

## Exit from Authoritarianism

While Middle Easterners have been depicted as recent arrivals to the West, the United States and Britain have served as notable receiving countries for these populations for well over a century (Cainkar 2013). Factors pulling emigrants to these countries have included educational and employment opportunities, labor recruitment, and colonial ties between the United Kingdom and southern Yemen. The first major wave of emigrants – consisting primarily of Christians from greater Syria and sailors from British-held parts of Yemen – began in the 1880s. While some of these immigrants experienced newfound peace and prosperity in their host-societies, they were also subjected to ghettoization, nativist violence, and discrimination. Their arrival to port cities such as New York and South Shields in England continued until restrictive immigration quotas and travel bans were imposed in the aftermath of World War I (Bozorgmehr et al. 1996; Gualtieri 2020; Hooglund 1987; Jacobs 2015). By virtually banning migration from Asian countries and the former Ottoman Empire, migration slowed to a trickle.<sup>1</sup>

The United States and Britain provided similar “contexts of reception” for emigrants from the region for much of this period. Although persons from the Middle East and North Africa have been classified in the US Census as “white” – and one had to be white in order to naturalize in the United States from the Naturalization Act of 1790 until 1952 – their whiteness has been marginal and probationary at best across the western world (Maghbouleh 2017).

<sup>1</sup> As migration expert Sarah Gualtieri (2020: 146) writes, the first wave of emigrants from greater Syria to the United States began in the 1800s and continued until the US Immigration Act of 1924; the second wave occurred during the interwar period but was hampered by quotas and restrictions; and the third was marked by major wars in the region, especially over the state of Israel and the subsequent Palestinian refugee crisis.

As a matter of practice, Middle Easterners have been treated as racially and culturally inferior – as “yellow” Asians, morally and politically suspect Turks, or as members of the “brown” race – throughout their history (Cainkar 2018; Jamal and Naber 2008; Naber 2014). Because the ability to naturalize was tied to being white, Syrian Christians in the United States fought for this recognition, eventually gaining permission to naturalize and vote in the 1910s. After extensive battles in the courts, Yemenis were not granted permission to do the same until the 1940s. In 1965, governments in the United States and Britain struck down overly restrictive migration policies and readjusted country-specific quotas. In combination with push factors – political instability, stifling economic immobility, and state-sponsored scholarships – Libyans joined their counterparts from Yemen and a recently independent Syrian nation during this period in search of opportunities abroad.

As is the case for any diaspora, the political voice and visibility of these national groups was indelibly shaped by geopolitical circumstances. After the 1967 Arab–Israeli war and amid the tumult of global protests in the 1960s, members of these communities joined labor movements and pan-Arab associations to contest Zionism, imperialism, and discrimination (Shain 1996). Likewise, they also became subjected to heightened degrees of surveillance and persecution as potential Palestinian insurgents and communists for decades afterward (Pennock 2017). Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Arab and Muslim immigrants were further subjected to mandatory special registration, mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, wiretapping, and visits by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Cainkar 2009; Howell and Shryock 2003; Naber 2006; Staeheli and Nagel 2008). Taken together, these populations’ transnational ties have been used to indict them as enemies of the state and as potential terrorists (Nagel 2002).

In light of these historical circumstances, this chapter investigates how emigrants and refugees from Libya, Syria, and Yemen mobilized for change in their home-countries from the United States and Britain before the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. After providing the requisite contextual background, I focus in depth on their anti-regime mobilizations during the periods of authoritarian rule that became the impetus for the 2011 uprisings. For Libyans, this began in 1969 after Muammar al-Gaddafi overthrew Libya’s King Idris. In Syria, Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, with his son Bashar appointed through manipulated elections after Hafez’s death in 2000. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh came to power in 1978, first in North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic, YAR) before becoming president of the modern-day Republic of Yemen that joined north and south (formerly the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, PDRY).

As this chapter illustrates, repression and economic hardship in their home-countries had forced many regime opponents into exile from authoritarian rule. The dislocation of varied oppositionists, from political elites to grassroots

revolutionaries, civil society actors, and student activists, gave rise to new anti-regime networks abroad. Members of these diaspora networks and groups would play an important role in auxiliary activism for the Arab Spring in 2011 and beyond. I also find that Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni immigrants in the United States and Britain established groups dedicated to the empowerment and socialization of the diaspora community itself. According to respondents who had been involved directly in the founding and operations of these associations, such groups were intended to be strictly apolitical, focusing instead on meeting the professional, economic, and social needs of the national immigrant community. However, as I elaborate later in Chapter 3, the conversion of these organizations – what social movement scholars call “indigenous organizations” (McAdam 1999[1982]) – into politicized “mobilizing structures” (McAdam et al. 1996) enabled them to channel significant resources to Arab Spring allies in 2011 and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter also sets up the puzzles that I address in Chapter 3. First, in spite of their relative opportunities for voice, the political initiatives of anti-regime diaspora members from Libya and Syria remained relatively small, informal, or underground. The data demonstrate that attempts to broaden the scope and publicity of their claims to mobilize the wider anti-regime community in the open were largely unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Yemenis had several groups dedicated to political change, but these groups called for the autonomy or secession of southern Yemen from the north, rather than for regime change of the central government. Second, although emigrant communities often work collectively to support development and charity in their places of origin through fundraising and hometown associations (Moya 2005), *no* Libyan or Syrian groups were dedicated to development or aid in the home-country. Only in the Yemeni case did a few organizations undertake some charitable efforts; these were, however, exceedingly small and not the primary purpose of the associations that spearheaded these campaigns. Taken together, organizations dedicated to home-country development or charity were noticeably *lacking* in all three national communities prior to the Arab Spring. Chapter 2 explains these missing mobilizations as the result of transnational deterrents that have been largely overlooked in studies of transnational movements and diasporas to date.

<sup>2</sup> McAdam et al. (2001: 45) argue that “Mobilizing structures can be preexisting or created in the course of contention but in any case need to be appropriated as vehicles of struggle.” While I do not disagree, I contend that there is an important significance to the *conversion* of preexisting organizations to political causes; these organizations bring their own set of constituencies and resources to a movement and lend it legitimacy. Furthermore, creating new structures also takes significant resources, which can place an undue burden on activists. See Chapter 6 of this book on resource conversion for details.

## 2.1 LIBYA: FROM COLONY TO NATION

The modern nation-state of Libya is situated in the Maghreb of northern Africa between Tunisia and Egypt, along the Mediterranean Sea. It is comprised of three regions: Tripolitania in the northwest, which encompasses the capital city of Tripoli; Fezzan in the southwest; and Cyrenaica in the east, which includes Libya's second-largest city of Benghazi. Captured by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century, Libya remained part of the Turkish empire until it was taken by the Italians in 1912. Between the World War I and World War II, Libyans resisted colonial rule via insurgency led by Omar al-Mukhtar of Cyrenaica. The Italians responded without mercy to popular demands by the indigenous communities, including the Amazigh, for their rights.<sup>3</sup> By imprisoning and starving the population in concentration camps, their efforts to keep control ended up imprisoning more than 110,000 civilians and murdering forty to seventy thousand (Ahmida 2006; St. John 2017).

After the Allied powers captured Libya from the Italian fascist regime in 1942 during World War II, Britain and France split the country and governed different regions. Libya's King Idris returned from exile in Egypt, and the United Nations declared the country independent by 1951. The constitution, drawn up under the auspices of a black, red, and green flag, was modeled on the West and instituted a respectively liberal state guaranteeing many civil rights. Idris was a weak king, however, and perceived by many as a stooge for Western powers, which profited greatly from economic trade and the use of its coastal ground as a base for American military forces. At this time, Libya's population was only about three million people, despite residing in the fourth-largest nation in Africa.

