



# LIBYA

## Quick Facts

Population: 6,653,210 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 1,759,540 sq km

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

GDP (official exchange rate): \$33.31 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Libya is a failed North African state home to a wide array of Islamist and Salafi-jihadi groups. Longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi ruled the oil-rich country for four decades, gaining international notoriety as an eccentric and brutal authoritarian responsible for a number of high-profile international terror attacks. The Arab Spring revolution that toppled Qaddafi in 2011 turned the country into a battleground for small contingents of ideologically diverse militias, military units, tribal forces, and jihadists. The fall of the Qaddafi regime also created the opportunity for Libya's long-suppressed Islamists to wield political power. Libyan Islamists failed to achieve even the temporary political gains of their counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia, however. Successive transitional governments failed, sending the country spiraling into a complex civil war shaped by local grievances, regional power struggles, and ideological divides.*

*Several Salafi-jihadi groups have taken advantage of the revolution and subsequent civil war to establish and expand safe havens in Libya. These groups include the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia Libya and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya recruit and train militants, govern populations, and prepare attacks on other Maghreb states and Europe. Islamist militants in Libya, including jihadists, suffered major military losses in recent years but remain a formidable destabilizing force in the country. Regional states pursuing their own visions for the future of Islamism through Libyan proxies are also worsening the conflict. The ongoing crisis has destabilized Libya's neighbors, strengthened transnational smuggling networks, and exacerbated massive migrant flows to Europe.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Political Islam entered Libya in the mid-20th century, when King Idris I welcomed asylum-seekers from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This sanctuary period ended in 1969, when Colonel Muammar Qaddafi overthrew the monarchy. Qaddafi violently suppressed all political opposition during his forty-year rule, including Islamist forces. Islamist organizations, nevertheless, challenged the regime through both peaceful and violent means from the 1970s to the 1990s. State oppression fostered the development of Libyan Islamist networks in the country's prisons and beyond its borders—in Afghanistan and London.

Qaddafi later sought to co-opt Islamist organizations through a policy of negotiation and de-radicalization spearheaded by his son, Sayf al-Islam, in the early 2000s.

The 2011 Arab Spring protests rallied Islamists and secularists alike against the regime. Qaddafi responded to unrest with a brutal crackdown leading to a civil war and a subsequent NATO intervention that tore apart the state and led to the dictator's death. The resulting power vacuum yielded chronic instability as various groups vied for influence and failed to exert full control. Libya's transitional government struggled to establish order and rebuild state institutions. Militias and other non-state actors proliferated and strengthened during this period.

Rivalries developed into a full-scale civil war by 2014 when Commander Khalifa Haftar, a former regime officer, launched Operation Dignity with the goal of defeating Islamist groups in Libya.<sup>1</sup> An alliance of mainly Islamist militias launched Operation Dawn to counter Haftar's offensive in August 2014, seizing Tripoli's airport and other parts of the capital.<sup>2</sup> Outside actors, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey, have since backed various proxies. Ongoing factional conflict has even mobilized formerly nonviolent quietist Islamists to join the fray in defense of their interests.<sup>3</sup>

Post-revolution Libya gained international notoriety as a hotbed for transnational Salafi jihadi organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda. Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafi-jihadi group formed by members of al-Qaeda and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, is likely responsible for the September 2012 attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi that killed four Americans, including Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens.<sup>4</sup> ISIS took root and grew rapidly in Libya in 2014, establishing the first branch of its caliphate outside of Iraq and Syria. ISIS's Libyan branch has also supported terrorist attacks in Europe, especially the May 2017 Manchester bombing.<sup>5</sup>

Islamist militants are currently losing ground in Libya, but remain a threat to the country's stability. The establishment of the UN-backed Government of National Accord in late 2015 widened a split between hardline and moderate Islamists in the Operation Dawn coalition, and ultimately marginalizing hardline forces aligned with a now-defunct pro-Islamist parliament. In December 2016, GNA-allied forces, with U.S. support, ousted ISIS from its stronghold in Sirte.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent U.S. airstrikes hindered ISIS's efforts to reconstitute. Haftar's forces made significant gains against Islamists and jihadists in eastern and central Libya from 2016 to 2017, including retaking Benghazi. Egyptian and Emirati support for Haftar, paired with a downturn in Qatar's regional influence, has further weakened Libya's Islamists. Libya's diverse array of Islamist and jihadist actors continue to be key players in the conflict, however. They will regain and likely retain power as long as Libya lacks effective governance and security structures.

