

# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

**Libya**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 introduces “Culture General,” the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment.

Part 2 presents “Culture Specific” Libya, focusing on unique cultural features of Libyan society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact AFCLC's Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and

visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible.

We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more



sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

## Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard.



As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me."

Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

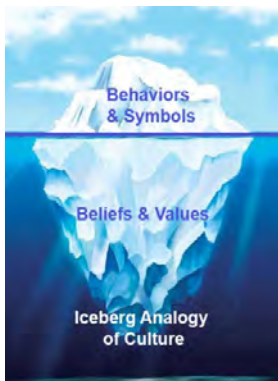
### **Cultural Belief System**

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### **Core Beliefs**

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as



depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

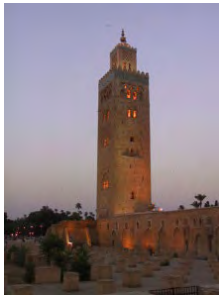
In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout the African Continent, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common among most African countries. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Africa has a history that spans the entire existence of humankind. In ancient times prior to the emergence of written languages, history and

wisdom were preserved across generations and ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles.

Ancient civilizations evolved in all corners of Africa, inspired in part by peoples from the Middle East bringing trade, beliefs, customs, language, and on occasion, colonization. Far from being isolated empires, the African civilizations were intimately connected by commerce and marriage throughout various regions of the continent, and when confronted by outsiders, managed to adapt to their influences. Eventually, Arab traders introduced Islam to Africa and also instituted the Trans-Saharan African slave trade that lasted from the 7th to 19th Centuries.

The “golden age” of European exploration, which lasted from the 18th to mid-20th century, prompted the wholesale exploitation of Africans resources – first human assets through slavery, followed by natural resources such as minerals, precious gems and metals, and wildlife, thereby diminishing most of what was traditional and African.

The introduction of the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade altered the slave trade through both the sheer number of



Africans enslaved and through the cementing of a racist ideology of Black inferiority to legitimize the institution of slavery. Slavery decimated the African continent for over 400 years through the forced relocation of an estimated 25 to 30 million Africans worldwide. This figure does not include those Africans who died aboard ships or during capture. While abolition of the slave trade dissolved the institution of slavery, it did not end the European



presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

Starting in the mid-19th century, European colonialism served to redefine African ethnic relations on a large scale; however, as African societies began to resist colonial rule and seek their independence, widespread ethnic conflict and genocide occurred. Sustained westernization and globalization continue to shape the continent through poverty, disease, and social reform. A history still to be recorded, Africa's future identity faces many challenges in critical areas such as environmental change, ethnic strife, women's health and security, and education.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several millennia and continue



to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.

Tribes are still represented today across the African political landscape, although the use of the word "tribe" is sometimes misinterpreted due to its western notion of "primitiveness" and oftentimes substituted with the term "ethnic group." Lacking centralized authority, tribes are organized around segmented descent groups or in some cases age groups.

Everyday governance is discharged through councils of respected elders and sanctioned through ritual and other means. East African pastoralist groups such as the Maasai, along with

some West African tribes and the Berbers in North Africa, represent this type of organization.

Chiefdoms or kingdoms are ruled by kings or queens from a royal clan and generally incorporate millions of subjects. Kingdoms such as the Zulu or Swazi in southern Africa developed through conquest, while others like Ghana's Ashante developed through an association of related traditional states.



However, colonialism eventually diluted the power and reach of these empires, whose leaders were often retained as indirect rulers or figureheads.

Today, all three of these political organizations still

exist, although in the confines of modern African nation-states created by colonial powers who had little regard or understanding of African cultures. This juxtaposition of modernity with tradition has caused severe conflict throughout the continent.

Challenged to construct their respective “national” identities, regional leaders attempt to do so by diluting the traditionally cohesive power of ancestry. These national ruling elites, who derive their power from wealth and commerce rather than tribal affiliation, feel threatened by loyalty to these traditional organizations, labeling their rule as “tribalism.”

This “class versus descent” scrimmage for power has resulted in conflicts across the continent and a dramatic divergence of interests. As a means to overcome these and other issues on the continent, a 55-nation federation, the African Union (AU), was formed in 2002. AU's charter is to promote “greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples” by building partnerships in all segments of “civil society.”

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help

preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the African continent consisted of orally transmitted indigenous religious practices. As in many societies, African indigenous beliefs influenced diet, subsistence patterns, family structures, marriage practices, and healing and burial processes. In essence, Africans constructed their worldview through their indigenous religions.



Today, the African continent is primarily either Muslim or Christian. Other faiths such as Judaism and Hinduism exist as pockets in different regions of the continent, primarily in urban areas. The historical

trajectories of Islamic and Christian expansion in Africa offer intriguing commonalities in how Africans across the continent initially reacted to the introduction of each of those religions. For example, it is common throughout the continent to find a blending of many elements of indigenous religious practices with local Islam and Christianity.

Consequently, many African native religions share similarities with religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in their understanding of God as the creator and ruler of all life, although He is considered untouchable by humans.

However, unlike Christianity and Islam, many African indigenous religions believe that God is not directly involved in people's lives. To them there is a spirit world populated with former good and bad human beings. The good spirits intercede with God on behalf of their living families to



whom they then relay God's will through dreams and acquired possessions. The bad spirits work to bring misfortune through sickness, death, or natural disasters to those who behave inappropriately.

Many indigenous African religions revere "nature" spirits living in the sky, water, and forests. These impersonal spirits help protect people from harm and provide them with life's essential ingredients such as water, sun, and wildlife. This belief system is commonly referred to as animism.

Just as spirits mediate relations between God and humans, religious specialists act as mediators between spirits and humans to provide protection from harm.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin"). The traditional African family with respect to marriage, family structure, and descent is a much different arrangement than is found in most American families. Likewise, there are several components of the traditional African family that are common to all African cultures.



First, perhaps the most difficult feature to reconcile to Americans is that of polygyny – the practice of a husband having more than one wife. A benefit of this arrangement is that it promotes societal alliances through marriage, procreation, and family wealth through female labor.

Second, due to polygyny, the family in most African cultures has historically consisted of an expanded set of kin or relatives that extends well beyond the American notion of a nuclear family. This arrangement created a family environment where children considered all siblings as "brothers and sisters" and all of the wives/mothers as "mother."

Third, the extended African family traces descent through either the male or female side of the family, a practice which differs considerably from the American family. Patrilineal descent (through the male side of the family) is the more common approach and usually features polygyny. The matrilineal (through the female bloodline) marriage pattern is more uncommon and almost always features monogamy – it is rare to encounter a wife having more than one husband.

Lastly, it is common for two or more blood lines (lineages) to share a common ancestor and collectively form a clan, which is the largest social unit. Clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries.

The dramatic social changes in Africa during and after colonialism in the last 4 decades have obviously affected the traditional family, and variations on these 3 features can be found across the continent.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles. Gender roles in Africa follow no single model nor is there a generalized concept of sex and common standard of sexual behavior.

Prehistorically, gender role differentiation in Africa's hunting and gathering cultures was based on a division of labor featuring different, yet complementary, sets of responsibilities for males and females, adults and children. Females gathered over half

the caloric needs from natural vegetation, while also reproducing and raising offspring. Males were primarily hunters but also assisted with gathering.

These gender patterns continued as agricultural practices advanced.



Females shared in farming while continuing to provide for the family's subsistence, and males produced the cash crops. Pastoralists like the Maasai of Kenya traditionally have featured males involved in cattle-raising and females in food production.

The 19th-century European colonial period introduced a cash economy into Africa, with female labor used to produce the cash crops. By inserting male authority over females, colonial administrators disrupted the distinct yet complementary male/female relationship that had been traditionally African.

More recently, western influence across the continent has dramatically altered the traditional gender roles. Educational and professional opportunities for females, along with increased family migrations to urban areas, have radically altered traditional male and female gender roles.

Likewise, the number of singles parents and even child- or other relative-led families has increased with the predominance of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and warfare, further altering traditional gender responsibilities. Additionally, ethnic conflicts involving abuse of women are prevalent in many unstable countries, and while the rubric of traditional African gender generally remains, the forces of change are gradually ripping it away.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is



defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury

rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to

adopt multilingual practices, if for no other reason than to preserve their native heritage.

You may find it challenging to comprehend the scope of Africa's linguistic diversity. There are over 2,000 African languages (many spoken-only) from 6 major language families, and perhaps 100 of these languages are used to communicate among the more dominant ethnic groups such as Berber, Swahili, Yoruba, and others.

Official languages of African nation-states are few, yet the linguistic diversity expressed across the continent (Nigeria has 250 languages) has prompted an awareness of the value of Africa's linguistic traditions. While most areas of the continent speak the adopted language of their colonial past – such as



French and Portuguese in West Africa, French and Arabic in Morocco, and English in Kenya and South Africa – the majority of people also speak one or more traditional “indigenous” languages of their and other ethnic groups. As

African independence spread throughout the continent, ethnic groups continued to depend on their indigenous identifiers, such as language, to celebrate their “release” from colonial rule and to preserve a sense of indigenous identity.

While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

Africans admire and even expect extended greetings and small talk, and to attempt to rush or avoid social graces is considered disrespectful. Similarly, Africans avoid direct eye contact when communicating with new acquaintances and people of status,

particularly elders. They also are fond of non-verbal gestures, and it is common throughout African societies for members of the same gender to hold hands or touch while conversing.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.



The contemporary African educational system hardly resembles the traditional pre-colonial structure, whereby community elders were primarily responsible for preparing youth for adulthood. Their instruction included fundamentals of ethnic ritual and ceremony, along with customary protocol for their distinctive gender roles. A rite-of-passage commemorating their successful journey from childhood to adulthood served as a form of graduation.

European colonialism brought a more structured, formal educational system that catered to a small group of African elite who demonstrated potential to administer expanding colonial territories. Following independence, many African nations adopted the European system because they believed it would prepare them to be more competitive in intra-continental and global marketplaces, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also



hamper progress. According to 2023 statistics, about 100 million African children and youth were out of school, of which 35 million were of primary school age.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In low-context western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, most African cultures are traditionally high-context societies, whereby people center their activities on socializing and establishing close associations, having little regard for the passage-of-time.

Only after establishing trust and honor will your typical African counterpart agreeably proceed with business. In his worldview, time is a precious commodity used to establish relationships and



form alliances. Any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock.

To an African, close physical proximity between individuals encourages cooperative trust, and for centuries they have viewed human linkage

as a core element to survival. This closeness is best represented in a traditional African village where strong kinship connections are evidenced by a display of close interpersonal relations among family members.

While conventional African concepts of time and space remain intact, throughout the continent western influence and globalization have stepped up the pace of African living, mostly in urban areas. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrations have reshaped traditional social and subsistence patterns.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Prior to 19th-century European colonization of Africa,

recreation served a vital subsistence role, whereby adolescents and adults alike participated in intellectually stimulating leisurely activities that concurrently served to develop essential hunting and pastoral skills.

Games of chance and skill were important to early childhood development, providing social outlets within and outside their community. Featuring wrestling, jumping and running; traditional African sport was steeped in religious ritual.



Along with colonialism came the introduction to Africa of western sports such as soccer, cricket, rugby and track and field. This emphasis on western sport continued to thrive with African independence and globalization, as seen in sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela skillfully employed sport to promote a unified South African nation. Importing the predominantly “white” game of rugby, Mandela used it to fuse a racially divided country following his election in 1992. This event is the theme of the motion picture “Invictus,” exemplifying how sport can serve to create national identities and overcome ethnic division. His efforts have inspired many other African nations to follow suit.



Likewise, East African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have produced the world's dominant male and female distance

runners, and South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria emerged as strong contenders in the 2010 World Cup. African nations are now competing in leagues such as the International Basketball Association (FIBA) World Championships, and there is also a

growing number of African basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Despite having only 18% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 65% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 95% of malarial diseases occur in Africa.



These and other medical conditions are attributed primarily to viral infection and widespread poverty caused by extreme climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled with inadequate preventative measures. While extensive drought generates widespread famine, civil disturbances generate millions of displaced persons. Likewise, with only 65% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to basic drinking water, water-born bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.



Many people in Africa lack access to western medicine, and as a result depend on traditional health practices to combat disease. In addition, some traditional beliefs run counter to western medical practice and perhaps discourage individuals from utilizing those services even when they are available. This problem is further intensified by lack of federal

regulatory healthcare management.

While modern healthcare procedures are more common in urban areas, many rural people rely on traditional practitioners who use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients. Similarly, many families have their own secret remedies. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices do not adequately treat many of the more serious conditions.

On a positive note, western influence has stimulated some progress in combating Africa's health crisis. More resources are devoted to achieving basic human security by assessing disease symptoms early and with scientific accuracy.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Traditionally having an agrarian-based economy, Africa today remains predominantly agricultural, featuring less industrialization than most other parts of the world. Post-colonial adversities such as civil war, disease, poverty, and unstable dictatorships posed unusual hardship on several young African nations; however, Africa currently stands at the cross-roads of economic development with many nations becoming some of fastest growing regions in the world.



Colonialism institutionalized the exploitation of Africa's mineral resources, resulting in today's oil industry dominating the economic market in several coastal regions. A surge in global oil prices; a growing African middle class; and reduction in civil wars, foreign aid, and inflation collectively promise a more positive outlook for the future.