On September 1, 1969, a cabal of military men calling themselves the Free Officers Movement overthrew King Idris in a bloodless coup d'état. They were led by a twenty-seven-year-old captain named Muammar al-Gaddafi. Sporting a starched beige uniform and a gold-threaded officer's cap, Gaddafi was virtually unknown at the time, but it would not take long for his name to become synonymous with Libya itself. After expelling Western powers, the political elite, and banning the Latin script, Gaddafi was hailed by many outsiders as an anti-imperialist hero. Over the course of his forty-two-year rule, however, the Libyan people became the subjects of a brutal political experiment requiring total acquiescence. The regime constructed numerous internal security forces dedicated to coup-proofing the regime. As in other totalitarian societies of the twentieth century, a huge percentage of the population was incorporated into

<sup>3</sup> Libyan tribes include Arab, Tuareg, and Tabu, the latter of which dominate the southern Fezzan region. The Tabu were historically "a clan-based society of camel herders, speaking a language of Nilo-Saharan origin," while the Tuareg are originally pastoral nomads whose populations span "the Sahara and the Sahel in southern Libya and parts of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger" who speak "a dialect of Amazigh (or Berber) known as Tamasheq" (Wehrey 2017).

the state's security apparatus and conscripted into the military. Under the guise of erecting a socialist republic for the masses, Gaddafi created Revolutionary Committees<sup>4</sup> to enforce loyalty and root out dissenters. Anyone suspected of doubting their leader was branded a traitor and convicted without a trial. Ordinary Libyans, students, communists, and Islamists did not take this treatment lying down, and protested vehemently through marches, petitions, and strikes. The Revolutionary Committees reacted with a vengeance, beating, imprisoning, and hanging organizers in grotesque public executions. Early resistance suffered further as students and activists were conscripted and forced to die in a pointless war with neighboring Chad between 1978 and 1987.

In 1973, Gaddafi dissolved all preexisting laws, placing the nation under a brand of Islamic *shariah* law, and eliminated the private sector. In 1975, he published the first of his three-part *Green Book* outlining his vision of social revolution, which children were forced to study in schools. In 1977, he dubbed Libya the *Jamahiriyya*, and claimed to serve as Libya's figurehead under popular rule, led by the General People's Committees. Claiming that Libya's Amazigh and Tuareg ethnic populations (sometimes referred to as Berbers) were a colonial invention, he instituted an Arabization program that outlawed their distinct identities and cultural symbols.<sup>5</sup> And despite his brash talk against Western powers and capitalism, Gaddafi was deeply reliant on foreign weaponry, trade, and technologies to enforce totalitarian power (Bassiouni 2013; Wright 2012: 206). In turn, the Gaddafi family amassed extraordinary wealth and absolute power for itself.

## 2.2 EXITING GADDAFI'S JAMAHIRIYYA

By expelling foreign powers, nationalizing industry, and routing out government officials who had served King Idris, Gaddafi created a wave of exiles and emigration of businessmen, doctors, and technocrats in the 1970s. At the same time, the regime also needed to equip and train its own nationals to run the oil sector. For this, the regime sent people abroad, particularly to the United States

<sup>4</sup> Due to his concerns about coup-proofing his regime, Gaddafi's bloated military apparatus was generally underequipped and undermined by the deliberate rotations in leadership; meanwhile, the best equipped forces, such as the Military Intelligence, the 32nd Brigade (*katiba*) led by Gaddafi's son Khamis, the Revolutionary Guard (*al-Hiras al-Thawri*), and the Jamahiriyya Security Organization (*Hayat Amn al-Jamahiriyya*), were dedicated to rooting out domestic dissent and protecting the Gaddafi family (Bassiouni 2013: 133–42).

<sup>5</sup> The Tuareg and Tabu have been subjected to neglect, coercion, and cooptation by Gaddafi, as well as the suppression of their culture, for decades. As Wehrey (2017) writes, the regime imposed the "systematic marginalization of two major non-Arab communities in the south, the Tabu and the Tuareg, to whom the Libyan dictator promised full citizenship rights in return for service in his security forces, particularly in the case of the Tuareg. These promises never materialized. . . ." In 1994 he revoked the Tabu people's citizenship, denying them basic access to employment and healthcare, and the Tuareg were routinely conscripted by Gaddafi for use in his security forces.

and Britain, on student scholarships. The English city of Manchester, due in part to its clustering of prestigious universities and the process of chain migration, became home to the largest concentration of Libyans outside Libya.<sup>6</sup> By 2011, national statistics reported 15,046 Libyan nationals residing in Britain, with two-thirds of them living in Manchester (El-Abani et al. 2020). Libyans also came abroad to the United States as refugees and students after 1965. Students were expected to return in order to bring their skills back to the homeland, though many remained abroad to escape repression and conscription into the Libyan military.

In the face of such extreme brutality, survivors had little choice but to go underground or flee the country. In 1981, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), founded by an ambassador-turned-defector named Dr. Mohamed Yusuf al-Magariaf, plotted from Sudan to overthrow Gaddafi by force.<sup>7</sup> After the NFSL's CIA-backed assault on Gaddafi's compound was exposed by informants in 1984, key leaders were captured and executed, and the group never recovered. Survivors fled into neighboring states, traveling with their families from one country to the next using forged passports. Due in large part to Western governments' growing animus toward Gaddafi and his links with international terrorist attacks, some NFSL fighters and their families were granted asylum in Britain and the United States.

As Libyan dissidents escaped Gaddafi's dystopia, their aspirations for a freer Libya traveled with them. By the 1970s, approximately one hundred thousand Libyans had left their homeland, and those who gained asylum in the United States and Britain used this opportunity to continue their activism and to recruit new members. Ahmed, who grew up in exile with other NFSL families in Lexington, Kentucky, recalled,

My father came to the United States on a scholarship from the Libyan government to study engineering. He became politically active, was opposed to some of the activities of the regime, and was pretty vocal about it. Eventually that led to participation and involvement with the National Front for the Salvation of Libya – the *Jebha*, as we affectionately call it. That became a major part of the community that grew up in exile. Many of our social functions [and] formative experiences were really brought about by this network of individuals who made the principled decision to stand up against the regime and were paying the consequences for those decisions abroad.

Others formed smaller groups congruent to the NFSL, such as Mahmud, an activist-turned-businessman. “Some of the students who had been harassed – I was one of them – had to leave to go to UK,” he explained.

<sup>6</sup> See Othman (2011) for more information about Libyan education in the Manchester community before the 2011 revolution.

<sup>7</sup> Sudanese president Gaafar Nimeiry, irked by Gaddafi's adventurism in Africa, provided refuge to NFSL insurgents until he was overthrown in 1985.

Others like myself kept gathering together outside, and we had a political movement. I was a joint member of the National Democratic Party, which was active for a long time since 1970. [It was] a mixture of Libyan intellectuals, students, and civil societists. We gathered to collect information and talk about human rights issues. We had a newspaper called the Voice of Libya, *Sawt Libya*, as a privately funded organization. Our members were across London, Egypt, and Switzerland.

As opposition to Gaddafi took an increasingly Islamist turn in the 1980s, dissidents in the diaspora mobilized in the spirit of a religiously oriented vision of liberation. According to Pargeter (2008: 87), Libyan students who were attracted to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood movement originating in Egypt “formed their own *Ikhwani* [Brotherhood] groups in the United States and the United Kingdom and, in 1979, began referring to themselves as the Libyan Islamic Group, *Jama’a Islamiyya Libiya*.” Others sharpened their fighting skills in the internationalist brigades of anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan. According to Middle East expert Alison Pargeter (2008), between eight hundred and one thousand Libyans joined the international struggle, with about three hundred returning to launch the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group against Gaddafi.

Another dissident named Dr. Mohamed Abdul Malek joined the European Muslim Brotherhood after his emigration to Manchester. He founded an initiative called Libya Watch, a one-man organization dedicated to raising awareness about imprisoned Brotherhood members in Libya. Dr. Abdul Malek explained,

As part of Libya Watch, we would support asylum seekers from Libya. I remember there was one incident in which we showed this [British] judge the public hanging of individuals in Libya in Ramadan. You know what he said? “This is a fabricated tape. This cannot be true.” It was very difficult for Westerners to appreciate what was going on because it simply does not happen here. But it was real. It was *very* much real.

Political activism before the Arab Spring also focused on one of the regime’s most egregious crimes. During the region-wide crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, Libyan Brothers and other dissidents were imprisoned in the regime’s hellish Abu Salim prison. After prisoners organized a strike in 1996 against increasingly inhumane conditions, approximately twelve hundred inmates – many of them gravely crippled by disease and torture – were gunned down en masse. Information in Libya was so tightly controlled that the victims’ families and the outside world remained unaware of the massacre for years. In the early 2000s, the regime began to send notices to the families that their loved ones had died. Grieving relatives and lawyers in Benghazi started calling on the regime to acknowledge the Abu Salim Massacre. To support their demands, dissidents in Britain organized demonstrations. “The anniversary of the Abu Salim prison massacre was a day that we would not miss,” Dr. Abdul Malek of Libya Watch attested. Nagi, a former British emigrant who I interviewed in Tripoli, recalled,

The Abu Salim prison massacre demonstrations [happened] in Manchester and in London, but mainly Manchester, in support of their demands. We did a lot of activities, displaying posters and things, trying to raise the awareness of these issues.

