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Post-conflict State building in Libya: the role of decentralisation after the fall of Gaddafi's regime

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INTRODUCTION

The collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011 marked an historical turning point in Libyan history, dismantling a highly centralised system of power without leaving behind resilient institutions capable of rebuilding governance. What followed was a period of fragmentation, in which militias and local actors competed for authority, creating a complex and unstable political landscape. In this context, rebuilding the Libyan state became an urgent necessity as well as an extremely complex task.

The research question guiding the analysis of this thesis is: "how did the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 reshape the prospects for post-conflict state building, and to what extent can decentralisation serve as a viable strategy in this process?"

This research question emerged from my personal experience during an internship at the International Cooperation Centre in Trento, where I had the opportunity to work on the EU-cofunded REBUILD project. REBUILD is a decentralised cooperation initiative that seeks to strengthen local public services in Libya. While editing interviews with Libyan mayors and listening to their words, I began to reflect on what decentralisation actually means and on its potential for rebuilding the Libyan state. Therefore, the research question of this thesis begins from my curiosity that was further shaped by discussions with my tutor, Stefano Rossi, and by witnessing first-hand the trust and sincerity of the relationships built among Libyan majors and European partners through the REBUILD project, particularly during its final Steering Committee meeting. These experiences inspired me to investigate whether decentralisation could represent not only some inspiring and beautiful words, but also a pathway for rebuilding trust and governance in Libya.

To address this question, Chapter 1 examines what is meant by state building and why this concept is particularly relevant in post-2011 Libya. Following

Berman and Lonsdale, state building can be understood as a deliberate and often externally promoted effort, guided by predefined agendas and implementation plans. State building is often presented as a linear process that moves from conflict towards a predefined model of statehood. However, in reality, it interacts with the tortuous and historic process of state formation, whereby the state evolves through the creation, appropriation and transformation of sites of authority. Understanding the difference between state building and state formation, and how the two interact, is crucial for analysing the prospects and limitations of post-conflict reconstruction in Libya. In this context, decentralisation has been proposed as a potential strategy to rebuild legitimacy from below and to respond to local demands in the fragmented Libyan political landscape. However, decentralisation carries many risks. While it is often promoted as a way to strengthen governance in post-conflict or post-authoritarian settings, its actual outcomes depend heavily on political context, institutional capacity, and local power dynamics.

Then, Chapter 2 turns to the Libyan case. To understand how the collapse of the Libyan state reshaped the prospects for reconstruction, it is necessary to analyse the legacy of Gaddafi's regime and its implications for state building. For 42 years, Gaddafi maintained a deeply centralised and highly personalised system of power, rooted in his revolutionary ideology and codified in the *Green Book*. The fall of this authoritarian system left behind an institutional vacuum that severely weakened Libya's capacity for governance. The chapter also examines the first attempts at decentralisation through Law 59 (2012), which established elected municipalities as the main pillars of local governance. While the reform formally transferred important responsibilities to the local level, its implementation was characterized by a lack of resources, and continuing conflict. Finally, the chapter considers decentralisation as a possible strategy for rebuilding the Libyan state, proposing innovative proposals such as the strategy "empowered decentralisation: a city-based strategy for rebuilding Libya".

Chapter 3 focuses on the REBUILD project, which is examined as a tangible attempt to operationalise decentralisation in practice.

By combining theoretical reflection with an empirical case study, this thesis does not aim to provide a definitive answer, but rather to analyse the opportunities and risks that decentralisation offers as a strategy for state building in Libya. Empowering municipalities can potentially contribute to rebuilding legitimacy and improving service delivery, but its effectiveness depends on a range of political and institutional factors. Whether decentralisation can truly become a pathway for Libya's reconstruction remains an open question that this thesis seeks to explore.

CHAPTER 1: STATE BUILDING IN LIBYA

1.1 The Concept of State Building

The collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 profoundly disrupted Libya's political and institutional order, creating a fragmented landscape characterised by contested authority and weak institutions. Following this collapse, the urgent need to rebuild the Libyan state led to a series of international interventions aimed at restoring governance, ensuring stability and rebuilding public institutions.

Such interventions typically involve a variety of international actors, including donors, international development agencies, and NGOs. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a significant increase in international interventionism, with the United Nations assuming an increasingly prominent role as global peacekeeper. Rising international threats linked to terrorism and organised crime have prompted the consolidation of a security–development nexus, in which establishing functioning state institutions has come to be seen as the most effective means of addressing global security challenges (Duffield, 2001; OECD, 2008).

This logic was further reinforced after the 11 September 2001 attacks. The redefinition of global security paradigms led to the widespread belief that international security depended on stabilising fragile and failed states. This belief stems from the idea that areas without effective governance could facilitate transnational threats, such as terrorism. Consequently, state building became a key policy area for the international community (European Security Strategy, 2003).

Within this framework, state-building interventions typically address technical and managerial aspects, aimed at maximising states' effectiveness and efficiency with very little concern for their political repercussions (Darbon 2003, in de Simone 2022 p. 6). By treating governance as a technical issue, these interventions tend to disregard the underlying power struggles and local political dynamics that define state–society relations.

Consequently, these interventions have been criticised for overlooking the socio-historical complexities of the contexts in which they operate. Scholars like Roland Paris compared them to the colonial *mission civilisatrice* (Paris, 2002), suggesting that these interventions often reflect an intention to civilize fragile states through Western models. Similarly, other actors have described them as an imperialist enterprise (Chandler, 2006; Richmond, 2011), imposed by Western actors without proper adaptation to local contexts. These critiques highlight how international state-building projects often export Western institutional models that are alien to the African context, thus undermining local legitimacy and ownership.

A significant turning point came in 2008, when the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) acknowledged that legitimacy, not just capacity-building, must be a central element of an effective state (de Simone, 2022). The OECD defined state-building "as purposeful action to develop the capacity, institutions, and legitimacy of the state in relation to an effective political process for negotiating mutual demands between the state and societal groups" (OECD, 2008 p. 14).

The OECD highlights the need to recognise that the state should not merely be

an instrument of imposed authority but should be embedded in a social contract between the state and society. Accordingly, state-building interventions must consider not only national institutions, but also the local level where legitimacy is actually built. Since 2008, there has been a gradual shift in the field of state building, with growing support for decentralisation reforms and an increasing emphasis on local governance as a method of improving legitimacy, accountability, and service delivery. This shift is clearly reflected in projects such as REBUILD, which aims to support Libya's decentralisation process and improve its population's living conditions by strengthening local institutions and promoting participatory governance. The REBUILD project will be examined in greater detail in chapter three, as a form of bottom-up cooperation based on the active involvement of local actors.