Countries such as Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa are economically the wealthiest on the continent, with regions such as East Africa showing signs of economic stability. Despite the economic upswing, much of sub-Saharan

Africa's future economic prosperity is held hostage by devastating diseases such as AIDS, particularly in areas of southern Africa, and the growing effects of climate change and man-made environmental degradation throughout the subcontinent.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Africa lags far behind most of the world in manufacturing capacity and output. Even the more economically-developed nations such as South Africa are competitively weak when compared to non-African industrialized nations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced some growth in raw exports although this increase did little to boost long-term manufacturing capacity.

Today, Africa is experiencing an actual decline in manufacturing capacity due primarily to a lull in the global economy, along with other indigenous issues such as environmental stress, poor physical and organizational infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled personnel. Likewise, African manufacturing capacity is no match against global powers such as China and significant Southeast Asian markets.

International aid from both governmental and non-governmental organizations has helped African nations establish preliminary economic footholds. For example, many of them have dedicated industrial developmental zones to attract foreign investment and increase export-related manufacturing capacity, although Africa is far removed from having a significant role in the global marketplace in the foreseeable future.



Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize African society at large, we will now focus on specific features of Libyan society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

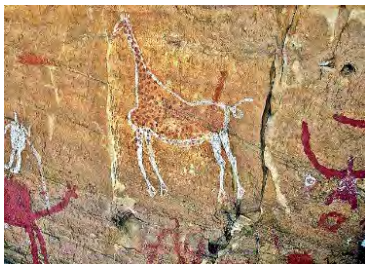
## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

During Libya's ancient and complex history, its nomadic people become subjects of vast empires, foreign colonizers, and most recently a socialist despotic regime. Libya's 3 main regions – Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan –each with its own unique history, united for the first time under Italian colonial rule in 1934. Established in 1951 under United Nations (UN) orders, independent Libya was an oil-rich Islamic kingdom before a 1969 revolution brought Muammar Qadhafi to power. Since the 2011 “Arab Spring” movements that toppled Qadhafi, civil conflict has consumed Libya.

### Early History

Archaeological findings in Libya's **Haua Fteah** cave near the Mediterranean coast suggest early humans inhabited the region as early as 200,000 years ago. Around 8,000 BC, regional inhabitants



formed semi-permanent settlements, herding cattle and farming a few crops. These people enjoyed lush landscapes until desertification began to change the terrain about 8,000 years ago.

Inscriptions from the Egyptian Old Kingdom (2,700-2,200 BC) are the earliest written documentation of human activity in the region. These records note that nomadic **Amazigh** (Berber) tribes from the region of modern-day Libya raided Egyptian lands near the Nile River. These raids were largely unsuccessful, and for centuries, the Berber tribes paid tribute to

Egypt, while individual Berbers served in its armies. Years later in 945 BC, a Berber Army officer seized control of Egypt as Pharaoh Shoshenq I, marking the beginning of the so-called Libyan dynasties that ruled Egypt for over 200 years.

**The Phoenicians:** Meanwhile, the sea-faring Phoenicians from present-day Tyre, Lebanon established trading posts on Libya's western coast around 1000 BC. Three of these settlements – Sabratha, Oea, and Leptis Magna – were known as **Tripolis** (3 cities), eventually becoming Libya's present-day capital, Tripoli. The region around Tripolis, known as Tripolitania, thrived as part



of a major trading empire based in Carthage (in present-day Tunisia) that linked Mediterranean and trans-Saharan trade routes.

**Greek Colonies:** In 635 BC, Greek settlers colonized

Libya's eastern coast, founding the city of Cyrene and giving the greater region the name Cyrenaica. The Greeks became prosperous farmers and traders before they were conquered by the Persian Empire in 525 BC. About 200 years later, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and retook Cyrenaica for Greek Macedonia. Around that time, Greek settlers developed the name *Libya* from the Egyptian word *Levu*, the name for a nomadic Berber tribe that raided Egypt. For centuries, the name Libya referred to all Berber-occupied regions in North Africa, encompassing lands from Cyrenaica to Morocco.

**Garamantes Nomads:** With the Phoenicians and Greeks controlling the Libyan coast, the Berber Garamantes tribe dominated the southwestern inland region known as Fezzan. Skilled engineers, the Garamantes constructed stone dwellings, pyramidal tombs, and **foggares** (underground stone-lined irrigation canals) at their oasis capital in Germa. As talented horse-breeders, the Garamantes dominated trans-Saharan trade routes on their horse-drawn war chariots and periodically battled the coastal settlers.

## Roman Empire

Meanwhile, the Romans began building their empire in central Italy. A rival to both the Phoenicians and Greeks, the Romans fought Carthage in 3 wars beginning in 264 BC, eventually destroying the city and taking control of Tripolitania in 146 BC. The Greeks in Cyrenaica managed to remain independent of Roman rule a few years longer, until Cyrenaica's heirless king died and bequeathed the region to Rome in 96 BC.

Under Roman rule, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica generally maintained their respective Punic (Phoenician) and Greek identities, separated from each other by the vast Sirtica desert region. Other than a significant Jewish rebellion in 115 AD (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the 4 centuries of Roman rule were largely conflict-free and known as **Pax Romana** (Roman peace). The region produced grains, olives, wine, and other goods to help feed the Empire. In return, Rome invested in the region's infrastructure, creating an extensive network of roads, aqueducts, baths, stadiums, and other structures remaining as ruins across Libya today.

The Roman Empire in Africa reached its peak under Emperor Severus (r. 193-211), a native of Tripolitania whose birthplace, Leptis Magna, became a major center of commerce and culture.



Following the end of his dynasty in 235, there was a period of political turmoil, with frequent leader turnover, steep taxes, and inflation. Even while losing its political hold, the Empire continued to influence the region, notably introducing early forms of Christianity in the 2nd century (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

In 365, an earthquake destroyed Leptis Magna and Cyrene, and in 395 Roman Emperor Diocletian split the Empire. Tripolitania became part of the Latin-speaking Western Roman Empire governed from Rome, while Cyrenaica was aligned with the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire ruled from Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey).



**“Barbarian” Invasions:** Beginning in the 4th century, the Roman rulers faced increased pressure from foreign invaders, collectively known as “Barbarians.” The Berber tribes from Fezzan sporadically attacked Roman coastal towns, and in 455, Germanic Vandal tribes invaded North Africa from Spain. The Vandals levied taxes and exploited the land, damaging the region’s economy. In 533, Byzantine Emperor Justinian defeated the Vandals, claiming Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Plagued by weak governance and ongoing Barbarian invasions, the region struggled to return to prosperity.

### **The Arrival of the Arabs and the Advent of Islam**

Eager to spread their religion, early converts to Islam from the Arabian Peninsula invaded, conquering Cyrenaica and Tripolitania around 640 and Fezzan a few decades later. The Arab raids did not initially convert many residents nor establish



Islamic rule. Over time, however, Islam would fundamentally reshape the region’s society (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Some Berber residents began to accept Islam, intermarry with Arabs, and facilitate

further Arab conquests. Other Berbers, including some Christian and Jewish populations, initially resisted and fought the Arabs independently or as allies to Byzantine forces. Still others sought to assert their uniqueness by embracing a particular school of Islam which rejected central Islamic governance and Arab caliphs (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

### **Arab and Berber Islamic Rule**

By the late 7th century, the Byzantine Empire had lost control of the region. Over the next almost 1,000 years, various Arab and Berber Islamic groups jockeyed for power and influence. First, the Umayyad dynasty based in Damascus, Syria governed the region until it was overthrown by the Abbasid dynasty centered in Baghdad, Iraq in 750. The region prospered under the

Abbasids, who rebuilt much of the ruined Roman infrastructure. Meanwhile, Muslim Bedouin nomads from the Arabian Peninsula moved into the region, giving allegiance only to their tribal leaders.

**Fatimids:** In 909, Shi'a Muslim Berbers known as Fatimids rebelled against their Sunni Muslim Arab Abbasid governors (see *Religion and Spirituality*). By the mid-10th century, the Fatimids had conquered Egypt and granted the semi-autonomous Zirid Dynasty rule over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. As factions struggled for power, the Zirid **amir** (commander) rejected Egypt's Fatimid Shi'a regime in 1049, initiating the Berbers' return to Sunni Islam.



**Banu Hilal and Banu Sulaim:** Angered by the Zirids' reversion to Sunni Islam, the Fatimids encouraged the Arabian Banu Hilal and Banu Sulaim tribes to punish the Zirids. Moving into the region in large numbers, these Bedouin tribes expedited Arabization, the process of adopting Arabic language and cultural customs. The Arab tribes plundered the region, weakening it so much that the crusading Normans of France were able to sack Tripoli in 1146 and hold it for 12 years.

**Almohads and Hafsids:** In 1158, the Islamic Almohad Empire of Morocco and Spain conquered Tripolitania, uniting the entire **Maghreb** (most of western North Africa). In 1207, the Almohads installed the Hafsid dynasty in Tunis (Tunisia) to rule over Tripolitania. With strong commercial ties to Europe, Tripoli became a major trade center before entering an era of slow decline. Meanwhile, Cyrenaica was nominally aligned to the new Mamluk dynasties in Egypt, although Bedouin in both Cyrenaica and Fezzan generally continued to accept no authority beyond their own tribal leaders.

### **Spain and the Ottoman Empire**

For much of the 16th century, Spain and the increasingly powerful Ottoman Empire based in Istanbul challenged Hafsid

rule and fought for supremacy of the Mediterranean. In 1510, Spain sacked Tripoli and built a naval base there. In 1524, Spanish King Charles V entrusted Tripoli's defense to the Knights of St. John, a Catholic military order based in Malta. Meanwhile, the Ottomans rapidly expanded their territory into

North Africa with the help of pirates such as Barbarossa (Redbeard). By 1551, the Ottomans had driven the Maltese knights from Tripoli.

For the next 160 years, Ottoman **beys** (provincial

governors), **deys** (military leaders), and **pashas** (governors) competed for influence, while nominally reporting to the sultan in Istanbul. Although political infighting was common, Tripoli's economy flourished from the trans-Saharan slave trade and state-sponsored piracy. During this period, Europeans called the region the "Barbary Coast" for the native Berber inhabitants, who were mostly of mixed Arab-Berber ancestry by this time.

**The Karamanli Dynasty:** In 1711, Ahmad Karamanli, a **khouloughli** (son of a Turkish soldier and an Arab woman) cavalry officer, besieged Tripoli and killed 300 Ottoman officials. Karamanli subsequently purchased the position of **pasha** from the sultan. Though nominally under Ottoman control, Karamanli created a hereditary monarchy in Tripoli. Like many **pashas** before him, Karamanli ensured Tripoli's prosperity primarily through piracy. Unlike earlier **pashas**, Karamanli was able to extend his authority over some of the mixed Arab-Berber tribes in Fezzan and Cyrenaica by the time of his death in 1745. Although Tripoli's pirate fleet declined in subsequent years, the Karamanli dynasty continued to demand payment for safe transit from all passing vessels.

**The Barbary Wars:** From 1790-1800, the newly-independent US paid the Karamanlis over \$2 million for the safe passage of American merchant vessels in the Mediterranean. When the



Karamanli *pasha* demanded higher payment in 1801, the US refused. In response, the *pasha* declared war on the US and took American merchantmen captive. US President Thomas Jefferson responded by sending warships, notably the *Philadelphia*. When the frigate ran aground in Tripoli harbor, it was captured by the Karamanlis and refloated. Returning to the ship at night by small sailboat, the Americans overpowered the Karamanlis and set fire to the *Philadelphia*. Meanwhile, US troops had seized Derna in Cyrenaica and were planning to advance on Tripoli when negotiators reached a peace accord, ending the war in 1805.



In the 1820s, British and French maritime dominance drastically curbed piracy in the Mediterranean, reducing the Karamanlis' income. In response, the Karamanli *pasha* raised taxes on local residents, while spending lavishly on himself and his allies. Ensuing violent protests led to civil war. Soon, the Ottomans stepped in, sending the *pasha* to exile and reinstating direct rule in 1835. After 120 years of Karamanli rule, the region returned to the Ottoman fold as a province called Tripolitania that also included portions of Cyrenaica and Fezzan.

Nevertheless, this return to Ottoman rule had little effect on the region beyond the coastal urban centers of Tripoli and Benghazi. In these interior regions, most Bedouin tribes continued to give allegiance only to their tribal leaders. Beginning in the mid-1800s, the decline of the slave trade negatively impacted the region's economy.

### Rise of the Sanusi Order

In the 1830s, Algerian Muslim scholar Sayyid Muhammed Ali as-Sanusi developed a religious following, establishing **zawiyas** (lodges) throughout the Cyrenean interior. Based on conservative Sufi orders originating in the Arabian Peninsula, Muhammed Ali promoted a form of extreme self-discipline that

appealed to and won the allegiance of many Bedouin (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

When Muhammad Ali died in 1859, his son Muhammad al-Mahdi as-Sanusi continued missionary activities, bringing the



**Sanusiyah** (Sanusi Order) widespread popularity. In 1895, Muhammad al-Mahdi moved the *Sanusiyah* headquarters to Kufra in southeastern Cyrenaica, where he proclaimed *jihad* (holy war) against French colonial and Christian missionary ambitions in the greater Sahara region. Upon Muhammad al-Mahdi's death in 1903, the *Sanusiyah* comprised 146 *zawiyas* across North Africa and Arabia. These *zawiyas* effectively controlled vast areas, providing residents

with security, a system of Islamic justice, and some educational opportunities (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Further, the *Sanusiyah* acquired control of many trade routes, solidifying its influence in Cyrenaica.

