American Foreign Policy Council

Libya

QUICK FACTS

Population: 6,244,174

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: Muslim (official; virtually all Sunni) 96.6%, Christian 2.7%, Buddhist 0.3%,

Government Type: operates under a transitional government

GDP (official exchange rate): $73.6 billion (2013 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated December 2014)

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 longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi's ouster in 2011, which was inspired in part by events of the "Arab Spring." Small contingents of local jihadists, militias, renegade generals, and secular forces have been battling for control of Libya in the civil war that has followed Qaddafi's overthrow.

On the whole, 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 Qaddafi'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 declared itself a constitutional monarchy under King Idris in 1951 after it won its independence from Italy in the aftermath of World War II. In September 1969, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi staged a military *coup d'état* in the country, after which he established an Arab nationalist regime that adhered to an ideology of "Islamic socialism." Before long, Qaddafi's authoritarian regime began to generate resentment among Islamist groups, leading to an Islamist revival beginning in the late 1970s. Yet the Qaddafi regime also supported terrorist activities abroad that included the downing of two airliners and a discotheque bombing in Berlin.

When the unrest that would later be termed "Arab Spring" began in several Middle Eastern and North African countries in late 2010 (reaching Libyan cities in 2011), Qaddafi responded with a brutal crackdown on protesters. The response from the populace ignited a fierce civil war that lasted until mid-2011, when the Qaddafi regime was toppled. The resulting power vacuum invited chronic instability as various groups, both Islamist and secular, vied for power and influence, with no single group able to exert full control. In the interim, Libya's government has struggled to maintain order and rebuild state institutions, witnessing a rise in the presence and power of militias and other non-state actors.

In February 2014, retired General Khalifa Haftar, a former Qaddafi loyalist, began "Operation Dignity" with a sizable military force, attacking Islamist militant groups and targeting terrorists. To counter Haftar's movement, an alliance of Islamist militias launched "Operation Dawn" and in August 2014, seizing the Tripoli airport and other parts of the capital. Since then, other nations, such as the United Arab Emirates, have thrown their support behind Haftar in the form of airstrikes.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood's origins trace back to Egypt in the 1920s but it would not make its first appearance in Libya until 1949, when a number of its Egyptian members fled political persecution in Cairo and were granted refuge in Benghazi by King Idris.[1]

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood (LMB) thus began as a branch of the original Egyptian organization. The LMB was founded by Egyptian cleric Ezadine Ibrahim Mustafa and several other refugees. Under King Idris, the group and its leaders were allowed relative freedom to spread their ideology. The LMB attracted local adherents and continued to gain support via other Egyptian leaders working in Libya. This

all changed when Colonel Muammar Qaddafi came to power in 1969. Viewing the Brotherhood as a potential source of opposition, Qaddafi promptly arrested a number of the Brothers and repatriated them back to Egypt.[2] The crackdown continued until 1973 when members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood were arrested by security services and, under duress of torture, agreed to dissolve the organization -- effectively silencing them for 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* law through peaceful means. Once again it began accumulating popular support, including from Libyan students who returned from the UK and US after making contact with LMB members who fled earlier repression. Through these contacts, the new generation was exposed to a plethora of Islamist ideas. The students took an active role in helping to spread the Brotherhood's ideology, joining the movement's covertly operated groups of interlinked cells active throughout the country.[3]

The group drew much of its popular appeal through the charitable and welfare work of its members. These programs were particularly successful at attracting members of Libya's middle class to join the LMB. The group's programs were particularly strong in the eastern area of Benghazi, where the main tribes had traditionally opposed Qaddafi's rule.[4] The regime, however, continued to take an uncompromising stance toward the LMB, persecuting most and publicly executing some. By the mid-1980s, the majority of members that remained in Libya were either imprisoned or executed.[5]

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood returned to the scene in 1999 through dialogue with the Qaddafi regime. The exchanges gained momentum in 2005-2006 when Muammar Qaddafi's son, Sayf al-Islam, personally worked to advance the dialogue in an effort to co-opt and neutralize opposition groups. These efforts focused particularly strongly on Islamist groups, such as the Brotherhood. By the eve of the Libyan uprising in the spring of 2011, it was estimated that the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood had roughly one thousand members within Libya and two hundred in exile.[6]

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood had a poor showing in the 2012 parliamentary elections that followed Qaddafi's ouster, especially relative to the political success of its counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia.[7] The setbacks suffered by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after its electoral success, including the deposing of the Brotherhood-backed president, Mohamed Morsi, in 2013, seems to have encouraged rather than placated anti-Brotherhood activists in Libya. The rejection of the movement might be seen as part of the legacy of Qaddafi's opposition to, and demonization of, the party. In some cases, resentment toward the Brotherhood stems from perceptions that it is inherently anti-democratic or associations between the Brotherhood and more radical groups like al-Qaeda or Ansar al-Sharia.[8]