### *The Muslim Brotherhood*

The Muslim Brotherhood is a transnational organization that seeks to establish sharia as the base for the state and society through nonviolent means. The Brotherhood originated in Egypt in the 1920s. It came to Libya in 1949, when King Idris I allowed Egyptian Brotherhood members fleeing political persecution in their country to settle in Benghazi.<sup>7</sup> Several of these asylum-seekers, along with Egyptian cleric Ezadine Ibrahim Mustafa, founded the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood as a branch of the original Egyptian organization. King Idris I allowed the group relative freedom to spread its ideology, and it in turn began to attract local adherents.

Colonel Muammar Qaddafi overthrew the Libyan monarchy in 1969 and promptly cracked down on the Brotherhood as a potential source of opposition, arresting a number of members and returning others to Egypt.<sup>8</sup> The crackdown continued until 1973, when detained and tortured Brotherhood members agreed to dissolve the organization, effectively silencing themselves for the remainder of the 1970s.

The Brotherhood reorganized in the early 1980s and revived its aspirations to replace the Qaddafi regime with sharia law. It renamed itself the Libyan Islamic Group or al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya al-Libiyya. It began to acquire popular support among Libyan students who met exiled members in the U.S. and UK.

These students spread the Brotherhood's ideology and joined its covert cells inside of Libya.<sup>9</sup>

The Brotherhood generated much of its popular appeal through charitable and welfare work, despite the state's repression. Its programs drew members of the Libyan middle class in particular. The Brotherhood was strongest in eastern Benghazi, where major tribes historically opposed Qaddafi's rule.<sup>10</sup> The regime either imprisoned or executed most Brotherhood members remaining in Libya by the mid-1980s.<sup>11</sup>

The Brotherhood began to regenerate in 1999 through dialogue with the Qaddafi regime. The talks gained momentum in 2005-2006, when Muammar Qaddafi's son, Sayf al-Islam, assumed an active role in the talks in an effort to co-opt and neutralize opposition groups, especially Islamists. The Brotherhood had roughly 1,000 members within Libya, and 200 more in exile, on the eve of the Libyan uprising in early 2011.<sup>12</sup>

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood has lost popularity in recent years, however. This decline first manifested in a poor showing in the 2012 parliamentary elections that followed Qaddafi's ouster. This defeat is noteworthy when compared to the success of the Brotherhood's counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia during the same period.<sup>13</sup> The setbacks suffered by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after its electoral victory, most notably the ouster of the Brotherhood-backed president Mohammed Morsi in 2013, emboldened anti-Brotherhood activists in Libya. Support for the Libyan Brotherhood remained limited in 2014, when affiliated candidates and parties secured only 25 of 200 available seats.<sup>14</sup> The public's rejection of the movement reflects the legacy of Qaddafi's demonization of the organization. Resentment toward the Brotherhood also stems from perceptions that it is anti-democratic as well as associations between the Brotherhood and more radical groups like al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>15</sup>

The Brotherhood remains a player on the Libyan political scene. It announced its support for the UN-backed Government of National Accord in March 2016.<sup>16</sup> However, the Brotherhood's influence is limited by the fragmentation of the Libyan Islamist movement and the rise of anti-Islamist militia Commander Khalifa Haftar.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Tablighi Jama'at*

Tablighi Jama'at (Islamic Transmission Group) is a revivalist and largely apolitical pan-Islamic organization founded in India in the late 19th century.<sup>18</sup> The number of Tablighi supporters in Libya today is relatively small, and there is only one known Tablighi center in the country.<sup>19</sup> The Qaddafi regime arrested and subsequently co-opted many Tablighi members in the 1980s, which led the group to distance itself from politics.<sup>20</sup> Tablighi Jama'at is pursuing active dawa (preaching) campaigns in Libya. Muhammed Jihani, a Libyan Tablighi cleric based in the UK, claimed to have received support from the Libyan minister of religion in June 2016.<sup>21</sup>

