Libya

Quick Facts

Population: 6,890,535 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 1,759,540 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Berber and Arab 97%, other 3% (includes Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Italian, Maltese, Pakistani, Tunisian, and Turkish)

GDP (official exchange rate): $30.57 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

Introduction

The North African nation of Libya is a failed state that is home to a wide array of Islamist and Salafi-jihadi groups. Muammar Qaddafi ruled the oil-rich country for four decades. The 2011 Arab Spring, the resulting Libyan revolution and a subsequent NATO intervention toppled the dictator's centralized state. The country devolved into a battleground for an array of ideologically diverse groups. The fall of the Qaddafi regime created the possibility for Libya's long suppressed Islamists to wield political power, but they failed to achieve even temporary political gains. Successive transitional governments likewise faltered, and the country spiraled into a complex civil war shaped by localized grievances, regional power struggles, ideological divides, and a zero-sum competition for power and resources.

Several Salafi-jihadi groups took advantage of the regime's fall and subsequent instability to establish and expand safe havens in Libya. These groups include the al-Qaeda–linked Ansar al-Sharia Libya and the Islamic State (IS). Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya have recruited and trained militants, governed populations, and prepared attacks on other states in the Maghreb and in Europe. Islamist militants in Libya, including Salafi-jihadis, remain a destabilizing force and threat despite significant losses.

Islamist Activity

Political Islam appeared in 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 Libyan monarchy. Qaddafi violently suppressed all political opposition during his forty-year rule, including the country's Islamist element. Islamist organizations 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, including in Afghanistan and England. 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 Qaddafi regime. Qaddafi's brutal response led to a civil war, a NATO intervention, and ultimately the dictator's death.

Various groups vied for influence in the resulting power vacuum, yielding chronic instability. Libya's transitional government struggled to establish order and rebuild state institutions. Militias and non-state actors proliferated and strengthened in the three years after the revolution.

Rivalries exploded into a full-scale civil war by 2014, when Khalifa Haftar, a former regime officer, launched Operation Dignity with the goal of defeating Islamist groups in Libya.[1] An alliance of western Libyan militias, including Islamist ones, launched Operation Dawn to counter Haftar's offensive in August 2014, seizing Tripoli's airport and other parts of the capital and causing a split in the country's transitional government.[2] Outside actors, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Russia, and Saudi Arabia supporting Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and Qatar and Turkey bolstering the Government of National Accord (GNA) have since backed various proxies. Ongoing factional conflict has even mobilized a growing number of formerly nonviolent "quietist" Salafists to join the fray to defend their interests in opposition to both the Muslim Brotherhood and violent Salafi groups.[3]

Post-revolution Libya became a hotbed for transnational Salafi-*jihadi* organizations. For example, Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafi-*jihadi* group formed by members of al-Qaeda and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), is likely responsible for the September 2012 attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi that killed four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens.[4] IS took root and grew rapidly in 2014, establishing the first branch of its *caliphate* outside of Iraq and Syria. IS's Libyan branch has also supported terrorist attacks in Europe, notably the May 2017 Manchester bombing.[5]

Islamist and Salafi-*jihadi* armed groups in Libya, ranging from Islamist-leaning militias in the Libya Dawn coalition to Ansar al-Sharia allies and the Islamic State, have lost significant ground in the past five years, but remain a threat to the country's stability.[6] The establishment of the UN-backed GNA in late 2015 widened a split between hardline and moderate Islamists in the Operation Dawn coalition, marginalizing the former. In December 2016, GNA-allied forces, with U.S. support, ousted IS from its stronghold in Sirte.[7] Subsequent U.S. airstrikes have hindered, but not stopped, IS's efforts to reconstitute. Haftar's forces made significant gains against Islamists and Salafi-*jihadis* in eastern and central Libya from 2016 to 2019, including retaking Benghazi and claiming victory in Derna. Islamist and Salafi-*jihadi* armed actors remain key players in the Libya conflict, however. They will regain and likely retain power as long as Libya lacks effective governance and security structures. Nonviolent Islamist political actors also remain active in Libya, but are less influential than more organized armed factions.