To understand the kind of state that these interventions seek to create, it is important to consider the nature of the state itself. Often, the state is simply considered as an unproblematic structure whose formation is assumed rather than analysed. Most analyses rely on Max Weber's classic definition of the state as a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber 1958 p. 78). This definition provides an ideal type: it assumes a coherent, unified and goal-oriented political entity. It also implies a model that can be universally replicated, as if Western institutions could simply be “copied and pasted” into any context. Criticism raised against state-centred approaches points to a distortion of the concept of state derived precisely from the adoption of Weber’s definition of the state understood as a unitary, coherent, and goal-oriented entity (Migdal 2001, 12). As Migdal explains, applying the rigid, state-centred, Weberian model leads to deviation from the ideal state being viewed as failure rather than a different mode of political organisation.

To move beyond the limitations of state-centred approaches, scholars such as Risse and Hameiri have proposed analysing how authority is distributed among public and private, formal and informal actors (Risse 2011a; Hameiri 2009; 2010). This is particularly relevant in the Libyan case, where authority is

dispersed among different actors. Therefore, Libya should not be understood as a failed state simply because it does not conform to the Weberian ideal. Rather, Libya can be interpreted as a political entity undergoing a complex process of state formation, in which authority is dispersed within and outside the state's nominal borders and exercised by various private and public, formal and informal, as well as licit and illicit entities.

Even when international interventions aim to establish a centralised state, the resulting governance structures often undermine the Weberian concept of a cohesive state in post-conflict countries (Costantini, 2015). These efforts tend to create hybrid arrangements in which authority is deeply embedded in society yet fails to produce unified or effective state institutions. This is evident in Libya, which is now formally under the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli; however, the country remains practically divided, with competing governments and local actors exercising de facto authority[1].

Rather than being a deviation from the norm, this situation reflects the dynamics of state formation: a continuous negotiation between imported models and local forms of power that produces hybrid and often unstable forms of governance. In practice, state-building projects in Libya since 2011 have failed to generate state authority (Costantini, 2015); rather, these efforts have favoured the dispersion of authority across different levels of governance and actors as part of the state-formation process, as we shall see in chapter two.

When conceived by international interveners as a linear process linking a state of conflict to an ideal model of statehood, state building becomes part of the tortuous and historic process of state formation. State formation is a messy, open-ended process defined by shifting alliances, power struggles and

[1] As of 2024, the Government of National Unity (GNU), based in Tripoli, controls most of western Libya and is internationally recognised. However, a rival government, supported by the House of Representatives and backed by General Khalifa Haftar, exercises de facto authority over eastern Libya.

contested sites of authority (Herring and Rangwala, 2006; Blieseman de Guevara, 2012a; Richmond, 2013). Indeed, in the Libyan context, state-building efforts since 2011 have not resulted in the formation of a unified, sovereign state (Costantini, 2015). Instead, these efforts have contributed to the dispersion of authority across multiple levels of governance and among various actors. This dispersion is not an unintended consequence, but rather a fundamental feature of Libya's evolving political order: a hybrid form of governance reflecting the multitude of actors involved at various levels, both formal and informal, and both local and international. Within this framework, decentralisation has been proposed as a strategy to reconfigure governance, respond to local demands and rebuild legitimacy. The following chapters will use this framework to evaluate the viability of decentralisation as a strategy for rebuilding the Libyan state.

1.2 Understanding State Building and State Formation

In order to analyse the Libyan case, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual distinction between state building and state formation — two processes that are profoundly different even though they are often conflated.

State building refers to a conscious effort to construct an apparatus of control (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992 p. 5). This definition captures the objective of state building programmes designed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which aimed to strengthen state institutions' control capacity in terms of security and administrative processes (Paris, 2004). Therefore, these programmes were designed to stabilise post-conflict countries by creating functioning institutions and strengthening the formal authority of the state. However, they often focused on technocratic solutions and neglected the historical and cultural context in which they were implemented.

State formation is a fundamentally different phenomenon. According to Berman and Lonsdale, state formation "is an historical process whose outcome is a

largely unconscious and contradictory process of conflicts, negotiations and compromises between diverse groups whose self-serving actions and tradeoffs constitute the 'vulgarization' of power" (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992, p. 5). Rather than being the product of deliberate planning, states emerge from an unpredictable process shaped by different actors at different levels fighting for their own interests, confronting each other and finding compromises through negotiation.

Berman further emphasises this concept by drawing a parallel with the trajectory of capitalist development in colonial Africa. He argues that such development was only possible through the emergence of endogenous capitalist forces (Berman, 1992). In this analogy, externally driven state-building projects in post-conflict contexts can be viewed as arenas of negotiation where imported concepts such as democracy, decentralisation and good governance are not merely implemented, but constantly reinterpreted, reshaped or even resisted by local political actors (de Simone, 2022). This observation is particularly pertinent to the Libyan case, where international initiatives interact with fragmented domestic authority structures. The local dimension is a crucial factor in the process of state formation. The consent, resistance, or strategic action of local actors plays a decisive role in shaping the outcomes of externally promoted reforms. In this regard, Fanon argues that the historic mission of the national middle class was to act as an intermediary, a transmission line between the nation and capitalism (Fanon, 1961 p. 152). As he demonstrates, colonial domination in Africa was not imposed unilaterally, but often depended on the collaboration of local actors who engaged with the colonial state and expanded its reach. This dynamic clearly parallels contemporary international state-building efforts, which rely on the cooperation — or manipulation — of domestic elites who may accept, coopt or subvert the external agenda to serve their own power strategies (de Simone, 2022).

State formation is therefore not a linear or planned process. Instead, it is a plural and contested process, whereby the state evolves over time through the

creation, appropriation and transformation of sites of authority. This complexity is particularly evident in contexts such as post-conflict Libya, where governance is characterised by the coexistence of different levels (international, transnational, national and local) and types of authority (private and public, formal and informal).

Therefore, distinguishing between state building and state formation is crucial: whereas state formation unfolds historically through processes of conflict and negotiation, state building refers to a deliberate and often externally driven effort, guided by predefined agendas and implementation plans. However, this does not imply that state building is a process free from contradictions or conflict. On the contrary, even when pursuing clearly defined and well-planned objectives, such efforts can produce contradictory or non-intended effects, as they are embedded in broader and more differentiated social and political dynamics. Indeed, state building is often based on normative assumptions about what a 'modern' or 'functioning' state should look like — assumptions that may not align with local political realities.

