

American Foreign Policy Council

LIBYA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 6,002,347

Area: 1,759,540 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Berber and Arab 97%, other 3% (includes Greeks, Maltese, Italians, Egyptians, Pakistanis, Turks, Indians, and Tunisians)

Religions: Sunni Muslim 97%, other 3%

Government Type: operates under a transitional government

GDP (official exchange rate): \$85.11 billion (2012 est)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2013)



The tragic death of U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other diplomatic personnel during the September 11, 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi represents the most prominent episode of growing Islamist violence in Libya since Muammar Qadhafi's ouster. Small contingents of local jihadists, as well as alleged elements from al-Qaeda, have come to the fore in Libya since the start of the country's "Arab Spring" ferment in 2011.

The citizen backlash against the attack, which led to the overrunning of a series of militia bases belonging to the groups Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB), Rafallah al-Sahati, and February 17, has provided hope for an end to the recent violence. However, groups like ASB and Ansar al-Sharia in Darnah (ASD) likely will continue to provide security challenges as spoilers to the newly-elected Libyan government. Specifically, ASB, which has since the consulate

attacks attempted to burnish its local credentials through social services, is likely to grow in popularity due to a disconnect between locals and the national government.

On the whole, however, Libyans have rejected extreme ideologies of all stripes. In the country's recent parliamentary elections, a coalition of moderate parties emerged victorious while the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood had a poor showing compared to its brethren in Egypt and Tunisia. Further, the post-jihadists of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) that took part in the election did not garner any popular support. It is likely, though, that as the public square—which was completely snuffed out by Qadhafi's repressive policies opens further in Libya, Islamists will have an opportunity to gain more of a following, likely in non-violent forms, though violence will likely still attract some adherents at the fringes of national politics.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Libya won its independence from Italy by the end of World War II and declared itself a constitutional monarchy under King Idris. On September 1969, Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi staged a military *coup d'état* in the country, establishing an Arab nationalist regime that adhered to an ideology of “Islamic socialism.” It was not long before his regime began to generate resentment among Islamic circles in the country, which led to an Islamist revival beginning in the late 1970s.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood first appeared in Libya in the 1949.¹ The Libyan branch was founded by Egyptian cleric Ezadine Ibrahim Mustafa and several others, who were given refuge by former Libyan King Idris after fleeing political persecution in Egypt.² The king allowed them a relative degree of freedom to spread their ideology, and the movement soon attracted a number of local adherents. It gained further momentum through Egyptian teachers working in Libya.³ Qadhafi, however, took a less accommodating stance, regarding the Brotherhood as a potential source of opposition.⁴ Soon after coming to power, he arrested a number of the Brothers and repatriated them back to Egypt. In 1973, the security services arrested and tortured members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, who, under pressure, agreed to dissolve the organization. As a result, the Brotherhood remained silent throughout the remainder of the 1970s.

However, in the early 1980s, the Brotherhood (which by then had renamed itself the “Libyan Islamic Group” or *al-Jama'a al-Islamiya al-Libiyya*) revived its aspirations to replace the existing secular regime with sharia through peaceful means, and was once again beginning to gather pop-

ular support. The group was given a boost by a number of Libyan students who had returned from the United Kingdom and the U.S., and who took an active role in helping to spread the Brotherhood ideology. The movement operated covertly in groups of interlinked cells active throughout the country, and drew much of its popular appeal through the charitable and welfare work of its members. In particular, the movement attracted members of the middle classes and was especially strong in the eastern area of Benghazi, where the main tribes have traditionally opposed Qadhafi's rule.⁵ By the mid-1980s, most members that remained in Libya were either imprisoned or executed.⁶

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood returned to the scene in 1999 through dialogue with the Qadhafi regime. This exchange gained more momentum in 2005-2006, when Muammar Qadhafi's son Sayf al-Islam helped move the process forward. Sayf specifically did this to co-opt the Brotherhood. On the eve of the Libyan uprising in the spring of 2011, it was estimated that the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood had around a thousand members within Libya, and 200 in exile.⁷ Today, it could be stronger still; in December 2012, Mohammed Sawan, the leader of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party, stated that the organization now boasts more than 10,000 members, suggesting that it has been successful in garnering new support over the past two years.⁸