Tablighi Jama'at

The number of *Tablighi* supporters in Libya today is relatively small, as there is only one known *Tablighi* center in the country.[9] The *Tablighi Jama'at*, however, distanced itself from politics after many of the organization's members were arrested in the 1980s, and were subsequently co-opted by the regime.[10]

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

The roots of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group can be found in an underground *jihadi* movement formed in 1982 by Iwad al-Zawawi, however the LIFG did not officially announce its formation until 1995.[11] Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, the LIFG advocated for military operations against the regime, seeking to overthrow Qaddafi and plotting attacks against other senior figures in the government. After failed attempts to overthrow the regime in 1986, 1987, and 1989, authorities arrested many of the rebels, including al-Zawawi.[12] Many of those who were not captured fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Many LIFG members seized the opportunity to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. There, they and other Libyans set up their own military training camps. At times, LIFG members received instruction from members of al-Qaeda.[13] In addition to military training, the Libyan recruits were indoctrinated by influential *jihadi* clerics such as Abdullah Azzam.[14] While in exile in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the movement began to form into an identifiable organization.

Following the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, Libyan LIFG members either returned home to establish cells, moved to Sudan to establish a base of operations to plan the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, or moved to London for logistical and financial support. Contrary to popular belief, however, the LIFG's interlude in Sudan was not predicated on the plans of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. According to Noman Benotman, a senior leader and member of the group's shura council, the LIFG staked out Sudan as a potential base following the Afghan jihad in 1988-1989, deciding it was appropriate to move closer to the Libyan front in 1993.[15] It was from Sudan that they sent delegations to Algeria to continue training.

The LIFG under the leadership of Commander Abu Abdullah al-Sadek worked to establish the organization's structure and develop the leadership skills of cell leaders throughout the country.[16] The LIFG leaders were forced to accelerate their plan in 1995 due to poor operational security. When members of the LIFG extracted one of their comrades from a hospital in Benghazi, Libyan security became aware of the operation and quickly moved to suppress the group. As a result, the LIFG was compelled to officially announce itself for the first time in October 1995.[17]

After the incident at the hospital, the Qaddafi regime asked, and eventually convinced, the Sudanese regime to eject the LIFG from Sudan. As a result, many LIFG members returned to Libya while others escaped to London. Once the LIFG was exposed, the group sprang into action and throughout the 1990s conducted military operations against the Libyan regime, including several failed attempts to assassi-

nate Qaddafi himself. The Libyan regime fought relentlessly against the LIFG, killing Salah Fathi bin Sulayman (a.k.a. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Khattab), one of the LIFG's founding fathers, in a battle with Libyan soldiers near Darnah in September 1997.[18]

By 1998 the LIFG's insurgency and terrorist campaign within Libya had, by all measurable standards, come to a halt. However, the group did not declare an official ceasefire until 2000.[19] Following the campaign, many members were imprisoned in Libya. Many of those who escaped returned to Afghanistan. Among those who fled were the LIFG's emir, Abu 'Abd Allah al-Sadiq, the chief religious official Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa'idi, and Abu Anas al-Libi, who had been recently implicated in the 1998 Embassy bombings.[20]

By 2005, the Libyan regime began a reconciliation and de-radicalization process at the prompting of Qaddafi's son, Sayf al-Islam.[21] After years of negotiations, 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."[22] The new code viewed the armed struggle against Qaddafi's regime as illegal under Islamic law and set down new guidelines for when and how *jihad* should be fought. However, it also stated that *jihad* would be permissible if Muslim lands were invaded, citing Afghanistan, Iraq and the Palestinian territories as examples.[23] Many leaders and members of the LIFG were eventually released from prison in March 2010.[24] However, others such as Abd al-Wahab Qa'id were not released until after the Libyan uprising began in March 2011 against the Qaddafi regime.[25]

The LIFG went on to play a prominent role in challenging the Qaddafi regime during the events of the Arab Spring. Following the overthrow of Qaddafi, many leaders and members have created political parties and have opted to participate in the new Libyan political system.

