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## What happened to the 'other' Libyans?

G+1

Web exclusive

Five years after the beginning of the war that toppled the country's former Prime Minister, Muammar Gaddafi, Libya's Amazigh struggle to reshuffle amid the growing chaos in the region. **Karlos Zurutuza** reports.



The historical fortress in Nalut, one of Nafusa's biggest Amazigh towns. by **Karlos Zurutuza**

We could almost say that Libya is a single-road country, one



which runs between the borders of Egypt and Tunisia. During the 2011 war, the

frontline was moving along the coastline which is home to 80 per cent of the population.

In the spring of 2011 we would often hear of the coastal cities of Benghazi or Misrata, but still hardly anything from the Nafusa mountain range. It's a rocky plateau that runs parallel to the Mediterranean Sea and lies about 80 kilometres from Tripoli. When the war between Gaddafi's forces and the opposition reached a dead end on the coast, Nafusa's strategic location played a key role. The final attack on the capital was launched from here.

The rebels would still need three months to get to Tripoli and the [activity in the mountains](http://www.dw.com/en/libyan-highlanders-adapt-to-changing-war-scenario/a-15200662) (http://www.dw.com/en/libyan-highlanders-adapt-to-changing-war-scenario/a-15200662) was hectic. The most pressing need was to ensure supplies from the Tunisian border: water, food, fuel, weapons. But the local Amazigh were also [striving to release](http://www.dw.com/en/berber-culture-blooms-in-libyas-western-mountains/a-15274861) (http://www.dw.com/en/berber-culture-blooms-in-libyas-western-mountains/a-15274861) the first newspapers in their language, their first radio programmes. That same legion of volunteers also had to cater for the first children ever attending classes in their native language.



Amazigh school books are released by a group of volunteers. Karlos Zurutuza

Also called **Berbers**

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berbers>) which is a term some find offensive, the Amazigh are native inhabitants of North Africa, with a population extending from Morocco's Atlantic coast to the west bank of the Nile in Egypt. The Touareg tribes in the interior of the Sahara desert share the same ancient tongue. However, the arrival of the Arabs in the region in the seventh century was the beginning of a slow yet gradual process of Arabization. Today, unofficial estimates put the number of Amazighs in Libya up to almost 600,000, about 10 per cent of the total population.

In 1973, Muammar Gaddafi launched a 'Cultural Revolution' under which any publications not in accordance with the principles espoused in his 'Green Book' were destroyed. That included those mentioning the Amazigh. According to Gaddafi, the Amazigh were of 'Arab origin' and their language 'a mere dialect'. Registration of non-Arab names was forbidden, Libya's first Amazigh organization was banned and anyone involved in their cultural revival prosecuted.

Tripoli fell in August 2011. A few days later, several members of the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) – the parallel government set up by opposition – landed in the capital on a plane that had taken off from Nafusa's main road. It was then [when I first met](http://www.dw.com/en/libyas-berbers-feel-rejected-by-transitional-government/a-15515687) (http://www.dw.com/en/libyas-berbers-feel-rejected-by-transitional-government/a-15515687) Fathi Ben Khalifa, the NTC's only

Amazigh member.

Ben Khalifa was a well-known Amazigh dissident from Libya who lived in Morocco for 16 years until he left for the Netherlands to escape Gaddafi's attempts to get capitol city Rabat to hand him over. He told me that relations between the Amazigh and the NTC had already been cut.

'There's no positive attitude toward our constitutional recognition and there's even hostility against us,' Ben Khalifa told me over a cup of coffee in downtown Tripoli. He stressed that the people in the NTC were 'exactly the same' as in the previous regime. 'They're trying to project an image of being liberal and open-minded but the reality is that the majority of them still stick to the same authoritarian old methods,' lamented the prominent dissident.

In November 2011, thousands of Libyan Amazigh took to the streets to denounce that Tripoli's new executive was systematically marginalising them. The feeling of *dejá vu* was painfully present.



One of several pro-Amazigh marches in Zuwara, in Libya's northwest. Karlos Zurutuza

## The war after the war

I've been travelling to Libya every year since 2011, most times through one of its border crossings which Tunisia shares, in

Nafusa and Zuwara. The latter is a coastal town which also happens to be the second Amazigh enclave in the country after their mountain stronghold. As I had already checked in several mountain villages, Zuwara was also littered with Arab settlements set up in Gaddafi times. Unsurprisingly, this town was one of the last Libyan spots to witness clashes between Gaddafi loyalists and rebels.

In 2012 Libyans voted in their first elections ever so the NTC could transfer the power to the General National Congress. The euphoria vanished with the first sectarian attacks – against Sufis – and the assassination of the US ambassador in Benghazi. The Libyan vessel was seemingly starting to heel soon after it had weighed anchor.

In 2013, almost any faction in Libya could put the pressure on the government by blocking some of the country's gas and crude complexes. And the Amazigh [were no exception \(http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/11/libyas-berbers-close-the-tap/\)](http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/11/libyas-berbers-close-the-tap/): 'The government does not recognize us, and we don't recognize the government,' read a banner on display.