Despite Islamist and Salafi-*jihadi* losses, ongoing conflict in Libya holds opportunities for such groups to regain strength. Haftar's forces attempted to seize the capital, Tripoli, in April 2019, kicking off more than a year of fighting in the capital region. A Turkish-backed intervention helped GNA forces, including Libyan Islamist militias and Syrian fighters, defeat Haftar's forces in Tripoli despite significant support from Russia, Egypt, and the UAE.[8] As of August 2020, the focus of the conflict has shifted to central Libya and the country's oil resources.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood seeks to establish sharia as the foundation for state and society in Libya. The organization came to Libya in 1949, when King Idris I allowed Egyptian Brotherhood members fleeing political persecution to settle in Benghazi.[9] Egyptian asylum-seekers and clerics founded the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood as a branch of the original Egyptian organization. The group, allowed relative freedom to spread its ideology, attracted local adherents.

Colonel Muammar Qaddafi overthrew the Libyan monarchy in 1969 and promptly cracked down on the Brotherhood, arresting some members and returning others to Egypt.[10] The crackdown continued until 1973, when 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 one governed by sharia law. It renamed itself al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya al-Libiyya (Libyan

Islamic Group), and gained popular support among Libyan students who met exiled members in the U.S. and UK. These students subsequently spread the Brotherhood's ideology and joined its covert cells inside of Libya.[11] The Brotherhood won popular appeal through charitable and welfare work and recruited members of the Libyan middle class to its cause. The Brotherhood was strongest in eastern Benghazi, where major tribes historically opposed Qaddafi's rule.[12] The regime either imprisoned or executed most Brotherhood members remaining in Libya by the mid-1980s.[13]

The Brotherhood began to regenerate in 1999 as a result of dialogue with the Qaddafi regime. The talks gained momentum in 2005-2006, when 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 is known to have had roughly 1,000 members within Libya and 200 more in exile on the eve of the 2011 Libyan uprising.[14]

After the fall of Qaddafi, the Muslim Brotherhood re-emerged and claimed a place in Libyan civil society. However, in the 2012 parliamentary elections that followed Qaddafi's ouster, a Brotherhood-affiliated party performed poorly[15] and support for the Libyan Brotherhood remained limited in the subsequent parliamentary elections two years later.[16] The public's rejection of the movement reflects the legacy of Qaddafi's demonization of the organization, as well as the growth of anti-Brotherhood sentiment surrounding the presidency of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt. Resentment toward the Brotherhood also stems from perceptions that it is anti-democratic as well as accusations of ties to more radical groups like al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia.[17]

Nevertheless, the Brotherhood remains a player in Libyan politics. It formally announced its support for the UN-backed GNA in March 2016.[18] 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.[19] Haftar's rise—backed by anti-Islamist leadership in Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, as well as Saudi Arabia—has made life even more difficult for the group. The decision by a notable number of Islamist politicians to leave the Brotherhood in order to gain broader support in early 2019 reflects the challenges facing the group in a highly polarized political environment.[20]

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)

The LIFG formed as an underground movement in 1982 that sought to overthrow the Qaddafi regime through an assassination campaign.[21] Authorities captured many LIFG members, including its founder Iwad al-Zawawi, after failed attempts to overthrow the regime in 1986, 1987, and 1989.[22]

LIFG members fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan where, supported by al-Qaeda, they built training camps to reinvigorate the organization and expand military capabilities. LIFG tested their military prowess while conducting jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.[23] Influential Salafi-*jihadi* clerics, such as Abdullah Azzam, also indoctrinated Libyan recruits.[24]

LIFG reinvigorated its efforts to overthrow the Qaddafi regime in the 1990s following the Afghan *jihad*. LIFG members established cells or traveled to London to obtain logistical and financial support from Al Qaeda and (allegedly) the British government.[25] They also sought to establish the group's structure and develop leadership capabilities in this period.[26] LIFG established a base of operations in Sudan in 1993.[27] The group then sent delegations from Sudan to Algeria to continue training. LIFG's interlude in Sudan was independent of the plans of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who spent five years there in the 1990s.[28]