Along with these efforts, a small group called the Libyan Human Rights Commission was founded in the United States in 1995 by émigré activists, with at least one member being formerly affiliated with the NFSL, to criticize the regime over its abysmal human rights record. In 2002, a small but significant number of websites emerged to publicize information about the country and to post the writings of Libyans, usually under pseudonyms. Ashur Shamis, who was exiled in 1969 after Gaddafi's coup, established a political organization called the Libya Human and Political Development Forum in London. As part of this initiative, he founded an online newspaper called *Akhbar Libya* that would often broach sensitive subjects, such as corruption among Libyan elites, using information gleaned from insider contacts. According to Gazzini (2007), *Akbar Libya* started as a four-page newspaper in the 1980s before going online in the early 2000s. Sites such as Libya Watanona (Our Homeland Libya), run by Dr. Ibrahim Ighneiwa, posted articles, histories, and letters in English and Arabic and was a hub for remembrances and grievances, but it did not have a specific political agenda. Other sites, such as Justice4Libya, were dedicated to remembering those who had been imprisoned and killed in the 1996 Abu Salim Massacre. A community leader who came up numerous times in my interviews, Ali Kamadan Abuzaakik, founder of the American Libyan Freedom Alliance (ALFA) in Washington, DC, also held meetings to evaluate the state of the opposition and consider their future course of action (Bugaghis and Buisier 2003). Exile organizations such as these were scattered and small, however, and generally lacked non-exile membership.

In 2005, members of the American and British NFSL, the Libyan Human Rights Commission, and other dissident groups such as the Libyan Constitutional Union and the Libyan League for Human Rights met in London to declare themselves a coalition called the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition. According to scholar Alice Alunni's (2019, 2020) extensive research on this conference, their members attempted to transcend ideology and Islamism to unite under a nationalist agenda. As part of this effort, they referenced the 1951 constitution and came together under the flag of King Idris's rule. Covered by the BBC and Al Jazeera, the Libyan regime condemned the conference. In doing so, however, the regime incidentally raised awareness of the opposition abroad and the 1951 governmental framework inside of Libya (Alunni 2019: 251).

In the 2000s, a number of websites were created from abroad in order to promote Amazigh culture and identity. In the 1970s, Libya's Amazigh association, the *Rabita Shamal Afriqiya*, was forcibly closed and its members arrested on charges of creating an illegal political party (Al-Rumi 2009). Because the heritage and language of this ethnic group had been repressed for decades in

Libya, some diaspora members only learned about their people's history after going abroad to study; according to Al-Rumi (2009), "A number of activists have attempted to use the web to reconnect Libyan Berbers with their language." One such website called Tawalt, which opened in 2001 from California (Alunni 2020: 143) and closed without explanation in 2009, "was the richest such cultural website, offering not only downloadable grammar books but also audio recordings of grammar classes of Tarifit, Tashalhit, and Nafusa, different branches of the Tmazight language. Unlike Tawalt, which is in Arabic (they claim to be the first ever Amazigh website in Arabic), two other Berber cultural websites, *Libyaimal.com* and *Adrar.5u.com*, are exclusively in Tmazight." According to Al-Rumi (2009), a UK-based organization called the Libyan Tamazight Congress (*Agraw a'Libi n'Tmazight*, ALT), founded in 2000, also demanded that the Gaddafi regime make official reference to the Tmazight language in the constitution and recognize the presence and legitimacy of the Amazigh people in Libya.

By the early 2000s, interviewees who had grown up in political exile attested that their parents' generation had given up hope or had spent a lot of time "discussing but not enough time doing, or reaching out," as M., a Libyan American activist, recalled. Their hopes for change at home were further dampened as Gaddafi's relations with the West improved. Gaddafi had been isolated in the global community for decades for sponsoring international acts of terrorism, including most infamously the 1988 Lockerbie airplane bombing.<sup>8</sup> In December 2003, following the US-led occupation of Iraq, Gaddafi agreed to give up Libya's weapons of mass destruction and settle his foreign debts. His son and heir apparent, Saif al-Islam, also sought to repair Libya's international reputation as a pariah state by releasing some political prisoners and opening an investigation into the Abu Salim Massacre.

This rapprochement was bad news for many of Libya's former freedom fighters. In addition to being persecuted by Gaddafi, members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group also became caught in the post-2001 war-on-terror dragnet. Under President George W. Bush, the United States began helping Gaddafi capture former fighters in 2004 and rendered them back to Tripoli for interrogation and torture. Britain also signed a rendition agreement with Gaddafi in a memorandum of understanding in 2005 (Human Rights Watch 2011b). Warming relations also made British officials more hesitant to accept refugees from Libya (Blitz 2009).

After 2004, the diaspora itself became a key component of the regime's plan to reestablish ties with the international community. In order to improve

<sup>8</sup> The Lockerbie bombing refers to the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which – on its way from Frankfurt to New York (John F. Kennedy International Airport) and Detroit via London – exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing a total of 270 people. While Gaddafi publicly denied responsibility, an investigation by British and American authorities found two of his agents to be responsible; while he paid compensation to the families, many of whom were American, in 2003.

Libya's legitimacy, many exiles received assurances by regime officials that they could return safely home. Saif al-Islam also coaxed the youth to reestablish ties with their homeland by sponsoring luxurious group trips to Libya, akin to Israel's birthright trips for Jewish Americans. In 2007, during Gaddafi's and Saif al-Islam's campaign to reintegrate themselves into the world community, a law banning Amazigh names was struck down, and the government hosted the Paris-based World Amazigh Conference for the first time (Alunni 2020). However, this was accompanied by subsequent mob violence and attacks against Amazigh figures inside of Libya and the mysterious closing of the Tawalt website in 2009, most likely due to regime intimidation and pressure.

In response to Gaddafi's reintegration into the global community, Hamid and fellow exile Abdullah established a social movement network called *Gaddafi Kbalas!*, or Enough Gaddafi, in 2008. M., a member of the Enough Gaddafi network, explained that they used their English-language skills and technological savvy to launch a website and a "new form of opposition, the next wave of opposition."

We staged protests, and [published] different reports on violations going on, in particular focused on Abu Salim victims and the massacre and the families of those individuals on social media, bringing up the violations of the past forty-two years. We tried to bring that to light, to look back at a lot of the violations that happened in the 1980s against college students, and put it into the foreground the international community should not be dealing with Gaddafi because he's a criminal.

This group also held a protest against Gaddafi's 2009 visit to the UN headquarters in New York. By this time, Gaddafi had turned into a bloated, incoherent megalomaniac. Sashaying in *jird* cloaks in front of the camera, his rambling speeches and eccentricities appeared laughable to outside observers. But his buffoonery masked a poignant cruelty that lay hidden behind a thick curtain of censorship. Regime control over the media and the Internet was hugely effective in isolating Libya from the rest of the world. Assuming that the Libyan people were too complacent, cowed, or brainwashed to resist Gaddafi, it seemed during my early graduate studies as though pundits had written Libya off as an example of unshakable authoritarian entrenchment. But although violence seemed to have succeeded in stamping out mortal threats to Gaddafi's rule within the nation's borders, the repression that had forced many of Libya's bravest and brightest abroad had also produced an anti-regime diaspora that remained steadfastly loyal to the homeland. It was these dissidents and professionals who would come together and help to bring about his downfall in 2011.

At the same time, public efforts to condemn Gaddafi in the years preceding the Arab Spring were rare. Protests, such as those initiated by Enough Gaddafi and Libya Watch, were small and led by a minority of exiles. Furthermore, in spite of the notable presence of anti-regime members in the United States and Britain, neither host-country diaspora produced civic

membership-based associations dedicated to ousting Gaddafi. In summary, the Libya anti-regime movement abroad, while noteworthy and important, was exceedingly small, lacked cohesion, and rarely involved non-exiles before the 2011 revolution.