Importantly, state building and state formation are not mutually exclusive, nor is one simply a consequence of the other. State-building interventions influence the distribution of power in state formation by allocating resources to particular actors (Bliesemann de Guevara 2012b, p. 5). Therefore, external interventions can shape internal political equilibrium: by empowering certain actors over others, they indirectly determine the trajectory of state formation. For example, supporting central governments, municipalities or armed groups through funding, training or recognition can create new hierarchies or entrench existing divisions. At the same time, the logic of state formation influences the outcomes of state-building efforts. To legitimate their agendas, international actors rely on both external models and internal processes. The success — or failure — of these efforts depends not so much on institutional design, but on the extent to which their initiatives align with the historical and cultural context of the country.

State formation and state building interact continuously. Understanding this interplay is essential for analysing post-conflict Libya, where international efforts to rebuild the state operate within — and are shaped by — an undetermined process of state formation.

1.3 Decentralisation as a State-Building Strategy

Decentralisation is often promoted as a strategy for improving governance in post-conflict or post-authoritarian settings. While it promises to improve legitimacy, inclusiveness and service delivery, its actual outcomes depend heavily on the political context, institutional capacity and local power dynamics. This section critically analyses decentralisation as a state-building strategy, examining its theoretical foundations, potential benefits, and inherent risks.

Decentralisation is a lengthy and complex process of reform that begins with constitutional and/or statutory changes at the centre; ideally, it progressively distributes responsibilities, resources, authority, and autonomy from the centre to the periphery (Olowu, 2004). Governmental authority and power are transferred to regional, provincial or municipal entities, making decentralisation a fundamentally territorial concept (Böckenförde, 2013). The delegation of power is geographically based: specific administrative responsibilities are assigned to subnational entities based on their location. This spatial redistribution reshapes the relationship between central and peripheral authorities, redefining the structure of the state across its territory and creating new centres of political and administrative power rooted in defined localities.

However, decentralisation is not merely a technical or territorial matter of the reallocation of power and resources; it is also a deeply political matter. Indeed, decentralisation reforms only make sense if they lead to effective local governance — that is, the establishment of functioning local systems of collective action that are accountable to and responsive to local residents'

priorities (Olowu, 2004). This means citizens are the key decision-makers in determining local priorities and allocation of resources.

As the UNPD states, "local governance authorities are viewed as pivotal in bringing formal state institutions into direct contact with their citizens and thus play a crucial role in establishing inclusive patterns of post-conflict governance, responsively providing services to divided populations and consolidating resilient law and order" (UNDP, 2010, p. 3). Decentralisation is expected to bring the state closer to citizens, promote local ownership, enhance government responsiveness and prevent the resurgence of authoritarianism by diffusing power. By redistributing decision-making power and resources, decentralisation is also seen as a way to make state institutions more responsive to local needs, rebuilding trust between the state and its citizens — particularly in contexts where centralised regimes have historically failed to do so. It is also seen as a means of addressing historical grievances, reducing regional inequalities and fostering inclusive political participation (Böckenförde, 2013). For these reasons, decentralisation is often promoted as a strategy for rebuilding the state, particularly in post-conflict contexts. However, this assumption must be critically examined to determine whether decentralisation truly offers a viable path for reconstructing the Libyan state. The strategy of decentralisation should not be viewed merely as a technical reform, but rather as a deeply political intervention within the process of state building.

In the Libyan context, the debate over decentralisation is closely linked to the history of Libyan governance. Having suffered for a long time under highly centralised political systems, Libya has now the opportunity to reform this legacy through decentralisation (Böckenförde, 2013), moving towards local governance where citizens of a defined area participate in their own governance. Proponents of decentralisation in Libya view it as an opportunity to break with the past, address regional disparities and promote more inclusive governance.

Nevertheless, several critical scholars have underlined the potentially divisive consequences of decentralisation, including elite capture and the reinforcement of locally defined citizenship rather than national citizenship (Boone, 2003; de Simone, 2013; Lentz, 2006a; Schelnberger, 2008). Indeed, decentralisation may empower local elites who are not accountable to their communities, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies and corruption. Furthermore, by promoting locally defined forms of citizenship, decentralisation can undermine a sense of national identity. Where local institutions are weak and the rule of law is fragile, decentralisation can facilitate corruption, clientelism and the entrenchment of existing hierarchies. Furthermore, if not carefully designed, decentralisation can exacerbate identity-based divisions, particularly when administrative boundaries coincide with ethnic, tribal, or religious lines (Böckenförde, 2013). In these cases, rather than bringing the state closer to its citizens, decentralisation can become a vehicle for fragmentation or even secession. Therefore, decentralisation reforms do not necessarily strengthen democracy and peace; this is due to a variety of context-specific factors, such as the nature of the political system and historical legacies in the exercise of power (Aalen, 2019; Siegle & O'Mahony, 2019).

Decentralisation is not inherently good or bad; its effectiveness depends on the context in which it is implemented, the motivations behind it, and the strength of the institutions that support it. It can serve as a tool for rebuilding state legitimacy from the ground up, but only if it is designed and applied with an acute awareness of local dynamics, power relations, and historical legacies. The benefits of decentralisation depend on various contextual factors, including legal safeguards that prevent the central government from unilaterally revoking the dispersal of power and authority (Böckenförde, 2013). Without such conditions, decentralisation risks becoming just another externally imposed solution that fails to deliver meaningful governance reform. As we will see in the next chapters, decentralisation efforts can have mixed results.

CHAPTER 2: THE FALL OF GADDAFI'S REGIME AND THE CHALLENGES OF POST-2011 STATE BUILDING

2.1 The Gaddafi Regime (1969–2011) and its implications for state building

To understand the challenges of state-building in post-2011 Libya, it is first necessary to examine the legacy of Gaddafi's Jamahiriya. The regime that emerged from the 1969 coup not only replaced the Senussi monarchy, but also redefined the political and institutional foundations of the Libyan state. Arab nationalism, fused with Islam and presented as a defence against Western imperialism, was a crucial part of Gaddafi's state-building project. For 42 years, Muammar Gaddafi established a deeply centralised and highly personalised system of power, rooted in his own revolutionary ideology and encapsulated in the Green Book.

