COAR
Center for Operational Analysis and Research

# Repping Masculinity: Gendering Libyan War Propaganda

June 2021

Cover image: Libyan children play checkpoints on a small road on the outskirts of Labraq, Libya. December 2014

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## Executive Summary

This paper analyses how masculinist gender discourse in Libya is militarised through its use in propaganda and how this influences military enlistment and mobilisation. We find gender-based propaganda campaigns during the Tripoli War of 2019-2020 took forms that targeted multiple aspects of masculinity in order to win popular support. Language seeking to emasculate and sexually humiliate men in opposing camps was especially popular, and its identification by this research unearthed several recurrent themes in the way that gender is harnessed in conflict in Libya.

First, much of the propaganda emphasised the high social and moral standing of 'militiamen' in Libyan society. This language telegraphed that militancy was a means of becoming a man in the eyes of their communities, thereby encouraging men to seek status through violence (active or otherwise). Second, gender was used to juxtapose men that fought in defence of their communities and those who did not. Whereas the former were presented as having mobilised more widely because they were 'manly', the latter were presented as weak, effete, and femine pacifists. Third, reliance on outside actors was cast by propagandists in subservient terms. Foreign powers were identified as dominant power-holders and their Libyan allies and supporters as receptive 'female' partners required to provide for the former's care. Finally, in almost all of the gendered propaganda assessed, themes of sexual abuse targeting both men and women were distressingly common.

Given the prevalence of this highly charged discourse, response actors and other stakeholders should reconsider the role gender plays in conflict, particularly how the presentation of masculinity can drive individual and collective wartime mobilisation. Gender must not be considered as merely an amplifier of conflict effects in both programme implementation and policy-making; it is also a discrete field of contestation capable of deepening ethnic, geographic, political, and other social schisms. Relatedly, gender sensitisation efforts in Libya should not only seek to challenge the attitudes that affect the prospects and conflict-related vulnerabilities of women, but also the expectations placed on men which increase their susceptibility to recruitment, mobilisation, and participation in violence.

## Key findings:


Misratan IDPs arriving in Benghazi by boat in 2011. In essence, this social media post claims that 'non-men' were fleeing the front but that the brave men of eastern Libya would take the very same boat to Misrata and liberate it from Gaddafi.[1]

- Propaganda concerned with demoralising opponents draws largely from popular culture but influencers were found to adopt a range of themes. Where language relating to gender was used, it was found in formats targeting armed men on all sides, disengaged civilians, and socio-geographical places of origin. Libyans interviewed in support of this research described this type of propaganda as 'hate speech'.
- Militancy is widely regarded and presented as a fast-track to adulthood. Demobilisation programming must go beyond livelihoods and education, further recognising the idolisation associated with militant masculinity in Libyan society. New coming-of-age rituals should be supported for young men and undertaken in tandem with activities that promote alternative masculinities.
- Widespread association of militancy with 'masculine' values like bravery and chivalry is embedded in the minds of prospective recruits. Programmers should seek opportunities to link qualities such as leadership and responsibility to more prosocial behaviours.
- Studies of military recruitment patterns should account for several gender-related dimensions including anxiety regarding the performance of masculine norms and fears of emasculation and

1 Translation: "Arrival of Misratan IDPs who escaped to Barqa [eastern Libya]. Most of those who escaped are men, and note that the boat returned with men from Barqa to defend Misrata."

miscegenation. Importantly, these factors are not only tied to concerns about social standing, but also political representation and economic survival. Indeed, they have fed into cycles of grievance and opposition that have characterised post-Gaddafi Libya.

- Gender programming should engage more young men and boys in order to challenge the persistent gender biases they inherit. The often patriarchal and narrow themes inherent in these biases naturally inhibit women's exploitation of the public sphere, but also increase men's susceptibility to recruitment, incitement, and violence.

## Introduction

The killing of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was one of the most striking scenes of Libya's Civil War. Bruised and bloodied by a NATO airstrike, rebels intercepted Gaddafi on a desert road outside his hometown in late-2011. Amid the joy and chaos, one rebel fighter is pictured sodomising Gaddafi with a wooden stick moments before his execution.[2] Among the many final humiliations inflicted on the former dictator, the act has resonated throughout Libya and its ensuing conflicts, serving as a reminder of how symbols of masculinity have aligned with honour and shame in times of war.[3]

War weariness and a political stalemate have done little to prevent the violence that still rallies young men to enlist in Libya's militias. Economic, social, and political grievances bring new generations to the front, driving countless battles and a cyclical climate of confrontation. For the young men themselves, war is regarded as a fast track to manhood. Typically 18 to 35 years old, new recruits are susceptible to the notion that participation and/or support for violence represents an entrance to a domain of masculine ideals. Compelled to defend, provide for, and act on behalf of their families and communities, these young men are seldom forced to enlist. Rather, they are frequently drawn to fight by the undefined and often unspoken peer and social pressures.

