

PEACEWORKS



Young and Angry in Fezzan

ACHIEVING STABILITY IN SOUTHERN LIBYA
THROUGH GREATER ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

By Mary Fitzgerald and Nathaniel L. Wilson



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**MEDIATION,
NEGOTIATION
& DIALOGUE**

ABOUT THE REPORT

Limited economic opportunity in the Fezzan region of southern Libya has been a driver of local conflicts and fueled a narrative among youth of pervasive marginalization.

This report, based on a survey of Fezzan youth, seeks to elicit what they consider to be the chief challenges they face and solutions they envision, with a particular focus on the region's oil industry. Work was supported by the Libya Program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Fitzgerald is a writer, researcher, and consultant specializing in the countries of the Mediterranean rim, with a particular focus on Libya. She has worked with several international organizations operating in Libya and is a contributing author to *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Oxford University Press). Nathaniel L. Wilson is USIP's Libya Country Manager.

Cover photo: A car drives along the road between Sebha and Ubari in southwestern Libya on December 24, 2013. Both cities are ethnically and tribally mixed, making them flash points for conflict. (Photo by Paul Schemm/AP)

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

(202) 457-1700

(202) 429-6063 (fax)

usip_requests@usip.org

www.USIP.org

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Summary



Fezzan is home to Libya's biggest oil field, making the region key to the country's hydrocarbon-dependent economy. Yet Fezzan remains the poorest region in Libya, with its youth bearing the brunt of chronic developmental challenges. This makes them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and criminal networks. As a result, youth have become drivers of conflict and instability in the region. Some have resorted to controversial tactics, including sabotaging energy infrastructure—thereby disrupting the national economy—to make their grievances heard.

Studies on youth in Libya tend to have a national focus. This report instead focuses on the grievances and demands of youth in Fezzan specifically and how they perceive security, developmental, and reconciliation dynamics. It explores how their voices can be amplified to contribute constructively to the conversation regarding medium- to long-term developmental challenges in their communities and the wider region.

Peacebuilding in Fezzan should bring the needs and aspirations of youth into conversations about political and developmental frameworks, including those related to corporate social responsibility. With elections scheduled for December 2021 expected to deliver Libya's first unified government with a popular mandate since 2014, there is an opportunity to ensure Fezzan is prioritized by the future executive and by Libya's international partners. Furthermore, the National Oil Corporation, which oversees the energy sector, should be encouraged to engage more with youth through dialogue about the future of their region and by investing in programs that provide a pathway to economic self-sufficiency, which could be expected to pay a peace dividend.



The El Sharara oil field in southern Libya is operated by the National Oil Corporation in a joint venture with several European oil companies. At normal production, it pumps around three hundred thousand barrels of crude oil per day. (Photo Ismail Zitouny/Reuters)

Introduction

Almost a decade after the overthrow of Muammar Gadhafi, Libya's chaos and dysfunction are felt by all its citizens, but most acutely by its youth. National power struggles have fed localized conflict, resulting in diminished prospects for the generation that has come of age in the post-Gadhafi period. These problems intersect particularly in Fezzan, Libya's oil-rich and ethnically diverse southwestern region.

Isolated by its geography and neglected by both the Gadhafi regime and the governments that followed it, Fezzan has nevertheless been affected by both the 2011 uprising and the civil conflict that has roiled Libya since 2014. This conflict has sharpened local divisions and compounded challenges unique to the region. Communities that have long suffered from poor infrastructure and a dearth of basic services have been torn apart by factional conflict that is often driven by competition for resources and control of strategic locations.

Tensions have flared over identity and citizenship, partly rooted in Gadhafi's divide-and-rule approach in a region where tribal and ethnic differences have been pronounced. Many of the younger generation have retreated further into their tribal and ethnic identities in response.

The challenges of youth in Fezzan are not uniform: they depend on location, gender, and tribe or ethnic group membership, as the question of citizenship rights underscores.¹ But, as this report illustrates, some challenges are universal. Insecurity, criminality, joblessness, and collapsed infrastructure affect the entire region.

Lacking agency and opportunities for employment, some of Fezzan's youth have fallen into criminal activity and smuggling, including human trafficking. Some have joined armed groups and, as a result, are seen as drivers of conflict, which can lead to an even greater

Youth demands for greater economic, political, and societal opportunities should benefit from a general preference for peaceful approaches to problem solving and from the significant intergenerational trust that exists in the region.

sense of marginalization. But others have formed civil society organizations (CSOs) or sought ways to access and influence decision-making in a society where generational hierarchies have been traditionally rigid.

In late 2018, demonstrations that ultimately led to the shutdown of the El Sharara oil field, Libya's largest, were driven by young people who had formed the Fezzan Anger Movement (FAM). (See box 1 on page 9 for a brief history of the movement.) While FAM has since lost some of the wide support it had initially won after the shutdown, the reasons for its emergence remain. The FAM episode serves as a starting point for this report's examination of the grievances and demands of young people in Fezzan as compiled in a survey of youth in the five main population centers of the region, supplemented by interviews with Libyan and international officials. The survey was designed to elicit the main challenges facing Fezzan youth—poor security and criminality were the top two cited—and what youth perceived as the obstacles to resolving those problems. The strength of youth activism and willingness to work toward specific solutions augur well for a fruitful collaboration on the part of international organizations and aid agencies in this pivotal moment for Fezzan, though effective solutions to local conflict, criminality, and the dearth of economic opportunity will also need consistent, effective support and commitment from the Libyan government in the longer term. The threat to achieving a stable security environment if the grievances driving youth demands are not addressed is too great to ignore.



A sparsely populated desert region occupying the southwest quadrant of Libya, Fezzan through geographic isolation has been prone to marginalization by Tripoli and other coastal power centers. This isolation,

combined with economic and political neglect, has fueled youth protests against perceived marginalization by the Libyan government. This situation has further enabled cross-border illegal weapon, drug, and human trafficking with neighboring states, which in turn have fed conflict in the region. Lack of economic opportunity, however, remains the outstanding issue, one for which many in Fezzan consider the oil companies operating there bear at least partial responsibility. The legacy of Gadhafi's favoritism toward certain tribes has also underpinned conflict between ethnic and tribal groups in this highly diverse region. Youth demands for greater economic, political, and societal opportunities should benefit from a general preference for peaceful approaches to problem solving and from the significant intergenerational trust that exists in the region.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Fezzan is home to less than 10 percent of Libya's population, some five hundred thousand people, but that population is both ethnically diverse and, as in much of the Middle East and North Africa region more generally, skews young. It is estimated that about two-thirds of Fezzan's population are under the age of thirty.²

Its unique demographics—Fezzan is Libya's most ethnically diverse region—are a product of both its location and its history. Libya's southern belt is closely interconnected with the countries it borders. Dynamics in Fezzan have long been influenced by the links, ranging from kinship to commercial, that connect communities there with communities in Algeria, Chad, Niger, and Sudan. Centuries-old trade routes looping from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean have also helped shape Fezzan. Gadhafi embraced a divide-and-rule approach toward the region, empowering some (predominantly Arab) tribes and alienating others (predominantly Tebu and some Tuareg). His ouster upended the local balance of power.

Map of Libya

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

Fezzan's population is a mix of Arab tribes, including the Awlad Suleiman and the Gadadfa (Gadhafi's tribe), the so-called Ahali (or Fezazna) population, and non-Arab minority ethnic groups such as the Tebu and Tuareg. The Tebu comprise different communities found across northern Chad, southern Libya, and pockets of Niger. The Tuareg are a historically nomadic people spread across the region from Libya to southern Algeria and Mali. Migration into southern Libya from neighboring countries, including by non-Libyan Tebu and Tuareg, has affected social dynamics in the region, sometimes leading to communal tensions. A significant number of people in Fezzan, including Tebu and Tuareg who were once promised citizenship by Gadhafi, are caught in a legal limbo with an undetermined status under Libyan law, thus making them even more marginalized and vulnerable.³

Fezzan has been particularly affected by the national power struggle, which led to the creation of rival governments and armed forces, that underpinned Libya's civil conflict between 2014 and February 2021. The conflict began in May 2014 when then retired general Khalifa Haftar, who was accused of attempting a coup earlier that year, launched an operation that targeted both militias in Benghazi, including extremist groups, and the then parliament in Tripoli. Fighting intensified following parliamentary elections that July and led to the establishment of rival governments. A UN-led dialogue process resulted in the establishment of the Government of National Accord in late 2015, but parallel bodies remained. The resulting polarization played out at the local level in Fezzan, with tribes, municipal councils, CSOs, student unions, and even sports clubs affected. This intensified after Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli in April 2019, sparking a war that lasted until a ceasefire in October 2020. The formation of the Government of National Unity, Libya's first unified government in seven years, in February 2021 has helped stem this trend, but challenges remain.⁴



GEOGRAPHY

The geography of Fezzan, with the difficulties presented by the considerable distances between its main population centers and exacerbated by the poor to nonexistent infrastructure linking them, has long been a challenge to its development. Poor transport links to Tripoli—the main airport in Sebha has been shut for extended periods in recent years, and only one road connects the capital to the region—reinforce the sense of isolation. The region suffers from a persistent electricity crisis. Telecommunications and internet access are spotty, and the health and education sectors are chronically underresourced. What development has taken place has been lopsided, which one local interviewee attributed to lack of interest from politicians.⁵

The following are the main population centers in Fezzan.⁶ They are also the locations surveyed in the data collection underpinning this report.