#### *The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)*

The origins of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) or al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya al-Muqatila bil-Libiyya, are rooted in an underground jihadi movement formed in 1982 by Iwad al-Zawawi.<sup>22</sup> The LIFG sought to overthrow the Qaddafi regime militarily by plotting attacks against the dictator and other senior regime figures. Authorities captured many LIFG members, including al-Zawawi, after a series of failed attempts to overthrow the regime in 1986, 1987, and 1989.<sup>23</sup> Many escapees fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Afghan jihad against the Soviets in the 1980s allowed the LIFG to consolidate and train. LIFG members established their own military training camps in the Afghanistan and al-Qaeda provided military training to them.<sup>24</sup> Influential Salafi jihadi clerics, such as Abdullah Azzam, also indoctrinated Libyan recruits.<sup>25</sup>

The LIFG reinvigorated its efforts to overthrow the Qaddafi regime following the Afghan jihad. LIFG members established cells or traveled to London to obtain logistical and financial support. The LIFG also

established a base of operations in Sudan in 1993.<sup>26</sup> The group then sent delegations from Sudan to Algeria to continue training. However, the LIFG's interlude in Sudan was independent of the plans of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, who spent five years there in the 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

The LIFG worked to establish its structure and develop leadership capabilities in preparation for a campaign to overthrow the regime.<sup>28</sup> The group accelerated its plans in 1995 due to poor operational security. LIFG members extracted one of their comrades from a hospital in Benghazi, sparking a crackdown by security forces that compelled the group to officially announce itself in October 1995.<sup>29</sup> The Libyan regime pressured the Sudanese regime to eject the LIFG at this time. Many LIFG members returned to Libya, while others escaped to London. Exposure forced the LIFG to intensify its operations. It conducted a series of attacks on the Libyan regime throughout the 1990s, including several failed attempts to assassinate Qaddafi. The Libyan regime fought relentlessly against the LIFG into the late 1990s and killed several of its leaders including one of the group's founding fathers, Salah Fathi bin Sulayman (aka Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Khattab).<sup>30</sup>

The LIFG's insurgency and terrorist campaign inside Libya effectively ended by 1998, though the group did not declare an official ceasefire until 2000.<sup>31</sup> Many of the members who escaped death or imprisonment returned to Afghanistan. Those who fled included the LIFG's emir Abdelhakim Belhaj (aka Abu 'Abd Allah al-Sadiq), chief religious official Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa'idi, and Abu Anas al-Libi, an al-Qaeda operative involved in the 1998 bombing of two U.S. embassies in East Africa.<sup>32</sup>

The LIFG has a complex relationship with al-Qaeda and its ideology. The U.S. Treasury Department designated the LIFG as a foreign terrorist organization in 2001 for its ties to al-Qaeda.<sup>33</sup> Senior al-Qaeda leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Yahya al-Libi announced a merger between the LIFG and al-Qaeda in 2007, but some LIFG senior leaders refused to swear allegiance to al-Qaeda.<sup>34</sup> The LIFG did not demonstrate significant support for al-Qaeda's attacks on the West.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, the group did not contain its activities to Libya. The U.S. State Department listed the LIFG as a foreign terrorist organization for its ties to the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, Morocco.<sup>36</sup> The State Department later delisted the LIFG in 2015.<sup>37</sup>

The Libyan regime began a reconciliation and de-radicalization process at the prompting of Qaddafi's son, Sayf al-Islam, in 2005.<sup>38</sup> This process led the LIFG to revise its definition of jihad to exclude violence against the state. LIFG leaders in Libya released a new code for jihad in the form of a 417-page religious document titled "Corrective Studies" in September 2009.<sup>39</sup> The new code permitted jihad only in the case of the invasion of Muslim lands citing Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Palestinian Territories, as examples.<sup>40</sup> The regime subsequently released many LIFG members in March 2010.<sup>41</sup> Others, such as former LIFG member turned parliamentarian Abd al-Wahab Qa'id, were not released until after the uprising against the Qaddafi regime began in March 2011.<sup>42</sup>

The LIFG network played a prominent role in the swell of Islamist activity that accompanied the Arab Spring and the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. Elements of the LIFG human network established branches of the al-Qaeda associate Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>43</sup> Other former LIFG members formed political parties. Islamist militias led by former LIFG members also wield significant influence. The presence of the LIFG itself has decreased and the group has shifted its efforts toward providing social services and youth activities. It changed its name to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change in an effort to further rehabilitate its image as a peaceful organization.