This report explores these themes with a view to informing thinking on community violence reduction programming in Libya. It first touches on how masculinity has been weaponised in the post-Gaddafi period in order to understand military enlistment dynamics and how propaganda discourse both draws on and deepens existing gender biases. The report then considers these issues in a review of selected social media pertaining to the events of the last major Libyan conflict, the so-called Tripoli War of 2019-2020 between the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA). We draw attention to the manipulation of Libyan masculinities to fuel further violence and military enlistment, and endeavour to highlight a new angle from which to consider and address the drivers of conflict in the country.[4]

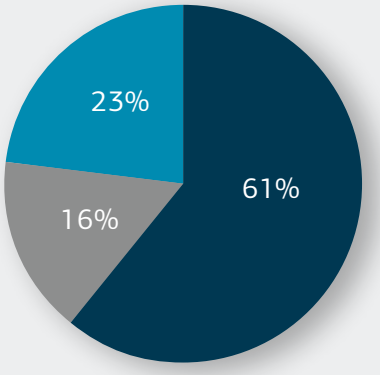
2 Tracey Shelton, "Gaddafi sodomized: Video shows abuse frame by frame (GRAPHIC)", the World, Global Post/Conflict, 24 October 2011: https://www.pri.org/stories/2011-10-24/gaddafi-sodomized-video-shows-abuse-frame-frame-graphic

3 David G. Gilmore, (1987), *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, American Anthropological Association, Edition Unstated.

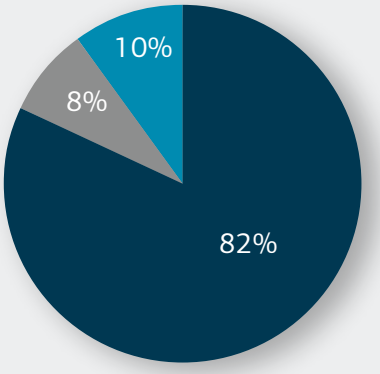
4 Relatively few studies have considered masculinity in the collective imagination and public discourse in Libya. Notable contributions to this topic were made by the photojournalist Tim Hetherington in 2011. His photos and documentaries captured representations of masculinity in Libya. Hetherington died covering the revolution in Misrata in April 2011.

## Box 1: Gender discourse in selected wartime propaganda, April 2019 - June 2020

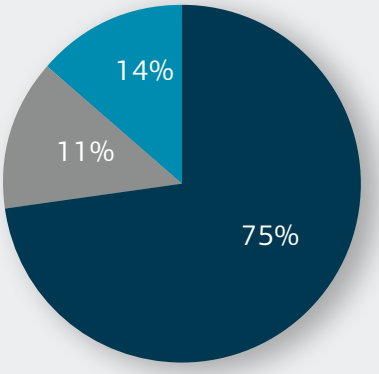
Was the post a gender related communications by the GNA?



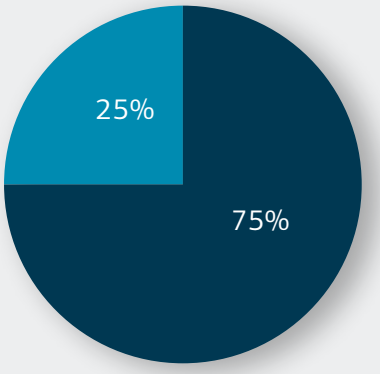

Was the post a gender related communications by the LNA?



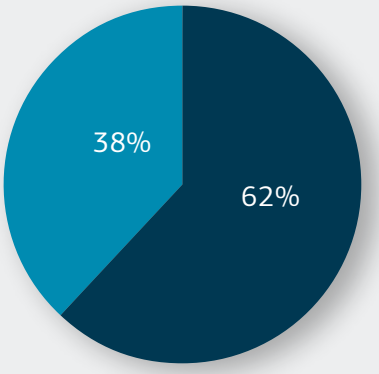

Was the post a gender related communications by the warring parties combined?




Was the post a gender communications which aimed to support recruitment and empower soldiers?