### 2.3 LIBYAN SOCIALIZING AND EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

Respondents who grew up in exile reported that their parents never intended to remain apart from Libya for long. Khaled, a second-generation Libyan American and the son of an NFSL activist who had grown up in Lexington, Kentucky, recalled, “We always thought that next year, next year, we’re going to go home. We used to say, *lan nabruhu*: ‘when we will return.’” But as repeated attempts to overthrow Gaddafi failed, interviewees like Khaled reported that their parents began to accept the fact that their exile might be permanent. Recognizing that youth like Khaled risked becoming estranged from their Libyan identity and culture, activist Dr. Gaddor Saidi founded the Libyan Association of Southern California in 1986 in Orange County as a way to organize regular community gatherings for families across the region. Gaddor reported that the association was apolitical even though many of those who founded it were in exile and involved in some kind of opposition activity, as he had been himself. He recalled,

Myself and others who organized it, we always made sure that it’s open, that we don’t get into the politics so that we at least give the young people some kind of platform to have some connection to their country. Hoping that one day they will go back. [But] we were thinking that it’s not going to happen in our lifetime, especially when Gaddafi’s children started taking hold of the country.

From Manchester, Zakia, who was forced to escape Libya with her husband and seek refuge in Britain in 1998, formed the Libya Women’s Association in 2003. Her group, which intentionally avoided any involvement with home-country politics, was founded to promote the social development of “Libyan women, and make them more active in the UK – to study, go out, and meet people. We did many activities for kids to push them to get all the positive things in the UK.” In the United States, members of the diaspora established a camp for youth called Amal, which means “hope” in Arabic. Adam of Virginia, a former participant in Amal and a second-generation exile, recalled fondly that because Libyans were scattered across the United States, the camp provided “an opportunity for everybody to come together, for families to meet up again. This is like our Libyan family. Of course, our immediate cousins are overseas in Libya. [But] these [people] are our surrogate cousins, mothers, fathers.” Initiatives like Amal were critical in fostering strong social and cultural ties for second-generation exiles who never knew, or who barely remembered, their homeland. As Abdullah, who grew up in the NFSL-Lexington community with Khaled, recalled,

[The adults] had schools on Sundays that taught us Arabic; we had young people who annually would rent a theater and put on shows. As much as we were a product of America, there was always a really strong bond between us and Libya, even just culturally, despite the fact that most of us had never been or would [not] go back and forth.

While I found no other named community associations during my research, respondents across various cities reported regularly hosting informal social events, such as religious *Eid* celebrations and annual community picnics. Respondents reported that these initiatives fostered their heritage and home-country connections, thereby inculcating loyalty to Libya among the younger generations. These ties would come to fruition and become conduits for activism during the 2011 revolution, as subsequent chapters explain.

#### 2.4 THE RISE OF THE ASSAD REGIME

The modern-day state of Syria, like Libya, was once part of the Ottoman Empire. It was ensconced in a territory known as “greater Syria,” which included Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and parts of contemporary Iraq. As emigrants fled war, religious persecution, and political violence, Syrians reached both the United States and Britain by the 1860s, settling in a larger wave than began in the 1880s (Gualtieri 2009, 2020; Seddon 2014). Muslims, however, were largely blocked from emigrating because of their forced conscription into the Ottoman military. Under the Ottomans, Syrians were considered part of the “yellow race” in the West and were associated with anarchists, papists, barbarism, and “Moslem” threats (Younis 1995). Thus, the majority of early Syrian emigration to the United States and Britain was comprised of Christians (Orthodox, Maronite, Melkite, and Protestant) who attained social mobility as peddlers, traders, and merchants (Younis 1995: 233).

Syrians became categorically distinguished from Turks in 1899 in the United States, though they were also suspect due to their Orthodox, non-Anglo origins (Jamal and Naber 2008). Through forming robust civic organizations, including the Federation of Syrian American Societies, they contested racial discrimination in the courts (Bragdon 1989; Gualtieri 2009, 2020; Younis 1995). By 1915, Syrians came to be considered white, and therefore able to naturalize, after a Syrian Christian named George Dow won his third appeal in court (Jamal and Naber 2008). By 1920, no Syrians were refused citizenship on the basis of their supposed race.

From the 1880s until the more restrictive quotas of the 1920s, Syrians emigrated to New York, New Orleans, into Texas and California through Mexico, and eventually spread to most states; about one hundred thousand Syrians entered the United States during this period (Gualtieri 2020). While they continued to face discrimination and racism, they also mobilized to

improve their collective treatment. When US Senator David Reed called them “Mediterranean trash,” Syrian American clubs pressured Reed to walk back his comments (Younis 1995: 216). So too did the Syrian American Federation of New York defend the naturalization rights of Syrians and lobby President William Taft for citizenship (Gualtieri 2009: 110–11). And although Syrians’ allies in the white Protestant church argued that “they do not carry revolutionary theories or propensities” (Younis 1995: 123), Syrians did mobilize from the United States on matters of national independence. The *Suriya el-Fetat* (Young Syria Party) was founded in 1899 to support a free homeland and recruit fighters in the struggle. During the turn of the twentieth century, media reports described how “revolutionists on lower Washington Street” in Manhattan plotted against Ottoman power (Younis 1995: 140). According to historian Adele Younis, they also lobbied the US government to help free Syria from the “Mohammodan [*sic*] Government of Damascus” (1995: 385). Syrian American organizations from states such as Massachusetts and Oklahoma also participated in the first Arab Congress, which convened in Paris in 1913 (Gualtieri 2009: 88).

Elites in the community sparred in the press about whether the immigrant community was really “for” or “against” the Turkish Sultan (Fahrenthold 2013), but they nevertheless professed a kind of long-distance nationalism that bridged sectarian labels (Fahrenthold 2019; Gualtieri 2009: 83–84). Later, Syrians in New York formed the National Independence Party of Syria to inspire resistance to French occupation, and the New Syria Party (Gualtieri 2009; Pennock 2017). Syrian presses also highlighted attacks, including the bombing of a Syrian’s home in Georgia in 1923 (Younis 1995: 245) and the lynching of a Syrian man in Florida and the killing of his wife by a police chief (Gualtieri 2020: 27). They advertised the community’s achievements, campaigns by elite women’s groups for charity, and assimilation-related activities such as literacy classes. Federations in the 1950s also agitated on behalf of the Palestinian refugee issue, as when the National Association of Syrian and Lebanese American Federations met with US President Truman in 1951 to convince him to attend to the problem (Gualtieri 2020: 83).

During World War I, a secretive accord between Britain and France called the Sykes–Picot Agreement was drawn up in 1916 and forged the modern-day boundaries of Syria. At the end of the war in 1918, Syria came under French control as per this arrangement and, as sanctioned by the League of Nations, became a mandated protectorate of the French. Battles for territorial control continued, which prompted the emigration of Christians in large numbers to the West. Battles also ensued against French rule, after which Syrians and the French agreed upon a treaty of independence in 1936. Hashim al-Atassi became Syria’s first president under the new constitution. After France fell to the Nazis in 1940, Syria came under the rule of the Vichy regime. Later, the Free French and the British regained territory, but this did not upend colonial control until 1946. At this time, Syrians came to be distinguished from the Lebanese and

Palestinians in the United States and Britain. Syria's independence was also followed by years of constant turmoil. Many Syrian Jews fled to the emergent state of Israel after Syria's loss in the 1948 Arab–Israeli war. Coup after coup ensued by colonels as different military factions vied for control. An alignment between Syria and the USSR pitted them against Turkey, leading to a cold-war era conflict that continues to influence Syrian politics today.

In 1958, Syria merged with Egypt, under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, to form the United Arab Republic, but Syria experienced another coup and withdrew from the union. In 1962, the government continued to discriminate against Kurds as so-called foreign agitators by stripping citizenship from some 120,000 of them (roughly 20 percent of this minority group). This policy trapped them in a country that had rendered them stateless as part of a vicious Arabization campaign (Chatty 2010; Human Rights Watch 1996).

In 1963, a group of officers launched a coup d'état against Syria's government that would eventually bring its Ba'ath Party members to power. During this time, a young officer named Hafez al-Assad was promoted to Minister of Defense. By November 1970, Hafez launched a so-called corrective revolution that made him prime minister. In 1971, President Hafez ushered in an iron-fisted dynasty that would last decades, enforcing total control over Syria's diverse population by forming a powerful coalition of Alawis (a minority sect of Shi'a Islam of which Hafez was a member), Sunni military men, and the business class. The regime also deployed a whopping twelve security agencies to surveil the population, subjecting regime critics, leftists, Islamists, and minorities to totalitarian state terror (Ziadeh 2011). As Syria expert Lisa Wedeen (2015[1999]) argues, Hafez built himself into a cult personality, and people were forced to perform "as if" they loved him unconditionally in elaborate public rituals. As the regime came to employ at least one person in every five, intelligence agents of *al-Mukhabarat* were literally everywhere. Activists and everyday people were detained without charge, and prisons were rife with unspeakable acts of torture, from the "German chair," designed to induce unconsciousness and break detainees' backs, to rapes and beatings with iron rods (Paul 1990).