#### *Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL)*

During the revolution, new Salafi-jihadi groups seized the opportunity to fill the vacuum created by the LIFG's renunciation of military operations. Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri charged senior operatives, including Abu Anas al-Libi, with forming a Libyan affiliate in 2011.<sup>44</sup> Former LIFG operatives formed branches of Ansar al-Sharia in the eastern Libyan cities of Benghazi and Derna.<sup>45</sup> Muhammed al-Zahawi,

a former LIFG member and prisoner of the regime, led Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi until his death in late 2014 or early 2015.<sup>46</sup> This group remains the primary suspect in the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.<sup>47</sup> Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi later changed its name to Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL)—a move that signified its desire to be perceived as a national movement rather than a local rebel force.<sup>48</sup> Ansar al-Sharia developed affiliates and established training camps throughout Libya, Sirte, and Ajdabiya.

The Benghazi-based Ansar al-Sharia is a separate organization from Ansar al-Sharia Derna, despite some crossover in membership and political goals. Former Guantanamo Bay inmate Abu Sufyan bin Qumu led the group in Derna.<sup>49</sup> Bin Qumu's status is unknown following rumors that he defected to ISIS.<sup>50</sup> Both Ansar al-Sharia branches seek to establish sharia law in Libya.<sup>51</sup>

ASL seeks to build popular support through dawa and charity campaigns. The group's dawa campaign increased its size and popularity at home and abroad.<sup>52</sup> Its most effective method to advance its agenda has been the provision of social services.<sup>53</sup> These services include infrastructure repair and development projects, the provision of security, and general aid.<sup>54</sup> One of the group's most successful projects was its anti-drug campaign, orchestrated in cooperation with a local hospital, a soccer club, and telecom and technologies companies in Benghazi.<sup>55</sup>

The ASL branches use local support bases to advance a global violent jihad. They form an important cog in the facilitation and logistics network within the global Salafi jihadi movement and have trained militants to fight in Syria, Mali, and North Africa.<sup>56</sup> The UN listed both Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi and Ansar al-Sharia Derna as terror organizations associated with al-Qaeda in November 2014.<sup>57</sup>

ASL develops battlefield relationships with other Libyan fighting forces to enhance its legitimacy, spread its ideology, and mask its affiliation to al-Qaeda. ASL has known ties to several smaller Salafi jihadi katibas (battalions) in Libya, including Katibat Abu 'Ubaydah al-Jarah and Saraya Raf Allah al-Sahati.<sup>58</sup> These alliances are a force multiplier for ASL, which had a few hundred members in 2012.<sup>59</sup> ASL exploited the chaos and instability in Libya in order to strengthen its presence in Libyan communities and spread its ideology alongside social programs.<sup>60</sup>

In 2014, ASL transitioned to almost exclusively military operations to defend its position in Benghazi. Also in 2014, former Libyan Army Commander Khalifa Haftar began his self-declared Operation Dignity campaign to defeat terrorists—defined as all Islamists—in eastern Libya, with ASL among his priority targets.<sup>61</sup> ASL launched a violent counteroffensive that caused high civilian and military casualties.<sup>62</sup> It joined with other Islamist militias fighting Haftar to form the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) in June 2014.<sup>63</sup> Shortly thereafter, the new umbrella organization overran several bases in Benghazi, seized a large cache of weapons, and declared the city an Islamic emirate.<sup>64</sup>

General Haftar's foreign-backed campaign gradually wore down the BRSC, which has since lost most of its military strength. The BRSC cooperated with ISIS militants in a last-ditch effort to preserve its strongholds.<sup>65</sup> Ansar al-Sharia officially announced its dissolution in May 2017 citing heavy casualties and leadership attrition.<sup>66</sup> Haftar declared victory in Benghazi in July 2017.<sup>67</sup> ASL and other al-Qaeda-linked militants fled the city to safe havens elsewhere in Libya.<sup>68</sup> Intermittent militant activity continues in Benghazi as of August 2017.<sup>69</sup>

Ansar al-Sharia Derna controls Derna city as part of the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD), which formed in December 2014.<sup>70</sup> The MSCD drove ISIS fighters out of Derna in June 2015.<sup>71</sup> General Haftar's forces tightened a blockade on Derna following the culmination of major operations in Benghazi in July 2017.<sup>72</sup> The MSCD is fighting to hold the city as of August 2017.