Was the post a gender communications which aimed to attack and humiliate the opponent?




Yes
No
Unclear

*Results in %*

*Source: COAR Global (Libya)*

The above graphic illustrates COAR analysis on the frequency of gender-related social media posts by three variously aligned social media influencers and propagandists. Facepager software was used to collect and identify Facebook posts making reference to gender published by the LNA's War Media Division, and the GNA-linked Naji al-Haj and Abdelmaled al-Madani between April 2019 to December 2019.

Of the 845 social media posts analysed, we found that 11% mentioned gender in some way. Around twice as many GNA-linked posts made reference to gender when compared with those from LNA-linked outlets (15.6% and 8.5% respectively). Of these posts, 38.8% were insults directed at the enemy, while 24.5% were written as paeans to the strength and valour of allies.

## Gender in Libya: Militiamen and Social Status

War in Libya has shifted neither fundamental understandings of gender nor notions of idealised masculinity in Libyan society. Dominant gender norms pre-date the 2011 Civil War and, to a great extent, have only been reinforced by recent conflicts. With few exceptions, a woman's standing in Libyan society is widely considered as lower than that held by a man, and often lower than that of her peers in the West and elsewhere. The word 'traditional' is often used to describe this status in the Arab world, a term which binds women to the domestic realm and establishes their assumed passivity or subservience. The role of women in Arab societies has of course varied over time across contexts, yet such nuances are seldom captured under the weight of contemporary discourses which inform a range of socialised gender-based divisions that affect both men and women in Libyan society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the domain of labour: whereas men are expected to play a role in the public sphere, women are confined to more domestic tasks. As such, war has always been considered men's business in Libya.[5]

The association of male militancy with power, wealth, and invincibility is established early in the life of a young Libyan. Libyan children often roleplay notorious strongmen in their games with one another, providing a telling example of how they are fascinated by the stature of militiamen from a young age. Militiamen command a young man's fear and/or respect. For some, they are perceived as heroes and idols, sometimes revolutionaries. For young men that have yet to establish themselves in a society where gender roles are so neatly defined, such qualities are highly attractive. Their embodiment and demonstration to the outside world by means of armed group membership is an aspirational and potent expression of strength. In many respects, it is the attainment of the masculine ideal practiced by many Libyan males in their formative years.

Naturally, the developmental trajectories of militiamen are reinforced and enshrined by language. Libyan Arabic slang incorporates a range of emasculating and derogatory terminology that, above all else, is used to challenge a male's claims to manhood. *Zuwamel*,[6] is an everyday insult in Libya, but can be delivered in such a way it becomes one of the most humiliating, embarrassing and anger-inducing labels for a Libyan male. Unsurprisingly, its use is often a trigger for interpersonal conflict and highlights the importance attached to an idea of masculinity which upholds dominance and is roundly dismissive of submission and weakness.

Norms of this kind provide fertile ground for the systematic manipulation of manhood and societal expectation in service of military enlistment and armed violence. They also play into the socioeconomic factors which are also regarded to at least partially drive many young Libyan men to join armed groups. Absent alternative employment, military enlistment represents the most accessible means to acquire the salary and status necessary to ensure that a man is able to provide for his family. Indeed, military service is perhaps the only professional sector in Libya which has not experienced a recession. With a home and a stable income generally considered as preconditions for men seeking a wife and family, military enlistment is affirmed as an important route to the attainment of male aspirations and social expectation.

## Masculinity in Wartime Propaganda: The Tripoli War

The Tripoli War (2019-2020) provides extensive evidence for the ways in which Libyan gender norms have been harnessed by propagandists to encourage allies and demoralise enemies. Bravery, manhood, and masculinity have been pervasive themes in material concerned with military recruitment, morale, and fighter retention. Conversely, weakness, submission, femininity and the absence of traits associated with mainstream Libyan masculinity have been widely used to undermine the opposition, to humiliate pacifists, and to reinforce pre-existing gender tropes. Though both parties to the conflict deployed gender-based propaganda to win popular support, emasculate the enemy, and sexually humiliate their rivals, some differences were observed. To a great extent, these differences arose from the manner in which the propaganda machines of the two belligerents were structured and fed into populist opinion within their respective areas of influence.

5 These notions of masculinity and femininity in Libya are entrenched in society to various degrees and correspond to earlier conceptions and divisions which play out in social status, spheres, practices, behaviours, and assumed duties. It is in this sense a societal characteristic that goes beyond wartime, as it applies in the absence of war as well.