A LIFG raid on a hospital in Benghazi sparked a crackdown by security forces that compelled the group to announce its existence publicly in October 1995.[29] The Libyan regime pressured the Sudanese regime to eject the LIFG at the time. Many LIFG members returned to Libya, while others escaped to England. Pressured by exposure, the LIFG conducted a series of attacks on the Libyan regime throughout the 1990s, including several failed attempts to assassinate Qaddafi. The Libyan regime fought the LIFG into the late 1990s and killed several of its leaders.[30]

The LIFG declared an official ceasefire in 2000 though its Libyan insurgency and terror campaign effectively ended by 1998.[31] Many members returned to Afghanistan. Those who fled included LIFG *emir* Abdelhakim Belhaj (aka Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Sadiq), its 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.[32]

The LIFG had a complicated relationship with al-Qaeda and its ideology. The U.S. Treasury Department designated members of the LIFG as Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2001 for their ties to al-Qaeda.[33] 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.[34] Likewise, the LIFG did not demonstrate significant support for al-Qaeda’s attacks on the West.[35] The group did not limit its activities to Libya, however, and the U.S. State Department listed it as a Foreign Terrorist Organization for its ties to the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, Morocco.[36]

Several LIFG members also went on to become senior figures in al Qaeda.[37] In 2005, the Libyan regime began a reconciliation and de-radicalization process overseen by Sayf al-Islam Qaddafi.[38] The LIFG revised its definition of *jihad* to exclude violence against the state in 2009, producing a new code titled “Corrective Studies” that permitted *jihad* only in the cases of the invasion of Muslim lands.[39] The LIFG officially disbanded in 2010. While the regime subsequently released many LIFG members, others, such as former LIFG member turned parliamentarian Abd al-Wahab Qa’id, were not released until the uprising against the Qaddafi regime in March 2011.[40] The U.S. State Department delisted the LIFG in 2015[41] and the UK Home Office did the same in 2019.[42]

The LIFG’s extensive network of former members has played a prominent role in the swell of Islamist activity that began with 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.[43] Other former LIFG members now lead political parties and militias. Among these figures are the group’s former *emir*, Belhaj, who founded the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change and sought to rehabilitate his image by providing social services and youth activities. Belhaj formed the Alwattan Party (“Homeland Party) to compete in the 2012 parliamentary elections (it won no seats) and backed the Libya Dawn coalition in 2014.[44] Khalid al-Sharif, an LIFG deputy *emir*, served as deputy defense minister in two post-Qaddafi governments and remains a key political figure. Al-Sharif endorsed a new political movement formed by Islamist political leaders in western Libya in July 2020.[45]

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL)

The 2011 revolution created an opportunity for new Salafi-*jihadi* groups 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.[46] Former LIFG operatives formed branches of Ansar al-Sharia in the eastern Libyan cities of Benghazi and Derna.[47] Muhammed al-Zahawi, a former LIFG member and regime prisoner, led Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi until his death in late 2014 or early 2015.[48] ASL is a Sunni Islamist organization that pursued strict adherence to *sharia* law in Libya.[49] ASL opposed the democratic system, considering it an immoral structure that unduly gives power to man instead of God.[50]

ASL remains the primary suspect in the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.[51] Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi later changed its name to Ansar al-Sharia in Libya – an attempt by the organization to rebrand itself as a national movement rather than a local rebel force.[52] Ansar al-Sharia developed affiliates and established training camps throughout Libya, including in Sirte and Ajdabiya.

Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi was 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 Derna group.[53] Bin Qumu’s status is unknown following rumors that he defected to ISIS.[54] Both Ansar al-Sharia branches sought to establish *sharia* law in Libya.[55]

ASL built popular support in Libya and abroad through *dawa* and charity campaigns.[56] Its most effective method was the provision of social services, including infrastructure repair and development projects, the provision of security, and general aid.[57] One of the group's most successful projects was its anti-drug campaign in Benghazi, coordinated with a local hospital, a soccer club, and telecom and technologies companies.[58]

The ASL branches used local support bases to advance a global violent *jihad*. They formed an important cog within the global Salafi-*jihadi* movement and trained militants to fight in Syria, Mali, and elsewhere in North Africa.[59] The UN listed both Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi and Ansar al-Sharia Derna as terror organizations associated with al-Qaeda in November 2014.[60]

ASL developed 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.[61] These alliances were a force multiplier for ASL, which had only a few hundred members in 2012.[62] Since then, however, ASL has exploited the chaos and instability in Libya in order to strengthen its presence in Libyan communities and spread its ideology.[63]

In 2014, ASL transitioned almost exclusively to military operations in order to defend its position in Benghazi. Former Libyan Army commander Khalifa Haftar began Operation Dignity to defeat terrorists—broadly defined as all Islamists—in eastern Libya, with ASL among his priority targets.[64] ASL launched a counteroffensive that caused high civilian and military casualties.[65] It joined with other Islamist militias fighting Haftar to form the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) in June 2014.[66] Shortly thereafter, the new umbrella organization overran several bases in Benghazi, seized a large cache of weapons, and declared the city an Islamic *emirate*.[67]

The BRSC has since lost most of its military strength. This is due, in part, to Haftar's foreign-backed forces fighting the BRSC's own fighters. The BRSC cooperated with ISIS militants in a last-ditch effort to preserve its strongholds in 2017.[68] Ansar al-Sharia officially dissolved in May 2017 due to heavy casualties and leadership attrition.[69] Haftar declared victory in Benghazi in July 2017.[70] ASL and other al-Qaeda linked militants fled the city to safe havens elsewhere in Libya.[71]

Ansar al-Sharia Derna controlled Derna city as part of the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD) starting in December 2014. The MSCD drove Islamic State fighters out of Derna in June 2015.[72] Haftar's forces seized most Derna from the MSCD in mid-2018 following a yearlong blockade.[73]

Islamic State (IS)

IS took advantage of Libya's persistent chaos in the wake of the 2011 revolution to establish its first *wilayat* (province) in North Africa. The group's aspirations for a Libyan franchise began in 2013, when Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent an emissary to Derna, which has longstanding Islamist militant networks.[74] ISIS leadership sought to establish a potential fallback for its base in the Levant.[75] Libyan militants and ideologues with ties to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria began pledging their allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by late 2014.[76] The establishment of three ISIS *wilayats* in Libya provided the group strategic proximity to Europe and a logistical 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, notably in Sirte, Sabratha, and various Benghazi neighborhoods. ISIS lost its first Libyan position when the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD), which included 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.[77] The MSCD ousted ISIS from Derna in June 2015.

ISIS tempered its loss in Derna with its takeover of Sirte on the central Libyan coast in spring 2015. The group conducted a *dawa* and intimidation campaign in the city, where it also co-opted pre-existing ASL networks.[78] ISIS propaganda soon featured the Libyan city alongside Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq as a demonstration of the expanding caliphate.[79] ISIS *Wilayat Tarablus* 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 Libyan state of revenue.[80]

Experts estimate that ISIS had 3,000 fighters in Sirte at the height of its presence there, although other reports estimated as many as 6,000 drawn from Libya, the broader Maghreb, and sub-Saharan Africa.[81] ISIS did not gain significant support from Libyan communities, which view the group 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.[82]

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 in Europe and Tunisia.[83] Libya-based militants conducted the 2015 Bardo and Sousse attacks that devastated Tunisia's tourism economy. ISIS also used Libya as a launchpad to try and expand the *caliphate* to the Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane in March 2016.[84] 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.[85]

Between 2016 and 2017, ISIS suffered a series of defeats that significantly reduced its strength in Libya. Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity forces, with some Western assistance, drove ISIS *Wilayat Barqah* from its posts in Benghazi. American airstrikes supported an offensive that ousted ISIS from 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.[86]