### **Ottoman Decline and Italian Ascendancy**

As Sanusi influence expanded into inland Cyrenaica and Fezzan, economic decline and nationalistic calls for self-rule grew stronger in coastal regions, threatening the Ottoman Empire's territorial claims. As the Empire weakened, a recently united Italy set its sights on establishing colonies in Africa.

In the 1880s, Italy initiated a policy known as "peaceful penetration" of North Africa, whereby it sought to gain influence by commercial and cultural means. By 1910, Italy had opened schools and banks in Tripoli, while enlarging its trade with several regional ports. Then in 1911, Italy used the murders of 2 Italians in Libya as a pretext to pursue more aggressive penetration. When the Ottomans sent arms to Tripoli, Italy formally declared war on the Empire, assured that other European powers would recognize its claims to African territory.

Ottoman troops acquired support from native residents wary of the Christian Italian invaders. Hostilities continued for over a year and included the world's first air raids. Preoccupied by instability in its European holdings on the Balkan Peninsula, the Ottomans sued for peace in 1912. Negotiated without input from the region's native residents, the subsequent treaty granted Italy sovereignty over newly "independent" Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, though the Ottoman sultan retained the right to appoint the Islamic leader in Tripoli. Primarily due to religious ties, most Libyans preferred Ottoman rule to Italian occupation. Nevertheless, Italian troops moved to establish a presence in the interior, reaching Ghat in southwestern Fezzan in 1914 before facing stiff resistance from local tribes.

### World War I (WWI) and the First Italo-Sanusi War

In 1914, turmoil in the Balkans triggered WWI between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (the US, Britain, France, Russia, and Italy, among others). Meanwhile, as the Italians continued to consolidate control of the region, local resentment of their occupation increased. When conflict flared, resistance organized behind the Sanusi Order. Nominally allied to the Central Powers, the Sanusis engaged Italy with Ottoman support in the First Italo-Sanusi War. By mid-1915, the Sanusis had pushed the Italians to within 20 mi of Tripoli. The Sanusis' momentum eventually stalled when the British successfully stopped their advance into Egypt.

As the Sanusis succeeded in pushing the Italians from most of the territory of modern-day Libya, internal disagreements



among the Sanusis forced Sanusi leader Muhammad Idris al-Sanusi (known as Idris) to stand down in 1916. Although neither side gave up their territorial claims, the Italians recognized Idris as *amir* of inner Cyrenaica, while retaining control of the coastal region. In an effort to secure their control, the Italians passed

legislation in 1919 establishing provincial parliaments and granting regional residents Italian citizenship.

### ***La Riconquista and the Second Italo-Sanusi War***

Soon, several Libyan factions were expressing their displeasure with the arrangement. In early 1922, Tripolitanian nationalists accepted Idris as their own *amir* in order to present a united front against Italy. Tired of fruitless negotiations, the Italians assembled troops and seized Misrata on the northwestern coast. In response, Libyan activists compelled Idris to accept leadership of an ***amirate*** (Islamic dynastic monarchy) that included Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan. Shortly thereafter, Idris fled to Egypt to avoid capture by the Italians. Meanwhile, Italy kept its coastal holdings.

In late 1922, Benito Mussolini became Italy's Prime Minister (PM), and by 1925, had consolidated a fascist dictatorship. To cement Italy's African claims, Mussolini vigorously pursued Italy's ***riconquista*** (re-conquest) of Libyan lands beyond the coast. Thus began the Second Italo-Sanusi War, which lasted almost 10 years and was far more violent than the first. With Idris in Egypt, Sanusi ***sheikh*** (tribal leader) Omar Al-Mukhtar led the resistance efforts. While Italy captured Tripolitania with relative ease, Mukhtar used guerilla tactics to withstand the Italian forces



in Cyrenaica for years. Nicknamed the "Lion of the Desert," Mukhtar is still a Libyan hero today.

In response, Italian forces led by General Graziani introduced harsh policies and tactics, resulting in prolonged misery among native Cyreneans. Italian forces, comprised primarily of Eritrean Christian mercenaries, erected a 200 mi barbed-wire barrier along the Egyptian border to disrupt Sanusi supply lines. They also slaughtered Libyans' livestock and forced up to 100,000 Cyreneans into concentration camps, where many thousands died from the harsh conditions. In 1931, the last Sanusi stronghold fell. Italian troops captured Mukhtar

and hanged him, forcing about 20,000 Libyans to watch. By 1932, Italy's military pacification of Libya was complete, and Graziani declared a renewed *Pax Romana*.

### The Fourth Shore

In 1934, Italy united the region as a colony called Libya, although Italy's fascist government frequently referred to the colony as its "Fourth Shore." As Italy consolidated control, it divided the colony into 4 provinces: Tripoli, Misrata, Benghazi, and Derna, with Fezzan under military occupation. In the same year, the Italo-British-Egyptian Agreement defined Libya's present-day borders. A year later, Libya acquired the Aouzou Strip from France, an area along the Libya-Chad border which later caused conflict with Chad (see "Libya as a Rogue State" below).

Even while fighting the Sanusi rebels, Italy had invested in large farms and estates along Libya's coast. Despite the 1930s global depression, Italy continued to devote resources to its new colony, seizing tribal lands where authorities settled tens of thousands of Italian peasants in the late 1930s. By 1940, just 12% of the colony's 900,000 inhabitants were Italian, yet they controlled the best farmland and were the main beneficiaries of urban development projects.

Italy's occupation provided other benefits for Italian settlers such as improved transport infrastructure, irrigation systems, and medical care. While some Libyans benefited from enhanced sanitation systems and replenished livestock herds, most suffered immensely during Italian rule. Italy provided Libyans no modern education (see *Learning and Knowledge*) and further prohibited them from working in positions superior to Italians. Experts estimate around 25% of the Libyan population died during Italy's 30-year occupation. Under these repressive conditions, Libyans





began to organize against the Italian colonists as Europe prepared for another world war.

### World War II (WWII)

Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, officially beginning WWII with the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) opposing the Allies (Britain, France, the USSR, and the US, among others). With Britain's pledge to ensure Libya's post-war independence, Amir Idris raised a Sanusi force from his exile in Egypt. Composed primarily of exiled Cyreneans and organized by the British, the Sanusi Army, also known as the Libyan Arab Force, fought alongside British troops during the 1940-43 North Africa Campaign.



The joint British-Libyan forces enjoyed early successes against Italy in Cyrenaica. In 1941, the German Afrika Korps commanded by Lt Gen Rommel reinforced Italian troops and regained much of Cyrenaica. The combatants

exchanged control of Cyrenaica several more times, but in early 1943, British and Libyan troops finally defeated Rommel's forces and proclaimed victory in Tripoli.

**The Fate of Libya's Jews:** On the eve of WWII, over 30,000 Jews lived in Libya, primarily in Tripoli and Benghazi. In 1938, the Italian colonial government began to implement discriminatory laws against the Jews. During the early part of WWII, Italy used Benghazi's Jewish quarter as an anti-aircraft position, resulting in severe bombings. In 1942, Italian and German forces sent over 3,000 Jews to concentration camps in Europe, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. Over 20% of the Jews sent to the most brutal camp in Jado, Tripolitania perished under the miserable conditions. Even after the British-Libyan liberation, Jews continued to face discrimination and violence. Due to the rampant anti-Semitism even after the war, almost all Libyan Jews emigrated (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

## Libya and the UN Mandate

Following Italy's defeat in 1943, Britain established separate military caretaker governments in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, with joint British-French control of Fezzan. While the majority of Libyans supported independence, conflicting interests among the WWII victors delayed progress towards this goal. As one of its first mandates, the newly-established UN sought to resolve the issue of Libyan sovereignty. Frustrated at the slow pace, Idris proclaimed Cyrenaica's independence but received no international recognition. After protracted negotiations, the UN approved a resolution in late 1949 calling for a sovereign state comprised of Libya's 3 historic regions by January 1952.



In response, Amir Idris proposed a plan that would grant Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan a degree of independence under a centralized federal government. Representatives from each province instead declared their preference for a monarchy led by Idris. Despite the reservations of Tripolitanian delegates who preferred a unitary state, the assembly adopted a Constitution providing for a hereditary federal monarchy, a representative parliament, and a supreme court. Further, the Constitution stipulated that Libya would have 2 federal capitals in Tripoli and Benghazi, as well as a provincial center in Sebha, Fezzan. Just 2 weeks before the UN deadline, the United Kingdom of Libya became Africa's 5th independent nation on December 24, 1951.

## The United Kingdom of Libya

In early 1952, the new Kingdom held free and fair parliamentary elections. Faced with significant losses, the Tripolitanian nationalist parties contested the results as violent protests erupted. In response, King Idris dissolved all political parties, detained opposition leaders, and curbed media freedoms. While

cultivating close relations with other Arab-majority nations, the Kingdom also granted military bases to Britain and the US in exchange for financial and military assistance in 1953.

As one of the world's poorest countries, the new Kingdom was heavily dependent on Western and UN development assistance. Between 1953-59, Libya received over \$100 million in US financial aid, partially as a payment for use of the Wheelus Air Base near Tripoli. Of Libya's 1.2 million inhabitants, nearly 3/4 lived in Tripolitania, where 50,000 Italians continued to dominate urban areas and coastal agricultural endeavors. By contrast, most Libyans subsisted through traditional small-scale farming and herding.



**Esso Strikes Oil:** In 1959, Esso, an American firm that later became Exxon, struck oil in northwestern Cyrenaica. The discovery immediately attracted foreign investors for 2 reasons: Libyan ports were near European markets and the crude oil was of high quality, requiring minimal refining. As commercial development rapidly ensued, massive wealth began to flow into the sparsely populated country. In 1962, Libya joined the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), then briefly became the world's 4th-largest oil exporter in the late 1960s.

### The Kingdom of Libya

As the Libyan government explored how to spend its newfound wealth, some Libyans accused King Idris of favoring Cyrenaica over the other 2 provinces. In response, Idris replaced Libya's inefficient and bureaucratic federal government with a unitary state, the Kingdom of Libya. While the new Kingdom claimed to end favoritism among regions, some opponents criticized the change as superficial, particularly after Idris attempted to move Libya's capital to Bayda in Cyrenaica.

Meanwhile, thousands of Libyans were migrating to the coast, seeking jobs in the expanding oil industry. As many new arrivals moved into suburban shanties, the idea that Libya's oil wealth was not fairly shared quickly spread. While King Idris attempted to promote a sense of Libyan nationalism around the monarchy, his primary loyalties remained with the residents of Cyrenaica and the *Sanusiyah*.

**Tensions Rise:** As opposition to the King grew, Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser began to promote the idea of pan-Arab nationalism, a notion that appealed to some Libyan youth and urban residents. In response to rising anti-Western agitation in 1964, King Idris requested that Britain and the US evacuate their military bases, although the action was not fully completed.

When King Idris refused to participate in the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of 1967, riots erupted in Tripoli and Benghazi. Angered at Idris's perceived lack of support for Arab causes, protestors attacked Libya's small Jewish community, along with Western offices and embassies. To demonstrate his support for Arab goals, Idris offered Egypt, Jordan, and Syria significant financial

aid to mitigate their battlefield losses to Israel. Nevertheless, Idris grew increasingly detached from the concerns of the Libyan people, spending most of his time at his palace in Derna, near Britain's military base.



### **The Libyan Revolution**

By the late 1960s, King Idris was widely unpopular. Inspired by Egyptian President Nasser's radio addresses on pan-Arab unity, Libyan Army Captain Muammar Qadhafi led

70 junior-level officers in a bloodless coup against King Idris, who was out of the country. Originating in Benghazi, the September 1, 1969 coup received widespread support and was over in just 2 hours.

## The Libyan Arab Republic

Within days, coup leaders formed a 12-man Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) that received international recognition as the official government of the new Libyan Arab Republic. The new government successfully blocked all challenges to its authority, sentencing hundreds of former officials to prison for treason and corruption. Although sentenced to death, King Idris avoided this fate by spending the rest of his life abroad.

The RCC implemented sweeping reforms as 27-year-old Colonel Qadhafi became the world's youngest head of state. Qadhafi subsequently made Sunni Islam the state religion (see *Religion and Spirituality*), asserted Libya's identity as an Arab nation (see *Political and Social*



*Relations*), and declared the country neutral in global affairs. Despite this declaration of neutrality, Qadhafi demonstrated distinct anti-Western and pro-Arab tendencies. For example, as part of his "cultural revolution," Qadhafi required the US and Britain to close their military bases while banning "Western" symbols such as English and Italian writing, nightclubs, and churches (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Further, Qadhafi expelled most remaining Italian and Jewish residents, nationalized most foreign companies, pledged to fight Israel, and dedicated his revolution to Egyptian President Nasser.

## Qadhafi Consolidates Power

To promote a unified Arab-based Libyan identity, Qadhafi and the RCC created a new political party, the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), banned the *Sanusiyah* (see *Religion and Spirituality*), and marginalized Berber, Tuareg, and other non-Arab minority groups (see *Political and Social Relations*). After failing to establish a new pan-Arab state with Egypt and Syria, Qadhafi suppressed all political activity, while bringing the media under even tighter control.