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

When the LIFG ended its military operations and joined the political process in the post-Qaddafi era, new *jihadi* groups began to emerge in its absence. Most prominent amongst these has been *Katibat Ansar al-Sharia* in Benghazi (ASB), which first announced itself in February 2012.[26] The organization is led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, a former inmate of Qaddafi's infamous Abu Salim prison, and remains the primary suspect in the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.[27] The organization has since changed its name to *Ansar al-Sharia in Libya* (ASL) - a move that signifies its desire to be perceived as a national movement, rather than a rebel fighting force.[28]

ASB (now ASL) should not be confused with Ansar Al-Sharia in Derna (ASD), despite some crossover in membership and political goals. ASD operates under the leadership of former Guantanamo Bay inmate Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, and, as the name suggests, is based out of Derna.[29] ASD also shares the similar objective of establishing *sharia* law in Libya. However, there are no known direct ties between the two Ansar Al-Sharia organizations.[30]

ASL has been able to expand in size and popularity through its violent *da'wa* campaign at home and abroad.[31] ASL has also been involved in training individuals to fight in *jihads* abroad, such as in Syria, Mali, and North Africa.[32] This has further cemented ASL's role as a cog in the facilitation and logistics network within the global jihadi movement. However, ASLs most successful method to advance its agenda has been through the provision of social services.[33]

ASL has provided local services similar to those historically provided by other Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They have participated in infrastructure repair and development projects, the provision of security, and general aid.[34] One of the group's most successful projects has been their anti-drug campaign, which was orchestrated in cooperation with the Rehab Clinic at the Psychiatric Hospital of Benghazi, the Ahli Club (soccer team) the Libya Company (telecom and technology company) and the Technical Company.[35]

In late November 2014, the UN placed both ASB and ASD on its blacklist, adding them to the list of terror organizations associated with Al-Qaeda that face arms embargos, global travel bans, and asset freezes.[36]

ASL has known ties to several smaller *Salafi-jihadi katibas* (battalions) in Libya including *Katibat Abu 'Ubaydah al-Jarah* and S*araya Raf Allah al-Sahati*. Many of these *katibas,* among others, participated in ASL's first "annual conference" on June 6, 2012.[37] Based on photos from the event, as many as a thousand individuals attended. At that time, it was believed that ASL had only a few hundred members.[38] Currently, the group has expanded and, at its second annual conference in late June 2013, roughly two thousand people attended.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Libya has roughly six million citizens and at ninety-seven percent of the population, the country is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim. The remaining three percent includes a mix of Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews.[39] 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.[40] Non-Sunni Muslims in Libya are primarily native Ibadi Muslims or foreigners from other countries.

For the majority of Libyans, Islam permeates everyday life. In all public schools, and in private schools that admit citizens, religious instruction in Islam is compulsory. *Sharia* governs family matters such as inheritance, divorce, and the right to own property.[41]

Islam plays a dominant role in Libyan society and is the official state religion dictated by the interim constitution, while *sharia* law provides the principal source of legislation. Under the same constitution, non-Muslims are granted freedom to practice their beliefs. Laws enacted during the Qaddafi regime restricting religious freedom remain in place but are rarely enforced.[42]

Radical Islamism was staunchly opposed by the Qaddafi regime and traditionally found few followers inside Libya. However, following Qaddafi's ouster in 2011, Libyans responded enthusiastically to Islamist political parties as they promoted a sense of identity and pledged to maintain order.[43] On the other hand, while Libyans continue to grasp for a political identity, many remain skeptical of Islamist extremism.[44]

In the absence of strong political and social institutions, many Islamic organizations filled the void by providing valuable social and governmental services. By providing services such as health care, youth activity planning, and religious organization, groups like ASL and the LIFG have gradually moved away from their image as global jihadi organizations. The ASL has gradually turned its activities toward aiding the general public at home and abroad while the LIFG has disbanded its jihadist activities altogether. In an attempt to change the group's image, the LIFG even changed its name to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

When Qaddafi took power in 1969, he implemented a new political system, entitled the *Jamahiriyah*, meaning the "state of the masses." Under this system, he engaged in a series of repressive reforms that outlawed political parties and refused to tolerate any organized political dissent.[45]

Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood began to convene in the 1980s with a plan to change the existing regime, albeit via peaceful means. It wasn't until great socio-economic problems struck Libya in the 1990s that the Muslim Brotherhood opted for a more violent path to change. By 1998, the Qaddafi regime had overcome the Islamic opposition within the country and by the early 2000s, it seemed as if only small pockets of jihadist resistance remained.[46]

After 2005 Qaddafi's son and political advisor, Saif al Islam, began to negotiate with Islamists to free those imprisoned under Qaddafi in exchange for the recognition of the legitimacy of the government, the renunciation of violence, and formal revisions of their Islamist doctrines. As a result of these negotiations, more than one hundred members of the Muslim Brotherhood were released in 2006, as well as hundreds of members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group by 2008.[47]

When Arab Spring reached Libya in the late 2000s, it led to the outbreak of civil war. The war ended in 2011 when Qaddafi's regime was toppled with the assistance of Western airstrikes and the former dictator was assassinated. After Qaddafi's death, the country began a turbulent transition to democracy. Parliamentary elections were held in 2012 in which the LMB-affiliated Justice and Construction Party (JCP) and the National Forces Alliance ran in opposition to one another.[48]

At the time Mohammed Sawan led the JCP, overseeing electoral victories in 17 of 80 seats available to parties within the 200-seat parliament.[49] Meanwhile, the National Forces Alliance won 39 of the 80 seats. To the JCP's dismay, the party did not achieve the same electoral successes as Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party, the JCP's model and inspiration.