Sebha is the region's administrative capital and a historic hub for trade and smuggling routes. More recently, human trafficking has flourished there. With an estimated two hundred thousand inhabitants drawn from a range of tribes and ethnicities, Sebha is Fezzan's largest population center. Sebha's



Black smoke billows from buildings in Sebha, the largest city in southern Libya, on January 17, 2014, following several days of clashes between rival militias and ethnic groups. (Photo by Saddam Alrashd/Reuters)

post-Gadhafi trajectory has been turbulent and marked by episodes of communal violence. Specific neighborhoods are often associated with a particular tribe, ethnic group, or faction. In 2019, forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar—a mix of both local allies and armed groups deployed from eastern Libya—took control of Sebha as part of Haftar’s push into the south. Home to Fezzan’s only university (which also has satellite campuses in Ubari, Murzuq, Brak, and Ghat), Sebha has seen its infrastructure crumble in recent years. Its airport, key to keeping the region connected, was closed between 2014 and 2019 because of poor security, and its operations remain limited. Some of Fezzan’s most active CSOs are based in Sebha.

Further southwest is **Ubari**, which, like Sebha, is ethnically and tribally mixed, making both flash points for conflict. Ahali form a large part of Ubari’s population,

as do the Tuareg, with the Tebu a minority in the town. Ubari’s proximity to the El Sharara oil field and the Algerian-Nigerian border gives it strategic significance. The town has experienced protracted bouts of communal violence, the most serious of which began in 2014 as a low-level dispute between Tuareg and Tebu fuel smugglers. The conflict grew into a wider conflagration that resulted in the deaths of more than three hundred people and extensive infrastructural damage. Some 75 percent of Ubari’s population were displaced by internal conflict between 2014 and 2016, but most have now returned.⁷

Farther south lies **Murzuq**, where Ahali and Tebu constitute the majority of inhabitants. The growth of artisanal gold mining in areas along the border with Chad and Niger has proved a boon to the local economy. Khalifa Haftar’s push into Fezzan in early

2019 resulted in tensions between the Ahali and Tebu communities that tipped over into serious violence. That August, a series of air and drone strikes carried out by Haftar's forces (known as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, or LAAF) killed dozens of Tebu, sparking heavy urban fighting and mass displacement.⁸ An estimated 60 percent of the population, most of them Ahali, fled the town.

In the far southwestern corner, next to Algeria, **Ghat** not only is physically isolated, it also has become economically isolated following the post-2011 closure of the Algerian border. Libyan Tuareg make up the majority of its population. The town is a transit point for migrants and also a hub for traders and smugglers. Ghat's isolation was highlighted in 2019 when heavy flooding caused a humanitarian crisis and the displacement of more than a thousand residents.

North of Sebha, **Brak al-Shati** is the main town in the Wadi al-Shati district, with a population drawn largely from Arab tribes. Its location makes the town a strategically important crossroads and a link in the fuel smuggling chain, as it is considered the gateway to the south from Tripoli. It is home to a key air base currently controlled by the LAAF.

ECONOMY

The country's poorest region is also where some of its most important oil and gas fields are located. One quarter of Libya's total production of crude oil comes from Fezzan. El Sharara, Libya's largest oil field, is located near the town of Ubari and was discovered in the 1980s. It is operated by Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) in a joint venture with Spain's Repsol, France's Total, Austria's OMV, and Norway's Equinor. Under normal production, it pumps around three hundred thousand barrels per day. The El Feel (Elephant) field, which was discovered in the late 1990s, is about a hundred miles (160 kilometers) from Murzuq. Operated by the NOC and Italy's Eni, it produces around seventy thousand barrels per day.

This should make the energy sector key to Fezzan's recovery and development, but relations between the local population and the NOC and its international oil company partners are often testy because of local perceptions that the region has not benefited from oil revenues. Few local people are employed at the oil facilities in either technical or nontechnical positions, and, while Libyan law stipulates that oil firms are obliged to invest in communities and promote social development projects, efforts have been piecemeal.⁹

Since 2011, long-standing frustrations over the belief that Fezzan was not benefiting from its oil wealth have spilled over into demonstrations, blockades, and other attempts to seize energy infrastructure, including pipelines. Some of the protests, like those of the FAM since it formed in 2018, have drawn on a regional narrative, while others have been more localized and focus on the specific grievances and demands of communities living close to oil facilities. In addition, complaints that not enough youth from Fezzan are accepted for training at the Libyan Petroleum Institute, the NOC's technical arm, are common.

In 2015, an oil academy was established in the small town of Germa to train youth from Fezzan for employment in the energy sector, but locals complain it is overseen by the Ministry of Education, not the NOC. As a result, prospects for trainees are perceived as poorer than those for Petroleum Institute graduates, whose employment within the NOC is largely guaranteed. There have been protests over the Germa oil academy's lack of equipment and resources.

Both during the Gadhafi era and after, Fezzan has heard repeated promises of development projects that never materialized. Plans before 2011 included launching agricultural programs and modern irrigation projects to provide work for unemployed youth. In 2013, former prime minister Ali Zeidan, who is from northeast Fezzan, tried to address discontent in the region by drawing up proposals to establish both an oil refinery in Ubari and an

NOC subsidiary for exploration and production in Sebha. The Government of National Unity has promised to resume the refinery plan, and the subsidiary (named Zallaf) is operating but has yet to move to Sebha. Its main team is based in Tripoli. Plans to create wind and solar power systems in other parts of the region have not been realized. Tourism, long a source of income for locals, even though the foreign tourism sector was still in its infancy, collapsed after 2011. Security challenges mean tourists are unlikely to return any time soon, though local cultural events, including the annual Ghat festival, continue.¹⁰

Fezzan's youth joblessness rate is estimated as similar to the national rate, which is around a quarter of the labor force. The consequences of being without work go beyond limited spending power: the traditional markers of adulthood in Libya, including getting married and starting a family, are also delayed because of unemployment.

Fezzan's unique socioeconomic context means the financial crisis that has gripped Libya since 2014 has

had a different impact in the region. Smuggling, long a key element of southern Libya's informal economy, flourished in the post-Gadhafi period and is now deeply entrenched as the economic lifeblood of the region. The deterioration of Libya's overall economy, which has led to public sector job cuts and the reduction of subsidies, plus cash shortages, high inflation, and surging black market exchange rates, has encouraged illicit activity. "Our region lives on smuggling," said one student from Sebha, referring to the flow that passes through Fezzan. Southwestern Libya is a key smuggling and trafficking hub for networks stretching across the Sahel and Maghreb. Trafficking routes from neighboring Algeria and Niger converge there. Because the region is a major gateway to transnational trafficking routes, the flows here are highly lucrative, leading to intense, sometimes violent, competition over who controls or has access to them. As a result, smuggling and trafficking have become intertwined with tribal dynamics in the region, and localized conflicts are often underpinned by such rivalries.¹¹

BOX 1. THE FEZZAN ANGER MOVEMENT

In late 2018, young people drawn from communities across Fezzan, including Sebha, Ubari, Murzuq, Ghat, and Brak al-Shati, came together in what they called the Fezzan Anger Movement. Though predominantly Tuareg, the group managed to get support from other sections of the population. They began sit-in protests in front of the El Sharara oil field in Ubari at the beginning of October that year, calling on the two governments then existing in Libya—the internationally recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli and the so-called Interim Government in eastern Libya—to pay attention to the needs of Fezzan.

The protesters made several demands, including the provision of liquidity for local banks, better fuel and food supplies (Fezzan’s geographic isolation means it suffers from frequent shortages of subsidized fuel and foodstuffs), and the reopening of airports in the south. They called for unemployed youth to be given jobs in Fezzan’s energy sector and demanded that oil companies operating in the region contribute more to its developmental needs, as required by Libyan law. The protests started by FAM created momentum, which ultimately led to the shutdown of the El Sharara oil field—by the guards tasked with protecting it, not by the FAM activists themselves—for several weeks.

FAM was not the first movement of its kind in Fezzan, and the tactic of sit-ins had been used before by other movements. But FAM had a greater impact, likely because of the grassroots support it was able to garner across the region.

The episode also challenged certain stereotypes of youth in Fezzan. Many of the movement’s members and supporters were university educated. “Their capacity to mobilize people was striking,” recalled one foreign official. “They managed to appoint a representative in each of the major towns within a short time. They had the ability to articulate clearly the problems of the region and mobilize people because the entire south identified with their demands. It was impressive.”