As is often the case, extreme repression provoked a backlash,<sup>9</sup> particularly by groups suffering from the brunt of regime repression, such as the Kurds and the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The regime and the Brotherhood's radical flank waged war on each other until Hafez al-Assad dealt the group a decisive blow in 1982. After a Brotherhood cell in Hama reacted against a regime ambush in the early hours of February 2, Hafez responded by deploying at least ten thousand troops to seal off the city and destroy the resistance once and for all. Within a week, it was reported that "Syrian tanks are methodically

<sup>9</sup> For superb demonstrations of severe repression's backlash effect, I recommend works by Goodwin (2001), Hess and Martin (2006), and Rasler (1996).

leveling vast areas of Hama.”<sup>10</sup> The entire city was cut off from electricity, telephone communications, food, and water; regime soldiers looted people’s homes and raped inhabitants. Residents succumbed to starvation and death from otherwise treatable injuries. Those who tried to flee were often caught at military checkpoints, and the highways running through the city remained under lockdown.<sup>11</sup>

The press blackout during this period was highly effective as the city remained officially sealed off from outsiders for months. By May, reports were circulating figures of ten, twenty-five, and fifty thousand civilian casualties. Even Assad’s biographer, Patrick Seale (1982), reported in the British press that “refugees from Hama claim that ‘at least 25,000 people’ were slaughtered and whole neighborhoods devastated in a two-week orgy of killing, destruction and looting.” What became known as the Hama Massacre would foreshadow the regime’s merciless reaction to the 2011 uprisings and the many massacres to come during the Arab Spring.

## 2.5 ESCAPE FROM THE CULT OF ASSAD

After the United States and Britain changed entry rules for immigrants from the Middle East and Asia in 1965, Syrian immigrant communities began to settle in Britain and became far more diverse in the United States. They came to include non-Christians, political refugees, students on state-sponsored scholarships, and businessmen. Survivors of the Hama Massacre of 1982, for instance, and many Muslim Brothers were forced abroad in the wake of this atrocity. One survivor of the crackdown named Walid Saffour formed the oldest known anti-regime group in either the United States or Britain in the late 1980s. This London-based organization was called the Syrian Human Rights Committee. This organization was dedicated to publicizing atrocities committed by the regime during and since the Hama Massacre. Dr. Saffour and other exiles also held periodic protests outside the Syrian embassy in London to commemorate these events. When I met his daughter Razan in Manchester, she told me,

<sup>10</sup> Reports circulated that some army units defected within the first week of the assault, which were difficult to verify. The loyalty of the security forces most certainly came under significant stress during this period, as in Dara’a and elsewhere (Abdulhamid 2011). Out of a quarter of a million members, more than half are conscripts (see Heydemann 1999; Ziadeh 2011). The massacre of primarily Sunni civilians by Sunni army conscripts on behalf of the Alawite-dominated government caused a significant rupture in the regime’s offensive. While few details are known and it is not clear how many soldiers defected, this likely prolonged the conflict significantly.

<sup>11</sup> Responding in an Orwellian fashion, the Syrian government denied anything unusual was happening in Hama. Ahmed Iskander, Minister of Information, described reports of mass murder as the “stuff of dreams”; other officials went further, dismissing accusations of “serious disturbances” as “lies” and “a flagrant intervention” in Syria’s affairs (Seale 1982).

When we were born, we grew up very much in this opposition atmosphere. I had an uncle who was tortured to death in Tadmor Prison. My father, he was also tortured in the '80s. He refused to go out and protest for [the regime], so they took him and they broke his nose, broke his back. They put him in a wheel and they pushed him down a very steep staircase. Usually people die, but he survived to tell the tale. So when he came here, he was very, very active.

Another anti-regime organization, the Western Kurdistan Association, was founded by Dr. Jawad Mella. Dr. Mella was a Peshmerga fighter in Syria and exiled to London in 1984. He established the association to serve as a government-in-exile for Syrian Kurds and to lobby the British government to support the secession of a Kurdish-dominated region of his homeland, dubbed Western Kurdistan. Dr. Mella also attested to assisting Kurdish Syrian refugees in Britain through charitable works, bringing members of the community together to form a Kurdish football team, and housing a small Kurdish library, museum, and archive in the London neighborhood of Hammersmith that had recently closed at the time of our interview. Dr. Mella also maintained ties to the broader transnational Kurdish movement by representing Kurdish Syrians in the Kurdish National Congress and by displaying the Kurdish national flag at the Western Kurdistan Association's headquarters. Dr. Mella and his activist colleagues also held periodic protests outside the London embassy and took every opportunity to speak to the media about the need for independence from the Syrian Arab Republic.

Political activism increased ever so slightly in the 2000s at home and abroad during a brief and tenuous opening in autocratic rule. Hafez died in 2000 and his youngest son, Bashar, was recalled from his medical practice in London to take the throne. Despite coming to power through a sham election and hastily rewritten constitutional rules, the transition was an initial cause for hope. Bashar had been relatively distant from regime politics for some time, and as an ophthalmologist, he and his glamorous wife, Asma, appeared young and cosmopolitan. Bashar was credited with bringing the Internet to Syria, and pro-democracy activists took advantage of the thaw in illiberalism to push for reforms. Prominent intellectuals and reform-minded Ba'ath Party members led the charge, organizing informal meetings to discuss their demands. In a "Statement of the 99," they called for an end to the permanent state of martial law, the release of all political prisoners, the safe return of political exiles, and the right to form civic associations and political parties. In 2001, a bolder "Statement of the 1,000" called for expanded rights and constitutional reforms. Kurdish leaders, who had long been stripped of their citizenship in Syria, mobilized to press for rights and recognition. Outsiders declared that a Damascus Spring was underway. But while Bashar initially closed the regime's notorious Mezzeh prison, released some political prisoners, and allowed some civil society groups to come above ground, these openings slammed shut in 2001 after the regime arrested many organizers and increased internet censorship.

During the false promise of Bashar's reforms in the early 2000s, second-generation exiles came of age in the West and joined their elders to advocate for democracy at home. Malik had been in exile since his birth in Jordan because of his father's oppositional activities. Growing up in London, he and others in the global anti-regime diaspora communicated through "Paltalk," a precursor to Skype, to discuss political change back home.

You had chatrooms where people get the mic and they talk. You had a Syrian group there, which was the opposition; the room was called Syria Justice and Freedom. I was there every night – I was basically *hooked* on this – from 8 p.m. to 11 or so. That was the peak. People would join to talk about issues related to Syria, some of whom lived in the US, some in the Gulf, some in Jordan. It was all anonymous, so no one quite knew who you were. This is how I got to know politics.

By 2006, Malik, his brother Anas, and their friends sought to forge an alternative to what he described as the two "classic" options in the exiled opposition: the Muslim Brotherhood and the communists. He went on to co-found a network of second-generation British Syrian exiles called the Syrian Exiles League. This group, which they later dubbed the Syrian Justice and Development Party, lobbied on behalf of exiled and stateless Syrians in the international community and founded a satellite channel called Barada TV. From London, Malik and his colleagues broadcast pre-recorded anti-regime programs with the intention of reaching audiences in Syria. Barada TV also provided fellow exiles with a unique platform to discuss the need for regime change in Syria and its atrocities against minorities, including against a Kurdish uprising in Al-Qamishli in 2004.

In 2005, the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri stoked an uprising that led to the withdrawal of Syria's occupation of Lebanon. Reformers seized upon this opportunity to publish the Damascus Declaration in 2005, which called for constitutional reforms, the recognition of Kurdish rights, and gradual political liberalization. (Muslim Brothers chose instead to form a National Salvation Front with the former vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam when he defected in 2006; see Conduit 2019.) The surge in hope for change and the newfound audacity of civil society leaders in Syria inspired the formation of new groups abroad as well. This included the Syrian American Council (SAC) in 2005, established by several first-generation immigrants in Burr Ridge, Illinois. The purpose of SAC was to support the burgeoning civil society movement in Syria and promote a general dialogue about civil liberties, but without explicitly mentioning or criticizing the regime by name. Its founding members also attempted to set up chapters in other US cities and invited well-known activists from Syria to attend their inaugural event in Chicago.