### *Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL)*

Persistent chaos in the wake of the 2011 revolution made Libya an ideal place for ISIS to establish its first wilayat (state) in North Africa. The group's aspirations for a Libyan franchise began in 2013, when ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi deployed an emissary to the eastern city of Derna to examine

the possibility of expansion.<sup>73</sup> Derna has been hospitable to Islamist militants for several decades. ISIS leadership understood that establishing a presence in the city could provide a necessary fallback option if the group were to lose its base in the Levant.<sup>74</sup> Libyan militants and ideologues with ties to Iraq and Syria began pledging their allegiance to ISIS by late 2014, seeking legitimacy through the group's infamous brutality and claim to have re-established an Islamic caliphate.<sup>75</sup> The establishment of three ISIS wilayat in Libya provided the group with a largely uncontested space in which to gain strategic proximity to Europe and operate a recruitment and training hub for Africa.

ISIS first took root in Derna through an affiliate called the Shura Council of Islamic Youth, later known as ISIS Wilayat Barqah (Cyrenaica). ISIS simultaneously developed outposts elsewhere in Libya such as Sirte, Sabratha, and various Benghazi neighborhoods. ISIS would not succeed in maintaining its first stronghold, however. The Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD), which includes Ansar al-Sharia and other LIFG-linked militias, fought back against ISIS in response to its extreme ideology, brutal methods, and the assassination of a MSCD leader.<sup>76</sup> The MSCD ousted ISIS from Derna in June 2015.<sup>77</sup>

ISIS tempered its loss in Derna with its takeover of Sirte on the central Libyan coast in spring 2015.<sup>78</sup> The group conducted a dawa and intimidation campaign in the city, where it also co-opted pre-existing Ansar al-Sharia networks.<sup>79</sup> It gained international notoriety in April 2015 for a video portraying the mass execution of Egyptian Coptic Christians and African migrants.<sup>80</sup> ISIS's propaganda soon featured the Libyan city alongside Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq, as a demonstration of the expanding caliphate.<sup>81</sup> ISIS Wilayat Tarabulus governed Sirte with the same harshness as its Levantine counterparts, enforcing corporal punishments and violently quashing dissent. ISIS gradually expanded to the east and west of Sirte, controlling a 150-mile stretch of coastline at its peak. It also conducted a campaign of attacks on oil infrastructure in eastern Libya in an effort to deprive the weak Libyan state of revenue.<sup>82</sup>

Experts estimate that ISIS had 3,000 fighters in Sirte, although other reports estimated as many as 6,000 drawn from Libya, the broader Maghreb, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>83</sup> ISIS did not gain significant support from Libyan communities, which view it as foreign. Claims of strong ties between pro-Qaddafi groups and ISIS in Libya, akin to those between former Baathists and ISIS in Iraq, are overstated.<sup>84</sup>

ISIS in Libya seeks to attack neighboring states and Europe. Katibat al-Battar, a seasoned ISIS unit compromised mainly of Libyan and European fighters, deployed from Iraq and Syria to Libya to coordinate attacks on Europe and Tunisia.<sup>85</sup> Libya-based militants conducted the 2015 Bardo and Sousse attacks that devastated Tunisia's tourism economy. ISIS also attempted to use Libya as a launch pad for an ambitious attempt to expand the caliphate to the Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane in March 2016.<sup>86</sup> Members of Katibat al-Battar met in Tripoli with Salman al-Abedi, the British suicide bomber who killed 22 people at a concert in Manchester, England in May 2017.<sup>87</sup>

ISIS suffered a series of defeats that significantly reduced its strength in Libya from 2016 to 2017. Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity forces, at times assisted by French Special Operations Forces, drove ISIS from its posts in Benghazi. American airstrikes supported an offensive that ousted ISIS from its base in Sabratha, near the Tunisian border. Sirte and surrounding small towns remained the group's primary stronghold until mid-2016, when ISIS overreached into terrain controlled by forces from the western Libyan city-state of Misrata. Misratan militias, aligned with the UN-backed government and backed by American air power, launched a grueling campaign to recapture Sirte that culminated in December 2016. Many ISIS fighters left the city, but the group still suffered significant casualties.<sup>88</sup>

