of anarchy. Anarchy, in turn, leads to competition among autonomous groups, and ultimately, the tendency to restore the balance of power among actors maintains the structure of the system. Thus, the problem of anarchy in failed states becomes a structural cycle that cannot be easily overcome. As in the case of Libya, despite many local and international initiatives, the cycle between the problem of anarchy and the survival of armed groups has prevented the establishment of a sovereign state for over a decade.

Funding statement: no funding available.

Conflict of interest statement: none

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