6 Translation: 'Men who have been sodomised by other men'.

As has been common to Libya since 2011, belligerents have sought to recruit along often localised sociopolitical lines. Tribe, family, city, neighbourhood and ideology have each been invoked as identities requiring solidarity and have served as persuasive calls to arms in a context where protection of these communities and characteristics is portrayed as a marker of manhood.[7] It is likely that these very localised expressions of identity have caused the abandonment of more unifying military narratives in favour of personal attacks, smear campaigns, and no holds barred attempts to undermine adversaries' fighting spirit.

COAR social media analysis found that LNA rhetoric tended to be less brazen than the GNA western coalition. GNA forces were steadily qualified as a bunch of teenagers *(Farkh)* by the LNA, implying the idea of childishness, irresponsibility, and a lack of maturity. It also hinted that if the men of the GNA were not so immature, they would not have opposed the regular officers of the LNA. This narrative sometimes went so far as to provide some moral latitude to opposition militiamen: *'... they are not fully responsible [...] they had once to take up arms to defend their neighborhoods and are now being trapped [...]* we can offer them a safe way out'.[8] This paternalist discourse portrayed the LNA in a merciful light to all sides, suggesting it would be forgiving towards their misguided opposition if only they would lay down their arms. In truth, this was purely a psychological tactic aimed to shore up the LNA's military weaknesses.

The LNA's channels of communication were rather more controlled and centralised than the disparate coalition of voices operating under the GNA. Whereas the LNA-aligned social media reviewed here linked to official propaganda channels and listed posting instructions,[9] GNA propaganda was broadly informal and undertaken by the fighter base and supporter networks, most notably through the Burkan al-Ghadhab Media Centre and GNA-sponsored citizen journalists. In a reflection of its professionalist self-image, the LNA was eager to demonstrate its discipline in the media space, forbidding aligned media from filming or quoting its forces in an effort to channel interest towards official propaganda outlets.

Photoshopped image depicting the LNA spokesman as a traditional belly dancer.

The GNA's approach arguably paid dividends on Libyan satellite television. Reportedly at the whim of Qatar, notorious GNA cheerleader and television presenter, Noman Ben Othaman, assumed a leading role in GNA public relations. In frequent five-hour long diatribes, Ben Othaman transformed LNA General Khalifa Haftar into a scapegoat. He regularly deployed ad hominem insults against Haftar's masculinity, effectively popularising the moniker *al-Bghal al-A'am* (General Faggot) and a number of others (the Rebel, General Zero, Hajala Rokn). Haftar's age and alleged infirmness were also the target of Ben Othaman's derision, with western-based armed groups coming to refer to Haftar as the Old Man of Rajma.[10] Most of Ben Othaman's attacks focused on Haftar's masculinity however, including unfounded claims that Haftar had been raped by Chadian forces during the Libya-Chad border war of the 1980s, and outright and repeated insistence that Haftar was a feeble character with feminine qualities and behaviour. Both examples recalled the incident preceding Gaddafi's death, with the symbolic (or in this case, rhetorical) sodomisation of a rival faction's leader intended to humiliate his masculinity and honour with sexualised insults.

> *"A terrorist is more honorable than you, because he's not a pimp. Take it from Noman, a former terrorist, you pimp. I'm speaking to you, you dog, you non-man.[11]"*

7 Libyan Grand Mufti, Sadek al-Gheryani praised the 'heros who rallied as one man' to protect the honor and decency of their homeland and families: https://www.facebook.com/IFTALibya/posts/2336684703048276

8 Khalifa Haftar's discourse first in September 2018, reiterated in 2019.

9 For example, posters were instructed not to divulge military positions.

10 Al-Rajma, near Benghazi, is the seat of the LNA General Commander Khalifa Haftar and the centre of his power.

11 Noaman Ben Othaman, on Libya al-Ahrar TV during the conflict with the LNA.

Ben Othaman also consistently praised the heroism of GNA fighters to raise their morale, often by providing examples of martyrs who had left behind widows and orphans for the cause. Implicit in the telling of these stories were notions of blame attached to men that had yet to engage in the war effort and the implication that these individuals were not real 'men'. Such tactics are indicative of those used by propagandists on all sides throughout the Tripoli War. The emasculation and defamation of opposition figures was common, whilst supporters of politically and militarily aligned groups were portrayed in terms evoking symbols of male power, strength, and bravery. This much is obvious from the names and slogans associated with militia and military infrastructure. Whether the 'Lions of Tajoura', the 'Janzour Knights' or LNA training centres described as *Masna'a al-Rijal* (The Man Factory), such symbolism has been expressly concerned with epitomising the battle-hardened ferocity of allies and the duty, righteousness, and, crucially, the *masculinity* embodied by military service.