On 1 September 1969, a group of young military officers, led by 27-year-old Gaddafi, overthrew King Idris in a bloodless coup. The Idris monarchy was perceived as corrupt and submissive to Western powers. Gaddafi presented himself as the heir to the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab vision. Arab nationalism, anti-Western sentiment and regional unity became the ideological pillars of the new regime, which aimed to align the country's destiny with that of the wider Arab world (Vandewalle, 2012). Gaddafi, as the charismatic leader of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), quickly consolidated power by abolishing Parliament and proclaiming the Libyan Arab Republic in place of the monarchy. In the following years, the RCC attempted to reshape Libya's institutions through revolutionary mobilisation, but it lacked a coherent programme for translating revolutionary ideals into effective governance (Vandewalle, 2012).

Disillusioned by the RCC's failure to mobilise the population, Gaddafi launched the so-called "Popular Revolution" in 1973, which marked a radical new phase.

The Popular Revolution involved the destruction of representative institutions, the removal of opponents and the abolition of existing laws. Framed as a bottom-up mobilisation of the people, this initiative relied on populist rhetoric such as 'the people govern themselves" (Vandewalle, 2012), which obscured the regime's ongoing concentration of power. This culminated in the proclamation of the Jamahiriya in 1977, presented as the "state of the masses."

The ideological foundations of the Jamahiriya were codified in The Green Book (1975), in which Gaddafi articulated his "Third Universal Theory." This ideological treatise aimed to reform the country's political and economic structures, seeking to establish a stateless society governed by direct popular democracy (Vandewalle, 2012). Gaddafi rejected constitutional guarantees as serving only the interests of the powerful (Gaddafi, 1975). He referred to this new state as a "Jamahiriya", a political community not defined by representation, but rather by consultation through a system of popular congresses and committees, representing the legislative and executive branches respectively. Citizens were expected to manage the country themselves, devising their own solutions to economic and social problems without state institutions (Vandewalle, 2012). The Jamahiriya was therefore organised in multiple levels. At the base were the Basic People's Congresses (BPCs), local assemblies where citizens debated and passed resolutions. These were implemented by the Popular Committees, which replaced traditional ministries. At the national level, delegates from the BPCs gathered annually in the General People's Congress (GPC), which appointed the General People's Committee, formally acting as the executive.

In practice, however, this structure remained largely symbolic: the Revolutionary Committees, established in 1977 and directly loyal to Gaddafi, soon became the real instruments of political control and coercion, excluding both the GPC and the Popular Committees (Vandewalle, 2012). Composed of loyal figures who reported directly to Gaddafi, the Revolutionary Committees enforced ideological

conformity and suppressed dissent. This gradually transformed the revolution into a personalist regime centred entirely on Gaddafi's vision and authority.

The Revolutionary Committees' mandate to "guide and defend the revolution" extended well beyond mobilisation, including the identification and elimination of those perceived as opponents of the revolution (Vandewalle, 2012). In 1980, they were authorised to establish revolutionary courts that operated outside the penal code. These courts were notorious for their politically motivated abuses and executions during the 1980s and 1990s.

The result was a dual system of authority in which the popular congresses and committees maintained a semblance of popular government while the Revolutionary Committees, who were directly loyal to Gaddafi, exercised real power (Vandewalle, 2012). Far from enabling popular self-government, as Jamahiriya claimed, this dual system reinforced a repressive order in which ideologically driven bodies systematically bypassed formal state structures. The regime's reliance on revolutionary ideology and direct rule eroded the very foundations necessary for a resilient state (Vandewalle, 2012). Therefore, the absence of institutionalised, independent governance structures, particularly in the legislative and judicial realms, created a vacuum that would become starkly evident after the regime's collapse, contributing to Libya's post-2011 fragmentation.

Another important aspect of the Jamahiriya was the centrality of nationalism in Libyan state-building. By linking nationalism to both regional unification and Islam, Gaddafi sought to create a cohesive political identity that legitimised his regime. Moreover, he emphasized a shared historical narrative of resistance to foreign domination, frequently invoking the suffering endured under Italian colonial rule and the brutality of fascist occupation (Vandewalle, 2012). This collective memory of injustice stimulated a sense of belonging to a community with shared values and history.

For Gaddafi, nationalism was a fundamental and almost natural force underpinning the survival of the state. In the Green Book, he wrote that

nationalism binds a community into a unified whole, enabling it to survive (Gaddafi, 1975 pp. 69-71). Within this framework, Arab nationalism became an ideological and strategic necessity for Libya, serving as the cultural glue that could ensure internal cohesion and strengthen resistance against external interference.

Gaddafi's religious programme combined modernist reform with political instrumentalization. He aimed to reform the traditional Islamic order by promoting a "more authentic application of the spirit of the Quran and Sunna to social life" (Hinnebusch, 1984, p. 70). He advocated a Qur'an-centric legal and moral order that he claimed embodied the authentic spirit of Islam while serving the goals of the revolution (Hinnebusch, 1984).

Therefore, Islamic reformation and Arab nationalism became core principles of state-building in Libya under Gaddafi's regime. Gaddafi argued that "when the social factor is compatible with the religious factor, harmony prevails and the life of communities becomes stable, strong and develops soundly" (Gaddafi, 1975 p. 72). For this reason, he stated that "the religion of Arab nationalism is Islam" (St. John, 1983), as a state without a unifying faith risked fragmentation, as Gaddafi wrote in the Green Book. The capacity of religion to reinforce nationalism provided the foundation for the Libyan state, aligning political identity with the cultural and historical experiences of its population (Gaddafi, 1975 pp. 71–72).

However, despite the Green Book's formal elevation of religion and custom to the status of 'the law of society', both Islamic law and Libyan customary norms were displaced in practice by secular, ideologically driven policies (Vandewalle, 2012). This means that the religious discourse was carefully managed by the regime, used to legitimise authority but deprived of independent legal force.

The role of religion in the Gaddafi regime challenges the theory of secularisation, which suggests that modernisation inevitably leads to the decline of religion in public life. On the contrary, during Gaddafi's leadership, religion evolved into a unifying political and cultural force that served as a powerful

source of national identity. Gaddafi subordinated religious discourse to the authority of the state. Religious references were used to legitimise political authority, while legislative reforms increasingly marginalised traditional sources of law. Consequently, religion functioned less as an autonomous legal framework and more as a unifying identity symbol, ingrained in the nationalist project and exploited to consolidate Gaddafi's personal power. Symbolic measures such as the banning of alcohol, the closure of nightclubs and the reinstatement of Islamic criminal penalties were used to reinforce the regime's legitimacy and present it as the defender of a political order that fused Arab nationalism with Islamic values (Hinnebusch, 1984; Vandewalle, 2012).