**A New Name:** In 1977, Qadhafi renamed the country the Socialist People's Libyan Arab **Jamahiriyah** (State of the Masses) then introduced his new form of direct democracy in a short treatise called *The Green Book*. Qadhafi replaced the RCC with a General People's Congress (GPC) that held all legislative and executive authority under his and his new cabinet's, the General People's Committee, command. At the provincial and regional levels, thousands of committees and congresses administered local affairs.



**Economic Reforms and OPEC:** The Qadhafi regime pursued strategic uses of its oil resources, such as supporting OPEC's early 1970s initiative to coordinate oil production in order to increase the global market price (see *Economics and Resources*). In response to the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the Arab members of OPEC plus Egypt and Syria declared an oil embargo against the US and other Israeli allies. Consequently, global oil prices increased from \$3 to \$12 per barrel in 1973, sharply increasing Libya's oil revenues despite the embargo.

Throughout the 1970s, Libya invested large sums of its oil income in infrastructure, schools, and hospitals, dramatically improving the quality of life for poor Libyans. In 1981, Qadhafi significantly curtailed private enterprise by nationalizing private companies and land, with Libyans restricted to owning only a single property. While poor Libyans tended to benefit from these changes, Libya's elite began to emigrate. By 1982, up to 100,000 highly educated Libyans had fled, causing a sharp reduction in available managerial and technical expertise. Due to heavy reliance on foreign technology and capabilities, Libya was unable to entirely nationalize its oil industry.

## Libya as a Rogue State

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, conflicts with the West continued. Further, Qadhafi's repeated calls for Arab unification caused friction within the region. In 1977, Egypt charged Libya with rebellion, resulting in a brief border war. A year later, Qadhafi annexed the Aouzou Strip, now belonging to Chad, beginning a 10-year conflict with that neighbor. Meanwhile, Qadhafi executed dissidents at home, while ordering Libyan exiles to return or face assassination. In the 1980s, Qadhafi kept his promise, ordering killings of exiled Libyans throughout Western Europe.

During this period, Libya supported global revolutionaries, ranging from South African anti-apartheid activists to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). When Qadhafi announced closer relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1979, the US declared Libya a major enemy, and 2 years later, a state sponsor of terrorism. After Libyan planes fired on US fighter jets in 1981, the US downed 2 Libyan aircraft. Subsequently, the US imposed a unilateral embargo. Tensions flared again in 1986, when Germany linked Libyan agents to a



nightclub bombing in West Berlin. In response, US President Ronald Reagan ordered the bombing of Benghazi and Tripoli.

In the late 1980s, calls for reform and unrest swept the USSR and Eastern European

Soviet bloc countries, causing their influence to decline. Consequently, Libya became increasingly isolated. Libyans were linked to a bombing of an American airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988 and of a French airliner over Niger in 1989, compelling the UN to impose sanctions against Libya in 1992. Meanwhile, Islamist insurgents objecting to the Qadhafi regime's use of Islam for political means became active across Libya (see *Religion and Spirituality*). In 1998, an Islamist group wounded Qadhafi in a failed assassination attempt.

## Libya Normalizes Relations

After 7 years of harsh UN sanctions, economic decline, and growing internal discontent, Qadhafi sought to strengthen his hold on power and rejoin the international community. In 1998, Libya abandoned its goal of pan-Arab union. In 1999, Libya agreed to extradite 2 suspected airline bombers for trial in Europe. Worried that he would meet a similar fate as Saddam Hussein after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Qadhafi agreed to pay compensation to the bombing victims' families and renounced Libya's development of weapons of mass destruction. By 2006, both the US and UN had lifted sanctions and restored diplomatic relations with Libya.

Beginning in 2005, some Libyan leaders, including Qadhafi's son, proposed wide-ranging political and economic reforms. For the first time in 20 years, Libya invited bids to develop oil fields, several of them awarded to American firms with much-needed technical expertise. Nevertheless, proponents of reform faced fierce opposition. After over 35 years of rule, Qadhafi remained in firm control of Libya's economy and society through the first decade of the new millennium.

## Civil Conflict

The 2011 "Arab Spring" pro-democracy movements that swept North Africa and the Middle East had profound effects on Libya. After oppressive governments fell in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia, the Libyan government's arrest of a human rights activist sparked protests in Benghazi in February. The government's violent suppression of the protest soon fueled country-wide riots as Libya descended into civil conflict.



As revolutionary activists organized as the National Transition Council (NTC), Qadhafi struck back, ordering air strikes against the protesters. The UN responded by freezing Qadhafi's assets, establishing a no-fly zone over Libya, and granting NATO the



use of “all necessary measures” to protect civilian lives. In May, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Qadhafi on charges of crimes against humanity. Ignoring Qadhafi’s calls for a ceasefire, conflict continued as NATO conducted over 10,000 airstrikes across Libya between May-November.



Following months of fighting, the NTC took control of Tripoli in August, forcing Qadhafi to flee to Sirte. In September, the UN recognized the NTC as the Libyan government’s official representative. A month later, opposition forces captured and then killed Qadhafi in Sirte. The NTC subsequently declared the liberation of Libya, appointing an interim Prime Minister (PM) until elections could be organized.

Although the conflict was officially over, various militant groups continued their operations as long-suppressed tribal and religious tensions continued to simmer. Nevertheless, Libya held elections for the new General National Congress (GNC) in July 2012 that brought a human rights lawyer to office as PM.

**Conflict Resumes:** In June 2014, Libya held parliamentary elections. Following losses at the polls, a coalition of Islamist groups led by the Muslim Brotherhood (an Islamist political organization active across the region) formed the National Salvation Government (NSG), also known as the Libyan Dawn militia. The NSG proceeded to occupy Tripoli, while refusing to allow the newly-elected House of Representatives (HoR) to replace the outgoing GNC. Consequently, HoR members fled to Tobruk where they set up a liberal federalist “Operation Dignity” government. With military aid from the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, the HoR and the Libyan National Army under the command of General Khalifa Haftar gained control of Cyrenaica and much of Fezzan. Meanwhile, the NSG, backed by Qatar and Turkey, governed much of Tripolitania.

Since 2014, despite frequent changes in political alliances and geographic areas of control, some of Libya’s militias have

aligned with either the Islamist-influenced government in Tripoli or the opposition government based primarily in Tobruk. Other militias have operated with relative independence, giving alternating support to the governments or local leaders that best suit their interests at the time.

### The 2012 Benghazi Attacks

On the evening of September 11, 2012, members of a Libyan Islamist militant group known as Ansar al-Sharia led 2 separate attacks on a US diplomatic compound and CIA annex in Benghazi. The attackers advanced on the American buildings with automatic weapons and grenades, easily overpowering security personnel and eventually killing the US Ambassador, a Foreign Service officer, and 2 former Navy SEALs. In 2014, US Army Special Operations forces captured Ansar al-Sharia leader Ahmed Abu Khattala and brought him to the US to stand trial, scheduled for late 2017 for his role in the attack.

**The Islamic State in Libya:** In late 2014, a group of Libyan militants pledged allegiance to the radical Islamist group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS—see *Political and Social Relations*), and took control of a 180-mi strip of coastline around Sirte. For over 2 years, ISIS governed the territory as its Libya Province, implementing a harsh regime that used repressive tactics such as terrorism and summary executions.

**A New Transition:** With UN backing, representatives from the NSG and HoR (though not their leaders) signed the Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015, creating a Government of National Accord (GNA). While the Western-supported GNA replaced NSG control in Tripoli in March 2016, it has yet to win widespread support. Further, General Haftar and the HoR refuse to recognize the GNA and continue to govern eastern Libya from Tobruk. In September 2016, General Haftar took control of Cyrenean oil facilities, securing his faction additional financial resources (see *Political and Social Relations*).

## Contemporary Libya

The chaotic, unstable situation in Libya continued to resemble a civil war throughout 2016. In January 2017, Libyan troops supported by NATO forces defeated ISIS's Libyan Province, ousting the jihadists from Sirte. Nevertheless, some 500 ISIS fighters continue to operate in Libya, often sheltered by around 2,500 other radical jihadists

scattered throughout the country, notably local affiliates of al-Qa'ida (a militant broad-based Islamist group). Meanwhile, various coalitions and militias continue to loosely support the GNA, HoR, and Libyan National Army.

**Prime Minister Sarraj and General Haftar Meet in Paris:** In July 2017, PM Sarraj, leader of the GNA since late 2015 (see *Political and Social Relations*), met with General Haftar and France's President Macron to discuss a pathway to peace. Sarraj and Haftar agreed on a 10-point plan that would bring a ceasefire between their respective factions and an agreement to hold elections "as soon as possible." As of June 2023, the election had not yet been held.

While the meeting between Sarraj and Haftar showed signs of progress, it resulted in few tangible improvements. Neither leader maintained complete control over all the militias and political groups that comprise their factions. Meanwhile, ISIS and other radical groups maintained a foothold in the country, particularly in the isolated desert areas southeast of Tripoli. Nevertheless, this meeting marked the greatest political breakthrough in Libya in the past several years. However, the civil war continued until a permanent ceasefire was signed in 2020.



## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Many Libyan myths reflect Berber, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Bedouin, and Islamic traditions.

Often exhibiting significant variation, Berber folklore and folk beliefs were typically passed through the generations orally. Certain fables with pre-Islamic roots tell of heroes and their adventures in enchanted lands or the spirit world. For example, in some tales the hero encounters a genie or other magical being who helps him gain his fortune. In others, the hero meets fierce monsters or wicked sorcerers who cast evil spells and prevent him from reaching his goals.

Libyan Berbers' close proximity to and exchanges with ancient Egypt resulted in shared myths and beliefs. For example, Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god of the afterlife and the underworld, was also a popular figure in Libya and perhaps of Libyan origin. Ammon, the Egyptian king of the gods and god of the wind, was also honored by the ancient Greeks who lived in Cyrenaica. Depictions of Ammon found there possibly date from as early as the 10th century BC.



Some well-known Greek mythical figures trace their origins to Berber folklore. A significant mythical Berber character is Anatha, the Libyan Triple Moon Goddess. Known as Neith in ancient Egypt, Anatha supposedly emerged from the now-vanished Lake Tritonis. Anatha's triple nature corresponded to the new, waxing, and full moon phases. The Greeks adapted the Berber myth of Anatha, making each part of her triple lunar nature correspond to a Greek goddess: Athena, Medusa, and Metis.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Libya

ليبيا (Arabic)

### Political Borders

Egypt: 693 mi

Sudan: 237 mi

Chad: 652 mi

Niger: 213 mi

Algeria: 615 mi

Tunisia: 286 mi

Coastline: 1100 mi

### Capital

Tripoli

### Demographics

Libya's population of about 7.36 million is growing at a rate of 1.44% per year. This growth is lower than neighboring Algeria and significantly lower than other Sahara region nations. Of note, non-citizen foreign workers make up about 10% of the population. Like many African states, Libya is a young nation – over 95% of the population is under age 64 and 32% under age 15. About 82% of residents live in urban areas, predominantly in the capital city of Tripoli and in Benghazi. With over 90% of residents living along the northern Mediterranean coast, Libya's interior remains sparsely populated.



### Flag

The Libyan flag consists of 3 horizontal stripes of red, black, and green, with a white crescent and star centered on the middle black stripe. The stripes represent Libya's 3 main geographic regions. The red band symbolizes Fezzan in the Southwest; the black at twice the width of the other bands represents the eastern region of Cyrenaica; and the green stands for Tripolitania in the Northwest.



An alternative interpretation suggests the red and black bands stand for blood spilled during foreign occupations of Libya, while the green symbolizes nature and peace. The crescent and star represent the nation's dominant religion, Islam. First adopted in 1951, the flag was suppressed by the Qadhafi regime (see *History and Myth*) then officially re-adopted in 2011.

## Geography

Situated in North Africa along the Mediterranean Sea, Libya shares borders with Egypt to the East, Sudan to the Southeast, Chad and Niger to the South, and Algeria and Tunisia to the West. Libya's total land area is about 679,362 sq mi, making it Africa's fourth-largest country and slightly larger than Alaska.

A thin strip of fertile, flat lowlands runs along Libya's rocky northern Mediterranean coast. Beyond the lowlands, the hot and dry Saharan Desert

extends south into the interior of the country, covering over 90% of Libya's total land area. Here, the landscape is characterized by rocky hills, large sand dunes, oases (small, isolated areas of



vegetation), and mountains. The towering and volcanic Tibesti Mountains lie in the South along the border with Chad, where Libya's highest peak, Bikkū Bitti, rises to 7,434 ft. Libya has no natural rivers, only dry river beds (**wadis**) that occasionally flood following seasonal rains.

## Climate

Libya's climate and temperatures vary across its 2 zones. Along the coast, Libya experiences a humid Mediterranean climate with short, mild winters, warm summers, and annual rainfall of up to 16 inches. Here, summer runs April-September, with temperatures averaging 82°F in July. Winter occurs from December-February, with temperatures averaging 52°F in January. In Libya's interior, a desert climate prevails, where temperatures may rise to 120°F during the day but dip below

freezing at night. Desert areas receive little to no rainfall. Hot, dry, and sand-laden winds (*ghibli*) blowing off the desert toward the Mediterranean are common from spring to early summer.

### Natural Hazards

Libya is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards, particularly *ghibli* winds and periodic droughts. Most prevalent in March-June, *ghibli* winds intermittently blanket portions of Libya with a thick haze of dust and sand. These winds last for hours or days and capable of forming a moving sandstorm wall up to 2,000 ft high. *Ghibli* destroy crops, kill exposed livestock, disrupt air and road traffic, and cause various health complications, particularly asthma and bronchial illnesses.