Movements-in-exile, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian Justice and Development Party, joined activists in Syria to sign the Damascus Declaration in 2005. However, the proponents of the Damascus Declaration

were arrested, leading to a new wave of exile. Activists Ammar Abdulhamid and Khawla Yusuf, a married couple, moved to the suburbs of Washington, DC in 2005 after being threatened by the regime during this crackdown. They continued their activities abroad by establishing the Tharwa Foundation in 2007. They dedicated this organization to promoting democratic change, non-violent resistance, and minority rights in Syria. Ammar also produced a six-part series titled *FirstStep*, broadcast through the Syrian Justice and Development Party's Barada TV channel out of London, to advocate for a nonviolent revolution in Syria.

Dr. Radwan Ziadeh, who had been an invited guest of the SAC inaugural event in Chicago a few years earlier, was forced into exile in 2007. He established the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Washington, DC, as an outspoken regime critic and academic. In a related case, Ayman Abdel Nour, a former Christian member of the Syrian Ba'ath Party had been forced to join his extended family in California after demanding reform. From exile he established a website called All4Syria in Arabic as a place to discuss political change at home. Artist-activists in exile like Marah Bukai, who settled in northern Virginia, remained an outspoken critic of the regime. Another figure named Rami Abdulrahman (born Ossama Suleiman), forced to leave Syria in 2000 (MacFarquhar 2013), founded the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights from his new home in Coventry, England, in 2006. This one-man operation, much like Dr. Abdul Malek's Libya Watch, was dedicated to drawing attention to human rights abuses and the plight of political prisoners.<sup>12</sup> All of these individuals, in conjunction with their contacts on the ground, would come to play important roles in the 2011 revolution.

Overall, the United States and Britain came to host several anti-regime organizations in the 2000s that were primarily headed by individual exiles. The formation of the Syrian American Council was the only attempt to establish a *membership*-based advocacy organization during this period. However, as Chapter 3 explains, SAC organizers remained unable to recruit members

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Mr. Abdulrahman did not respond to my requests for an interview in 2014 – however, this was likely because he was simply too busy, running an organization and a private business full time during this period. *The New York Times* reported in 2013 that

Mr. Abdul Rahman spends virtually every waking minute tracking the war in Syria, disseminating bursts of information about the fighting and the death toll. What began as sporadic, rudimentary e-mails about protests early in the uprising has swelled into a torrent of statistics and details . . . Mr. Abdul Rahman rarely sleeps. He gets up around 5:30 a.m., calling Syria to awaken his team. First, they tally the previous day's casualty reports and release a bulletin. Then he alternates between taking news media calls – 10 on a slow day, 15 an hour for breaking news – and contacting activists. (MacFarquhar 2013)

since the onset of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has played a leading role in broadcasting work during the uprising and subsequent war, and has generally earned a reputation as being a trustworthy source of information among NGOs (MacFarquhar 2013).

until the revolution, and anti-regime efforts by individual exiles lacked community support.

## 2.6 SYRIAN SOCIALIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT ORGANIZING

Like their Libyan counterparts, Syrian respondents reported that periodic gatherings took place across their concentrated communities in the United States and Britain. Since their emigration, Syrians have often maintained their heritage and transnational ties through social events, including outdoor picnics featuring celebrities (*mahrajans*), festivals, conventions, *haflas* (large indoor parties), and events held in Syrian and Syrian Lebanese clubs (Bragdon 1989; Gualtieri 2020; Younis 1995). These occasions brought together Syrians speaking English, Arabic, and Spanish in “spaces that renewed their Syrianness” (Gualtieri 2020: 72–76). The diaspora also gave rise to brick-and-mortar professional associations for doctors and new social clubs in the 2000s. These organizations were made possible by the Syrian community’s relatively high degree of wealth, as well as by regime sponsorship. I return to these issues in depth in Chapters 3 and 6.

From the United States, clubs included the Syrian American Club of Houston, founded in 1991. According to board member Omar Shishakly, the club was founded to promote Syrian culture and education by offering Arabic classes and student scholarships. He explained, “It’s a cultural club. We’re basically non-political in any way or form. We don’t support any sides. We also provide scholarships to about twenty students each year.” Former member Belal Delati of Southern California also reported that their local Syrian American Association was dedicated to celebrating Syrian national holidays and to helping Syrians “remember their heritage.” Parallel organizations operated in Britain; the British Syrian Society was founded in 2003 as a social club, although no Syrians I interviewed for their Arab Spring activism participated in it. Syrians, many of whom received state scholarships to study medicine and science in the West, also produced several professional organizations. Both the Syrian American Medical Association and the Syrian British Medical Society were founded in 2007. After the Arab Spring, these associations played a significant role in addressing the humanitarian crisis caused by regime repression and Syria’s ensuing war.

## 2.7 THE TWO YEMENS BECOME ONE

The Republic of Yemen is a stunning country of lowland deserts, high mountain ranges, and plateaus on the heel of the Arabian Peninsula. One of the poorest countries in the world, Yemen began the twentieth century as two nations: the north, an imamate, and the south, a British protectorate. Prior to

the formation of Yemen as the republic we know today, Zaydi tribes fiercely resisted Ottoman invasions from the north, which was key to Turkish trade with India. The Ottomans eventually conquered southern Yemen and the Tihama area along the Red Sea in the late 1530s, but Yemen proved to be a bloodbath for Ottoman soldiers sent in from Egypt. After a series of battles, territories traded hands many times between the Turks and various Yemeni forces, including Zaydi tribesmen of the northern highlands. By the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman forces and the Zaydis, among other groups, were still battling for control.

As the British Empire expanded its reach across the Asian continent, forces captured the southern port city of Aden, where they enforced a protectorate colonial status and signed treaties with local tribes. In 1892, the Ottomans again sent forces to conquer Yemen's northern capital of Sana'a, which became the administrative capital of the Ottoman's territory in Yemen. However, constant rebellions by Zaydi Imams, such as Yahya Hamidaddin, made imperialistic governance largely impossible. As a result, a treaty with the Ottomans in 1911 made Imam Yahya governor of the Zaydi northern highlands. Meanwhile, Imam Yahya did not recognize the British-Ottoman border agreement that divided Yemen into north and south. Fighting continued between the two sides over Yemen's middle ground as Yahya himself sought to capture Aden. Eventually, a 1934 treaty between the Imam and the British recognized the latter's authority over the "Aden protectorate" for forty years. During this period, Yemen became host to regional and internationalized mobilization by the Muslim Brotherhood and nationalists with competing visions for Yemen's future. In 1948, a Zaydi prince named Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Wazir assassinated Imam Yahya, but Yahya's son, the crown prince Ahmad, was able to regain control. Up until that point, Yahya had largely succeeded in sequestering Yemen from outside influences. At this time, Ahmad opened Yemen to foreign trade through an agreement with the USSR. When Imam Ahmad of the north died in 1962, a terrible civil war ensued in the northern Yemen Arab Republic that pushed out many Yemenis in search of sanctuary.

An uprising in the south by Marxist republicans and a nationalist military organization, who would later turn on each other, ousted the British in 1967 and gave rise to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the region's only socialist republic. The north and south then proceeded to fight each other on and off again in the 1970s. In the midst of this turmoil, Ali Abdullah Saleh came to power in the north in 1978.

In 1986, an internal civil war in the south killed thousands, weakening the state considerably. By 1990, amid the fall of the Soviet Union, the two governments agreed to merge into the Republic of Yemen. However, a civil war broke out between them due to southern grievances about being marginalized under the new elected government. In 1994, Saleh triumphed and became the first elected president of Yemen in 1999. The reunification of Yemen's two halves subjected the south to heavy repression, corruption, and neglect. Saleh relied

heavily on northern elites like his longtime ally and cousin, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the First Armored Division, to repress uprisings in the south (and in the far north, he launched wars against a Zaydi revival movement known as the Houthis). When a peaceful protest movement of unpaid southern pensioners arose in 2007, regime forces cracked down on the demonstrators with lethal force. This escalated long-simmering grievances over the south's repressive occupation by northern elites, and the south has since witnessed the mobilization of various factions for southern autonomy and independence under the banner of the old blue, red, white, and black socialist flag. Saleh's regime may have been Yemen's internationally recognized authority, but its legitimacy remained highly contested across its territory (Day 2012).