Two months after the FAM protests started, the prime minister of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Fayez al-Sarraj, promised a major fund—Libyan media reported up to one billion dinars—for development projects in Fezzan, but locals complain that the region has seen little evidence of such investment since.

FAM has threatened to resume protests several times, accusing the government in Tripoli of failing to follow through on its pledges. The movement still exists today but has fractured as a result of disagreements over strategy, and some members have left. While the NOC has already started incorporating a greater focus on community engagement in its strategic planning, the FAM episode serves as a reminder that youth, if overlooked, could prove a force to be reckoned with.

The Main Challenges Facing Youth



The main findings of this study underscore the disappointment and frustrations of youth in Fezzan as they seek better economic and societal conditions, but the results also show significant levels of intra- and inter-generational trust as they turn to solutions. Insecurity, a lack of opportunity, and a perceived failure of the national government and the oil companies that dominate the region's economy to meet Fezzan's needs ranked high as issues of concern. Some respondents, however, felt that local authorities in Fezzan, including elected representatives and tribal figures, could also do more to address their grievances.

Lack of security was identified by a majority of respondents as a main concern, but the security situation is not easily parsed, insofar as it is fed by criminality, intertribal conflict, and cross-border trafficking. The collapse of conventional security forces in the region has resulted in a turn to tribal connections for protection. Other issues identified as high priority include degraded infrastructure, poor education, and economic impoverishment. Achieving the traditional markers of adulthood in Fezzan, particularly getting married and starting a family, is more difficult in such conditions.

To determine youth perceptions on these issues, a quantitative survey was conducted, along with qualitative research in the form of interviews.¹² It should be noted that age categorizations of "youth" vary. The World Bank, for example, usually construes youth as referring to male and female persons between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. For this report, youth refers to those aged eighteen to thirty. A sizable proportion of

Libyan youth have not completed their studies (females in particular) or married or left their parents' home by the age of twenty-five.

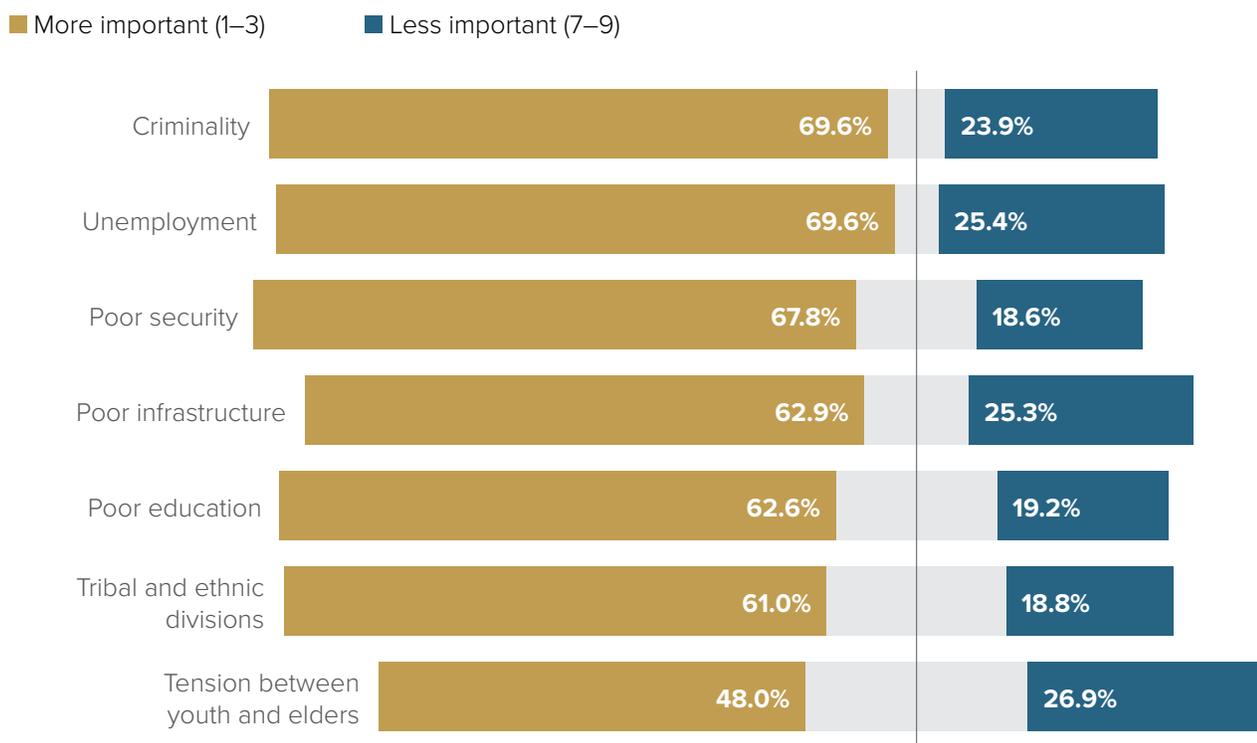
Interviews were conducted with elected representatives, local officials, elders, civil society activists, and youth leaders from southern Libya; officials from the National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank of Libya; personnel affiliated with the United Nations Support Mission in Libya; development practitioners; academics; and staff from international oil companies operating in the Fezzan region. Some interviews were conducted in Tripoli and Tunis, others by phone or electronically. Most interviews were conducted between November 2019 and April 2020.

SECURITY AND CRIMINALITY

In light of how much the security environment has deteriorated in Fezzan over the past decade, it is hardly surprising that lack of security and the attendant problem of criminality are considered the main challenges faced by youth in the region, according to survey results and other interviews.

The survey found poor security and criminality rated the top two challenges in southern Libya: nearly 60 percent of respondents said poor security was the most important factor (see figure 1 on page 11). Younger respondents, those aged eighteen to twenty-two, tended to be more concerned about criminal activity. The high level of concern for security would be expected to affect respondents' general worldview, feeding general distrust. Moreover, it may mean that a "security at all costs" mindset takes hold.

Figure 1. Main challenges facing youth in Southern Libya



Responses are based on a survey of 500 youth, male and female, aged 18 to 30, conducted in 35 mahallat across Sebha, Murzuq, Ubari, Wadi al-Shati and Ghat districts in February 2020. Respondents were asked to rank each factor on a nine-point Likert scale, with 1 being “most important” and 9 being “least important.” The above percentages aggregate the selections of 1–3 (“more important”) and 7–9 (“less important”).

Note: Neglect by the completing governments of Libya was also cited by a sizable percentage of respondents, though this result is not discussed specifically in this section.

In such a context, authoritarian approaches can often be attractive to the population. Some Libyans justify this preference by saying it is what they were used to under the Gadhafi regime. The post-Gadhafi dispensation in Fezzan allowed for militias, mostly tribal-based, to take action against perceived enemies, whether other militias or “criminal gangs.” A security force without a dominant tribal or ethnic affiliation coupled with a professional, community-oriented approach is largely unknown. More recently, LAAF forces incorporated smaller militias into their structure, a key purpose of which seems to have been to gain additional forces for their unsuccessful Tripoli offensive beginning in April 2019. This co-opting of local tribal militias allowed the LAAF to claim control of large areas of territory but often further exacerbated intercommunal tensions.

It is likely that youth who rank security as their top concern would also be prone to support military-style arrangements that prioritize short-term stability over long-term space for fundamental freedoms and a new approach to security forces’ relations with the communities they serve. This would have major implications for a future transition period in Libya, particularly with regard to security frameworks. If tackling insecurity is the highest priority, then civil liberties may well be sidelined in favor of heavy-handed solutions. However, in some areas with high levels of criminality and fighting between armed groups, what locals define as “civil liberties”—particularly in relation to what they are willing to trade for security—can be fluid.

Criminality is clearly an issue for young people in Fezzan and relates to poor security. It is a phenomenon

that people have to confront every day and dictates the choices they make about where to go, when to do so, and what precautions they have to take. As such, it has severely restricted movement and hampered educational and employment prospects, as well as opportunities for social interactions beyond the community, or sometimes in the immediate neighborhood.

The LAAF was able to enter Fezzan without much resistance partly owing to the promise of driving out the “criminal gangs” that terrorize the population and contribute significantly to the general sense of uncertainty. Faced with rising criminality and poor security, residents have fallen back on tribal protections, resulting in empowered tribal militias and ultimately a dense patchwork of competing groups.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment was cited as the third biggest challenge overall and accorded more importance by those aged eighteen to twenty-two years, with the highest level of concern recorded in Sebha and the lowest in Ghat. The Ghat result is notable because a 2015 World Bank study cited the Ghat region as having the third highest rate of unemployment in the country.¹³ Because Ghat is a major smuggling town, this result may be explained by the fact that livelihoods there are not as dependent on salaried employment.

Higher concerns about joblessness within the younger cohort in Fezzan more generally may reflect a more pronounced sense of uncertainty about the future among those who were not even in their teens when the 2011 uprising occurred.