A lack of significant rainfall leads to droughts, some lasting up to 2 years, resulting in food shortages and contributing to desertification. Positioned at the intersection of 2 tectonic plates, Libya also experiences intermittent earthquakes, averaging roughly 50 earthquakes per year. Finally, urban areas lack adequate storm drainage and are vulnerable to flooding from occasional but heavy downpours.

### Environmental Issues

Desertification, caused by recurrent drought and a general lack of surface water, leads to shortages in potable water. Although,



approximately 100% of the population has access to drinking water, 65% report issues with water quality. To help meet drinking, irrigation, and industry needs, Libya created the Great Man-Made River (GMR), a large-scale engineering project that channels water from

underground freshwater aquifers in the South to cities in the North (see *Technology and Material*). While the GMR successfully redistributes water to needy areas, reserves are quickly depleting. In addition, there is some international concern that the GMR is endangering fragile desert ecosystems such as oases that are reliant on the aquifers.

Along the coast, marine biodiversity is threatened by overfishing, invasive species, and rampant pollution from uncontrolled industrial and urban waste, untreated sewage, and petroleum byproducts. Finally, Libya's ongoing civil conflict since 2011 (see *History and Myth*) contributes to additional water and soil pollution. Besides leakage from damaged infrastructure, improper disposal of chemical weapons, ordinance, and nuclear fuels negatively impacts the environment.

## Government

The Government of National Unity (*Hukumat al Wahda al Watania*) serves as a temporary administration for Libya, established on March 10, 2021, with the aim of consolidating the competing Government of National Accord located in Tripoli and the Second Al-Thani Cabinet situated in Tobruk. This government receives de facto support from Turkey, Qatar, Algeria, and Pakistan. Libya is organized into 22 municipalities (*sha'biyyāt*), which are further divided into smaller administrative divisions. The 2011 Constitution was last amended in 2023.

## Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who serves as the head-of-government. Together with a 3-member Presidential Council, the PM oversees the country's day-to-day affairs and presides over Libya's provisional government, the GNU. The current PM of the GNU, Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dubaybah, and the President of the Presidential Council, Mohammed al-Menfi, both assumed office in February 2021.

## Legislative Branch

Also known as the Council of Deputies, Libya's legislature is a single-chamber House of Representatives (HoR), composed of 200 members elected by popular vote. Civil unrest resulted in extremely low voter turnout in the most recent parliamentary elections held in June 2014. As a result, not all 200 seats were filled. Although the HoR was to become Libya's sole legislative





body following the creation of the GNU in 2021, it has since chosen to reject the GNU's authority. Instead, the HoR independently administers a region in eastern Libya (see "Political Climate" below). In 2023, the HoR assigned a new PM, Osama Hammad, though Dubaybah still holds power.

### Judicial Branch

Under the Qadhafi regime until 2011, Libya's judicial system included a Supreme Court, regional courts of appeal, and a system of lower courts that oversaw cases pertaining to civil, criminal, and family disputes. As the highest court, the Supreme Court handled constitutional and legislative matters and served



as the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases. The Supreme Court consisted of 5 chambers of 5 justices each. The Qadhafi regime abolished independent religious courts in 1973, replacing them with

courts adjudicating Libyan law, a moderate and mixed system derived partly from **Sharia** (Islamic) law.

Since the 2011 uprising, Libya's legal system remains fractured. Judicial power is weak and courts occasionally suspend operations following bouts of violence. Further, members of the judiciary are under constant threat of intimidation and political assassination by terrorist and militant groups.

### Political Climate

Since Qadhafi's overthrow in 2011 (see *History and Myth*), Libya's successive interim governments have struggled to maintain political stability. Libya has experienced over a decade of unrest characterized by political instability and competing factions. This turmoil has effectively split the country into eastern and western regions, resulting in a "de facto" division.

On one side is the Government of National Unity, headed by Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dubaybah and situated in Tripoli, which receives advisory support from the High Council of State.

Conversely, the Government of National Stability, led by Osama Hamad and located in Tobruk, is backed by the House of Representatives and the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), commanded by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.

This schism can be traced back to the last national election in 2014, which ignited the second Libyan civil war. Libyans have not participated in presidential or parliamentary elections since 2014, a year marked by a disputed election that resulted in a split in governance and ongoing conflict. Although national elections were planned for December 2021, they were postponed indefinitely due to ongoing instability.

In spite of the national political impasse, several rounds of municipal elections have been conducted successfully over the years. For example, on November 16, 2024, the first phase of municipal council elections occurred in 58 municipalities, achieving a notable voter turnout of 74% among eligible participants. However, the second round, initially set for



February 8, has been postponed to an undetermined date, with some Libyans speculating it may occur in May 2025, though this remains unofficial.

While these local developments offer some hope, the

## Defense

The Libyan Armed Forces (LAF) are a small military force consisting of ground, naval, and air branches, having a joint strength of up to 7,000 active-duty troops. In 2014, a coalition of Islamist groups took control of Tripoli and other major cities, overrunning military bases and forcing a breakdown of LAF administration. Though partially recovered, the LAF remain top-heavy, staffed with mostly senior-ranking officers and burdened by a lack of new recruits and fledgling administrative



mechanisms. Due to continuing internal instability and emerging threats from radical Islamist groups, domestic counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts dominate LAF operations.

In addition to the LAF, several informal militias, many emerging during and after the 2011 uprising, operate within Libya. While the LAF incorporated some militias to help supplement its operations, factions of opposing Islamist militants frequently engage the LAF in armed conflict.

**Army:** The largest of the 3 branches, the Libyan Army has up to 7,000 active-duty troops, though actual numbers remain unknown. It consists of a special forces battalion, 3 maneuver battalions and units (including armored, light, and other), and a combat support battalion. Of note, the army is aligned to the HoR in eastern Libya, not the UN-recognized GNU in Tripoli.

**Navy:** The Libyan Navy consists of an unknown number of active-duty members and is equipped with 3 patrol and coastal combatants, 1 amphibious vessel, and 2 auxiliaries. Militias may control some naval equipment. Consequently, the level of state control over the inventory is unclear.

**Air Force:** The Libyan Air Force consists of an unknown number of active-duty personnel and has 3 combat-capable aircraft, 9 trainers, and an unknown number of helicopters. All aircraft have been inherited from the Qadhafi regime and serviceability may be an issue.

# Libyan Air Force Rank Insignia



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



First  
Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Master  
Sergeant



Staff  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Airman

## Security Issues

Libya's security environment is dominated by a variety of both internal and external threats. Algeria, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom reopened their embassies in Libya in April 2016 to demonstrate their support for the UN-backed provisional GNA. Following recent episodes of violence, US embassy personnel have relocated to neighboring nations.

**Internal Violence:** Violence stemming from militias and political groups seeking to gain control of Libya has plagued the nation since Qadhafi's overthrow in 2011. Conditions further deteriorated in 2014, when growing divisiveness among political actors, increasingly violent militias, and to a lesser extent, inter-tribal clashes in Libya's South pushed Libya into a state of insecurity. Throughout 2020, the capital city of Tripoli and other large northern urban areas were plagued by progressively violent and bitter skirmishes between militias and the ruling GNA. Ongoing violence severely hampered international efforts to aid the over 179,000 Libyans displaced by the conflicts.

**Illegal Migration:** Thousands of refugees and migrants fleeing political unrest and dire economic conditions in East and West Africa illegally pass through Libya before moving onto Europe. Although the influx of migrants temporarily decreased following the 2011 conflict, by 2013, transiting migrants began to exploit Libya's political instability and weak border controls, crossing the Mediterranean to Italy, Greece, and other southern European nations in growing numbers.

In 2023, more than 10,600 refugees and migrants, consisting of men, women, and children were captured at sea having disembarked from Libya. Despite the dangers, the Libyan coast remained an increasingly popular departure point in 2023, with smugglers easily moving more than 45,000 migrants amid the nation's lawlessness and political volatility.



**Islamic State Organization:** Ongoing instability has left Libya vulnerable to attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS,



also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS), a notoriously brutal militant Islamist group currently controlling large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. In 2014, ISIS seized a strip of land along Libya's northern coast. Although Libya

and its international allies eventually reversed ISIS's territorial advances (see *History and Myth*), Libya's recent political volatility fuels concerns that ISIS will establish terrorist networks within Libya and regain regional influence.

**Regional Insecurity:** Libya's porous borders and ongoing internal conflict have resulted in occasionally heightened tensions with neighboring Algeria, Chad, Niger, Sudan, and Tunisia. Regional tensions escalated most recently in 2023, when Chadian rebels, mostly from the Aozou region who reside in southern Libya, clashed with Libyan forces. Although both Algeria and Tunisia support Libya's provisional government, Libya's inability to curtail the movement of weapons, militants, and migrants across its borders intermittently causes friction. Meanwhile, exceptionally permeable borders with Sudan and Niger also contribute to Libya's migrant crisis.

### Foreign Relations

Ongoing internal instability has hampered Libya's ability to pursue its foreign policy goals. These include building friendly relations with neighboring countries, countering regional Islamist militant groups, and participating in organizations that promote regional security. Instead, since the start of the conflict in 2011, Libya has focused on internal security, accepting financial, political, and military support from its allies and global organizations, particularly the US, the United Nations (UN), and the World Bank.

While Libya's UN-backed interim GNU government maintains close ties with the US and other Western nations, its HoR opposition concurrently is cultivating relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Russia. Meanwhile, the NSG, a rival faction of Islamist militants also competing to gain control of Libya, intermittently receives economic and military support from Qatar and Turkey. International observers worry that these political and economic alliances will further challenge the fragile GNU and transitional government.

**Regional Relations:** Regionally, Libya participates in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), a trade and investment framework facilitating the economic and social development of its 21 member nations. Libya also participates in the African Union (AU), the Arab Maghreb Union, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These alliances collaborate in trade, industry, agriculture, transportation, communications, and natural resources, among other areas. In addition to promoting economic integration, these organizations address common security concerns and foster political cooperation.

**Relations with the US:** The US and Libya first established political and military ties in 1951 following Libya's independence (see *History and Myth*). Soon after, the Libyan government allowed the US to establish military bases in the country, fortifying bilateral relations. While diplomatic relations were strained during the Qadhafi era (see *History and Myth*), the US has actively engaged in Libyan affairs since his 2011 ouster. Although tensions temporarily heightened following a terrorist attack on a US compound in Benghazi in 2012 (see *History and Myth*), the US has continued to support Libya's democratic development. The US is currently working to help rebuild government institutions, develop civil society, and facilitate free and fair elections.



In addition, the US provides Libya with bilateral military assistance to strengthen national security institutions and



promote internal stability, engage militant groups, and protect vulnerable populations. While the US and Libya historically shared close economic ties, the protracted political conflict has severely hampered the US-Libya trade

relationship (see *Economics and Resources*).

## Ethnic Groups

Nearly 97% of Libyans are of mixed Arab-Berber ancestry. Most of the remaining 3% identify as Berber, Tuareg (a Berber group), or Toubou. Although the actual number is unknown, experts estimate around 770,000 foreigners, primarily from Egypt, Tunisia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, live and work in Libya. A small number of Asians, North Americans, and Europeans also reside in Libya.

### Arabs

The waves of Arab conquerors and settlers that swept through Libya between the 7th-11th centuries (see *History and Myth*) resulted in a mixed Arab and Berber populace. Beginning in 1969, Libyan leader Qadhafi denied Libya's multi-ethnic history, promoting the idea that all Libyans are fully Arab (see *History and Myth*). While residents who identified as Arab received special privileges, those who claimed another identity suffered under prejudicial laws and policies. Today, most Libyans identify as Arab, speak Arabic as their primary language, and follow Arab cultural customs. Some Libyans identify as Bedouin, a nomadic Arab sub-group.

### Berbers

Libyan Berbers constitute about 2% of the population. They typically reject the label "Berber," a term derived from a disparaging ancient Greek nickname for their people. Instead,



they typically refer to themselves as a group as **Imazighen** or “free or noble men” (singular **Amazigh**). Libyan Berbers may speak a Berber language (see *Language and Communications*) and live primarily in northwestern Libya, where some wear traditional Berber dress and maintain unique Berber-style homes. The Berbers suffered immensely under Qadhafi’s regime, which suppressed Berber languages, political

participation, and access to public services.



**Tuareg:** The Tuareg of southwestern Libya and other Saharan countries are a Berber sub-group. They form tribes and clans that collectively group into confederations led by

chiefs. Most Tuareg are nomads who work as traders or herders of camels. Calling themselves **kel tagelmoust** (people of the veil) or **kel tamashek** (speakers of Tamashek—see *Language and Communication*), they are also known as the “Blue People of the Sahara” for their distinctive indigo clothing.

## Toubou

Known as the “rock people” for their traditional rock-shelter and cave dwellings, members of the Toubou ethnic group primarily inhabit the Tibesti Mountains of southeastern Libya and northern Chad. Most Toubou are semi-nomadic traders or herders of camels, cattle, goats, and sheep. Some live as small farmers in permanent oasis settlements near Kufra. Like the Berber, the Toubou suffered harsh discrimination under Qadhafi. In 2007, his regime even stripped Toubou of their citizenship, claiming they were Chadians, not Libyans.

## Social Relations

Kinship is the governing principle of Libyan social relations. Libyans trace their identity first to their household and family (**lahma**), then to a clan (groups of families, or **bayt**), and finally to a tribe (**qabilah**) having a particular geographical home. Family and clan connections are important in most political and

economic activities. Libyans typically share their resources with their extended family (see *Family and Kinship*).