Smaller Groups

Not only did the Brotherhood garner support in the late 1990s, but a number of new Islamic groups also emerged. These included the Islamic Gathering Movement (*Harakat Atajama'a al-Islami*), founded by Mustafa Ali al-Jihani. Its support base was almost entirely in the east of the country, and its ideology was very similar to that of the Brotherhood. The global *Tablighi Jama'at* movement also succeeded in drawing support at this time, mainly in the western areas of the country. The *Tablighi Jama'at* chose, however, to distance itself from politics, after a number of its members were arrested in the late 1980s, and subsequently became co-opted by the regime, with some being given posts as *imams*.⁹ The number of *Tablighi* supporters in Libya currently is relatively small, since there is only one known *Tablighi* center in the country.¹⁰

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)

The dominant Islamist group that challenged the Qadhafi regime was the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). LIFG did not officially announce its formation until 1995, but the roots of the group can be found in an underground *jihadi* movement formed in 1982 by 'Iwad al-Zawawi. With no official name and under high security, the movement managed to spread and attract many followers throughout Libya over the span of more

than a decade.¹¹ Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, it advocated launching military operations against the regime in order to overthrow Qadhafi and plotted attacks against senior figures in his government. By 1989, authorities had discovered the insurgency and arrested many of the rebels, including al-Zawawi, after the group carried out failed attempts to overthrow the regime in 1986, 1987, and 1989.¹² Those who were not captured were forced to flee to Afghanistan.

The LIFG was engaged in long-term preparation for its military campaign, and to strengthen combat skills many of its members seized the opportunity to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. There, they and other Libyans set up their own camp and underwent military training, at times instructed by al-Qaeda members.¹³ However, it should be noted that LIFG members were the most critical of al-Qaeda of all the “Arab Afghans.”¹⁴ While in exile in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the movement began to morph into an identifiable organization. Besides military training, the Libyan recruits were also indoctrinated in Afghanistan by influential *jihadi* clerics such as Abdullah Azzam.¹⁵ These recruits began to develop fighting skills in anticipation of the day they would return to Libya to fight Qadhafi’s regime. Following the anti-Soviet Afghan *jihad*, Libyans either returned home to set up cells, moved to Sudan to establish a base of operations to plan the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime, and lastly London for logistical and financial support. According to Noman Benotman, a senior leader and member of the group’s *shura* council, the LIFG’s interlude in Sudan was not predicated on the plans of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Rather, they had staked out Sudan as a potential base following the Afghan *jihad* in 1988-1989. They only decided it was appropriate to move closer to the Libyan front in 1993.¹⁶ It was there they sent some delegations to Algeria to continue training as well as provide an area to enter Libya clandestinely.

Back in Libya, the LIFG, led by Commander Abdul Hakim Belhadj, was establishing its structure and developing the leadership skills of those in charge of cells and units throughout the country.¹⁷ The LIFG planned to meticulously build up its capabilities, but their planning was accelerated due to poor operational security in 1995. Members of LIFG attempted to extract one of their comrades from a hospital in Benghazi; Libyan security became aware of the plan and quickly moved to suppress the group. As a result, the LIFG was forced to announce itself officially for the first time in October 1995.¹⁸

Once the LIFG was exposed, it sprung into action to try and salvage its plans to bring down the regime. Throughout the 1990s, the LIFG conducted military operations against the Libyan regime, including several failed attempts to assassinate Qadhafi himself. The Libyan regime fought relentlessly against the LIFG, which suffered numerous losses, including that of Salah Fathi bin Sulayman (a.k.a. Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Khattab), one of its

founding fathers, who was killed in a battle with Libyan soldiers near Darnah in September 1997.¹⁹

By 1998, the LIFG's insurgency and terrorist campaign within Libya came to a halt. An official ceasefire was not declared until 2000, however.²⁰ Many members were imprisoned in Libya, while some that got away decided to return to Afghanistan—including the group's *emir* at the time Abu, 'Abd Allah al-Sadiq, its chief religious official, Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa'idi, and Abu Anas al-Libi, who had been recently implicated in the 1998 Embassy Bombings.²¹ A handful of LIFG members remained in London in exile, and eventually played an important role when the LIFG began its reconciliation process with the Libyan regime in 2005.

While the LIFG was against Bin Laden's plans, including the 9/11 attacks, they suffered the consequences heavily after the United States invaded Afghanistan. Unlike other *jihadi* groups that stayed behind to assist al-Qaeda in its fight with the United States, the majority of LIFG fighters and leaders in Afghanistan fled to Iran, where many were subsequently detained and deported.²² Some LIFG members stayed behind in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) and later joined al-Qaeda in an individual capacity (more on this below). But by 2004, the majority of LIFG leaders and members had been arrested, imprisoned, were in hiding, or had been exiled.