POOR INFRASTRUCTURE

Poor infrastructure was cited as the fourth biggest challenge, with Sebha respondents in particular rating it as important. Fezzan has experienced extended periods of underinvestment, and there has been little development of state infrastructure in the region since 2011. This has been the focus of public protests in Fezzan in

recent years, even as residents have constructed informal service networks to access water or the electrical grid. Poor electricity infrastructure affects both water supplies and the provision of health care. In addition, the lack of roads and other transport links feeds a sense of local and regional isolation.

EDUCATION

Younger respondents tended to be more concerned about the challenge posed by poor education in the region—again, a possible indication that the younger cohorts are more anxious about their future in light of what they have witnessed over the past decade. In some parts of Fezzan, education has been severely disrupted at different points since 2011 by local conflict. Fighting in Ubari, for example, resulted in the temporary closure of schools and the destruction of educational facilities. Technical or vocational training centers have been closed or occupied by armed groups. Respondents in Sebha more often cited poor education as a concern than did respondents in other areas.

TRIBAL AND ETHNIC DIVISIONS

That tribal and ethnic divisions were considered by nearly 40 percent of respondents as the most important issue facing them is notable. This does not necessarily reflect a view or wish that tribal identities should be discarded, replaced, or subsumed into larger identity markers. But youth clearly see such divisions, predicated on identity politics or culture, as negative. As a result, there may be an appetite for groups and activities that bring people together.

Communities, government, and even some working in the CSO sector sometimes fail to see how organizations that do transcend such divides are an important pillar of a functioning state, in part because Gadhafi undermined them. But the success of the Libyan Scouts and the Red Crescent shows that there is a need for groups that help bridge divides and provide members with meaningful activity, as well as allowing them to make more substantial positive contributions to society.

IDENTITY AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

It is common to hear young people in Fezzan say that tribal and ethnic identities are more important to their generation than to older generations in Fezzan. This indicates just how deeply tribal and ethnic affiliations have informed dynamics in the region since 2011.

It is noteworthy that majorities of survey respondents across all population centers agreed that tribal and ethnic identity was more important for youth than for their elders, but also that younger respondents, those between eighteen to twenty-two, recorded higher levels of agreement than those between the ages of twenty-three and thirty. This indicates that the trend toward youth in Fezzan—and in other parts of Libya—increasingly identifying with their tribal or ethnic background since 2011 is more pronounced among those who were not yet in their teens when Gadhafi was overthrown. They have grown up in an environment where such identities have become more entrenched, and this informs their views.

When asked why they answered the way they did, some respondents were positive about the role of tribes, praising them for contributing to social cohesion, for example, while others clearly considered the reinforcement of tribal and ethnic identity a negative phenomenon. Several referred to it in the context of racism and said it had a negative impact on friendships and social relations more generally. A female nurse in Sebha described youth in the city as “very tribal racists.” One employed male from Wadi al-Shati said, “The disintegration of the social fabric after the events of February 17 [the 2011 uprising] forced the youth to rely on tribal support.” Others described it as a “vicious circle” whereby conflict had caused people to retreat more into tribal and ethnic identification but that the resulting tribalism consequently fueled further polarization and conflict. Narratives that have demonized the “other” help draw youth into conflicts involving their own tribe or ethnic group. Though internet access is limited in Fezzan, a number of interviewees noted that social media had fueled polarization by reinforcing

tribal and ethnic identity through hate speech.

Some complained that traditional authorities tended to prioritize the interests of their own tribes or families. With traditional authorities now taking on responsibilities related to providing services and security, this can create more social tensions. “Tribal and ethnic connections have definitely become more important for the youth,” said Mohammed, a student from Sebha, in an interview. “This is due to the instability and lack of security. In the south, state collapse and the lack of functioning police and army means you fall back on relying on your kin, tribe or ethnic group to protect you. This way of thinking often changes when youth from Fezzan individually move north and work in urban settlements on the coast.”

This was borne out by two interviewees in their twenties from Fezzan, one a graduate student, the other a medical professional, who met and became friends while living in Tripoli. “I trust Mohamed more than I trust my cousins,” said one. “When we are in Tripoli we feel a shared sense of being from Fezzan no matter what tribe or ethnic group we come from, but when people go back to Fezzan, many return to their tribal identity and allegiances. It’s a trap people need to break free from.” His friend, who is from a prominent Arab tribe, noted that he had worked with Tebu and others from a rival tribe: “We didn’t feel that sense of tribal division between us. Not everyone has a tribal mentality even if they come from a major tribe.”

Another interviewee, a Tebu man from Qatrun, a village in the Murzuq district, said youth in Fezzan needed to be encouraged to feel a sense of citizenship instead of reducing their identity to whatever tribe or ethnic group they belong to.

“I would like to see a day when people in Fezzan say ‘I am from Fezzan’ before they say what tribe or ethnic group they belong to,” said an interviewee from an Arab tribe in Sebha. “We need new

Interviews showed that while intergenerational dynamics are changing, elders retain significant influence. Three-fifths of survey respondents said they believed elders in their community paid enough attention to the challenges faced by youth.

projects—particularly sports and cultural initiatives—that bring youth together so people shift beyond those narrow identities.”

Intergenerational relations have been in the spotlight in Fezzan over the past decade, with signs that traditional age-based hierarchies have been loosening, particularly as young people gain leverage through joining armed groups. But the interviews showed that while intergenerational dynamics are changing, elders retain significant influence. Three-fifths of survey respondents said they believed elders in their community paid enough attention to the challenges faced by youth, with Murzuq respondents recording the highest level of approval, followed by those in Wadi al-Shati and Ubari. A number of interviewees from Ubari noted the mediation role played by tribal elders during the 2014 war in the town. More respondents by a narrow margin in Sebha said they believed elders did not pay enough attention.

Overall favorability toward the older generation dipped with age. When asked why they answered the way they did, the responses from those who believed elders give sufficient attention to youth tended to reflect a sense of deference toward the older generation, along with a belief that older people were wiser and had more life experience and knowledge. Others framed it as elders fulfilling their duty or responsibility to the community. Several said they believed elders had the best interests of youth at heart. One respondent mentioned the role of local merchants and business owners in providing employment for youth.

The responses from those who believed elders do not pay enough attention to the challenges faced by youth included some vociferous criticism by those who, while respectful of elder authority, felt elders are ill-equipped

to respond to contemporary difficulties experienced by the younger generation. “Their thinking is different, their time is different from ours,” said one male student from Sebha. Another noted, “There are different mentalities and a gap caused by a lack of understanding between older and younger.”

A Sebha teacher in his twenties maintained that the elders “do not have the ability to control young people.” Another teacher, a woman in Ubari, echoed this belief: “The elders, with their prejudices and tribalism, do not have a decisive authority or control over the youth.” A female teacher in Sebha was similarly critical. “They do not give the problems of young people priority or importance; they are just concerned with the external appearance, customs and traditions.” These responses show that while a majority of respondents believed that tribal and ethnic identities are more important to their generation than to the older generation—though they were divided over whether this was a positive or negative development—others, particularly those who bristled at tribalism, associated tribalism with elders and considered it regressive and insufficient to address contemporary problems.

A male student in Sebha was scathing: “They only care about themselves. It’s mostly the older generation who have been in government or hiring youth to participate in fighting.” Others, however, praised their role on tribal councils. A female student from Sebha said, “They do what they can under the difficult circumstances, and they solve problems in a significant way.” A male student from Sebha said they were able to mediate between youth: “They form reconciliation committees and peace groups between the warring youth and rival tribes.” Another respondent stressed the need for intergenerational cooperation “linking the ideas and proposals of both generations.”

One interviewee, a student from Sebha, argued that the concept of “youth” should be approached differently according to the particular context of Fezzan: “The family/tribal unit is stronger and more important in the south, and it is difficult for ‘youth’ to act without elder support.”

Another interviewee, a man in his late forties from Qatrun, noted the differences he had observed between his generation and the younger cohort: “I see changes in generational relations in the sense that the younger ones are not so disciplined. They don’t listen to the elders as much. This can be a positive and constructive, but it can also be negative.”

The research found that intergenerational divides are not as pronounced as may have been expected. In fact, some of the youth had very positive things to say about the role of elders. This could indicate that the older generation plays an influential role when it comes to youth, something that could be enhanced through additional support. Anecdotally, elders have attempted to influence or maintain control over youth, especially those who are armed. However, this has not always produced results, and it is clear that in some cases, particularly in Sebha during past outbreaks of tribal fighting, youth were not being directed by elders. Instead, armed youth often act on tribal and community interests according to their own autonomous power dynamic, unrelated to that of elders.

FEZZAN’S BRAIN DRAIN

The limited number of highly prized government jobs in Fezzan means youth graduating from high school and university seek other opportunities to make a living. Many decide to leave the region entirely, causing a brain drain that worries the older generation.