## 2.8 YEMENI EMIGRATION HISTORY AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Yemenis were the first Muslims to emigrate to Britain, according to historian Fred Halliday (2010[1992]), due to their recruitment as laborers in the coal furnaces of British naval ships. From port cities like South Shields, they established the first mosques, Islamic schools, and the first Arabic-language newspaper in western Europe called *Al Salaam* (Halliday 2010[1992]).<sup>13</sup> Many of these ships also headed to the United States, and especially New York, beginning in the early 1900s. In both receiving countries, restrictive immigration controls enacted between 1917 and 1924 limited Yemeni emigration. Nativism stoked riots against the hiring of so-called colored seamen, who were already underpaid and working in miserable conditions, in England and Wales. Many of their communities were additionally segregated in the slums of port cities due to racism and nativism.

As Yemenis emigrated, so did their loyalties. In 1936, for example, a leader named Sheikh Abdullah al-Hakimi came to Britain as a sailor and worked to mobilize the community of South Shields to support the Free Yemen Movement in North Yemen. He formed the Committee for the Defense of Yemen in partnership with the Aden-based Grand Yemeni Association and lobbied the British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin for assistance (Seddon 2014: 143–44). His paper, *Al-Salaam*, published criticisms of the northern Imam as well, criticizing the leader in an open letter for making the Yemeni people poor and forcing them abroad to survive. His mobilizing efforts faced a number of challenges, not the least of which was competition from community members who supported the Imam. One such member, Hassan Ismail, rallied the community around the Imamate and set up a rival mosque.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In Britain, these communities were initially (and erroneously) referred to as *lascars*, an anglicized word from the Arabic term for soldier, *al-askari* (Seddon 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Seddon (2014: 145) writes that “With most of their families and tribesmen still living in the Yemen and under the direct rule of the Imam, it would not make good political sense to offer any

After World War II, the demand for Yemeni labor on ships decreased due to the changeover to oil-based fuel; in both the United States and Britain, Yemenis were compelled to transition to the service sector and industrial manufacturing. In the mid-nineteenth century, Yemenis in both host-countries moved to industrial cities such as Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester, Toledo, and Detroit through chain migration to factories, where men often lived and worked together. Yemenis also worked in California, with as many as one hundred thousand men working as seasonal labor in the fields (Friedlander 1988). These groupings also corresponded with region and tribe much of the time and made social spaces, such as Yemeni cafes, primarily male spaces. These labor sectors often kept them socially isolated, with limited abilities to attain upward mobility and improve their English skills.<sup>15</sup> Later on, Britain's migration controls of 1962 also constricted Yemenis' abilities to move back and forth between their places of residence in Britain and the South Yemen protectorate, which meant that they had to remain abroad in order to continue making wages. This separated many families, as wives and children were forced to remain at home as anchors to keep remittances flowing to extended families in Yemen (Halliday 2010[1992]). It is estimated that these men sent home \$1,000 to \$1,500 per year in the 1970s (Halliday 2010[1992]: 14).

Inspired by the torrent of nationalism sweeping the Global South, Birmingham workers formed an organization called the Arab Workers Union to reflect popular support for Nasserism and nationalism. As themes of Arab nationalism circulated around the *mahjar* (Gualtieri 2009: 16), so too did Yemeni Ba'athist supporters compete internally with Nasserists. With the onset of the civil war in North Yemen in 1962, Yemenis mobilized in the community, keeping informed through letters exchanged with family members, the international circulation of Yemeni newspapers, and a radio station from the central Yemeni city of Ta'iz. According to Halliday (2010[1992]: 88), exiles in the British community contributed part of their earnings (totaling sixty thousand pounds) to the new Yemeni National Development Bank, which was risky due to Britain's involvement in a war in the South. Halliday (2010[1992]: 88) also notes that a British news organization accused Yemenis of channeling funds to an insurgency in the South that had killed British forces in the Radfan uprising of 1963, leading to raids. Nevertheless, as workers donated about a pound a week to the effort, the Arab Workers Union collected donations to the National Liberation Front in the South "and transmitted the funds either through the NLF's offices in Cairo or through individual couriers who returned home on temporary visits" (Halliday 2010[1992]).

hostile opposition to the Imam that might result in remittances not reaching dependants [*sic*] and also possible reprisals against relatives back home."

<sup>15</sup> Yemeni workers did, however, participate in the US Farmworkers' Movement. See Gualtieri (2020: 65–66).

The Arab Workers Union was also impacted, however, by tensions within Yemen's anti-British coalition following the ousting of British forces from Aden in 1967. Members eventually split off to form the Yemeni Workers' Union, which was founded specifically to "forge a link between the workers here and the workers' movement and the revolutionary socialist movement in the homeland, and therefore to transform work within the ranks of the workers and to increase their understanding of our Yemeni homeland" (Halliday 2010[1992]: 91). Organizers also formed the Arab Workers League in Birmingham and the Yemeni Welfare Association of Manchester in response to these developments, which helped local migrants with passports, taxation, and other issues related to their sojourns. The Yemeni Workers' Union, with chapters across different cities in England and Wales, faced a number of challenges, however, due to workers' intense schedules, geographical spread across different locales, and illiteracy. The lack of full-time middle-class professionals to organize this work also impacted mobilization for the Arab Spring, which I address further in Chapter 6.

Interestingly, while some Yemenis did mobilize as part of the Farmworkers' Movement in California in the 1970s, Yemeni unions were not keen to strike, as this would impact their remittances; they did not possess strike funds (Halliday 2010[1992]: 103). Yemeni unions were also significantly marginalized within white-dominated unions. Rather than focus on workplace issues, they formed these organizations to help with home-country state building, including appeals by Yemen's postcolonial southern government to help build a new nation. They also fundraised for development projects such as water infrastructure, mobilized to support Palestinians, promoted literacy classes, and held community meetings. Literacy in Arabic and English was especially important, given that about two-thirds of Yemenis from South Yemen were illiterate (Halliday 2010[1992]: 98). In 1973, the Yemeni Workers' Union funded a hospital in South Yemen along with migrants in the Gulf region, and other medical aid from Birmingham in 1975, as well as roads, schools, and cultural centers, with most of the funds coming from workers in Birmingham and Sheffield (Halliday 2010[1992]: 94). They also sent funds to the Palestinian resistance and the Omani resistance against the British. According to Pennock (2017: 71), "Yemenis who supported the Omani rebels against the British held political events in the Southend [of Detroit/Dearborn], mainly *haflas* (parties) that incorporated lectures and poetry about the rebellion." According to Seddon (2014), these organizations declined in the 1980s as a recession led many Yemenis to return home or to find work in the Gulf region. In Britain, the community was roughly halved from about fifteen to eight thousand by the 1980s.

Detroit and Dearborn, Michigan attracted many North Yemenis for work via chain migration to the automobile industry. Historian Pamela Pennock (2017: 180) reports that their communities, while often unwilling to strike, did "remain engaged in the political conflicts brewing in Yemen . . . and some of

them were intensely active on Yemeni political issues through their involvement in the Southend-based Yemeni Arab Association and Yemeni Benevolent Society.” Community members included supporters of leftist and rightist political factions within Yemen itself, which caused intra-diaspora conflicts (Pennock 2017: 270–71).<sup>16</sup> North–South tensions dominated activism as well. According to Halliday (2010[1992]: 108), as the governments of North and South Yemen fought wars internally and with one another, this “made North–South collaborations difficult, and the two unions ceased to operate” in the diaspora thereafter. They also faced the problem of home-country officials who demanded bribes in order to renew migrants’ paperwork and came to Britain demanding gifts (Halliday 2010[1992]: 77–78). This likely exacerbated grievances and mistrust of home-country ruling elites.

In the 1980s, funding from municipalities in Britain enabled community figures to set up community associations from each country: for North Yemenis, the Yemeni Immigrants General Union, and from the South, Yemeni Community Associations (Halliday 2010[1992]: 108). These organizations were primarily dedicated to promoting the Yemeni community’s abilities to navigate British society and achieve social mobility, though historian Fred Halliday (2010[1992]) mentions that they did raise several thousand pounds for a flooding emergency in South Yemen in 1989. In the 1990s, members of the Sheffield community reported establishing several organizations to help their fellow migrants and refugees.