The following year, the Libyan regime at the prompting of Muammar al-Qadhafi's son, Sayf al-Islam, began a reconciliation and de-radicalization process.²³ The negotiations took a few years, but in September 2009 LIFG leaders in Libya released a new "code" for *jihad* in the form of a 417-page religious document titled "Corrective Studies."²⁴ The new code viewed armed struggle against Qadhafi's regime as illegal under Islamic law and set down new guidelines for when and how *jihad* should be fought. It does, however, state that *jihad* is permissible if Muslim lands are invaded, citing Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine as examples.²⁵ Many leaders and members of the LIFG would eventually be released from prison in March 2010.²⁶ Others, such as 'Abd al-Wahab Qa'id, the brother of the late al-Qaeda ideologue and operational leader Abu Yahya al-Libi, would not be released until after the Libyan uprising against the Qadhafi regime began in March 2011.²⁷ The LIFG was effectively disbanded when the revisions were completed. Following the revolution, many leaders and members decided to create political parties and buy into the political processes of the new Libyan system.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Libya is a country of about 700,000 square kilometers and 5.8 million inhabitants, 1.5 million of whom are foreigners. Ninety-seven percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, with the rest belonging to different Christian

churches.²⁸ The dominant school of Islamic thought among the Libyan population is the Malaki School (similar to other North African countries). A minority favors Salafi interpretations, which usually uses the Hanbali School dominant in Saudi Arabia.

Before the 2011 revolution, Libya did not have a constitution, and hence there were no explicit legal provision governing relations between religion and society, or religion and state. However, some degree of guidance was provided in the Great Green Charter on Human Rights²⁹ that was adopted in 1988. According to the Charter, the government tolerated most minority religions but strongly opposed militant forms of Islam, which it viewed as a security threat. Religious practices that conflicted with the government's interpretation of *sharia* were prohibited.

Nevertheless, Islam represented the equivalent of a state religion, as it was and remains thoroughly integrated into everyday political and social life. As with all other aspects of individuals' lives in Libya, the government closely monitored and regulated Islam to ensure religious life included no political dimension. Monitoring of mosques and a widespread culture of self-censorship generally ensured that both clerics and adherents stayed within well-established lines of acceptable practice. Even mosques endowed by prominent families generally conformed to the government-approved interpretation of Islam. The Qaddafi regime also maintained control over religious literature, including Islamic literature;³⁰ for example, the government denied public access to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood's Internet site.³¹

The World Islamic Call Society (WICS) was the official conduit for the state-approved form of Islam. With an emphasis on activities outside the country, it operated a state-run university for moderate Muslim clerics from outside the Arab world. Before the revolution, WICS had trained 5,000 students in Islamic thought, literature and history. Upon graduation, the government encouraged students to return home and promote its interpretation of Islamic thought in their own countries.

A state-run religious endowments (*awqaf*) authority previously administered mosques, supervised clerics and had primary responsibility for ensuring that all religious practices within the country conformed to the state-approved form of Islam.³² Religious instruction in Islam was required in public schools, but the government did not issue information on the religious affiliation of children in public schools, and there were no reports of children transferring to private schools for alternative religious instruction.³³

Notwithstanding these mechanisms, however, Libyans have proven suscep-

tible to the lure of Islamism. Libyan nationals figured prominently in the senior leadership of al-Qaeda once the movement began to reconstitute itself in Pakistan after 2004. A few, however, had been associated with al-Qaeda going back to the 1980s and 1990s, including:

- Ibn Shaykh al-Libi, head of the infamous Khalden training camp in Afghanistan. He was arrested in November 2001 and provided false testimony to the Bush administration that there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. He died in prison in Libya, allegedly as a result of torture, after being repatriated from Guantánamo Bay.³⁴
- Abu Faraj al-Libi replaced Khaled Shaykh Muhammad as al-Qaeda's third in command after Muhammad was apprehended until his own arrest in the spring of 2005.³⁵
- Abu Anas al-Libi, who was implicated in the 1998 Embassy Bombings and currently believed to be establishing al-Qaeda cells in Libya, though this information has not been confirmed.³⁶
- Shaykh Atiyatullah 'Abd al-Rahman al-Libi, who, prior to his death in a drone strike in August 2011, had ascended to become deputy leader of al-Qaeda and was a well-respected ideologue. Before Bin Laden's death, Atiyatullah was also viewed as his right-hand man.³⁷