Also following Qaddafi's fall, the LIFG split into two political factions - the Hizb al-Watan (HW) and Hizb al-Umma al-Wasat (HUW) - both of whom took part in the legislative elections in 2012. The HW ran as a broad-based moderate party while the HUW ran as a more conservative Islamic party. The HUW claimed the rest of the LIFG members, and operated under the leadership of Sami al-Sa'adi.[50] To the their dismay, the HW did not win any seats in the election, while HUW garnered one seat. The HUW's seat was allocated to Abdul Wahhab al-Qa'id, brother of the late Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior al-Qaeda figure.

Other small Islamist parties also failed to perform. The Salafi party al-Asala failed to win a single seat while the Hizb al-Islah wa-l-Tanmiyya, led by former member of the Muslim Brotherhood Khaled al-Werchefani, similarly garnered very little support.

Libya's most recent legislative elections in June of 2014, however, showed improved support for the Islamist parties, with 30 of the 80 parliamentary seats available going to Islamist parties or candidates. However, due to political hostilities between secular forces and Islamist militants, the result of the election proved highly contentious, sparking a wave of violence that continues to this day.[51]

In August 2014, Tripoli was seized by the armed group the National Salvation group, which established a self-declared government. Nevertheless, elected officials and parliament still continue to operate as the official government hundreds of miles from Tripoli in the city of Bayda. The occupying force has even taken control of the government's web presence, boasting the face of the rebel-declared prime minister, Omar al-Hasi, instead of the officially elected Prime Minister Abdullah Thinni.[52]

The national government is also greatly undermined by the separate factions that exist in the capital city of Tripoli and Benghazi. Fighting between militant groups of both cities has escalated since May of 2014, at which point retired General Khalifa Haftar announced the armed campaign "Operation Dignity" against the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (an alliance that includes Ansar al-Shari'a, Libya Shield units, and other armed groups). Operation Dignity has included a series of air strikes over Benghazi's populated areas.

Throughout the summer Tripoli experienced several weeks of armed violence to its west. An alliance of armed groups primarily from the city of Misrata and the surrounding area launched "Operation Dawn" against armed groups allied with fighters from the Warshafana region. In response, a series of air sorties were launched against Operation Dawn's militant groups.[53]

By the end of 2014, the security situation in Libya had deteriorated even further. Fighters from the Islamist State, whose organizational base remains in Iraq and Syria, were reportedly gaining a foothold in the chaotic country. Ansar al-Shari'a was added to the United Nations Security Council's terror list in November, owing to its links to al Qaeda and for running Islamic State training camps. Starvation, displacement, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and illicit arms trading were all on the rise by December 2014, while diplomats warned that terrorist and criminal networks were "developing closer ties to Mali and Northern Nigeria in a "crisis that is threatening to destabilize the entire region."[54]

ENDNOTES

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[13] Evan F. Kohlmann, "Dossier: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group," NEFA Foundation, October 2007, 3, http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefalifg1007.pdf.
[14] Ibid., 4.
[15] Tawil, Brothers in Arms, 93-94.
[16] Kohlmann, "Dossier: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group," 8.
[17] Tawil, Brothers in Arms, 65.
[18] Kohlmann, "Dossier: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group," 8-11.
[19] Tawil, Brothers in Arms, 140.
[20] Ibid., 179.
[21] Omar Ashour, "Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 23, iss. 3, 2011, 384.

[22] 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."

[23] Ibid., 388.

[24] Ibid., 384.

[25] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Political Islam and the Fate of Two Libyan Brothers," New York Times, October 6, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/world/africa/political-islam-and-the-fate-of-two-libyan-brothers.html?pagewanted=all.

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[38] Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia."

[39] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, n.d., http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222303#sthash.IH9pgQVJ.dpuf

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[45] Pargeter, "Political Islam in Libya."

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[47] Manal Omar, "Libya: Rebuilding From Scratch," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, n.d., http://www.wilsoncenter.org/islamists/libya-rebuilding-scratch

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