Youth migration for education or work, whether domestically to coastal cities such as Tripoli and Benghazi or overseas, has been a fact of life in Fezzan for generations. In recent years, a number of young people from

the region have joined the migrant flow to Europe. Others have moved to neighboring countries in search of opportunities.

Though no data exist on the number of youth leaving the south, either cyclically or permanently, the perception is that it has increased in recent years as prospects dim in the region’s cities and towns. “Some of our brightest and best young people leave. They go to the north, and our worry is that they won’t come back,” said one interviewee, an activist in his fifties from Sebha. “Everything precious in our region leaves: whether oil, water, or our youth,” observed an older government employee from Samnou, a town north of Sebha. “We’re losing our brain. There are few places for youth to work or get an education and entrepreneurs struggle because the market is too small.”

Almost 90 percent of survey respondents said they would leave Fezzan to pursue work, training, or educational opportunities elsewhere. Marginally more men than women said they were willing to leave. The highest number was in Sebha. The younger the respondents, the more likely they were to say they would leave.

The reasons respondents gave for wanting to move away ranged from the pragmatic to the poignant. Chronic insecurity, poor living conditions, and unemployment were cited, as were the lack of social, cultural, and educational opportunities and prospects for self-development. Several respondents spoke of wishing to learn new languages and engage with other cultures. “There are no ingredients for life here,” said one man from Ubari. “We feel our time is wasted in Sebha without the benefit of living,” said an unemployed woman from the city.

“I moved first to go to university in Tripoli, and I decided to stay after graduating,” said one interviewee, a twenty-two-year-old dentist from Sebha. “I couldn’t cope with the psychological challenges of being [in Sebha]. The feeling of being trapped

A significant number of youth in Fezzan have tried to create their own opportunities for legal employment through entrepreneurship. . . . Young entrepreneurs in Fezzan, however, have less access to liquidity, state-led entrepreneurship programs, and infrastructure, such as business incubators.

due to the difficulty of traveling in and out of Sebha, the power shortages, the problems with cash supplies, and the complete lack of facilities.”

A number of female respondents cited the lack of opportunities for women in what remains one of the most traditional regions of Libya. “It’s a very male-dominated society here,” said one woman in Wadi al-Shati. “Society here restricts women and does not support them in education, development, or work,” observed a female student from Sebha. Another respondent, a teacher in Wadi al-Shati, said she wanted to leave Fezzan because of the “lack of incentives for women and our marginalization.”

Many respondents who said they would leave added that it would be a temporary measure to gain education, skills, and experience that they could then use to benefit the

south and their own communities. A considerable number of youth living in Fezzan have received their university education in other parts of Libya. For example, the leader of Fezzan Anger Movement studied at Tripoli University.

Several of those who said they would not leave explained that it was because they wanted to help develop the region. A significant number of youth in Fezzan have tried to create their own opportunities for legal employment through entrepreneurship. A 2016 survey conducted for Expertise France found that the percentage of youth that had started a business in Sebha (39 percent) matched the national average, showing that entrepreneurship was not exclusive to large coastal cities such as Tripoli and Misrata.¹⁴ Young entrepreneurs in Fezzan, however, have less access to liquidity, state-led entrepreneurship programs, and infrastructure, such as business incubators.



Tuareg women gather to vote in a school that serves as a polling station in Ghat, Libya, on June 25, 2014. Ghat has become economically isolated since the closure of the Algerian border. (Photo by Ali Alhmdani Aghali/Reuters)

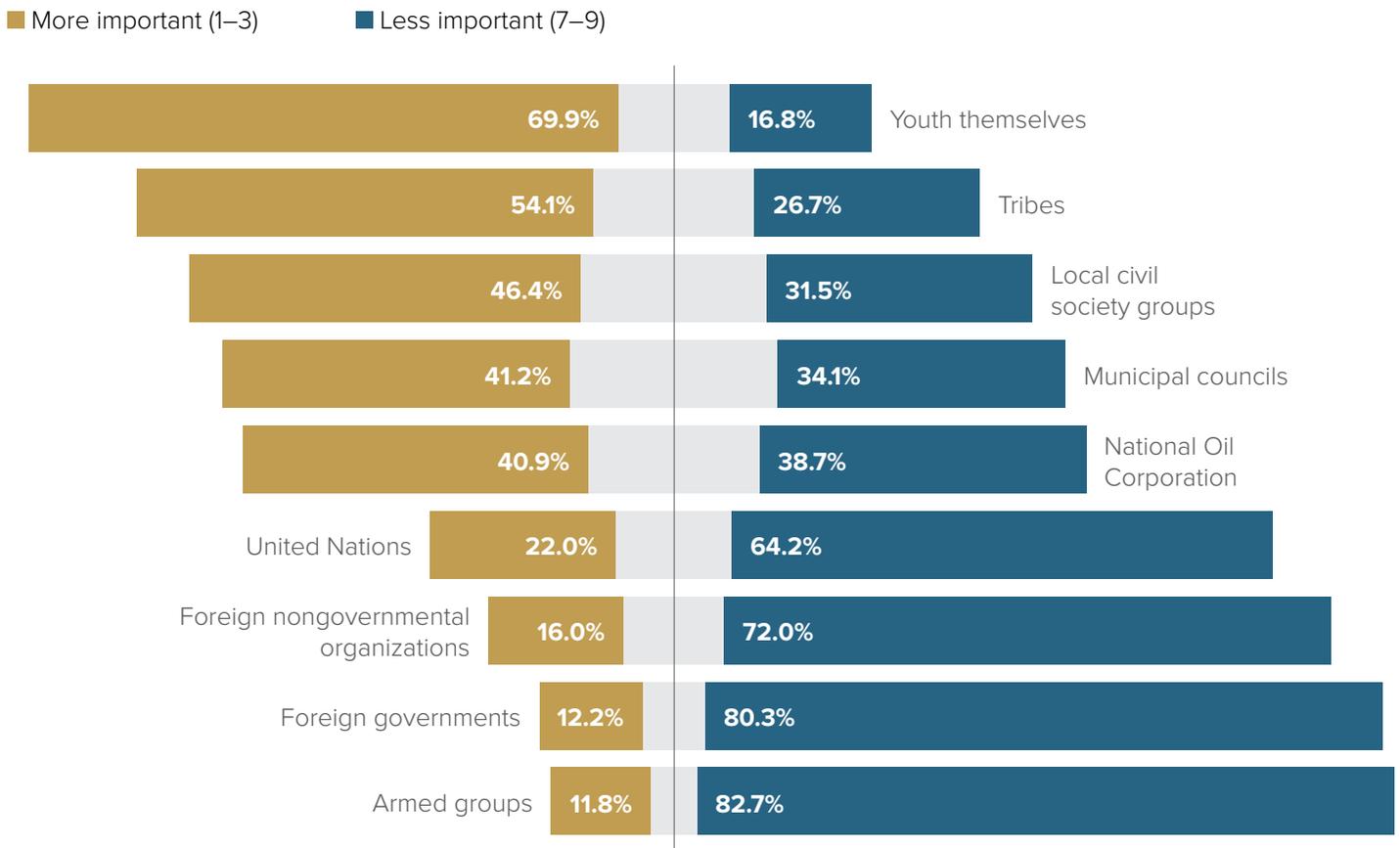
Who Do Fezzan's Youth Trust?

In a striking indication of respondents' perception of themselves and their peers, a majority of survey respondents said they trusted youth more than anyone else to improve the situation of young people in Fezzan (see figure 2 on page 18). Such a high response rate could indicate a sense of youth agency worth harnessing by other stakeholders to address developmental and conflict-related challenges. It could also indicate an identification with peers that transcends tribal and other divisions and thus could provide opportunity for cooperation in tackling common challenges. The younger the respondents, the more favorable was their view of youth. Respondents from Sebha polled the highest on trust in youth and Ghat the lowest. Insofar as Sebha respondents polled lower on trust in tribes than respondents in other population centers, this may indicate that youth there believe they are more capable of

solving local problems because they have been failed by tribal leaders too often.

With Fezzan's entrenched history of tribal dominance, it is not surprising to see respondents rank tribes higher than municipal councils or national authorities when it comes to trust in improving the situation of youth. Traditional authorities are sometimes perceived as exclusionary or self-interested, yet they remain key actors and have proved particularly effective in certain circumstances in Fezzan, including resolving disputes. Some have incorporated youth elements. In Ubari and Ghat, where there are significant Tuareg populations, the local tribal structure constitutes the main governance and security actor through Tuareg councils, including those linked to the Supreme Social Tuareg Council, a national entity. Affiliated Tuareg "youth councils"

Figure 2. Who is trusted to improve the situation of youth in Fezzan?



Responses are based on a survey of 500 youth, male and female, aged 18 to 30, conducted in 35 mahallat across Sebha, Murzuq, Ubari, Wadi al-Shati and Ghat districts in February 2020. Respondents were asked to rank each factor on a nine-point Likert scale, with 1 being “most trusted” and 9 being “least trusted.” The above percentages aggregate the selections of 1–3 (“more trusted”) and 7–9 (“less trusted”).

exist to convey the views of younger tribal members. Respondents in Murzuq, Wadi al-Shati, and Ubari gave tribes a high ranking, while those in Sebha gave them a lower ranking. Female respondents ranked tribes higher than male respondents did, and the younger the respondents, the more positive they were.