Additionally, several prominent ex-LIFG commanders joined al-Qaeda in individual capacities after the American invasion of Afghanistan, and took over prominent public positions within its leadership and infrastructure. They include:

- Abu al-Layth al-Libi, one of the senior military commanders of al-Qaeda fighting the Coalition and Pakistani troops. He was responsible for the Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces until U.S. forces killed him in the spring of 2008.³⁸
- Abu Yahya al-Libi, who, prior to his death by drone in June 2012, had reached the position of deputy leader of al-Qaeda and was the head of al-Qaeda's religious committee.³⁹
- Abdullah Sa'id al-Libi, who served during 2008-2009 as the head of internal regions (Afghanistan-Pakistan border zone) in al-Qaeda's military committee until killed by a U.S. drone attack.⁴⁰

Libyans also figured prominently in the Iraq War. In October 2007, coalition forces in Iraq captured records in a raid near Sinjar along the Iraqi-Syrian border that contained a list of foreign fighters that joined al-Qaeda in Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007.⁴¹ Libyan fighters were estimated to constitute 18.8 percent of foreign fighters in Iraq, second only to Saudi Arabia's 41 percent.⁴² Notably, however, these fighters did not attempt to over-

throw the Qadhafi regime when they returned home, and it is believed that some were even reintegrated through the reconciliation process.⁴³ There are signs, however, that at least some have returned to militancy either in Syria or with Islamist brigades in Eastern Libya.

In addition to Islamist activity within Libya, some of the Libyan fighters that assisted in the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime have lent their hand in the Syrian civil war against the Assad regime.⁴⁴ Dozens of Libyans, if not more, have joined Liwa' al-Ummah, an armed opposition group in Syria led by Mehdi al-Harati, an Irish-Libyan dual national who was previously a commander in the Tripoli Brigade. While led by Libyans, Syrians comprise more than 90% of the fighters. There have been at least ten confirmed cases of Libyans dying on the Syrian battlefield.

Libya has also become a transfer point for fighters from Western Europe and the Maghreb headed to Syria. News reports and *jihadist* sources suggest that some of these individuals have attended training camps in Misratah, Benghazi, the desert area near Hon, and the Green Mountains in the east, though the accuracy of these reports is unknown.

The new Libyan government has yet to draw up a constitution, as of this writing. As a result, there are no provisions currently related to religion and society. Many Islamists and pious non-Islamist Muslims alike believe that *sharia* should be enshrined in the constitution. What that means, though, is up to interpretation depending on whether one follows a traditional or *jihadi* trend. The contestation over this will likely heat up as the process for writing the constitution begins.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

During Following the fall of the Qadhafi regime, Islamism has re-emerged onto the Libyan scene, encapsulated in a number of Islamist movements. There are two main types: those working within the system and those playing spoiler outside of it.

Parliamentary Islamists

After Qadhafi was killed in the fall of 2011, the transition to democracy began. Many believed the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood would win big in the parliamentary elections, following in the footsteps of its brethren in Tunisia and Egypt. In March 2012, the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood established a political party called the Justice and Construction Party (JCP), modeled after the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.⁴⁵

Mohammed Sawan leads the JCP. ⁴⁶ Libya's parliamentary elections were allocated so that parties would run for 80 seats, while independent politicians would contest 120. Of the 80 seats that would go to the parties, the JCP won 17, second only to the broad-based coalition of the National Forces Alliance, which secured 39 of the seats. The JCP's performance, however, paled in comparison to the larger numbers pulled in by Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party and Tunisia's Ennahda, which both received more than 37% of the seats in their respective parliamentary elections.

With regard to the LIFG, once the uprising began, it stuck to its word and did not return to *jihadi* activities, even changing its name to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change. As the rebellion unfolded, however, many members of the group joined the armed resistance, where they drew on their prior combat experience; most prominently, LIFG figure Abdul Hakim Belhaj became head of the Tripoli Military Council.⁴⁷

Following Qaddafi's fall, the LIFG split into two political factions that contested the July 2012 legislative elections: the broad-based moderate party Hizb al-Watan (HW), which Belhaj joined, and the smaller, more conservative and Islamist-tinged Hizb al-Umma al-Wasat (HUW), which most other LIFG members joined under the leadership of prominent figure Sami al-Sa'adi.⁴⁸ HW did not win any seats in the election, while HUW garnered one, which was allocated to Abdul Wahhab al-Qa'id, brother of the late Abu Yahya al-Libi.