## Battle of the Brioche

In the early stages of the Tripoli war, the scale of threat posed to the GNA by the LNA was poorly understood. Rates of mobilisation in the west were therefore low, and anti-LNA figures were compelled to stress the existential challenge presented by an LNA takeover of western Libya. Leaders quickly set about emphasising the duty of all free people to defend Tripoli and the outcomes of the 2011 revolution, drawing on long-standing east—west rivalry and portraying General Haftar's claim to power as Gaddafi-esque in form and intent. With the backbone of the LNA composed of eastern-based fighters, the notion that the citizens of Tripoli must not 'return to chains',[12] was both a powerful and accessible narrative for western military recruitment. According to western propagandists in the GNA, a successful LNA assault on Tripoli would result in eastern rule over the country's west and reduced western self-determination. The men of Tripoli were therefore addressed directly, with GNA officials speaking to their sense of honour and masculinity in order to mobilise a defence of home and family.

Systemic attacks on pacifists, especially men, arguably contributed to the rate of enlistment throughout the conflict. In the context of the homeland narrative perpetuated by the GNA and its supporters, these attacks equated pacifism with fear. They signalled that an unwillingness to fight on behalf of the west was an impossible ideological position given the threat faced by the region and highlighted pacifists as lacking the bravery of their military peers. Neutrality and impartiality were often a target of insult and defamation, and individuals who voiced such opinions were roundly dubbed as traitors that were less 'manly' than those serving on the front.

Despite the direct appeals of GNA leaders and the various pressures imposed upon them, fatality monitoring indicates that just 20% of the GNA's casualties in the city were from Tripoli.[13] GNA propagandists were clearly aware of the limited local enlistment suggested by this figure, blaming locals for their inactivity and suggesting they should be the first ones to hold the front against the invaders. 'Tripolitans are sipping coffees' became a popular refrain to admonish the lack of local engagement in the war effort and looked to cast locals as indifferent to the LNA attack. Such language was nothing new. Numerous Libyan clichés describe young men from the capital as tender, conciliatory, and unsuited for war. Indeed, the term 'brioche' has long been used to describe these attributed characteristics, and has been applied with regularity in order to differentiate Libya's more urbane westerners from their peers in the rugged rural hinterlands to the east.[14]

> *"Allah Allah... The days when we were sitting in cafes, while the 'tree's' [great/brave men] were in the line of fire defending Tripoli! May God have mercy on you, O Ahmed, the great among the martyrs my brother.[15]"*

Unable to penetrate Tripoli to its satisfaction, the GNA glorified recruits from other cities. Misrata, 200km east of the capital, witnessed mass mobilisation to an extent which massively strengthened the GNA. Indeed, over 45% of GNA fighters killed during the Tripoli War were from the city, most of whom

12 Husain Mustafa, 'We are not returning to the chains', 'The General faggot of Cyrenaica [eastern] province', 27 April 2020: https://www.facebook.com/100002987165085/videos/2684551884987691/?sfnsn=wa

13 Unpublished data belonging to COAR Global.

14 COAR interview.

15 A western pro GNA-activist going as far as to suggest he himself hadn't done enough while a friend died on the frontlines, while reminding all who aren't on the frontlines of their duty. Source: Social media post on 2 May 2020.

were likely compelled to defend the capital in order to prevent an assault on their own communities.[16] This mass mobilisation was heralded by pro-GNA propagandists as proof of Misratan men's vitality and was in turn used to shame Tripolitan men's relative lack of participation in the war effort. Naturally, with a certain concentration of GNA support, Misratans became something of a frontline in the propaganda war and were perhaps the main targets of LNA propagandists and influencers.

## 'Who's the Woman in this Relationship?'

With foreign involvement in the Tripoli War, a collection of warmongering narratives and cheap psychological propaganda was used to discredit opponents and underline the bravery of allies. On one hand, foreign involvement provided propagandists with considerable material to appeal to their own particular strands of Libyan nationhood and to illustrate the corruption of their opposition by a foreign invader. On the other, it allowed for the incorporation of sexual, often homophobic, stereotypes which portrayed foreign support as a metaphor for the submission and passivity of the enemy.