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.[87] ISIS is reconstituting in central and southwestern Libya, where it has access to lucrative smuggling routes.[88] Intermittent U.S. airstrikes have interrupted the group's resurgence, but it is not defeated. Hundreds of ISIS militants—if not more—remain active as a network of cells and military units—termed "Desert Brigades"—throughout the country.[89] The previously dormant ISIS *Wilayat Fezzan* has become the group's most active in Libya, claiming regular guerrilla attacks in Libya's remote southwest.[90] The group has also conducted several high-profile attacks intended to disrupt the formation of a functioning Libyan government in Tripoli, including a May 2018 attack on the High National Election Commission and a September 2018 attack on the National Oil Corporation.[91]

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

AQIM was first established in 1998 in Algeria as a Salafi-*jihadi* organization with the goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in the Maghreb that would enforce *sharia* law. The instability in North Africa that followed the Arab Spring in 2011 created a conducive environment for the group's expansion throughout the region. As a result, a number of fighters left the Sahara and Sahel region to fight in the growing conflict in Libya, allowing the group to expand east.[92] AQIM fighters transited southwestern Libya with the help of locals toward coastal Ansar al-Sharia networks.[93]

The fall of Qaddafi in 2011 gave AQIM the means to easily acquire weapons and recruit more fighters, especially amongst the experienced Tuaregs, who were supported by Qaddafi.[94] In post-Qaddafi Libya, AQIM took advantage of the security vacuum and opened training camps, like the Ubari camp in the Southwest.[95]

In 2012, reports indicated that al-Qaeda sought to create a clandestine network in Libya to be used in the future to destabilize the government and offer logistical support to the branch's activities in the region.[96] AQIM has supported Ansar al-Sharia since its establishment in 2011. In return, Ansar al- Sharia in Libya has provided AQIM affiliates with fighters in Mali.[97]

AQIM has shifted its focus to the Sahel region of West Africa since coopting the Tuareg rebellion in Mali in 2012, with AQIM's prioritization of the Mali theater intensifying with the formation of an AQIM-affiliated umbrella group (Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen) in 2017. AQIM has retained a senior leadership haven in southwestern Libya. The United States carried out a series of drone strikes against al-Qaeda in southern Libya in 2018, begining on March 24 and ending on November 30, the last of which killed 11 suspected members of AQIM in southwest Libya near the town of al Uwaynat.[98] The US denied involvement in a strike targeting al-Qaeda in southwest Libya in February 2019. The GNA released a statement confirming a join US- Libyan operation, which allegedly hit an al-Qaeda cell in near Ubari.[99] The State Department reported in June 2020 that, since 2016, forces aligned with the LNA have conducted operations against both AQIM and ISIS in southern Libya, where terrorist groups are known to operate freely.[100] However, it must be mentioned that LNA operations in the Fezzan have also been criticized for targeting civilians.[101]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Libya has over six and a half million citizens, roughly 97 percent of whom are Sunni Muslim. The dominant school of Sunni thought in Libya is Malikism, often considered the most moderate of the four traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence.[102] Non-Sunni Muslims in Libya are primarily Ibadi Muslims in the native Amazigh community or foreigners, including Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews.[103]

Islam permeates everyday life for most Libyans. Religious instruction in Islam is compulsory in all public schools. *Sharia* governs matters like inheritance, divorce, and the right to own property.[104] Libya's draft constitution designates Islam as the official state religion and *sharia* as the principal source of legislation.[105] The constitution bars non-Muslims from Libya's parliament and presidency, per a July 2017 draft; however, the country's interim laws protect the rights of non-Muslims to practice their faiths.[106] A protracted and fierce debate over *sharia* has revealed cleavages over the role of Islam in contemporary Libyan society.[107]

Islamist political ideology in Libya has surged since the fall of the Qaddafi regime, but still lacks broad support. Libyans responded enthusiastically to Islamist political parties following Qaddafi's ouster because they promoted a sense of identity and pledged to maintain order.[108] Many Libyans remain skeptical of Islamism, but years of failed political transition have emboldened various Islamist factions and militias.[109] Islamist organizations have filled the governance gap left by the collapse of the Libyan state by providing valuable social and governmental services, including health care, youth activity planning, and religious organization. This allowed groups like ASL and the LIFG, in limited cases, to gradually move away from their image as global *jihadi* organizations and gain some domestic support.