The Third Universal Theory extended Gaddafi's populist principles into the economic domain, calling for the abolition of the wage system, denounced as a form of exploitation that reduced workers to slaves, whether under private employers or under state ownership (Gaddafi, 1975). Gaddafi argued that rather than being wage-earners, citizens must become "partners in production". According to this vision, the nation's wealth should be shared equally, and citizens should not only profit from the country's wealth but also become equal partners. He desired the complete cessation of classes and the restoration of natural laws, as these laws produce natural socialism based on equality among the components of economic production (Gaddafi, 1975, p. 43).
This economic vision also extended to the abolition of private property. By the end of the decade, the state controlled all sectors of the economy. The GPC announced state control over exports, imports, oil and land, effectively dismantling the remaining private sector. Although economic redistribution was presented as a step towards 'natural socialism', it actually served to anchor citizens' lives to the state, thereby reinforcing political dependence on Gaddafi's regime.

To sum up, during his 42 years of absolute power, Gaddafi concentrated all authority in his own hands without establishing an institutional apparatus

capable of surviving him (Fasanotti, 2017). Under the slogan of 'government of the masses', all opposition was eradicated, and any possibility of democratic participation was eliminated. The result was an authoritarian state with no resilient institutions, whose apparent stability was entirely bound to Gaddafi's figure.

2.2 2011 as a historical turning point and the need to rebuild the State

During the 1980s and 1990s, Gaddafi maintained control over oil revenues, thereby consolidating his authoritarian rule. Meanwhile, Libya became increasingly isolated on the international scene due to accusations of terrorism, most notably the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, as well as U.S. air strikes in 1986. International sanctions and fluctuating oil prices weakened the economy, but the regime's coercive capacity and patronage networks ensured its survival.

In 2003, Gaddafi sought reintegration into the international community by abandoning his weapons of mass destruction programme. The United States then lifted all economic sanctions against the Jamahiriya, and diplomatic relations were re-established. This process attracted foreign investors back to Libya, particularly in the oil sector, and was accompanied by Gaddafi's calls for political and economic reforms. He openly acknowledged the failure of the public sector and called for privatisation in key areas, including the oil industry, promising a break from the inefficiencies of the state-run economy (Vandewalle, 2012).

However, the regime's reliance on extensive patronage networks meant that any reform that threatened the four-decade-long privileges of intermediaries was bound to encounter resistance and ultimately fail (Vandewalle, 2012). Although Gaddafi's diplomatic shift seemed to indicate a new commitment to the international community, reintegration primarily served Libya's economic and strategic interests. The legacy of an inefficient state-run economy, exacerbated by two decades of sanctions and growing social pressures such as

youth unemployment, meant that reintegration into the international community was essential.

By the late 2000s, Libya appeared to be both diplomatically rehabilitated and economically stable, but unresolved structural weaknesses persisted. The cult of personality deepened, now aimed not only at domestic audiences but also at projecting Gaddafi's image abroad as a victorious leader who had stood up to the West and won. Nevertheless, for the majority of the population, public and private life remained sharply divided, and many Libyans coexisted with the revolution without identifying with it (Vandewalle, 2012). Indeed, beneath this façade, the regime led to political exclusion and failed to cultivate a genuine sense of nationhood or mobilise sustained popular support.

In the late 2000s, anti-government protests and Islamic fundamentalist organisations increased dramatically across the Middle East, ultimately leading to the Arab Spring in 2011, which spread throughout the Arab world. In Libya, the seeds of the uprising lay in the contrast between the country's reintegration into the international community and its stagnant, exclusionary politics and repression. On 15 February 2011, protests erupted in Benghazi following the arrest of human rights lawyer Fathi Terbil. Demonstrations then rapidly spread across eastern Libya, where long-standing grievances regarding political and economic marginalisation fuelled the mobilisation of armed groups. The regime's violent response, involving the deployment of heavy weaponry and air power, transformed the unrest into a civil conflict. The Libyan crisis attracted Western intervention under the banner of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorised a 'no-fly zone' over Libya to protect civilians against Gaddafi's forces (Zifcak, 2012). NATO quickly assumed responsibility for its implementation, but the mission, initially framed as humanitarian protection, evolved into a military campaign that facilitated regime change. In March 2011, the Transitional National Council (TNC) was formed in Cyrenaica. It declared itself the sole representative of the Libyan people and quickly gained recognition from France, the US, the EU and NATO. By August, rebels,

supported by NATO, had stormed Tripoli and captured Bab al-Aziziya, the symbolic centre of Gaddafi's rule. On 20 October 2011, Sirte fell and Gaddafi was killed.

2011 represented a historical turning point in Libya's history. The collapse of Gaddafi's regime did not lead to reforms of existing institutions; rather, it left the country facing the challenge of building them almost from scratch. Despite international recognition, the TNC struggled to extend control beyond urban centres, while regional divisions deepened, and porous southern borders facilitated arms trafficking and the entrenchment of non-state actors. This fragmentation of power resulting from the collapse of Gaddafi's regime is part of Libya's contested state formation process, in which authority is dispersed among a multitude of actors involved at various formal and informal levels, both locally and internationally.

The absence of an experienced bureaucracy, the proliferation of armed groups and the fragmentation of political authority created an environment in which state-building became an urgent necessity and a complex task (Vanderwale, 2012). The legacy of the Jamahiriya, marked by the concentration of power in informal networks and the suppression of pluralism, meant that post-2011 Libyan leaders were confronted with a dual challenge: establishing a new institutional framework while simultaneously attempting to forge a cohesive national identity within a deeply fragmented political landscape. This made state building not merely desirable, but necessary, setting the stage for domestic and international interventions in the years that followed.

2.3 Decentralisation as a state building strategy in Libya

The fall of the Jamahiriya in 2011 opened a fragile and uncertain transition. Early elections in 2012, held before reaching consensus on a shared vision of the desired state, deepened social polarization (Hove, 2015). The vote brought the General National Congress (GNC) to power, replacing the National Transitional Council (NTC) as Libya's legislative authority. However, the GNC

soon disappointed both domestic and international actors by failing to deliver a constitution and proving unable to deal with the growing threat of Islamist radicalism (Fasanotti, 2017).