In the years preceding the Arab Spring, anti-regime activism in both host-countries was dominated by calls for southern secession. One former southern politburo member I interviewed in Sheffield named Abdo Naqeeb, for instance, fled the sacking of Aden in 1994 by boat with other members of the defeated government. After settling in Sheffield, he and his colleagues engaged in lobbying efforts in 2004 and 2005, meeting with officials in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as with members of Congress in the United States. He was also a proud member of the pro-secessionist “TAJ,” or the Southern Democratic Assembly, which established a headquarters-in-exile in London in 2004.<sup>17</sup> Abdo and his colleague Dr. Mohammed al-Nomani explained that they were part of a specific “current” within the former

<sup>16</sup> Despite conflicts between Yemeni emigrants owing to conflict transmission, as I explain in detail in Chapter 3, the community would at times mobilize when directly threatened, as in the aftermath of a robbery and murder of Yemeni immigrant Ahmed Ali Almulaiki in Detroit (Pennock 2017). Leaders of an informal organization called the Detroit Yemen Society organized hundreds in a demonstration in front of the Detroit police headquarters in order to demand improved police protection. These “incidents likely facilitated the capacity of Yemenis for major political and labor activity in the fall of 1973” (Pennock 2017: 180).

<sup>17</sup> A week before our meeting in an Indian restaurant in Sheffield in 2012, Abdo Naqeeb and fellow TAJ member Dr. Mohammed al-Nomani had been in Cairo attending a conference of Yemeni southern secessionists led by Ali Naser Mohammed, a former southern elite. Ali Naser Mohammed lost the southern civil war of 1986 against another faction in the Yemeni Socialist

Yemeni Socialist Party, translated somewhat awkwardly into English as the “Party to Reform the Path of Unity [with the North].” This organization was a part of a transnational coalition of separatists with ties to specific factions in the former southern leadership.

Other pro-secession groups were founded independently of the old political establishment entirely. The National Board of South Yemen, also located in Sheffield, was established by secessionist supporters in 2007 to lobby and protest on behalf of popular movements in south Yemen. After being invited to attend one of their meetings during a gray, raining evening in the fall of 2012, I observed their members – men of various ages and political backgrounds, some communists, others unaffiliated with any particular faction – debating amicably in Arabic around a long table about how to plan a protest during an upcoming visit of Yemen’s president to London. This group also participated in pro-South rallies in London on several occasions, including in 2009 and 2010, to correspond with diplomatic visits by regime officials. A parallel organization in the United States was founded in response to the 2007 pensioners’ crisis in South Yemen to work on a similar set of actions. This group, called the South Yemeni American Association, was formed in New York to lobby the UN on behalf of the southern pro-secessionist movement and held demonstrations publicizing the South’s plight.<sup>18</sup>

After the 2006 presidential elections in Yemen, President Saleh indefinitely postponed future elections and sought to amend the constitution in order to abolish presidential term limits. On the eve of the 2011 revolution, the regime faced mounting international pressure to resume elections. However, no movements that I could locate in the diaspora were active in supporting democratic change in Yemen at this time. Rather, the only known anti-regime Yemeni groups operating in the US and British diasporas before the Arab Spring were dedicated to advocating for the cause of South Yemen autonomy and independence specifically.

## 2.9 YEMENI SOCIALIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT ORGANIZING

Yemenis have long socialized together in mosques, community holiday celebrations, and in Yemeni cafes. However, in terms of their formal socialization and empowerment efforts, I located only one organization dedicated to this effort before the Arab Spring in the United States. The American Association for

Party led by Ali Salem al-Baydh. See Steven Day’s (2012) excellent book on these dynamics, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*.

<sup>18</sup> I contacted supporters of the South Yemeni movement with several interview requests in the New York area, but I never received a response. Because this group had no public online profile or official status that I could find, it remains unknown whether this group’s informal membership extended beyond the New York area.

Yemeni Scientists and Professionals, founded in 2004 in Rhode Island, was established to promote education and the professional class among Yemeni immigrants. Other chapters were later formed by community leaders among large Yemeni populations in Michigan and California. This was the most cited organization among the Yemeni Americans interviewed, and according to its website as of 2012, its leaders have worked to deliver education-related aid to Yemen. I also discovered the existence of a group called Yemeni American Association of Bay Ridge, founded in New York in 2010. Little is known about this group and its activities, however, and it appears to have become defunct relatively shortly thereafter.

The Yemeni community in Britain, on the other hand, hosts a greater number of community organizations owing to a legacy of immigrant incorporation policies and government subsidies targeting populous minority communities. This was made possible in part by support for ethnic associations from British local councils in the 1980s (Halliday 2010[1992]: 142). These conditions led to the establishment of Yemeni Community Associations (YCAs) by community leaders in four English cities – Birmingham, Sandwell, Liverpool, and Sheffield – to provide educational and social services to local Yemeni immigrants and their children. While these organizations were intended to be divorced from home-country politics, the merging of the two Yemens in 1990 led to the merger of the YCAs as well. Saleh Alnood, the former elected head of the Sheffield Yemeni Community Association, emigrated from the South in 1989 at the age of thirteen. He explained that

Up till 1990, we had two Yemeni community associations in Sheffield.<sup>19</sup> Unity took place, and we assumed that we had to get unified as well. So we did. It was almost like we were [part of] the establishment in Yemen, when in fact we were independent bodies. We had no connection in terms of an organization of structure or anything to do with [the government in Yemen]. But we assumed: unity in Yemen, we have to unite here.

Organizers also established groups to assist migrants and refugees. Several residents in Liverpool formed the Yemeni Migrant Workers Organization to negotiate with the Yemeni government about making the process of emigration to Britain easier and more transparent. The Yemen Refugee Organization, which was founded by southern secessionist Abdo Naqeeb, also assisted with emigrant and refugee resettlement in Sheffield.

In 2010, a handful of Yemeni youth from London formed two groups aimed at community-building within the diaspora. The three youth founders of the Yemen Forum Foundation, established in 2010, traveled to various Yemeni communities with the intention of forming a UK-wide network dedicated to community development. Awssan Kamal, one of the organizers, explained that

<sup>19</sup> Saleh reported that the names of the two former YCAs in Sheffield were the Yemeni Workers Union, which represented the northern Yemeni diaspora, and the Yemeni Community Association, which represented the South.

the initial purpose was to first connect and mobilize the Yemeni diaspora, and in time to develop the capacity to help Yemen as well. The second group, led by a university-age youth named Maha, was called the Yemeni Youth Association. This informal group was founded in 2010 as an apolitical social club for London-based Yemenis. Maha was motivated to form this group in order to help her younger sister remain close to Yemen and to meet other Yemenis. She did so because London, in her estimation, did not have a “proper” Yemeni community at that time. Overall, while these organizations varied in size and scope, the British Yemeni diaspora nevertheless had a relatively robust domestic empowerment sector, while the American Yemeni diaspora was represented by one professional association.

## 2.10 CONCLUSION

After exiles and émigrés found refuge in the United States and Britain, they appeared to have gained what social movement scholars call the “political opportunities” necessary for activism and social initiatives. As Zakia of the Libyan community in Manchester told me with a wide grin and open palms, “The first time I feel that I’m free, that I’m *safe*, was when I came to England.” By keeping hope for change alive, reaching out to their community members, and participating in events for the national community, exiles and youth activists fostered transnational “ways of being and ways of belonging” in their home-countries (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1002) and laid the groundwork for the building of social movements for the Arab Spring in 2011.

However, I also find that Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni activists were hardly the “unencumbered” long-distance nationalists envisioned by Benedict Anderson (1998: 74). Despite their opportunities to voice grievances against home-country regimes from abroad, movements for regime change in Libya and Syria remained small and exile-driven, and those for Yemen remained focused on southern independence. And although these diaspora communities hosted nonpolitical empowerment and socialization initiatives for the diaspora itself, less than a handful of Yemeni groups were engaged in charitable efforts of any kind, and no Libyan or Syrian groups were established for this purpose. Despite the fact that the diaspora communities contained exiles and well-educated professionals who were eager to see democratic change and development at home, transnational activism of any kind for democratic change immediately preceding the Arab Spring was weak. What accounts for the character of voice in these anti-regime diaspora communities prior to the 2011 revolutions? Chapter 3 provides the answers, demonstrating how political conditions in the homeland cast a shadow over diaspora mobilization.