The NOC received a high ranking on trust from respondents, indicating not only an acknowledgment of the important role played by the energy sector in Fezzan but also the belief that the NOC as a Libyan entity—and local engagement with it—is key to the development of the region and to ameliorating the situation of youth in particular. This level of trust indicates opportunities may exist for the NOC to pursue broader

channels of communication and collaboration with youth outside current frameworks.

Attitudes toward municipal councils, considered by many international development agencies to be key to building stakeholdership at a local level, were mixed among respondents. There are fourteen municipalities in the Fezzan region. Each municipality has a municipal council of seven to nine members that is responsible for decision-making and a municipal administration tasked with implementation. Mayors and their deputies are elected by council members, while *mokhtars*, who act as interlocutors between the council and the community, are appointed by the mayor and the Ministry of Local Governance. Municipalities are responsible for service

delivery, but the highly centralized model that underpins Libya's local governance system—and the funding of it—means that councillors often lack the resources to respond swiftly to emergencies or invest in longer-term development projects. In Fezzan, municipal authorities have also become more interconnected with tribal dynamics, in some cases further empowering traditional authorities, which can affect perceptions. In some cases, such as in Murzuq, this has led to the fragmentation of municipal councils. The national political power struggle also prompted the formation of parallel municipal bodies, further undermining the credibility of local governance.

Local civil society groups polled higher than municipal councils on trust, with Sebha respondents inclined most favorably toward civil society, possibly reflecting the concentration of CSOs there, followed by Murzuq and then Ubari.

Female respondents ranked municipal councils—and the NOC and tribes—higher than male respondents did. This response may indicate greater confidence among young women in what are considered more solid “pillar” institutions, such as the NOC and local councils, or long-standing social structures like the tribes. As a result of Fezzan's social conservatism, opportunities for young women to become involved in the public sphere, including civil society, can be limited. This may explain the greater trust in more traditional or official entities, which tend to be male dominated.

Respondents in Ubari recorded the highest level of trust in armed groups, followed by respondents in

Murzuq. The interplay between armed groups and formal (municipal councils) and informal (tribes) authorities has become a feature of life across Fezzan, with linkages more pronounced in some areas than in others. In Sebha, respondents were least favorable toward armed groups, possibly because of the communal violence that has marked the town in recent years, though respondents in Ubari, which also experienced serious fighting during the same period, recorded the highest level of trust in armed groups.

Some Fezzan youth argue that while the region does suffer from neglect by the central authorities in Tripoli, the pervasive marginalization narrative can often be a convenient way to obscure the shortcomings of local residents who have been elected to national bodies or appointed government ministers since 2011. “We have our own representatives who get elected, go to Tripoli, and forget about the south,” said Mohamed from the Shati district, who is currently studying in Tripoli. “We have to admit our problems are also due to our own people letting us down: they are not representing us properly, they are not delivering for us.” Aged twenty-five, Mohamed is a member of a CSO in Shati and would like to run in municipal elections in future. He and others argued that people in Fezzan must examine their own attitudes and engage more in self-criticism instead of attributing the challenges they face solely to neglect by national authorities. “We have people in the south who are not persuaded they can change. There needs to be a change in mentality.”

How Youth View the Energy Sector



The smooth running of Fezzan’s oil sector, a crucial component of the Libyan economy, is dependent on maintaining good relations with communities living near oil fields and other sectoral infrastructure, and also with the wider population of the region. Many young people in Fezzan have a negative view of foreign oil companies operating there.

Almost 30 percent of survey respondents said they had a negative perception of foreign oil firms operating in the region, while only 13 percent said they viewed them positively. Negative attitudes were recorded from respondents across all population centers surveyed, not just those close to oil facilities, as in Ubari and Murzuq. Asked why they answered the way they did, several respondents pointed to the chronic lack of development in Fezzan as proof that their communities benefited little from the region’s energy sector. Several raised the issue of how oil revenues are distributed, insisting that the south was entitled to a greater share. A number noted that most of those employed at oil facilities in Fezzan were not from the region. Nonlocal employees include those in nontechnical work, such as catering, general maintenance, and other service-related jobs, which many argue could be subcontracted locally.

“These companies do nothing for those of us who live here, neither aid nor job creation,” argued one respondent. Another expressed concern about the environmental impact of the oil sector, adding that they wanted to see sustainable development for the region. Generally, those with negative views tended to believe oil companies care little about and invest little in local development, whether in the communities surrounding oil facilities or in Fezzan more widely.

The fact that a large majority of respondents held either ambivalent or negative views of foreign oil companies working in the region should be a matter of concern for such firms. It indicates that existing corporate social responsibility efforts have had little impact in terms of improving the perceptions of youth both within host communities and more generally across Fezzan.

Almost three quarters of respondents agreed that foreign oil companies should invest more in the communities surrounding their areas of operation. This view was particularly espoused by the younger cohort of respondents and was noticeable across all population centers surveyed, not just Ubari and Murzuq. Asked what foreign oil companies should invest in, respondents repeatedly listed critical infrastructure, particularly roads, airports, housing, schools, and hospitals; reliable power networks that would guarantee electricity and proper telecommunications across Fezzan; reviving and developing the region’s agricultural sector to ensure economic diversification; and youth training and job creation. The focus on large infrastructural works reflects a key grievance in the region but also demonstrates that many tend to conflate the role of the state with that of the oil companies—which do not consider such projects their responsibility—or expect oil companies to step in for a state that is often absent.

Several said oil firms should provide more direct employment opportunities for youth in the region. Some called for investment in the tourism sector. “Invest in breathing spaces for young people,” said one respondent, a business owner from Murzuq. Others echoed that opinion, citing the dearth of recreational facilities from playgrounds to entertainment centers and stadiums. One mentioned assistance for people with physical

Although the Fezzan Anger Movement may have less support today than at its height in late 2018, the ground appears to be fertile for copycat or new movements to emerge. For example, the “No to Discrimination: Libya for All” movement began in early 2020 in Ubari.

disabilities, an issue that has become a priority in Fezzan (and Libya more generally) since 2011, reflecting the mounting number of conflict-related injuries and amputations. Because of the generally poor state of the health care sector in Fezzan, there are limited facilities for amputees, and no rehabilitation center exists. Moreover, public infrastructure is old and decrepit and has not been refitted to adapt to new realities, including the growing number of amputees, many of them young men.

An overwhelming majority of respondents said they did not support the Fezzan Anger Movement, reflecting the perception that the group had lost some of the wider support it had gathered for its campaign after the El Sharara oil field shutdown. Nevertheless, nearly 20 percent of respondents said they supported the movement, which shows that its message and demands still resonate with a significant number of youth. The highest levels of support were in Sebha, followed by Murzuq and Wadi al-Shati.

This level of support is still significant and, if galvanized, would be more than enough to propel the movement forward. Although the Fezzan Anger Movement may have less support today than at its height in late 2018, the ground appears to be fertile for copycat or new movements to emerge. For example, the “No to Discrimination: Libya for All” movement began in early 2020 in Ubari. It stemmed from long-standing issues surrounding people with indeterminate legal status in Libya, many of whom are located in the south. The movement was led by Tuareg, who demanded civil rights. While the movement made its demands through peaceful means, there was no disavowal of violence in the future, and this may be the case with other such movements. In the summer of 2020, several movements emerged with demands for varying measures of regional autonomy, as did other movements opposed to the idea. If such

groups garner anywhere near the 20 percent rate of support that FAM has now, they could represent a potential new crisis for the fragile Libyan state and hamper any potential transition period.

An overwhelming majority of respondents said they opposed the tactic of sabotaging energy infrastructure to force authorities in Tripoli to pay attention to grievances in Fezzan. However, 18 percent said they supported the strategy, which has been employed on several occasions in the region since 2011. More women than men said they did not support such measures, and the highest opposition was among younger respondents, particularly in Sebha and Murzuq. Asked why they responded the way they did, those opposed repeatedly used the words “vandalism” and “destruction” to describe such tactics.

“Destruction creates nothing but destruction. It’s better to use reason to present your grievances,” said a female student from Sebha. “Sabotage does not lead to a solution,” said an unemployed man from Ubari. “It affects the country’s revenues and economy and hurts the ordinary citizen. Everyone suffers,” said another female student from Sebha. “I support a constructive approach, not vandalism,” said a female business owner from Sebha. “Sabotage is a loss for everyone,” said a male respondent from Wadi al-Shati. A female student from Ubari described energy infrastructure as “the property of the Libyan people,” which should not be hijacked. “There are other ways to make the voice of the south heard,” said a male respondent from Sebha. “To me this is ignorance, and it is not a way to build the state,” said a male student from Murzuq. “Why cut off your nose to spite your face?” said another male student from Sebha. Such responses reflect the fact that Fezzan generally suffers from severe fuel shortages, which means that its population directly experiences the impact of reduced oil revenue and state expenditure.