In July 2012, the NTC adopted Law 59, the Local Administration Law, which marked the first major attempt to introduce a decentralised model of governance since Gaddafi's fall. Under Law 59, 99 municipalities were established, and municipal councils were elected for the first time through universal suffrage. This reform aimed to address long-standing requests for local autonomy following decades of centralised authoritarian rule. However, the decentralisation process remained incomplete: while municipalities enjoyed electoral legitimacy, they lacked the resources, competencies, and legal clarity needed to respond effectively to citizens' expectations (UNDP, 2015). The second civil war, which started in 2014 and had disastrous consequences for the country's social and economic fabric, institutions, and infrastructure, stopped the nascent decentralisation process initiated by Law 59.

Following new elections in 2014, the House of Representatives (HoR) was formed, but Islamist factions refused to accept the results. Tripoli fell under the control of Islamist groups supporting the 'New GNC', forcing the HoR to relocate to Tobruk. From that moment onwards, Libya was effectively divided between two rival governments: a secular government based in Tobruk and supported by the HoR, which was recognised internationally; and an Islamist government rooted in Tripoli, supported by the New General National Congress (GNC) and Islamist militias (Fasanotti, 2017). This dual power structure has led to institutional paralysis and renewed conflict.

In an attempt to overcome this institutional divide, Libyan politicians signed the Skhirat Agreement in December 2015 under UN auspices, creating the Government of National Accord (GNA) as the sole legitimate executive authority. However, despite receiving strong political support from Western

governments and from the UN Security Council, which recognised the GNA as Libya's sole legitimate government, the agreement failed to gain internal legitimacy. The House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk and Khalifa Haftar refused to recognise the GNA, which became little more than a façade for the capture of state institutions by Tripoli militias (Asseburg, Lacher & Transfeld, 2018). The Government of National Accord (GNA) lacked the capacity to impose authority beyond a formal level, as real power in Tripoli rested with militias that exploited their proximity to state institutions for political and economic gain. In practice, this meant that the GNA existed more as a symbol of international consensus than as a functioning government, therefore the agreement reinforced the fragmentation of authority and revealed the limits of centralisation strategies (Asseburg, Lacher and Transfeld, 2018).

Today, this fragmentation continues: on the one hand, the House of Representatives (HoR) based in Tobruk and supported by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army; on the other, the internationally recognized Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli. Both claim legitimacy, but neither has been able to assert full control over the country, leaving large parts of Libya effectively governed by local militias and armed groups. This persistent duality of power illustrates the failure of centralization efforts to rebuild the Libyan state and perpetuates the structural institutional weakness inherited from the Jamahiriya.

In this fractured scenario, decentralisation emerged as a potential state-building strategy to address Libya's governance crisis. As argued in Chapter 1, decentralisation reforms only make sense if they lead to effective local governance, that is the establishment of functioning local systems of collective action that are accountable to and responsive to citizens' priorities (Olowu, 2004). In the fragile Libyan contexts, this is particularly significant: local institutions are expected to bring the state closer to citizens, enhance

responsiveness, and diffuse power in order to prevent the re-emergence of authoritarian patterns.

Moreover, Libyan political organisation has always been rooted in cities and regions rather than in a dominant capital, and the post-2011 context has only reinforced this trend, with militias and municipal councils filling the vacuum left by collapsed central institutions (Allen et al., 2019). Nevertheless, most formal strategies by the international community continue to concentrate on Tripoli and, to a lesser extent, on eastern power centres, thereby neglecting smaller Libyan municipalities. Decentralisation is therefore framed not only as a pragmatic attempt to adapt political structures to Libya's deep-rooted social, ethnic, and religious pluralism (Fasanotti, 2017), but also as a potential means of rebuilding trust between citizens and institutions, by redistributing power and resources in ways that can generate legitimacy from below (UNDP, 2010).

In this context, new approaches have been suggested that reconsider decentralization as a viable strategy for state-building. Among the most innovative is the "empowered decentralization: a city-based strategy for rebuilding Libya", proposed in 2019 by 17 experts like John R. Allen, Hady Amr and Federica Saini Fasanotti. The strategy which they propose puts municipalities at the heart of the reconstruction process, linking the distribution of resources to their performance and accountability. For instance, militias that provide local security under the supervision of elected officials could receive conditional assistance, and municipalities and civic organisations would gain access to funds for vital services such as healthcare, education, and water supply. Crucially, resources would be disbursed in regular instalments, enabling continuous monitoring and allowing reductions or suspensions in cases of non-compliance. Although experimental, such a mechanism could replace current fragmented and often predatory practices with incentives for responsible governance and constructive behaviour.

The initiative also highlighted the need for a strong international actor capable of managing security in Libya and maintaining a diplomatic presence on the ground. This actor would not only be expected to support the U.N. mission, but also to serve as a stabilising mediator in the broader geopolitical context. Writing in 2019, the authors suggested that the United States could play this role.

Crucially, the 17 experts warn against placing too much emphasis on national elections as the primary means of establishing legitimacy. While ultimately necessary, elections alone are not equivalent to the establishment of democracy and cannot ensure legitimacy in the absence of functioning courts, independent media, and institutional checks and balances. In the Libyan context, holding elections too soon could consolidate the power of predatory actors. Instead, the strategy advocates for the gradual empowerment of municipalities through local elections and inclusive mechanisms to generate legitimacy and rebuild the state from the bottom up. These local governments are already filling the vacuum left by the collapse of central authority and are seen as the most viable building blocks of Libyan state reconstruction.

However, whether decentralisation can provide an adequate response to Libya's fragmented and post-conflict context remains an open question. On the one hand, decentralisation offers a way to adapt governance to the country's diverse social and political landscape; on the other hand, however, it risks exacerbating territorial divisions and strengthening the power of militias and local elites, as discussed in Chapter 1. The challenge lies in developing a decentralisation model that genuinely contributes to state-building while preserving Libya's unity and national sovereignty and recognising local and cultural differences. Effective democratic governance must be based on clear, objective rules and competencies, rather than tribal, political or regional loyalties (Allen et al., 2019). This also requires transparency in public affairs and an independent judiciary that is free from coercion and external pressures, unlike under the Gaddafi regime.

In this perspective, the effectiveness of decentralisation also depends on the capacity of municipalities to act as credible and accountable providers of essential public services, ensuring transparency, inclusiveness, and resilience in local governance (Allen et al., 2019). Strengthening municipalities in this direction is precisely the goal of the REBUILD project, which will be analysed in Chapter 3 as a concrete attempt to support decentralisation and improve the quality of services delivered to Libyan citizens.