When Turkey intervened on behalf of the GNA, the LNA adopted an increasingly nationalistic tone, frequently recalling the Ottoman occupation of Libya and emphasising the duty of Libyan Arabs to prevent foreign trespass. Anti-Turkish rhetoric was common, but LNA-friendly social media also resorted to sexual themes to compel military enlistment, regularly depicting Syrian mercenaries fighting on behalf of the Turks as rapists and predators. LNA propagandists stressed that GNA troops were not 'man enough' to protect their women from such alleged assaults, thereby appealing to a range of masculine traits they sought to identify with the 'typical' eastern Arab male. Justice, honour, righteousness, and a sense of duty proved particularly powerful devices for encouraging the enlistment of eastern men, as many ultimately responded to the call to go Tripoli, over 1,000km away, to 'save' Libya from the ravages of what LNA discourse frequently portrayed as barbaric, alien, and colonialist invaders.

Image of a Misratan pouring the tea of Syrian and Turkish fighters.

The kind of language used to compel support for the LNA in the east was also inverted to shame men into action nationwide. For instance, LNA propaganda, smear, and disinformation campaigns targeted the pride of western Libyan men, taking aim at those it deemed were failing to protect civilians. Terms like *'Turkish warmers'* were used to suggest that GNA fighters existed only to warm the beds of Turkish soldiers. For its part, the GNA described the LNA in similar terms, referring to the LNA's subservience to Russian and Sudanese mercenaries in an effort to emasculate LNA fighters and discourage communal support.

> *"May Allah damn you, you animals, you emta' [sexual property] of the Sudanese mercenaries.[17]"*

Gender-based occupational stereotypes were also found across social media and television broadcasts relating to foreign involvement in the war. Derogatory in intent, these stereotypes were designed to insult the opposition and their masculinity. 'Onion peelers' was a term used often by both parties — especially the LNA — to suggest that men photographed preparing meals for their foreign comrades on the front were little more than cooks. Playing off the idea that such domestic labour was the preserve of women, material of this kind was expressly concerned with the portrayal of 'real' men as those holding the weapons standing in direct confrontation with their enemies. Libyan men at the rear were instead presented

16 According to COAR analysis.

17 Noaman Ben Othman on Libya al-Ahrar TV channel during the conflict with the LNA.

as the foreign fighter's inferior, an idea often extended to imply the sexual submission of the inferior and/or his inability to prevent the mercenary from 'taking' his wife and family. Playing into clichéd homophobic discourse, photoshoppers created satirical cartoon pornography showing Misratan men 'bending over' for Syrian mercenaries.

At times, wartime propaganda combined racial slurs with homophobic ideas. *Farakh Hamar* (red brat) was used mainly by eastern and southern Libyans to describe the fair-skinned men of the west, a number of whom have Turkish lineage. The term intends to depict westerners as soft and tender, suggesting that their fairness is indicative of femininity, is sexually appealing to their male peers, and that they might therefore serve as sexual objects to be dominated by their tougher and darker-skinned compatriots. Terms like *gahwi'ein* (the browns) are used in reference to skin that has suffered the hardships of labour and sun, suggesting that such exposure is only accomplished by and through masculinity, and that fairness is a marker of femininity and weakness.

> *"The dirtiest of God's creation, the whores of civilization, and the whores of Libya, these dirty dogs of the Qarmatians tribes.*[18, 19]*"*

With the Tripoli War now over, acts of memorialisation have continued to emphasise the heroism and machismo of those who sacrificed their lives. Each year, the two sides commemorate their victories and wartime hardships, often through statements and military displays that appear rather more concerned with outdoing erstwhile enemies than remembrance. In the latest of these events, an LNA fighter pilot died after crashing his plane during a stunt display.[20] That pilot, like many other fighters before him and likely many others after, is now amongst the stories told to the next generation. Bounded by the narratives touched upon in this report, his legacy will be used to sustain the logic that might defend belligerent interests in future. It may also be adopted to ignite anger, play on masculine insecurity, and incite feelings of injustice which enable belligerents to condemn those not 'man enough' to stand for what their lions, knights, and, most importantly, men had died for.

**18** Qarmatian were a syncretic branch of Sevener Ismaili Shia Islam. The term is a derogatory way of describing eastern tribes, in response to eastern tribes attacks on the Ottoman origins of some western tribes.

**19** Noaman Ben Othman on Libya al-Ahrar TV channel during the conflict with the LNA.

**20** LNA's War Media Division, 29 May 2021: https://www.facebook.com/1172000652978620/posts/1827698424075503/