The tribal chief is typically a **sheikh** who derives his authority from the power and connections of his extended family. Of note, succession within the tribe does not always pass from one generation to the next. Instead, it often passes laterally to a brother, nephew, uncle, or cousin. Significantly, sheikhs generally wield influence rather than power. Instead of issuing decrees or laws, a sheikh traditionally mediates disputes based on custom. To justify his claim to rule, a sheikh is bound to demonstrate deep generosity to his tribal members.

While Libya has around 140 different tribes, only about 30 typically exercise political influence. Since the 2011 civil conflict (see *History and Myth*), tribal affiliations have been increasingly influential in determining local authority in the absence of a central government. The Warfalla tribe of eastern Tripolitania is Libya's largest tribe with over a million members. The Magarha tribe of Fezzan, since moved to Sirte, is Libya's second-largest, with almost a million members. Other major tribes include the Misrata, Qadhadhfa, Zintan, and Zuwayya. Since the family and tribe underpin Libyan society, tribal loyalties are often more significant than political or economic connections.

The starkest societal division is between the native population and certain foreigners.

Libyans typically show respect to Westerners and to foreign workers with managerial or technical expertise. By contrast, manual laborers, sub-Saharan Africans, and people with darker complexions often face discrimination, racism, and overt hostility. Meanwhile, migrants and refugees seeking eventual asylum in Europe reside in temporary camps or detention centers fraught with violence and criminal activity. These populations are especially vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and physical harm.



### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

According to US government estimates, about 97% of Libyans are Sunni Muslims. The remaining 3% includes Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of the Baha'i faith (teaches the essential worth of all religions and the unity and equality of all people). Sunni Islam has been Libya's official religion since it achieved independence in 1951. In 2011, Libya's provisional government issued a temporary Constitution confirming Sunni Islam as the state religion and proclaiming **sharia** (Islamic law) as the country's legal foundation.

While the 2011 Constitution also gives non-Muslims the freedom to practice their religions, Libya's current government (see *Political and Social Relations*) is largely unable to control chronic conflict among Islamist militants, political groups, and tribal factions. Consequently, members of religious minorities are vulnerable to attack, and the fractured judicial system is incapable of adequately addressing religious freedom violations.

#### Islam

##### Origins of Islam

Muhammad, who Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in



the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.

##### Meaning of Islam

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is "a person who submits to God."

## Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into 2 sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (*Caliph*) of the Muslim community (*Ummah*) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

## Five Pillars of Islam

There are 5 basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."
- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Pray 5 times a day while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka'aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.
- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate a percentage of one's income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (*The Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia once in a lifetime.



## Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one God.

**Abraham:** All 3 faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

**Scriptures:** Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New



Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

**Jesus:** The 3 religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still

waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.

**View of Death:** Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

### Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

### Ramadan

Observed during the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar (see *Time and Space*), Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn

self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal—by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life.

Libyan Muslims typically break their daily fast at sunset with a meal known as **iftar** that usually begins with dates, lentil soup, and tamarind juice, followed by more substantial dishes. Ramadan includes several holidays:

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This “Night of Power” marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** This “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrates Ramadan’s end and is a national holiday in Libya.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the Hajj ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid al-Adha:** This “Festival of Sacrifice” commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God.

### **Sufi Tradition:**

Characterized by mysticism and ritualistic prayer, the Sufi tradition of Islam has a rich history in Libya. In

the past, **marabouts**, Islamic teachers believed to hold **baraka**, or special spiritual powers, were venerated as scholars and healers. Today, their shrines and tombs continue to be places of pilgrimage.



## **The Introduction of Organized Religion**

### **Judaism**

The first Jews arrived in Libya from Palestine between 2,000-2,500 years ago. Jewish communities along Libya’s coast generally prospered during this period, and the writings of 1st-

century Jewish scholar Jason of Cyrene are still studied today. The peace of Roman rule (see *History and Myth*) was broken by several Jewish rebellions, the largest spreading through Cyrene and neighboring Egypt in 115 AD.

Over the centuries, more Jews migrated to Libya's shores, particularly those fleeing the Inquisition in Spain in the 15th century. With the Italian colonists' arrival in the early 20th century, Libya's Jewish community resisted the efforts of Italian Jews to influence its traditions. As anti-Semitism grew in fascist Italy prior to World War II (WWII), anti-Jewish incidents in Libya also increased. In the late 1930s, the Italian government



imposed anti-Semitic laws on Libya. Still, Jews made up 1/4 of Tripoli's population in 1941. As North Africa became a battleground in WWII, Italian and German forces interned some Libyan

Jews in local labor camps while deporting others (see *History and Myth*).

In 1948, around 36,000 Jews lived in Libya. As postwar Arab nationalism grew (see *History and Myth*), several Jews chose to emigrate, particularly to newly-founded Israel. Meanwhile, intolerance increased, with the Libyan government closing Jewish schools and denying Jews the right to vote or purchase property. By the time Qadhafi seized power in 1969 (see p. 15 of *History and Myth*), just 500 Jews remained in Libya. Qadhafi subsequently expelled all remaining Jewish residents, while confiscating their property. Experts believe that just 20 Jews remained by 1974, and that Libya's last Jewish resident left the country in 2003. Libya's currently volatile political environment prevents Jewish representatives from reopening Tripoli's synagogue. Experts estimate that close to 200,000 Libyan Jews today live outside of Libya.

## Christianity

Christianity arrived in Libya during the 2nd century AD, and by the end of the 4th century, many settlements along the coast had been Christianized. Cyrene and Leptis Magna were important centers of Christian thought.

Some scholars believe that John Mark, author of the Gospel of Mark, was born in Cyrene. According to tradition, St. George slew his famous dragon at a place called “Silene” in



Libya. After some 500 years, Christianity gradually retreated from Libya following the Arab invasions that began in the 7th century (see *History and Myth*).

## Islam

Unlike the arrival of Judaism and Christianity, the arrival of Islam and accompanying Arabization had widespread and long-lasting effects on the region (see *History and Myth*).

**The Arrival of Islam:** After Muhammad's death, Islam spread as conquering armies moved from Arabia into North Africa. The Arabs' advanced across the region irregularly, both militarily and in the number of converts. Waves of Islamic expansion followed as several different Arab dynasties struggled over the centuries to control the region as part of their extended empires (see *History and Myth*). Despite some Berber resistance, Islam and Arab culture spread relatively rapidly. Some Berbers converted to Islam after marrying Arabs, while others converted and joined military service to avoid Arab-imposed taxes. Still others converted but defied the Arabs, protesting Arab interpretations of Islam and their treatment as second-class Muslims (see “Kharijites” below). A few Berbers maintained their pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices or combined them with Islamic traditions. Most Islamic ruling groups were Sunni, except for about 100 years in the 10th century, when a Shi'a Berber dynasty called the Fatimids ruled (see *History and Myth*).



**Islam in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries:** In the 1830s, Algerian Muslim scholar Sayyid Muhammed Ali as-Sanusi began promoting an ethic of extreme self-discipline combined with a return to fundamental Islamic teachings. Based in Sufi traditions, his **Sanusiyah** or Sanusi Order or Brotherhood sought to regenerate Muslim identity and spirituality and found broad support among Libya's Bedouin population. By 1867, some 50 Sanusi **zawiyas** (lodges) in Cyrenaica functioned as

monasteries, schools, courts, and places of pilgrimage for Order members.

Gradually, the Sanusi Order united some feuding clans, organizing effective resistance first against the Ottoman Turks and then the



Italian colonists (see *History and Myth*). Gradually, Sanusi leaders gained recognition as political leaders. During World War II, the Sanusis comprised a rebel force in support of Britain (see *History and Myth*). Upon Libya's independence in 1951, the leader of the Sanusi Order became Libya's King (see *History and Myth*).

**Islam Under Qadhafi:** The Sanusi Order lost its place in Libyan society with Qadhafi's 1969 coup (see *History and Myth*). With the goal of turning Libya into a socialist state based on *sharia* law, Qadhafi declared Sunni Islam the official religion, while banning the Sanusi Order and putting all Islamic mosques and lodges under state control. Embracing Islam as an essential element of his reforms, Qadhafi prohibited alcohol, transformed many churches into mosques, and ordered the closure of nightclubs and similar venues.

While some elements of Libya's generally conservative society embraced these changes, Muslim leaders generally disapproved. Resistance grew when Qadhafi dismissed the need for expert interpretation of the Qur'an and assumed the

role of Islamic jurist, making his word final on all religious matters.

Qadhafi's government sought to control all aspects of religion in society, particularly preventing the development of religious extremism. Consequently, the regime significantly limited religious freedom, swiftly arresting individuals it suspected of supporting extremist practices. Internal security agencies closely monitored and controlled all religious activities, while other policies censored and restricted religious material entering the country. Despite this censorship, Islamist organizations emerged around radical leaders advocating armed struggle.

## Religion Today

Since the 2011 ouster of Qadhafi, Islam continues to provide Libyan society with its central cultural identity and gives individuals moral and ethical guidelines. Even those who do not practice Islam consistently typically fast for Ramadan, just as non-religious people in the US celebrate Christmas. Observant Muslims consume neither alcohol nor pork (see *Sustenance and Health*).

### Islam

About 90-95% of Libyans identify with the Maliki school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought that teaches the primacy of the Qur'an over later teachings and stresses the importance of community consensus. Libya's Tuareg residents are largely Sunni Muslims, who typically mix elements of Islam with their own social customs. Most

Toubou practice a form of Islam heavily influenced by the Sanusi Order, while a small community of Libyans are members of the Ahmadiyyah Order, a Sufi tradition that arose in Egypt. Almost all other non-Sunni Muslims are non-citizen immigrants from the Middle East and other African nations (see *Political and Social Relations*).



**Kharijites:** Many Libyan Berbers are Kharijites (also known as *Ibadis*) who trace their history to a Berber protest movement that

arose shortly after the Arabs' arrival in North Africa (see *History and Myth*). Unlike most Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, the Kharijites believe any Muslim can become a religious leader.



**Folk Beliefs:** Some Libyans combine local cultural traditions with Islamic beliefs and practices, though these practices appear to be becoming somewhat obsolete. For example, some Libyans wear amulets inscribed with Qur'anic verses to protect themselves from curses or spirits called *djinn*.

### Christianity

Libya's small Christian community consists mostly of Egyptian and sub-Saharan African migrants and a small number of Europeans and North Americans. Close to 50,000 mostly Egyptian Coptic Christians reside in Tripoli, Misrata, and Benghazi. Small numbers of Roman Catholics live in most large urban areas. Tripoli and Benghazi are also home to small numbers of Orthodox Christians and African and Filipino followers of a nondenominational, evangelical Christian church.

### Religion and Politics

Taking advantage of Libya's weak government, fundamentalist Islamist groups actively seek new supporters. In this volatile environment, members of minority religious groups are vulnerable to acts of violence, intimidation, and discrimination. In 2012, an attack on a Coptic church in Misrata left 2 dead and 3 injured. In 2012-13, **Salafists** (fundamentalist Sunni Islamist groups) staged attacks on Sufi religious sites, destroying several mosques and tombs of Sufi scholars in Tripoli and Zliten, while threatening Sufi leaders. In 2014, members of ISIS (see *Political and Social Relations*) bulldozed several important Sufi shrines, and in 2015, executed dozens of Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

While urbanization has altered family structures in recent decades, traditional values such as regard for community, respect for elders, and loyalty to family, clan, and tribe are still the basis of family life. Libyans typically have strong connections to their kin, maintaining relationships with extended family members and involving them in important life events.

### Residence

For much of Libya's history, a majority of residents lived in the countryside, with just 20% residing in urban areas in 1950. In subsequent decades, an influx to the cities occurred, as some Libyans pursued educational and employment opportunities. By 2023, the proportion of urban-dwellers had increased to about 82%.

In both urban and rural communities, residences typically divide into public and private spaces, with private areas reserved for family and close friends. Traditional furnishings include decorated floor cushions and Persian-style wall hangings or carpets.

**Rural:** In rural areas, the extended family traditionally lives in a compound of several houses. Normally constructed of mud and straw bricks, most rural homes are painted white or light brown to deflect the heat. Usually a single story, homes often feature several rooms centered around an interior courtyard and a public reception room, where the family welcomes visitors. In some rural homes, windows open only to the courtyard. Rural-dwellers with the financial means often construct concrete and stone villas within gated neighborhoods.



**Urban:** Through the mid-1960s, most urban dwellings were constructed of traditional mud and straw bricks. As part of governmental development projects in the 1970s-80s, these buildings largely were demolished and replaced by concrete high-rise apartments. Over 277,000 new housing units opened from 1970-95 under governmental subsidy programs, allowing some Libyans to purchase their own apartments for the first time. As urban population growth continued to outpace housing construction, shantytowns developed on the outskirts of urban areas, where residents built their own simple housing from available materials.



Today, some urban residents continue to own apartments in state-constructed buildings even though housing materials remain inadequate. While some residents with higher incomes live in 2-story

European-style villas, other Libyans are forced to make their homes in abandoned apartment buildings or makeshift huts constructed of mud bricks, wood, or metal sheets. These residences typically lack access to electricity, clean water, and sanitation services.