CHAPTER 3: DECENTRALISATION IN PRACTICE: THE REBUILD PROJECT

3.1 The REBUILD project: origins and objectives

During my internship at the International Cooperation Centre in Trento, I actively participated in the activities of the REBUILD project – Research and Education Building Urban Institutions for Local Development. REBUILD is a decentralised cooperation initiative that seeks to strengthen local public services in Libya by establishing a permanent training mechanism delivered by Libyan universities to Libyan municipalities (REBUILD, 2025). More specifically, the project aims to improve the capacity of ten Libyan municipalities to design, implement, and evaluate local public policies (REBUILD, 2025); thereby contributing to the consolidation of local governance structures.

The project was developed within the framework of the Nicosia Initiative, a decentralised cooperation platform launched in 2015 by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) to foster partnerships between Libyan and European local authorities (REBUILD, 2025). The initiative originated from a direct request of Libyan municipalities, which, following the decentralisation reform introduced by Law 59 of 2012, lacked the resources and competences to

translate newly transferred responsibilities into practice. The CoR responded to the Libyan requests by mobilising European local authorities to share expertise and provide support to Libyan municipalities, with the aims of improving public services in Libya and of helping Libyan cities to enter the international community.

The REBUILD project is financed by the European Union, the partners are ten Libyan municipalities (Azzawiya, Benghazi, Bani Walid, Gharyan, Sebha, Sirte, Tobruk, Tripoli Centre, Zintan, and Zliten), two European local authorities (the Autonomous Province of Trento - coordinator - and the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia) and an affiliated body, the International Cooperation Centre of the Province of Trento. The International Cooperation Centre is a non-profit association engaged in the analysis, information, training and promotion of knowledge on international cooperation, European affairs, peace, and human rights. It promotes the coordination of initiatives and actors operating in international cooperation, enhances the specificities of local experiences, and fosters their international projection.

What further increases the value of REBUILD is its specific nature as a decentralised cooperation project. This means that, unlike initiatives promoted by large international organisations or national governments, REBUILD is directly managed and implemented by through the direct involvement of local authorities, such as the Autonomous Province of Trento and the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, and local administrations such as the 10 Libyan partner municipalities. The historical background of the Italian partners is particularly relevant: Trento, for example, achieved its special autonomy after a long process of negotiation following the annexation of South Tyrol and Trentino to Italy after World War I, which required building institutions capable of preserving local diversity as a cornerstone, while promoting national unity. Similarly, Friuli Venezia Giulia was granted autonomy after World War II in recognition of its borderland position and cultural complexity. These

experiences of negotiating autonomy and managing governance in fragile or contested contexts put them in a particularly good position to understand some of the difficulties faced by Libyan municipalities and to offer practical experience. This peer-to-peer dimension of cooperation, rooted in local experience and in a reciprocal exchange of knowledge, instead of externally imposed agendas, strengthens the legitimacy of the project. In this sense, REBUILD exemplifies how decentralised cooperation can represent a complement to traditional international assistance, providing a more pragmatic and reciprocal way of supporting governance reforms in fragile contexts.

The project pursues five main objectives. It aims to support the decentralisation process in Libya and contribute to the improvement of living conditions by fostering the development of local public services. At the same time, it seeks to strengthen the capacities of Libyan municipalities to design, implement, and evaluate equitable, sustainable, inclusive, and resilient policies, while also enabling them to act as accountable political and administrative representatives for the people of their territories. Finally, the project aspires to establish and test a sustainable learning framework on local development and governance.

To translate these objectives into practice, REBUILD adopts an integrated approach based on three main lines of intervention. First, it promotes capacity building through a university-based continuous learning system for Libyan municipalities. This learning system relies on a training of trainers (ToT) programme for Libyan universities, followed by training sessions delivered by university staff to Libyan municipalities. The training curriculum combines e-learning, in-person teaching, and experiential mentoring, and is structured into thematic cycles addressing topics such as promoting democracy through local government, technical tools for project management, leadership and human resource management, and the delivery of key public services (including fisheries, waste management, health services, and e-government).

Second, REBUILD encourages the creation of a community of practice that connects Libyan municipalities, universities, and European partners. This network is designed to foster the exchange of good practices, knowledge, and experiences through activities such as summer schools, field visits, and regular dialogue between Libyan and European institutions. The aim is not only to transfer technical expertise but also to create a peer-to-peer learning environment that strengthens the long-term capacity of local governance structures.

Finally, the project includes the implementation of two pilot projects according to the priorities expressed by the Municipalities. One, coordinated by the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, focuses on fisheries and involves the municipalities of Benghazi, Sirte, Tobruk, Tripoli, and Zliten. The second, coordinated by the Autonomous Province of Trento, targets water management and involves the municipalities of Azzawiya, Bani Walid, Gharyan, Sebha, and Zintan.

Through this integrated approach – capacity building, peer-to-peer exchange, and pilot projects – REBUILD aims not only to strengthen the institutional and administrative capacity of Libyan municipalities, but also to create opportunities for them to deliver better services, engage with international partners, and position themselves as accountable and resilient actors within Libya's decentralisation process (REBUILD, 2025).

3.2 **Case study: Fishery Project**

Among the activities implemented by REBUILD, the Pilot Project on Fisheries represents a concrete example of decentralisation in practice (Disamis, 2024). Fishing has historically been a vital sector for Libya, supported by strong know-how and local training structures. However, many of these structures were damaged during the conflicts, undermining the sector's ability to sustain local livelihoods and to contribute to the diversification of the Libyan economy away

from oil. In response, REBUILD has promoted a bottom-up approach that empowers municipalities to revitalise the fishery sector and enhance Libya's export capacities towards the EU market (REBUILD, 2025).

The project involves five municipalities – Sirte, Zliten, Benghazi, Tripoli, and Tobruk – and is coordinated by the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, with technical assistance from the Italian National Institute of Oceanography and Applied Geophysics (OGS). Its main goal is to provide local fishing communities with a facility for the storage, refrigeration, processing, and commercialisation of fish, thereby ensuring a traceability system in line with EU standards. This is intended both to facilitate access to local and international markets and to promote the sustainable management of marine resources.

The initiative is structured around three pillars: first, the definition of traceability and certification paths in line with EU legislation, covering storage, refrigeration, and management processes; second, the strengthening of local training institutions through courses enabling young fishermen to acquire the technical skills necessary to support local development in the field of fisheries; and third, the testing of infrastructure in one of the targeted municipalities to ensure compliance with EU regulations for conservation, refrigeration, commercialisation, and delivery to customers.