ISIS in Libya remains a potent threat despite its territorial losses. Former CIA Director John Brennan warned in June 2016 that the branch was ISIS's most developed and dangerous, citing its influence in Africa and ability to stage attacks in Europe.<sup>89</sup> ISIS is reconstituting in central and southwestern Libya, where it has access to lucrative smuggling routes.<sup>90</sup> Intermittent U.S. airstrikes have interrupted the group's resurgence, but it is not defeated.<sup>91</sup> Hundreds of ISIS militants—if not more—remain active as a network of cells and small units throughout the country.<sup>92</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Libya has over six and a half million citizens, roughly ninety-seven percent of whom are Sunni Muslim. The dominant school of Sunni thought in Libya is the Maliki School, often considered the most moderate of the four traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>93</sup> Non-Sunni Muslims in Libya are primarily Ibadi Muslims in the native Amazigh community or foreigners, including Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews.<sup>94</sup>

Islam permeates everyday life for most Libyans. Religious instruction in Islam is compulsory in all public schools. Sharia governs family matters such as inheritance, divorce, and the right to own property.<sup>95</sup> Libya's draft constitution designates Islam as the official state religion and sharia as the principal source of legislation.<sup>96</sup> The constitution also bars non-Muslims from Libya's parliament and presidency, per a July 2017 draft, though the country's interim laws protect the rights of non-Muslims to practice their beliefs.<sup>97</sup> A protracted and fierce debate over the legal status of sharia reveals persistent cleavages over the role of Islam in Libyan society.<sup>98</sup>

Islamism in Libya has surged since the 2011 revolution. The ideology has traditionally found few followers in the country and the Qaddafi regime staunchly opposed it. Libyans responded enthusiastically to Islamist political parties following Qaddafi's ouster because they promoted a sense of identity and pledged to maintain order.<sup>99</sup> Many Libyans remain skeptical of Islamism but years of failed political transition have emboldened various Islamist factions and militias.<sup>100</sup> Islamist organizations have filled the void left by the collapse of the Libyan state by providing valuable social and governmental services, including health care, youth activity planning, and religious organization. The ability to provide governance has allowed groups like Ansar al-Sharia and the LIFG to gradually move away from their image as global jihadi organizations and gain some domestic support.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Libya won its independence from Italy in the aftermath of World War II. It became a constitutional monarchy in 1951 under King Idris I, the head of eastern Libya's Sufi Senussi order. Colonel Muammar Qaddafi overthrew the monarchy in a military coup d'état in September 1969. He established a new political system—the Jamahiriyah or “state of the masses”—an Arab nationalist regime based on an ideology of Islamic socialism. Qaddafi outlawed all political parties and organized political dissent, including Islamist groups.<sup>101</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood organized in the 1980s with the intent of peacefully replacing the existing regime, despite intense pressure from Qaddafi's security forces. The Brotherhood's failure to achieve peaceful change set conditions for the emergence of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). The LIFG launched several failed efforts to topple the regime and assassinate Qaddafi in the 1980s and 1990s. The regime decimated the Islamist opposition by 1998. Only small pockets of jihadist resistance remained by the early 2000s.<sup>102</sup>

Qaddafi's son and advisor, Sayf al-Islam, began negotiations with Islamists in the mid-2000s. He brokered a deal to free imprisoned Islamists on the condition that they recognize the legitimacy of Qaddafi's government, renounce violence, and formally revise their doctrines. These negotiations led to the release of more than one hundred Brotherhood members in 2006 and hundreds of LIFG members by 2008.<sup>103</sup> The LIFG also renounced violence against the state. The regime brought quietest Salafi clerics from Saudi Arabia to Libya during this period in order to foster religious discourse that condemned rebellion against the state.<sup>104</sup>

The Arab Spring protests upended Libya in February 2011. The regime cracked down violently on protesters, plunging the country into civil war. The conflict provided an opportunity for Islamist networks to reconstitute in the country bolstered by additional prisoner releases. Qaddafi's fall sent Libya into a turbulent democratic transition and set the stage for a plethora of groups, both Islamist and secular, to vie

for power in the resulting vacuum.

Political Islamists participated in parliamentary elections in 2012. The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Construction Party (JCP) faced off against the liberal National Forces Alliance (NFA).<sup>105</sup> The JCP, led by former political prisoner Mohammed Sawan, won 17 of 80 available seats to the NFA's 39.<sup>106</sup> The JCP failed to achieve post-Arab Spring electoral success like that of its model and inspiration, Egypt's Brotherhood-backed Freedom and Justice Party.