### Family Structure

Libyans trace their identity through the extended family (*lahma*), clan (group of families, or *bayt*), and tribe (*qabilhah*) (see *Political and Social Relations*). They typically maintain close relations within the *lahma*, which includes the immediate family, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Libyans demonstrate notable respect for elders, frequently caring for their parents when no longer self-sufficient. In rural areas, members of a *lahma* usually prefer to live in close proximity. Even though some young unmarried men leave their home community seeking work, their bonds with family and friends who stay behind typically remain strong.

## Children

Traditionally, the extended family shared responsibilities for childcare, a custom that largely continues today even though nursery schools and nanny services are becoming more widely available in some urban areas. Most children assist with household chores from a young age, particularly on rural farms. Children typically live with their parents until marriage.



**Birth:** Following a child's birth, the father or another male family member kisses the baby, while whispering **Allahu akbar** (God is great) as a blessing and prayer. Female family members greet the mother and child upon their arrival with the **zagharid**, a wail of joy. Several weeks after the birth, the family traditionally holds a celebration to mark the infant's survival through the critical first few months.

**Circumcision:** Some Libyan boys undergo circumcision at birth, while others between ages 10-11, signifying their passage into membership in the Islamic community.

## Dating and Marriage

Dating in the Western sense is uncommon in Libya. Since there are few socially acceptable avenues for unrelated young people to meet, most rely on introductions by kin, friends, and colleagues. Of note, some urban young adults now turn to social media to find and communicate with potential partners, though most courtships occur under family supervision.

Traditionally, a marriage was an arranged union meant to cement alliances and bring prestige, social status, and greater economic opportunity to both families. While arranged marriages are still common, Libyan men and women are increasingly likely to marry due to mutual attraction. Even when families suggest a

match, the couple usually spends a significant amount of time getting to know each other before agreeing to a betrothal.

The legal marriage age is 20, though younger Libyans may wed earlier with their parents' permission. Although some girls in rural areas marry younger, early marriage is relatively rare. On average, women marry in their 20s and men in their early 30s. While forced marriage has been illegal for decades, the practice occasionally occurs in areas controlled by extremists such as ISIS (see *Political and Social Relations*).

**Bridewealth:** Upon marriage, the groom and his family pay the customary Islamic bridewealth or **mahr** to the bride's family in exchange for her promise of marriage. This payment often consists of goods like gold jewelry or furnishings, or a promise of housing. Because bridewealth tends to be costly, Libyan men typically postpone marriage until financially secure.

### Polygyny

Polygyny is the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In accordance with **sharia** (Islamic law – see *Religion and Spirituality*), some Libyan men historically had up to 4 wives. While Libya's long-time leader Qadhafi never technically banned polygyny, he did require consent from a man's first wife. As a result, few Libyan men had multiple wives. In 2013, the Constitutional Court lifted these legal hurdles to polygynous arrangements.

**Weddings:** Libyan weddings tend to be elaborate family-sponsored community gatherings. Though some thrifty urban residents opt for a single day of festivities, weddings usually consist of a series of lavish celebrations lasting 3-6 days, causing a significant financial burden to the average family.

Customary wedding rituals usually are segregated by gender. For example, the bride's female family and friends conduct the **nejma** – the decorating of the bride's hands and feet with

intricate temporary tattoos made from a reddish-brown dye extracted from the henna plant. On the last day of the festivities, family and friends accompany the bride in a procession to the groom's house where the wedding ceremony, the **nikkah**,

signing of the formal marriage contract, occurs. Afterwards, family and friends shower the bride with rice and candy.



**Divorce:** At less than 1 divorce per 1,000 inhabitants, Libya's divorce rate is much lower than

the global average of 1.8 and the US rate of 2.4. To attain a divorce in Libya, a couple must appear before a judge to present their reasons for the divorce from a list of acceptable explanations. Following a divorce, the woman usually returns to her father's house to live. Libyan women have the legal right to initiate a divorce but face social stigma and may have to forfeit certain rights under *sharia* (see *Sex and Gender*) once the divorce is finalized.

## Death

In accordance with Islamic tradition, Libyan burials occur as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. The deceased is bathed, dried, and wrapped in a **kafan** (clean, unadorned linen). Male relatives and friends transport the deceased to a mosque or other locale where an **imam** (Muslim spiritual leader – see *Religion and Spirituality*) leads the assembled in prayer. Relatives then transport the deceased to a cemetery, where the body is buried. Women typically do not attend the funeral, instead remaining at the deceased's home where they engage in ritual wailing.

For 3 days following the funeral, the family gathers for prayers and receives mourners who offer condolences. To mark her husband's passing, a widow typically avoids all interaction with male non-relatives for several months following his death.



## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Traditional Libyan society privileged men over women. Under Qadhafi (see *History and Myth*), the government instituted measures to improve women's status by expanding their legal rights and access to education and employment. Nevertheless, Libya's society continues to be patriarchal, meaning men hold most power, authority, and social prestige. Moreover, **sharia** (Islamic law – see *Religion and Spirituality*) Islamist extremism and some cultural traditions tend to hinder women's full participation in the economic, political, and social spheres.

### Gender Roles and Work

Even if they work outside the home, Libyan women traditionally remain responsible for the majority of household chores such as preparing meals, cleaning, and caring for children and elders. Rural women often perform additional tasks around the home, mostly collecting water and firewood, building and tending fires, and working the fields.



**Labor Force:** In 2024, about 33% of Libyan women worked outside the home, a rate higher than that of neighboring Tunisia (27%) and Egypt (15%) but also lower than the US rate of 57%. Women's employment rates are higher in urban regions along Libya's coast.

Women work in a variety of sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, education, business, and aviation. Female college graduates often specialize in medical, legal, aviation, and education professions. Nevertheless, women often experience gender-based segregation, discrimination in hiring and promotion, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

## Gender and the Law

While the interim Constitution guarantees equal rights to women in most areas, discrimination persists because laws sometimes are not enforced. Further, the implementation of *sharia* restricts women's rights, while certain cultural traditions hinder women's full participation in society.

For example, inheritance customarily passes through the male line. Consequently, despite equal property rights before the law, few women fully control or own property. Because it is based in *sharia*, legislation relating to family issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody often disadvantages women. While Libya ratified a 2008 United Nations convention to eliminate discrimination against women, it also reserved the right to override those principles in conflict with *sharia*.

While reliance on *sharia* sometimes restricts the autonomy of women, as of 2020, 46% of surveyed Libyans favored using *sharia* as the main or sole source of governance. Roughly 42% responded that laws should be equally based on *sharia* and the will of the people, while only 10% said laws should be based mostly or entirely on the will of the people. Of note, women's representation in the legal field, both as lawyers and prosecutors, has risen since the 1991 appointment of the first female judge.



## Gender and Politics

Holding the right to vote since 1964, Libyan women generally express notable interest in the political process. While roughly 2 of every 3 women voted in Libya's 2012 general election following Qadhafi's ouster (see *History and*

*Myth*), this rate was significantly lower than the male turnout. Participation was even lower in 2014 (see *History and Myth*), primarily due to growing disillusionment with the political process amid increased security concerns.

During the Qadhafi era (see *History and Myth*), feminist political movements and activist associations were generally grouped together under the Jamahiriya Women's Federation. Following Qadhafi's ouster (see *History and Myth*), several prominent women were involved in efforts to reorganize the government. A founding member of the National Transitional Council (NTC – see *History and Myth*), Salwa Bughaighis resigned from the NTC after a few months, protesting the lack of women in the new government. These and other views brought her into conflict with religious extremists (see *Religion and Spirituality*). One of Libya's foremost human rights activists, Bughaighis was assassinated in 2014.

In 2012, the NTC started encouraging women to run for office. The effort has been largely successful: in the 2014 elections, 16% of General National Congress members were women, less than that of the US, where some 28% of Congress members are women. As of March 2025, women held 16.5% of seats in the House of Representatives, a body which presently governs eastern Libya (see *History and Myth*). Still, female politicians and political activists continue to face harassment and threats of violence.



### Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Rape is a criminal offense under both *sharia* and civil law, though victims largely do not report occurrences to avoid an accusation of adultery or bringing shame to their families. Even when a case is successfully prosecuted, judges may suspend a prison sentence if the victim agrees to marry her attacker.

Since Libya currently has no dedicated law prohibiting domestic violence, physical and sexual violence against women is relatively common. A 2023 survey determined that 11% of female respondents aged 15-149 agreed that domestic violence perpetrated by husbands is justified in certain cases. In

comparison, 30% of women agreed worldwide, as well as across the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region.



Historically, some Libyan females were forced into unwanted or early marriages, frequently to first cousins, in order to strengthen kinship ties (see *Family and Kinship*). This practice was outlawed during

Qadhafi's rule and became much less common, although it has been revived in some areas due to the influence of ISIS (see *Political and Social Relations*) and other extremist groups.

### Sex and Procreation

Libyans typically consider sexual intimacy a private matter. Public displays of affection, both kissing and holding hands, are considered socially unacceptable. Further, sexual relations outside of marriage are illegal, punishable by up to 5 years of prison.

The Libyan birthrate has dropped dramatically in recent decades, from 7.8 children per woman in 1981 to 3 in 2024. This decrease was primarily due to women's improved access to education and employment. An estimated 28% of Libyan women use contraceptives. Abortion is allowed only if the mother's life is endangered.



### Homosexuality in Libya

Civil and *sharia* laws prohibit homosexual acts. Punishment consists of imprisonment up to 5 years. Homosexuals experience significant social stigmatization and tend to conceal their sexual orientation. In 2015, members of ISIS executed at least 2 homosexual men in Libya. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Libya. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

The official language of Libya is Arabic. Although Qadhafi-era Arabicization policies (see *History and Myth*) promoted Arabic over all other languages, some 287,000 Libyans speak a native Berber language today.

### Arabic

Most Libyans speak a variety of the Libyan Arabic dialect as their first language. In school, Libyans learn to read and write Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is prominent across Arabic-speaking countries. Libyans use MSA for writing, formal discussions, speeches, and for signage. With a 28-character alphabet, MSA is written horizontally from right to left.

The 3 major varieties of spoken Libyan Arabic reflect Libya's history and geography (see *History and Myth*). For example, the Tripolitanian dialect spoken in western Libya is similar to the predominant Arabic dialect of neighboring Tunisia. By contrast, the Eastern Libyan Arabic variety resembles Egyptian Arabic, and the Southern Libyan Arabic dialect shares features with Sudanese Arabic. While Libyan Arabic speakers usually can converse with Arabic speakers from other North African countries, Arabic speakers from beyond the region may have difficulty understanding local Libyan dialects.

After he seized power in 1969 (see *History and Myth*), Qadhafi banned the use of other languages in all public writing, such as street signs and shop notices. Unlike some other Arabic-speaking countries, Libya usually does not depict multilingual signage, making some knowledge of MSA essential for foreign nationals.



## Berber Languages

Like Arabic, Libya's Berber or Amazigh languages are members of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Spoken most extensively in Libya, Algeria, Mali, Morocco, and Niger, Berber languages are sometimes referred to collectively as Tamazight. Libya's most widely spoken Berber language is Nafusi, spoken by about 247,000 residents, mostly of the Jebel Nafusa area and other regions of Tripolitania. Other Berber languages having significantly fewer speakers include Awjilah and Ghadames.

Libya's Tuareg population (see *Political and Social Relations*) speak a Berber language known variously as Tamashek, Tamahaq, or Tahaggart. Of note, inscriptions in this language using an ancient alphabet known as **tifnagh** have been found on rock surfaces in the Sahara.

## Other Languages

Residents of Libya speak other languages as well. Unlike Libya's other native languages, Domari, spoken by around 30,000 Libyans in the region around Tripoli, belongs to the Indo-European language family. Due to Libya's colonial past (see *History and Myth*), some 30,300 Libyans speak Italian today. Foreign workers (see *Political and Social Relations*) speak variants of Arabic (such as Levantine, Moroccan, Tunisian, and Sudanese Arabic), Italian, French, Greek, and Serbian.



**English:** English is a popular second or third language. It is the preferred language of instruction in science, engineering, and medicine and has also grown in importance as a business language.

## Communication Overview

Effective communication in Libya requires not only knowledge of Libyan Arabic or MSA but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Libyans are normally warm and friendly with relatives and friends but often reserved and distrustful when



addressing strangers or outsiders, particularly Westerners. This custom is likely due to the government's anti-Western stance during the decades of the Qadhafi era (see *History and Myth*). Nevertheless, most Libyans are courteous, typically valuing the group's needs over their own personal preferences.

Libyans prefer politeness during public interactions, expressing goodwill instead of criticism of another person's ideas. A foreign national should avoid giving direct criticism, especially in front of others. Instead, he should subtly blend indirect critique with praise if appropriate or wait for a private discussion. Of note, Libyans habitually use the term **Alhemdulillah** (thanks be to God) as a substitute for "yes." By contrast, the term **Inshallah** (if God wills) signifies either consent or uncertainty, depending on the situation and should not be interpreted as a promise of action.

## Greetings

Libyans typically extend greetings with great care and respect. Upon entering a room, Libyans say **Salaam Aleikum** (peace be upon you), to which all present respond, **Wa Aleikum as-Salaam** (and upon you be peace). Depending on the time of day, they might also say **sabah al-khayr** (good morning) or **masa'**

**al-khayr** (good evening). Libyans inquire about someone's well-being with **kayf halak** (how are you?).

Following this verbal exchange, Libyans of the same gender typically shake right hands, avoiding the use of the left hand (see *Time and Space*), or exchange cheek kisses. Libyans often maintain hand contact through a series of ritual initial questions (see "Conversation Topics" below).