After an assessment of the five sites, the fishery port of Zliten was selected as the main location where to implement the pilot facility for the collection and storage of fish. This decision was due to its strong fishing community, proximity to processing plants, and municipal commitment to investing in the sector. After assessing the five sites, the fishery port of Zliten was selected as the main location for the pilot infrastructure, due to the presence of a strong fishing community, the proximity of processing plants, and the municipality's commitment to investing in the sector. The facility has is expected to be inaugurated in September 2025 and comprises two refrigeration rooms, one

freezing room and one processing room. All rooms are designed in accordance with EU quality and traceability standards.

By reinforcing the infrastructure required to organise the fish supply chain and by aligning it with EU standards, the project responds to a concrete local priority (Disamis, 2024). The fisheries pilot can thus be interpreted as a practical example of decentralisation in action. Rather than leaving the management of strategic resources to the central state, the project empowers the municipality of Zliten to take direct responsibility for managing a pilot facility for the collection and storage of fish, crucial for the fishery sector. By training municipal staff and ensuring that local authorities co-own both the infrastructure and the decision-making process, the project strengthens the administrative and technical capacity of municipalities to deliver services to their citizens (Disamis, 2024). Libyan fish stocks represent a valuable opportunity not only for Libya but also for Italy and Europe, given their high quality. However, sustainable management is vital to avoid the mistakes of overexploitation seen in other parts of the Mediterranean and to ensure a responsible and long-term growth of the sector (Andaloro, 2023).

While the fishery pilot project demonstrates the potential of decentralisation to empower municipalities and promote local development, it also highlights some of the challenges inherent in applying this model to Libya. Decentralisation risks reinforcing fragmentation, as municipalities may become stronger in delivering services at the local level without being integrated into a broader national framework. In the Libyan case, where rival governments and militias continue to exert competing forms of authority, the empowerment of municipalities may strengthen local governance but does not automatically translate into national cohesion. As the Intermediate Evaluation Report notes, projects like REBUILD have succeeded in consolidating the administrative and technical capacities of municipalities (Disamis, 2024), but their impact on Libya's national institutional architecture remains limited.

3.3 Focus on decentralisation: activities and outcomes

Decentralisation was one of the main objectives of the REBUILD project. The project aimed to strengthening the capacities of Libyan municipalities, in line with the framework of Law 59/2012, by establishing a continuous learning system linking Libyan universities and municipalities in key managerial areas, thus laying the foundations for the development of a stronger local apparatus for the delivery of public services (Disamis, 2024). Indeed, the training curriculum delivered under REBUILD included modules on human resource management, circular economy principles in urban development, waste and water management, and fisheries. By involving universities, the project helped to establish a solid basis for local networks of public actors capable of sustaining decentralisation and supporting municipal capacity-building beyond the life of the project (Disamis, 2024). It remains to be seen whether this learning system will be fully internalised by municipalities and continue to improve local governance once REBUILD concluded in May 2025. However, its creation already represents an important innovation in Libya's post-2011 context, because it filled a critical gap in terms of technical expertise.

Unlike many international initiatives designed and managed externally, REBUILD marked the first time that Libyan municipalities acted as full partners (co-applicants) in an EU-funded project, rather than as mere beneficiaries. This means that they have a responsibility not only in the implementation of the project activities, but also in the quality of the project as a whole (Disamis, 2024).

Another important achievement was the creation of a community of practices among Libyan municipalities and between Libyan and European local authorities. The project, through the promotion of good practices and knowledge exchanges through the study visits, contributes to strengthening relations

between the institutional actors involved, creating spaces of communication and dialogue, and human and professional relations (Disamis, 2024). This means that mayors and municipalities, which were formally under the authority of rival governments in Libya, agreed to cooperate within the same European-funded initiative.

By fostering regular interaction and peer-to-peer learning, REBUILD created spaces of communication and dialogue where municipalities could cooperate on common objectives, despite the deep national divisions that characterise Libya. During the final Steering Committee, I was able to observe first-hand these tangible relationships that had been built through REBUILD. Libyan mayors demonstrated trust in one another and in their European partners, showing that four years of shared work, knowledge exchange and joint efforts had fostered a genuine sense of shared purpose. In this way, REBUILD enhanced the legitimacy of local authorities. By proving that municipalities are capable of delivering services and managing projects, the project contributed to rebuilding trust in local governance and strengthened the image of municipalities as credible interlocutors (Disamis, 2024).

While REBUILD has advanced municipal capacity and cooperation and represents a concrete step towards operationalising decentralisation in Libya, the broader national challenge of Libya's political fragmentation remains unresolved. Strengthening municipalities is a necessary step towards effective decentralisation, but without progress at the national level, the sustainability of these gains may be limited.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the challenges of state building in post-2011 Libya and the potential role of decentralisation as a strategy to address them. The collapse of Gaddafi's highly centralised regime eroded the institutional

structures of governance without leaving behind resilient alternatives, resulting in fragmentation and competing forms of authority. In this context, rebuilding the Libyan state form scratch has proved both urgent and extremely complex.

Within this framework, decentralisation emerged as a potential state-building strategy, promising to strengthen legitimacy and service delivery but also carrying significant risks in fragile political contexts. The reform introduced by Law 59/2012 formally placed municipalities at the centre of local governance, but its implementation was limited by conflict, lack of clarity, and insufficient resources. Innovative proposals, such as the strategy of "empowered decentralisation," have since suggested municipalities could serve as building blocks for Libya's reconstruction.

Finally, the REBUILD project represents a concrete attempt to operationalise decentralisation in practice. REBUILD sought to strengthen the capacity of ten Libyan municipalities through a permanent learning system linking universities and local authorities, the creation of communities of practice, and the implementation of pilot projects on fisheries and water management.
The fishery pilot in Zliten, in particular, provided a tangible example of how decentralisation can empower municipalities to manage resources, deliver services, and engage with international partners. At the same time, the project revealed the limits of decentralisation in a divided national framework, showing that strengthening municipalities alone cannot resolve Libya's broader political crisis.

In summary, decentralisation can contribute to Libya's state-building process by strengthening municipalities, improving service delivery, and fostering legitimacy from below. However, its long-term effectiveness depends on whether municipal empowerment can be linked to broader efforts to overcome national fragmentation.

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