A worker checks pipes and valves at El Sharara, Libya's largest oil field, on December 3, 2014. (Photo by Ismail Zitouny/Reuters)

Respondents who did not oppose using sabotage insisted that there was no other way to voice the grievances of the south. “It’s the only means of pressure we have to achieve our demands,” said a female teacher in Sebha, a sentiment echoed by a female doctor in Ubari. “We have no other way to express our rights and make sure our voice is heard,” said a male student from Murzuq.

This disparity in support for nonviolent civic action is a cause for concern. While the majority of respondents were against violence, their reasoning was based on the idea that violent tactics are not effective and harm public interest. At the same time, some of these respondents noted that because they are economically marginalized, shutting down the oil fields would lead to “ruin.” If groups using violence and sabotage are in fact able to pressure decision-makers to accede to their demands, then it is conceivable that individuals

otherwise opposed to violence would be swayed to support them. Opportunities therefore exist for businesses and governmental actors to take proactive measures to address grievances and also contribute to stability in the region.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN FEZZAN

The survey results revealed that many youth in Fezzan feel that companies operating there do not give enough back to the region, particularly to the communities in areas surrounding energy infrastructure. A significant number of respondents viewed oil firms negatively and believed they care little about local development and investing in host communities. National Oil Corporation officials say this is an unfair perception. The NOC and its partners have made social development investments in some of these areas but often

are not credited with having done so (some oil majors prefer to keep their involvement low profile). One NOC official noted that his interaction with activists from the region had shown that their knowledge of existing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives was limited. Under Libyan law, CSR activities are incorporated into the contracts signed by international oil companies under their exploration or operation agreements with the NOC. Some development specialists argue that the CSR framework in Libya should be updated to reflect changing realities and include more extensive consultative processes with host communities. “The whole architecture of CSR in Libya needs to be rethought,” said one senior UN official.

Some oil majors with operations in Libya now include an increased focus on youth in their global CSR strategy, even if such a youth orientation has been little developed in the Libyan context. Total, one of the NOC’s partners in the El Sharara field, for example, lists “Youth Inclusion and Education” as one of four priority areas in its international CSR programming. Total says it wants to work with educational and social stakeholders, including schools and sports associations, to foster academic success and soft skills; promote access to general and vocational training, particularly in industrial disciplines; and support entrepreneurship through assistance for business creation and social innovation.

In recent years, the NOC has included a deeper community engagement component in its strategic planning. It has increased its cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and other international development agencies. The NOC’s sustainable development department coordinates projects related to health, education, water, and other infrastructure, in addition to environmental protection, skills training, and job creation. It has overseen a number of

projects in different parts of Fezzan, including the maintenance of schools, university departments, and sports clubs; the provision and maintenance of water pumps, wells, reservoirs, and sewage pumps; and the provision of medical equipment, generators, and educational materials. It also helped establish a capacity-building center, supported a women’s center, and provided scorpion bite antidote serums in the Ubari basin and an aid convoy to Ghat. In March 2019 the NOC, along with Repsol, OMV, Total, and Equinor, signed a \$20 million agreement to support sustainable development projects for residents living close to sites operated by NOC subsidiary Akakus, including in Ubari and Sebha, over the next two years. These included youth assistance programs in Ubari and an NOC-led training initiative for young entrepreneurs. The NOC has also supported cultural activities and engaged with the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. It has also worked with CSOs catering to people with special needs.

“The aspirations of the residents of areas near oil operations range from basic demands to high-ceiling demands,” said Mokhtar Abduldaem, head of the NOC’s sustainable development department, adding that requests are assessed to see how well they match overall strategy and budgeting. The NOC, he said, was committed to “a safe, clean and just environment which is also an encouraging environment for work, investment and growth in these areas.”

A key element in the NOC’s future engagement with Fezzan is Zallaf, the subsidiary established in 2013 to carry out exploration and production activities in the south. While Zallaf’s main headquarters team has not yet moved to Sebha as planned, the company has started some projects there. In late 2019, it launched a skilled labor program to train young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five from across Fezzan.

Youth Activism in Fezzan: Challenges and Opportunities



A signal finding of the survey was the striking number of youth in Fezzan who said they trusted their peers more than anyone else to improve the situation of young people in their region. The FAM represented one form of youth activism, but Fezzan's civil society space contains a small yet active cohort of youth who have attempted to counter the communal divisions and prejudices fueling ongoing violence. This provides an opportunity for peacebuilding.

CSOs in Libya are a phenomenon generally associated with the post-Gadhafi period. During the forty-two years of Gadhafi's rule, the only large and nationally active organizations permitted to operate were the Scouts, which have had a presence in Libya since the monarchy era, and the Libyan Red Crescent. After 2011, Libya witnessed major growth in CSOs as a result of the opening of the public space and increased international engagement and donor investment. By 2014, more than four thousand CSOs had been formed and registered with the Civil Society Commission (CSC), which was established in 2011. Many of these organizations—and other informal groups that have not registered with the CSC—have since become inactive for various reasons, including the impact of conflict and insecurity on civil society space and the fact that many activists have fled the country since 2014. According to both the Tripoli- and Benghazi-based CSCs, a total of 480 CSOs were registered in the south of Libya between 2011 and the end of 2018, fewer than 10 percent of the national total. Several of these now exist only on paper, and some consist of just one or two people.

The reality of Fezzan's demographics—a population of a half million spread across a vast expanse of desert—makes CSO organizing and activity more challenging than in the larger population centers on Libya's coastline. Few CSOs in the south have websites or email because internet access is so limited.

Despite these logistical challenges, young people occupy a significant part of Fezzan's civil society space. A number of youth have established organizations that push back against the positions of others—including groups in the civil society sphere—who hold more exclusionary and partisan viewpoints. Some have lobbied for greater youth engagement with local institutions, which are largely dominated by an older generation, often comprising tribal and other elites. In Brak al-Shati, a USIP-supported project resulted in the inclusion of a youth representative at municipal council meetings. That initiative was based on the premise that integrating youth in local community governance structures could decrease feelings of alienation, contribute to supporting an effective and inclusive decentralization process, and provide young people with some measure of agency. USIP shared the model with the UNDP to use in its work in Fezzan. In Sebha, the Sebha Youth Movement started to engage with its local municipal council in late 2018 to highlight poor service delivery in the city. They held a session of accountability for the municipal council and service institutions that resulted in improved communication among the council, service providers, and citizens. The engagement between Sebha Youth Movement and the municipal council continues and has been viewed as a model for other communities in the region.

As in other parts of Libya, the civil society sphere in Fezzan is often hobbled by infighting and lack of cooperation between different organizations, which makes international donors wary of feeding rivalries and divisions. Only a small number of Fezzan’s formal NGOs have been in operation for several years.

While internet penetration remains limited in Fezzan, several young people with access have connected with peers in the region and other parts of Libya, increasing their awareness of opportunities and ideas outside more traditional environments. Some have sought to challenge perceptions of Fezzan and its people. “For too long, there have been stereotypes against the south such as not being educated or unable to speak English, being violent, unqualified, not having the tools and so on,” said one youth activist and NGO president, Bushra Alhodiri, in another context. “This is racial discrimination and obviously false, but lack of direct communication with the south, this has led to these stereotypes being projected to the government and the international community. This only emphasizes the need for direct communication and work with the youth in the south.”¹⁵

Some interviewees also maintained that the particular nature of Fezzan society, with its heavy overlay of tribal and ethnic dynamics, means formal NGOs have to navigate a different space there and have less freedom to develop. As in other parts of Libya, the civil society sphere in Fezzan is often hobbled by infighting and lack of cooperation between different organizations, which makes international donors wary of feeding rivalries and divisions. Only a small number of Fezzan’s formal NGOs have been in operation for several years and enjoy high levels of donor engagement in the form of training, assistance with strategic planning, and financial support. Other civil society elements in Fezzan include trade unions, business councils, professional associations, and faith-based groups, along with more

traditional or ad hoc initiatives led by local elders or notables. Some are platforms for specific issues or ethnic groups: there are several specific Tuareg CSOs, for example, that highlight issues such as citizenship rights.

Only 12 percent of survey respondents said they were a member of a CSO—a number roughly balanced between males and females. When asked which CSO they belonged to, survey respondents mentioned the Scouts more often than any other entity. Respondents in Sebha, Murzuq, and Ghat, including several women, said they were members of the Scouts. As in other parts of Libya, the Scouts have long been respected in Fezzan for their neutrality and inclusivity, as well as for their record of community service. They have worked on initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue and peaceful coexistence and promoting civic engagement. They have also participated in humanitarian efforts during emergencies.

