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Lamma: A Journal of Libyan Studies

Title

Field Research in Libya

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/11w4n6cf>

Journal

Lamma: A Journal of Libyan Studies, 2(0)

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Publication Date

2022

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Field Research in Libya

Conducting field research in Libya presents itself with a set of challenges for both those who have access and those who seek to find connections. Not only has the country been in civil war over the past decade but also research sources such as archives are often inaccessible. The political polarization and the policies of silencing voices have taken such deep roots that conducting interviews and focus groups face numerous setbacks. They vary from the rejection of participants for fear of being associated with “journalism” and therefore being at risk of interrogation to forced disappearances to direct violent interruptions. The cause for this distrust depends on where you are conducting research in the country and where it might be perceived as threatening to the present status quo.

This essay draws on my experience attempting to conduct ethnographic research in Libya in 2020 before COVID lockdowns set in. I address the consequences of the national and international pandemic measures on in-person meetings and how I had to change my research methodology to adapt to the numerous constraints. It will also cover the ethical question of conducting interviews and focus groups in social/political science with participants who might be at risk regardless of their position and how to best avoid such consequences.

Introduction

Libyan and foreign researchers face a multitude of challenges when conducting field research in Libya, from restrictions of access to potential participants to struggling institutions and archives that are underfunded, understaffed, and often closed due to the developments of the conflict. Those who are interested in conducting field work especially in the political and social sciences must conduct a risk assessment for themselves and participants in the study.

To conduct interviews and focus groups for political and social

science projects, a longer time period must be allocated to finding interviewees. Researchers must foresee delays and remain flexible to possibly completely changing their methodologies depending on the situation in the country. This should be informed and updated by contacts in Libya and certain measures should be taken for the safety of the participants and data.

These complicated conditions for field research pose a number of ethical and methodological questions which this essay will touch upon briefly.

Context of Field Research in Libya

Libyan and foreign researchers have always had difficulties accessing research in Libya, from restrictions on visas, to restrictions of topics, to lack of funding afforded by universities. Libraries and archives are understaffed, with certain resources completely off limits due to their political nature.¹ In the wake of the uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, demands for protests in Libya were increasing. These protests erupted all over the country, eventually leading to an intervention and an eight-month confrontation between the opposition and governmental forces.²

The changes brought by the revolt opened up Libya to journalists and researchers who were interested in documenting the developments of the transition. In the climate of liberation after 2011, access was given to large parts of the country with little restrictions. Conducting research was accessible if challenging given that the country was still going through armed conflicts.³ This open space lasted until late 2013 when political developments resulted in post electoral violence in 2014 and Libya entered another stage of civil war.⁴

1 See Landen Garland, *2011 Libyan Civil War* (White Word Publications, 2012); Osama A. Tashani "The Scientific Research in Libya: The Role of the New Generation of Researchers," *Libyan Journal of Medicine* 4/4 (2009), 129.

2 *Ibid.*

3 See for example Lindsey Hilsum, *Sandstorm: Libya from Gaddafi to Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

4 See reporting from the International Crisis Group, "Libya: Getting Geneva

Human rights defenders, activists and journalists were targeted, assassinated, and forcibly disappeared and random shelling and bombing of infrastructure often targeted schools and universities which led to long term closures of campuses.⁵ Over the years, the space for conducting activities especially in relation to research and journalism has shrunk considerably. For research in political and social science, the conflict in Libya has created a highly polarized environment, which not only means that access can be difficult but that often individuals refuse to participate for fear of reprisals.

In March 2020, Libya confirmed its first case of coronavirus and began to take containment measures, which included a total shut down of institutions and a curfew on movement that was restricted to a few hours during the day.⁶ I had travelled to Libya earlier that month to conduct my ethnographic field research and it is safe to say that my plans had to completely change and I was unable to follow through with field work. It was not only a question of the logistics of a total shut down, but the military offensive against Tripoli was still happening and there was a general sense among the Libyan public of being overwhelmed and burned out.

While the shutdown measures have changed over the past year and a half and, to some extent, are now more relaxed, the situation remains incredibly unpredictable. Researchers will have to be confined to conducting interviews over the phone and online which poses several ethical and methodological questions as it concerns future research projects in the country.

Right,” in *Middle East and North Africa Report* No. 157 (February 2015), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libya-getting-geneva-right>

5 For reports about constraints on educational institutions in Libya, see the report “Libya: Education Under Attack 2018” published by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, <https://eua2018.protectingeducation.org/libya>

6 The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Libya on Tuesday, March 24, 2020, “Libya Confirms 1st Coronavirus Case” in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 25, 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/2198246/libya-confirms-1st-coronavirus-case>

Conducting Interviews and Focus Groups

In my experience, conducting interviews is extremely time consuming when attempting to reach the wider population. In contexts of distrust, the snowballing technique, a qualitative interviewing methodology that involves relying on other's recommendations for additional interviewees, helps resolve trust issues.⁷ I have found that participants in studies prefer to conduct interviews over the phone, even if the researcher is in the same location; this has especially been the case among women, for whom mobility can be restricted.

There are also security concerns that arise if the researcher were to meet interviewees in a coffee shop or another public space. There needs to be consideration given to potential perceptions of the public of how interviews by researchers might appear to be journalistic interviews. This assumption can lead to interviews being disrupted and poses considerable risk for the interviewee and researcher.

Focus groups are even more challenging, especially if the group has mixed gender participants; mixed gender meetings can be perceived negatively by certain conservative factions. Researchers have to take measures to mitigate disruptions of focus groups, such as selecting a neighbourhood that is relatively calm and has no armed groups. An even better option would be to see if the researcher can collaborate with the municipality or schools, if possible, to conduct these focus groups.

There are now more possibilities to conduct interviews and focus groups online but this approach can limit the research in terms of having a diverse sample of participants, which leads to a number of methodological considerations when designing political and social science research projects in Libya. My initial plans of conducting ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with random participants have changed to grounded theory with a much smaller and more focused sample of interviewees.

Would it be easier and more feasible to conduct quantitative re-

7 For a brief description of the snowballing technique in qualitative research see "Snowballing Technique," in *A Dictionary of Sociology*, ed. John Scott and Gordon Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100514607>

search than qualitative? This might be the case; however, it would still limit the research sample since it relies on people being online and having access to phones and computers. Researchers must consider structural issues that impact access to participants in Libya.

Ethical Questions

There are a number of ethical questions that must be carefully considered when working with Libyan participants, especially when researching conflict-sensitive topics that would pose a risk to the individual's livelihood. These considerations are not to discourage researchers from conducting the work but to establish certain guidelines such as using secure communication applications and encrypting emails and datasets.

I have observed research projects led by researchers abroad that rely heavily on young Libyan researchers to conduct field work without proper compensation or training. This is incredibly dangerous not only for the safety of the young researchers but also the validity of the data and, therefore, research findings. Research budgets must take into consideration proper compensation for and capacity building of young researchers.

The recent developments in the country might open up more possibilities of research and collaborations. Libyan universities struggled for the past decade and so there is a need for technical support for these institutions.⁸ Future programs must consider existing systematic discrimination and violence against certain social groups and women but also the lack of proper infrastructure to integrate young people into scientific research.



8 Eliza Volkmann, "Libya's universities face renaissance if new peace can hold," *University World News: Africa Edition*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210516164027391>