Amazigh





militiamen  
get set for  
war in  
Zuwara.  
Karlos  
Zurutuza

The rebel  
commander  
in charge  
complained  
about the  
60-member  
constituent  
assembly  
who set to  
work drafting  
Libya's new

constitution. The **crux of the matter** (<http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/11/spring-bursts-among-toubou-libyas-desert/>) seemed to be the six-seat quota given to the country's minorities: two for the Amazigh, two for the Touareg and two for the Tubu. The system had been designed to rule on majorities of two-thirds plus one, so non-Arab Libyans had literally no chance of achieving their rights.

Many in Libya pointed to a model that would give federal status to the country's three historic regions: Tripolitania in the west, Fezzan in the remote south and Cyrenaica in the east. The latter's **umpteenth declaration** (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/11/benghazi-self-rule-resonates-with-berbers-2013115122219533260.html>) of autonomy from Benghazi also fed the craving for autonomy among the Amazigh.

It was far from being a post-Gaddafi trend for the Amazigh. A draft paper written back in 2006 called: 'Autonomy, the concept and the establishment of the Movement for an Autonomous Region in Nafusa' pays witness to their desire for self-rule.

The 2014 elections turned into a new turning point. The Amazigh decided to boycott the process as well as the majority of the Libyans, with an 18 per cent turnout. That was the beginning of a new civil war with Libya turning into an open battlefield where several militias grouped into two paramilitary alliances: Fajr ('Dawn' in Arabic), led by the Misrata brigades controlling Tripoli, and Karama ('Dignity'), commanded by Khalifa Haftar, a Tobruk-based former army general.

Whereas Tripoli got support from Qatar and Turkey, Tobruk was backed by UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia and enjoyed international recognition. The tribes loyal to Muammar Gaddafi such as Warshafana, Warfala, Gadafa or Awad Suleyman also aligned with Tobruk. In fact, the current division in the country coincides almost to the millimetre with tribal alliances maps drawn during the Italian occupation. However, a new actor emerged in 2015: today, Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown, is the headquarters of ISIS in the country.

## New threats

How do the Amazigh fit into all this? Fathi Ben Khalifa points to 'a dispute between Islamists and Arab nationalists' in which his people should take no part. For the time being, the Libyan Amazigh are grouped into the so-called Amazigh Supreme Council. It's an umbrella organization for the 10 main Amazigh locations. Last August they **conducted a pioneering** (<http://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/libyan-amazigh-elect-supreme-council-members>) election process in Libya that allocated a 50 per cent representation quota for women.

During a visit to Nafusa last December, Kaire Ben Taleb, the elected representative told me that 'too many countries' are supporting both governments, but not a single one Libya's Amazigh. Isolation, he added, is rife.

'The few times Tripoli and Tobruk come together is when they both deal with the Amazigh issue. During elections last August both governments were accusing us of breaking the state, which was exactly Gaddafi's same narrative,' recalled Ben Taleb.



The historical fortress in Nalut, one of Nafusa's biggest Amazigh towns. Karlos Zurutuza

Another 'handicap' for the Libyan Amazigh is religion: unlike the Sunni majority throughout the country, they're Ibadi Muslims. 'We have to

watch because Salafism is permeating society through countries like Saudi Arabia. And you come across it not only in Friday sermons but even in school books,' Sheikh Ramadan Azuza, an Ibadi sheikh who had served time in prison during Gaddafi, explained to me.

While the Amazigh Supreme Council is currently considering the possibility of declaring an autonomous region of their own in Libya, the UN has launched a third Libyan government. It's a 32-member cabinet which is based in a hotel in Tunis, capital of neighbouring Tunisia, due to the lack of security in Libya.

The new executive has been tasked with uniting Libya's warring factions but, for the time being, it has already been rejected by leaders of the two existing parliaments.

The Amazigh remain prudent:

'The only legitimate representative body of the Amazigh people has been excluded from the negotiations so we neither support nor oppose the UN plan,' Ben Khalifa told me a few days back. The Amazigh leader, however, could hardly hide the recurrent feeling of being systematically excluded.

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1. [#1 \(#r1\)](#) Joy () 24 Feb 16

*It is interesting to learn that in order to achieve their goals, the Amazigh had no problem in helping the USUK?France and NATO to bomb the country, murder an elected leader, give space for the Sunnis Sallafists to be entrenched in the region and support the way Libya has been destroyed. They have no idea what they have done and the consequences of their actions. I am sure they think it was a great way to find their independence. They ought to look at the Kurds and the way Turkey is using them as excuse for not fighting ISIS.*

*Amazigh has made a pact with the devil. NATO is just interested in their resources and have no problem in sacrificing the whole lot, if suits their goeas.*

*What has Ben Khalifa learned in the Netherland? It seems that he has learned nothing, otherwise his wishful thinking of an independent state would have been to work closely with Tripoli, instead of helping ISIS to get hold of the country and the resources, the USUK got the gold, Clinton, the secretary of state, gave weapons to ISIS and their ambassador got killed and is all so as 600.000 people can get their way instead of cooperating with the security of Libya and of the world.*

*Ben Khalifa has helped his people to walk the road of self destruction...how sad!*

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