Other CSOs respondents said they belonged to included regional branches of the Libyan Red Crescent, various humanitarian organizations, and smaller local youth groups and cultural initiatives. One interviewee, a member of a Fezzan-specific NGO, expressed concern that not only had Libya’s civil society space more generally shrunk, but perspectives had also narrowed, reflecting broader social dynamics: “Civil society has become less national and less regional; instead it’s become more based on city or town, tribe, ethnic group or inner circle.” In a region like Fezzan, where tribal and ethnic divisions have often flared into violent conflict and civil society generally remains less developed than in other parts of Libya, this is a concerning trend.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Though youth from different parts of Fezzan have different experiences in many ways, all face challenges related to poor economic opportunities and share the perception that their voices are not heard and their concerns are not met. Many exhibit a willingness to work toward finding solutions with local and national entities, and some, like those who joined the Fezzan Anger Movement, have already taken action.

Addressing Fezzan's needs requires the collaboration of a wider range of stakeholders to produce comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Government institutions, including the National Oil Corporation, international development organizations, and the private sector should make a concerted effort to bring youth on board. A priority should be finding alternatives for those who feel so marginalized that they join an armed group or sabotage critical energy infrastructure to highlight their grievances.

Fezzan is critical to the future stability of Libya and the wider region, given its wealth of natural resources, the patchwork of armed groups operating there, and its straddling of several migration routes across the Maghreb as well as from the Sahel and into sub-Saharan Africa. Addressing its multiple, interconnected developmental challenges is a long-term undertaking that needs to be an inclusive, cross-generational effort. Engaging with and investing in Fezzan's overlooked youth should be a key part of building a more stable and prosperous Libya. Recommendations for the Libyan government, international partners, and local leaders follow.

The Libyan government should respond to the people of Fezzan and engage fully with their concerns. The Libyan government and its partners should capitalize on the lack of societal support for hijacking

energy infrastructure and should heed the grievances expressed and respond accordingly. They cannot count on continued general opposition to sabotage and must take proactive steps such as meaningfully engaging the people of Fezzan—including youth and women—in political dialogue, take into consideration their recommendations on how to best utilize oil revenues to buttress local development, and provide opportunities for youth training in new or revived industries, such as tourism.

International partners can help by creating a dialogue framework based on youth engagement. International partners should consider creating a dialogue framework that would bring together youth, both male and female, from Fezzan with representatives from the NOC and international oil companies to discuss the needs of the region in general and their communities in particular. This dialogue would encourage a more consultative and transparent approach to community engagement, leading to more informed and effective CSR programming, and also help assure youth that their voices are being heard. It could initially take the form of a Fezzan youth forum convened by a third party and attended by the NOC and its partners. The forum could then be followed by the establishment of a follow-up advisory body or youth committee to maintain channels of communication between youth in Fezzan and relevant interlocutors in Tripoli, particularly at the NOC. Opening an NOC-supported work hub for the advisory body in Sebha would provide a space for youth to discuss ideas and initiatives and help get local buy-in.

National and local leaders should provide ways for youth to interact in addressing common challenges. Together with international partners, national and local decision-makers should provide more opportunities

for youth to interact and cooperate with peers from different tribes and ethnic groups in tackling common challenges. Doing so in a way that avoids displacing tribal identity will prevent youth from doubling down on such identities to the detriment of others. One option is to support initiatives that encourage a sense of positive tribal identity in a nonexclusionary way and to support CSOs that promote inclusion and coexistence.

Positive intergenerational relations should be encouraged, with a focus on sustainable interventions.

Fezzan youth tend to generally have positive views of relationships between generations, so fostering those by demonstrating youth's positive contributions across tribal lines is also recommended. Adopting a conflict-sensitive approach is vital to account for local political, social, and cultural conditions, particularly in contexts where elders may have rigid ideas about generational hierarchies that diminish the role of youth.

Training elders to help make their mediation interventions, particularly when it comes to youth-driven violence, more systematic and sustainable will also benefit intergenerational relations and contribute to social cohesion.

Local partners remain key to ensuring youth are heard, including youth who have migrated. The security and logistical difficulties of operating in Fezzan will continue to be an impediment, but local partners, with strengthened capacities, remain key. Developing links with youth-focused CSOs in Sebha and other towns should help widen the range of interlocutors beyond what traditional authorities may propose. Ensuring a diversity of perspectives from various tribes and ethnic groups is important, but so is balancing grassroots youth voices from Fezzan with those of youth who have moved (to Tripoli or overseas) yet retain close links with their home communities.

Notes



1. A significant number of people in Libya are not officially recognized as citizens, and therefore cannot access documentation. They are referred to as “persons of undetermined legal status.” In Fezzan, these include Tuareg, Tebu, and also some Arabs. See Mercy Corps, “Lost in Civil Registration: Libyans with Undetermined Legal Status,” April 2019.
2. No precise data on youth demographics in the Fezzan region are available, but several elected representatives and local leaders estimate they constitute a majority of the population.
3. Valerie Stocker, “Citizenship on Hold in Libya: Undetermined Legal Status and Implications for Libya’s Peace Process,” European Institute of Peace, July 2019, www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Citizenship-on-hold-EIP-policy-paper-July-2019.pdf.
4. Nate Wilson and Elie Abouaoun, “Libya’s New Interim Government Is Facing an Arduous Task,” July 28, 2021, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/7/28/unspeken-challenges-could-derail-libyas-elections.
5. The interviewee, a graduate student from a village close to Sebha, remarked that the Ubari and Murzuq regions “are grossly underdeveloped because they are too far from important power centers for politicians . . . to care about.”
6. It should be noted that, while the introduction of Law No. 59 on local governance in 2012 allowed for administrative districts, including municipal councils, governorates have not yet been established and boundaries are not comprehensively defined. The towns of Sebha, Murzuq, Ubari, and Ghat are surrounded by extensive wider hinterlands or districts that are referred to by the same names as the towns themselves. Brak al-Shati is the main town in the Wadi al-Shati district.
7. City Profile of Ubari, UN Habitat, October 2018, www.unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-04/city_profile_of_ubari.pdf.
8. Sometimes referred to as the Libyan National Army, or LNA, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces is the official name given to this force by its commander, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.
9. Libya’s key petroleum legislation is the Petroleum Law No. 25, which entered into force in 1955, the same year the first Libyan concessions were awarded. In the decades since, the Petroleum Law has been amended by various regulations, negotiations, and new versions of model contracts. In 1973, the Libyan government introduced Exploration and Production Sharing Agreements (EPSAs). EPSAs are subject to the principles set out in the Petroleum Law. Under an EPSA, the Libyan government, through the National Oil Corporation, retains exclusive ownership of oil fields, while signatory oil companies are considered contractors. EPSAs contain an article stipulating corporate social responsibility as a contractual obligation. The corporate social responsibility component was introduced under the EPSA IV round in 2007 and remains in place today.
10. Despite some restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the twenty-sixth iteration of the Ghat festival kicked off on December 29, 2020.
11. See Fiona Mangan, “Illicit Drug Trafficking and Use in Libya: Highs and Lows,” Peaceworks no. 141, United States Institute of Peace, May 2020, www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/illicit-drug-trafficking-and-use-libya-highs-and-lows.
12. The quantitative component of the research consisted of a survey of five hundred youth aged eighteen to thirty, conducted in thirty-five wards, or mahallat, in five districts (Sebha, Murzuq, Ubari, Wadi al-Shati, and Ghat) in February 2020. The small sample size means a degree of caution should be applied when generalizing findings to the entire region. However, a wide cross section of youth from five different population centers in Fezzan was sampled, enough to acquire a more detailed understanding of the region’s youth landscape and trends. It is also worth noting that the data reflect a specific point in time in an environment that is still fluid.
13. Hebatalla Elgazzar et al., *Labor Market Dynamics in Libya: Reintegration for Recovery* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2015), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/967931468189558835/labor-market-dynamics-in-libya-reintegration-for-recovery>.
14. Altai Consulting, “Youth Motivations to Employment and Entrepreneurship,” October 2016, 58, www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Expertise-France_YME_Final-Report.pdf.
15. Bushra Alhodiri, “Peacebuilding: Thoughts and Initiatives of the Youth in Sebha,” Fezzan Libya Media Group, January 16, 2020, www.fezzanlibya.com/media/2020/01/16/peacebuilding-thoughts-and-initiatives-of-the-youth-in-sebha.

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Fezzan is home to Libya's biggest oil field, making it key to the country's hydrocarbon-dependent economy. Yet Fezzan remains the poorest region in Libya, with its youth bearing the brunt of chronic developmental challenges. The Fezzan Anger Movement, whose protests led to the shutdown of the El Sharara oil field in December 2018, drew attention to the plight of youth and their perceptions of marginalization by the Libyan government and the National Oil Corporation, the chief employer in the region. A survey of youth perceptions in this ethnically diverse region reveals the main obstacles youth perceive to economic and societal development while underscoring characteristics, such as inter- and intra-generational trust, that the government and its partners could leverage to achieve a peaceful development path in Fezzan.

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