Islamism has become increasingly divisive. The 2017 Gulf crisis, which pitted Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar over the latter's support for political Islamists, has produced increasingly polarized media treatment of Islamism in Libya. Anti-Islamist media outlets and officials tend to portray all political Islamists as terrorists, even though the majority of Islamist politicians and armed groups oppose, and often fight against, Salafi-*jihadis*.

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 and established the *Jamahiriyah* (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.[110]

The Qaddafi regime suppressed challenges to its rule, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's failure to launch set conditions for the emergence of the 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, leaving only fragmented resistance by the early 2000s.[111]

Sayf al-Islam Qaddafi began negotiations with Islamists on behalf of his father in the mid-2000s. He brokered a deal to free imprisoned Islamists if they agreed to recognize the legitimacy of Qaddafi's government, renounce violence, and formally revise their doctrines. These negotiations led to the release of more than 100 Brotherhood members in 2006 and hundreds of LIFG members by 2008.[112] The LIFG also renounced violence against the state. The regime brought quietest Salafi clerics from Saudi Arabia to Libya during this period to foster religious discourse that condemned anti-state rebellion.[113]

The Arab Spring protests upended Libya in February 2011. The regime cracked down violently on protesters, plunging the country into civil war. The conflict and additional prisoner releases allowed Islamist networks to reconstitute in Libya. Qaddafi's fall sent Libya into a turbulent democratic transition and set the stage for a power struggle 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).[114] The JCP, led by former political prisoner Mohammed Sawan, won 17 of 80 available seats to the NFA's 39.[115] 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.[116] 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.

Islamist parties and candidates won some seats the June 2014 legislative elections as political polarization increased. Low voter turnout and political violence between secular and Islamist forces marred the elections, and Libya collapsed into open war.[117] Operation Dignity and the subsequent political crisis split the government in half between the 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.

Libya has two primary political blocs as of March 2019: one in the west and one in the east. The United Nations-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), established in December 2015, controls the Libyan capital of Tripoli as of June 2020. 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 potential spoilers. The HoR, whose leadership is aligned with Haftar, refuses to endorse the GNA.[118] Haftar has maintained international acceptance and territorial control since 2017, raising his profile as a prospective strongman despite weaknesses in his fighting force and opposition from rival factions.

Haftar and his external backers, especially Egypt, the UAE and Russia, seek to eradicate political Islam and crush Islamist armed groups in Libya. He has courted religious conservatives by empowering followers of Madkhalism, a form of quietist Salafism that enshrines loyalty to a political leader and opposes more activist Islamist strains.[119] 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.[120] Islamism will remain a powerful current in Libya for the foreseeable future, however, as Libya is a key front in a regional struggle over future of political Islam.[121]

The future role of Islamist parties in Libya remains uncertain. As of June 2020, the GNA and its allies pushed the LNA out of Tripoli, ending Haftar's fifteen month attempt to occupy the city.[122] This development is likely to escalate the conflict after the Egyptian parliament authorized the possible deployment of troops to Libya. The European Union took the opportunity to call for a ceasefire, hoping to defuse the situation, just as GNA forces were planning to attack the resource-rich city of Sitre.[123] While how the situation will unfold depends heavily on the influence of external actors, it is unlikely that plans for peace negotiations will bear fruit.[124]

Islamist politicians and militia leaders have prominent roles in the Tripoli area. At the local level, quietist 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.[125] Salafi militias in Benghazi are also a powerful bloc within the LNA coalition.[126] Islamists will undoubtedly play a key role in shaping a future Libyan state, whether by participating in a democratic process, taking up arms for a local or national cause, or waging violent *jihad*.

ENDNOTES

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