Two political factions of the LIFG—the Hizb al-Watan (HW) and Hizb al-Umma al-Wasat (HUW)—also participated in the 2012 legislative elections. Former LIFG emir and Tripoli militia leader Abdelhakim Belhaj led the HW, which ran as a broad-based moderate party. Former LIFG religious official Sami al-Sa'adi led the HUW, which included most former LIFG figures and ran as a more conservative Islamic party.<sup>107</sup> The HW failed to win any seats in the election, while the HUW won a single seat, allocated to Abdul Wahhab al-Qa'id, brother of the late senior al-Qaeda official Abu Yahya al-Libi. Other small Islamist parties also failed to garner significant support. These parties include the Salafi party al-Asala, which won no seats, and the Hizb al-Islah wa-l-Tanmiyya, led by former member of the Muslim Brotherhood Khaled al-Werchefani.

Popular support for Islamist parties increased during June 2014 legislative elections, when Islamist groups or candidates won 30 of the 80 available seats. Low voter turnout and political violence between secular and Islamist forces marred the elections, however, setting the stage for Libya's shaky democratic transition to devolve into open war.<sup>108</sup> Former Libyan Army General Khalifa Haftar began Operation Dignity, a campaign to drive Islamist militias out of Benghazi and eastern Libya in May 2014.<sup>109</sup> The controversial operation preceded a political crisis between two transitional parliaments: the General National Congress (GNC, elected 2012) and the House of Representatives (HoR, elected 2014). Islamist militias affiliated with the GNC ousted the HoR from Tripoli further hardening the divisions between Islamists and their opponents.

Libya has three primary political blocs as of August 2017: two in the west and one in the east. The United Nations-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), established in December 2015, controls Tripoli through a loose coalition of allied militias.<sup>110</sup> The GNA was meant to bring together the warring GNC and HoR into a unity government. In practice, it divided and weakened the GNC's support base, though GNC leadership and armed allies remain spoilers in the peace process. The GNA and HoR have become the two main poles of the Libyan conflict. The HoR, whose leadership is aligned with Haftar, has refused to endorse the GNA.<sup>111</sup> Efforts by GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayez al-Serraj to strike a ceasefire deal with the increasingly powerful Haftar in mid-2017 have legitimized Haftar internationally and furthered his ascendance as a prospective strongman.<sup>112</sup>

Haftar's rise sets the stage for continued Islamist resistance in Libya. Haftar and his external backers, especially Egypt and the UAE, seek to eradicate political Islam and crush Islamist armed groups in Libya. He has simultaneously courted religious conservatives by empowering followers of Madkhalism, a form of quietist Islamism that enshrines loyalty to a political leader.<sup>113</sup> Haftar's campaign mirrors that of Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. Sisi's crackdown on political Islam benefited Salafi jihadi groups that argue for violence as the only meaningful force for change.<sup>114</sup> For the foreseeable future, Islamism will remain a powerful current in Libya, which has become a key front in a broader regional struggle to determine the future of political Islam in the Muslim world.<sup>115</sup>

As of April 2018, Islamists remain key political and security actors in Libya. Tripoli's High Council of State elected a member of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Construction Party as its head in April 2018, signaling a potential opening for détente between Islamist and anti-Islamist political factions.<sup>116</sup> The reported illness and subsequent return of LNA commander Khalifa Haftar in April 2018 introduces new instability into Libya's political dynamics. The future role of Islamist parties in Libya remains uncertain as the country prepares for elections in 2018 or 2019.<sup>117</sup> At the local level, Salafi militias



are taking on increasingly important security and governance roles in Libyan cities. The Salafi Rada Special Deterrence Force in Tripoli, for example, controls the city's one functioning airport and provides security in the name of the UN-backed GNA.<sup>118</sup> Salafi militias in Benghazi are also a powerful bloc within the LNA coalition.<sup>119</sup> Salafi violence targeting Libyan Sufi communities and their heritage is rising.<sup>120</sup>

Libya remains a haven for Salafi-jihadi groups due to ongoing instability in the country. ISIS militants based in central Libya are conducting a campaign of intermittent attacks intended to undermine security and potentially disrupt oil production.<sup>121</sup> A series of bombings and assassination attempts in January 2018 in Benghazi may signal the return of an Islamist insurgency to the city, though they may also reflect broader political unrest.<sup>122</sup> Salafi-jihadi militants continue to operate in Libya's interior, where the U.S. conducted an airstrike targeting al-Qaeda leaders in March 2018.<sup>123</sup>

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