Additionally, smaller Islamist parties also had a poor showing. The Salafi party al-Asala as well as the Islamist party Hizb al-Islah wa-l-Tanmiyya, which is led by a Khaled al-Werchefani, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, did not win any seats either.

Non-State Islamists

Even as the LIFG put down its arms after the war and joined the political process, new *jihadi* groups began to emerge. One of the largest is Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB), which first announced itself in February 2012 and is led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, who had previously been an inmate of Qaddafi's infamous Abu Salim prison.⁴⁹ The group is believed to be behind the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. In addition to online connections with the Ansar al-Sharia group in Tunisia, ASB has loose ties to several smaller Salafi-*jihadi* *katibas* (battalions) in Libya, including the shadowy Ansar al-Sharia in Darnah (ASD), led by former Guantanamo Bay inmate Abu Sufyan bin Qumu. However, there is no publicly-available evidence of coordination between ASB and ASD. Many of these *katibas* participated in the ASB's first "annual conference" in June 2012; based on photos from the event, as many as a thousand individuals attended. Recent reports suggest ASB has a few hundred members.⁵⁰

ASB's main concern is instituting their interpretation of Islamic law.

ASB has also been providing local services. ASB members have cleaned and fixed roads, provided aid during Ramadan, and most recently were helping with security at a hospital in Benghazi (though after their base was overrun by protesters they relinquished their security duties). Although the group admits to destroying Sufi shrines and graves in Benghazi, ASB has attempted to carve out a niche locally as defenders of a strict interpretation of Islam, while helping with the basic needs of the community.⁵¹

Another new actor is the shadowy “Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman Brigades,” named after the spiritual leader of the Egyptian al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah who is currently serving a life sentence in the United States for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center attack, among other plots. Not much is known about the group’s leadership or size, but it was responsible for a series of attacks in Benghazi in May and June 2012, including two attacks against the International Committee of the Red Cross, a bomb attack against the U.S. consulate, and a strike on the British ambassador’s convoy.⁵²

Al-Qaeda continues to boast a presence in Libya as well. Most recently, in August 2012, the Library of Congress published an unclassified report about the growing presence of al-Qaeda cells in Libya.⁵³ Al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as Abu Yahya and Atiyatullah prior to both of their deaths planned to create a base for *jihad* in Libya. The report identified Abu Anas as the “builder of al-Qaeda’s network in Libya” and referred to him as an intermediate between al-Qaeda senior leadership in Pakistan and the group’s leaders on the ground in Libya. The report also maintains that al-Qaeda is using the name Ansar al-Sharia as a front, though, scant evidence has been provided at this juncture regarding this claim. Further, much of the report provides circumstantial evidence, assertions, and hearsay. Therefore, more information is needed regarding the nature of al-Qaeda’s presence in Libya prior to assessing its true strength.

ENDNOTES

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[4] Ibidem.

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[12] Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi Books, 2010), 33.

[13] Evan F. Kohlmann, *Dossier: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group*, NEFA Foundation, October 2007, 3, www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefalifg1007.pdf.

[14] Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 13, 168.

[15] Kohlmann, *Dossier: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group*, 4.

[16] Ibid., 93-94.

[17] Ibidem, 8.

[18] Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 65.

[19] Kohlmann, *Dossier: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group*, 8-11.

[20] Ibid., 140.

[21] Ibidem, 179.

[22] Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 179-181.

[23] Omar Ashour, "Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 23 iss. 3, 2011, 384.

[24] Ibid., 385. According to Ashour there were a few bumps in the

road: “the six leaders in Abu Selim Prison wanted the decision to be unanimous so as to maximize the impact on the middle-ranks, the grassroots, and the sympathizers, and thus guarantee successful organizational de-radicalization. They thus demanded the involvement of the LIFG leaders abroad in the dialogue with the regime. Those leaders included two Shura Council members (Abu Layth al-Libi and ‘Urwa al-Libi) and two influential members of the LIFG’s legitimate (theological) committee: Abu Yahya al-Libi, currently believed to be the third person in al-Qaida, and Abdullah Sa’id, who was killed in December 2009 by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. All four rejected the offer.”

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