Greetings between Libyans of the opposite sex are typically nonphysical. Men usually greet women verbally or with a nod, though some women may extend their hands for a handshake. Foreign nationals should wait for Libyans of the opposite sex to initiate the greeting. Instead of shaking hands, some Libyans prefer to place a hand on their heart while bowing slightly.

## Names

Arab names for both genders normally reflect the genealogy of the paternal side of the family. The full name often consists of a first (given) name, the person's father's (first) name, the paternal grandfather's name, a family name, and sometimes a tribal or ancestral name. Some Libyans prefer to use just their first name and family name. Of note, Libyan women do not take their husband's name upon marriage.

## Forms of Address

Libyans use distinct forms of address to show respect and the



nature of the relationship. As in other societies, Libyans use affectionate terms for spouses and family members. Younger Libyans typically address their elders with deference. The titles **haj** (for

males) or **hajja** (for females) are used for those elders who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



Other titles represent the Arabic equivalents for certain occupations, such as doctor or teacher. Friends often refer to each other as **habibi**, **habibty**, **akha** (brother), or **ukhti** (sister).

### Conversational Topics

Following initial greetings, Libyans typically exchange inquiries regarding health and family. Etiquette requires that Libyans positively answer these inquiries, and during this initial series, conversation partners may clasp hands until the ritual questions have been answered. Following this exchange, Libyans typically participate in light conversation before progressing to more serious topics (see *Time and Space*).

Acceptable casual topics of conversation include the weather, family, children's achievements, television, movies, music, food, and sports. Since soccer is Libya's most popular sport (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), foreign nationals can help establish rapport by showing an appreciation for the sport.

Foreign nationals should avoid discussions of Libyan politics, Islam, and sexuality. While Libyans tend to appreciate humor, foreign nationals should exercise caution due to potential miscommunication.

Of note, Libyan men do not inquire about another man's female family members, and neither should foreign nationals.

### Gestures

As in other societies, Libyans use various gestures to emphasize or substitute spoken words. For example, Libyans may touch their fingers to the thumb to emphasize a point. Moving the head back quickly while clicking the tongue means "no." Libyans consider it rude have hands in one's pockets while speaking or to turn one's back to another person. They also avoid showing the soles of feet or shoes or walking in front of a praying person.



## Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## Arabic Pronunciation and Transliteration

Transliteration is the process of spelling Arabic words using the Roman (Latin) alphabet. Although Arabic dialects generally are consistent in the way words are spelled using Arabic script, there is no standard system for converting the Arabic alphabet into the Roman alphabet. Consequently, there are many different ways of writing Arabic with Roman letters. Further, pronunciations of Arabic words often vary, resulting in multiple transliterations for a single word. For example, the name of Libya’s long-time leader Qadhafi can be written in a variety of ways such as Gadafi, Ghaddafi, Kadafi, and Qatafi.

Some Arabic words use sounds or letters having no equivalent in the Roman alphabet. The following symbols and letters are used to represent those sounds and letters when transliterated into the Roman alphabet.

Letters or Symbol	Description	Example
gh	Like the guttural French “r”	Paris (as pronounced by a French person)
Kh or x	Strong “h”	loch (as pronounced by a Scottish person)
H	Whispered “h”	Hoot
dH	Soft “th”	This
‘ or ʔ	Glottal stop	Pause in the middle of “uh-oh”
q	“k” sound from the throat; “g”; or glottal stop	cough; golf; pause in the middle of “uh-oh”

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Libyan Arabic (Romanized)
Hi / Hello	Ahlan
Good morning	Sabah al-khayr
Good afternoon	Masa' al-khayr
Good evening	Masa' al-khayr
My name is ____	Ismi ____
What is your name?	Maa 'ismak / 'ismik?
How are you?	Kayf halak?
And you, how are you?	Wa enta, shen h'alek?
Thank God, I'm well.	Alhadu lillah, bahi
Please	Min fadlik
Thank you	Shukran
You're welcome	Marhaba
Yes / No	Na'am / laa
Goodbye	Ma'assalaama
Good night	Masa' al-khayr
Do you understand this language?	Tifhim fee haadhe il-loogha?
I (don't) understand	(Maa) nifhim(ish)
Sorry	Aasif
It doesn't matter	Ma lish
Can you help me please?	Min fad'lek, mumkin tsaa'aedni?
I will get an interpreter	Binjeb mutarjib
What?	Shenou?
Where?	Wein?
Who?	Men?
How?	Keif?
How much?	Giddash?
Congratulations	Mabrouk
What time is it?	Essaa'a geddash?
What do you want?	Shen teabee?

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 91%
- Male: 96.7%
- Female: 85.6% (2015 estimate)

### Early Education

Formal education arrived in the region as early as the 4th century BC, when the Greek city of Cyrene (see *History and Myth*) became a center of learning in philosophy, mathematics, and literature. With the spread of Islam beginning in the 7th century (see *History and Myth*), religious leaders opened **madrassas**, religious schools where scholars taught scripture and Islamic law to young men. By the end of the 11th century, regional religious leaders founded Sufi Islamic lodges called **zawiyas** that also offered some religious instruction.



Over subsequent centuries, *zawiyas* offerings expanded to include law, geography, history, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. By the mid-1800s, the new Sanusi Order (see *History and Myth*) controlled many of these lodges, while providing Libyans a focus for their anti-colonial activities. Meanwhile, schools associated with mosques called **kuttabas** provided boys instruction in the Qur'an (see *Religion and Spirituality*) and Arabic.

To bolster their regional control, the Ottomans opened privately-funded primary, military, preparatory, and technical schools in the 1860s, primarily for children from elite families. Despite this diversity of opportunities, education was limited to primary and secondary levels. Consequently, students had to travel abroad – typically to Turkey, Egypt, or Tunisia – to acquire advanced studies.

## Education in Colonial Libya

Beginning in the early 20th century, the Italians opened several schools in Libya as part of their “peaceful penetration” of the African continent (see *History and Myth*). During the 2 wars with Sanusi rebels in subsequent decades (see *History and Myth*), the Italian colonial government closed Libyan educational institutions, particularly *zawiyas* associated with the Sanusi Order.

By 1939, the colonial government operated some 93 Italian-language schools, primarily for Libya’s Italian residents. Meanwhile, Libyans had access to privately-funded alternatives, including some 400 Arabic-language schools, almost all *kuttab*s, 16 Jewish schools (see *Religion and Spirituality*), and a Greek-language school. Generally, education for Libyans was restricted to primary school and some vocational training.

## Education after Independence

Upon independence in 1951 (see *History and Myth*), the literacy rate in the new Kingdom of Libya was below 10%. To expand literacy, the government developed Arabic instructional materials, while promoting the re-opening of religious schools and the construction of state schools at the primary, secondary, and vocational levels. Educational opportunities expanded significantly when Libya opened its first post-secondary

institution, the University of Libya, in 1955, with campuses in both Tripoli and Benghazi. Offering programs targeting adult education, some 360,000 students were enrolled in all levels by 1969.



## Education under Qadhafi

Following Qadhafi’s seizure of power in 1969 (see *History and Myth*), the government continued to expand and reform its

educational programs. Qadhafi made education free from primary school to the university level, while providing extra

support to women's education. The number of enrolled students increased dramatically through the construction of new schools and the use of mobile classrooms in rural areas. Though the number of teachers more than quadrupled between 1970-86, Libya still relied heavily on foreign professionals to fill vacant teaching positions.

In the early 1980s, many highly-educated residents fled the Qadhafi regime (see *History and Myth*), leaving a void in the skilled workforce that was necessary to support and grow its oil-based economy (see *Economics and Resources*). In response, Qadhafi introduced his "New Educational Structure," emphasizing technical and vocational subjects. Further reforms in 2000 transferred responsibility for education to the 32 municipalities. Overall, school curricula during Qadhafi's rule conformed to his unique philosophy as outlined in *The Green Book* (see *History and Myth*).

### Modern Education System

Since Qadhafi's 2011 ouster (see *History and Myth*), educational opportunities remain available, though violence and political instability (see *History and Myth*) restrict access. According to law, 9 years of basic schooling are free and compulsory between ages 6-15. Higher education through post-graduate studies is also free though not compulsory. Arabic is the primary language of instruction in public schools.

The Libyan school year officially begins in September, consisting of 31 weeks of instruction at the primary level



and 33 at the secondary level. In reality, school years have been irregular since 2011, and in 2016 school did not start until late October in many districts due to a lack of both resources and security. Further, few public schools provide transportation, making access difficult in rural and conflict-prone areas. Consequently, increasing numbers of parents with the financial

resources are choosing to send their children to private schools, where secure and regular operation is assured.

Generally, Libya's ongoing violence and political instability affect education across the country. In 2023, over 280 schools had



been damaged or destroyed and 19 schools were being used as shelters. Many areas face chronic teacher and textbook shortages. The UN-supported Government of National Accord (GNA) in western Libya (see *History and Myth*) has tried to mitigate

these problems by providing course materials online; however, some students lack Internet access. Experts estimate some 1.3 million school children experience disruptions to their education. As a result, Libyans with Internet access increasingly enroll in online schools to continue their education. In 2021, only 10% of school-aged children had access to distance education.

Besides the effects of violence and instability, the Libyan school system faces other challenges. Observers criticize its inadequate educational materials, an emphasis on memorization over experiential approaches, a lack of funds, and a failure to provide adequate access to rural students. Further, education remains highly politicized. The Ministry of Education has eliminated all textbook references glorifying Qadhafi but has failed to replace them. Today's Libyan history textbooks condense the 4 decades of Qadhafi's rule into just 2 pages.

**Pre-Primary:** Pre-primary education is optional and starts as early as age 4 but remains relatively uncommon. In 2015, about 18% of children of the appropriate age attended preschool.

**Basic:** Libya's basic education system consists of primary grades 1-6 and lower secondary grades 7-9. The curricula for both schools include Arabic, geography, mathematics, natural sciences, history, art, music, technical education, religious education, and physical education. Upon completion of basic

education, students receive a Basic Education Certificate. Though Libya has a 94% primary enrollment rate, the average Libyan student still only spends 7.6 years in school.

**Upper Secondary:** Free but not compulsory, general upper secondary education comprises grades 10-12. Students choose to focus on either the humanities or the sciences while continuing general courses in religious education, Arabic, English, and physical education. Specialized upper secondary schools offer 4-year programs focusing on subjects like economics, media, and engineering. Graduates from both types of secondary school receive a Secondary Education Certificate, qualifying them to apply for university studies.

**Vocational Schools:** Even if students fail to earn their Basic Education Certificate, they can still enter a vocational school called an Intermediate Vocational Training Center for 2-3 years of training. As of 2018, 114 technical and vocational institutes offered courses of study in some 44 different vocations in 7 major fields: agriculture; marine fishing; electrical; mechanics; carpentry, building, and architecture; service industry jobs; and “female vocations,” presumably home economics, teaching, and nursing.

**Post-Secondary:** As of 2018, Libya was home to 24 public and 8 private universities. Public university study is available to all secondary school graduates for free. Accordingly, some 90% of Libyan students attend public university. Of the roughly 563,617 students pursuing higher education, nearly 60% are female. Some Libyans also study abroad, primarily in Great Britain, Egypt, and the US.



Of note, Libya has experienced a “brain drain,” or the emigration of the highly trained or educated in recent years due to a lack of jobs matching graduates’ qualifications.



## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Libyans consider trust, honor, and respect fundamental to building strong personal and professional relationships. While public displays of affection between the sexes is inappropriate, social touching between people of the same sex is more common than in the US.

### Time and Work

Libya's workweek runs from Sunday-Thursday. While business hours are normally 8:00am-4:00pm, they sometimes change to 7:00am-2:00pm during the summer. Some offices close for a midday break from 1:00pm-4:00pm and consequently open earlier or extend the workday. During Ramadan (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the workday is typically shorter, and some businesses may open only after sunset).

Some shops open from 8:00am-1:00pm and 4:00pm-8:00pm, while others open all day.

**Souks** (open-air markets) are often open Saturday-Thursday from 8:00am-5:00pm

and Friday from 8:00am-1:00pm. Most banks are open Saturday-Thursday from 8:00am-4:00pm and post offices from 8:00am-1:00pm and 5:00pm-8:00pm. While most businesses close on public holidays, some large stores and supermarkets in urban areas remain open. Businesses generally have limited hours or are closed on Fridays, the Islamic day of worship (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



**Working Conditions:** The standard workweek is 40 hours with up to 8 hours paid overtime. While Libyan labor laws provide some regulations to protect workers, enforcement is often inconsistent. Foreign workers with manual labor jobs like domestic care and construction receive fewer protections than other residents and are especially vulnerable to exploitation. In

addition to paid public holidays, Libyans receive 30 days of annual paid leave.

**Time Zone and Date Notation:** Libya observes Eastern European Time (EET), which is 2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Libya does not observe daylight savings time.

**Lunar Calendar:** Libyans use the *Hijiri* (Islamic) calendar to track Muslim holidays. Since it is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western calendar. The Islamic calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, each new week begins at sunset on Saturday, and the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

### National Holidays

These holidays occur on fixed dates:

- February 17: Revolution Day
- May 1: Labor Day
- September 16: Martyr's Day
- October 23: Liberation Day
- December 24: Independence Day

These holidays occur on variable dates according to the lunar calendar:

- **Mawlid al-Nabi:** Birth of Prophet Muhammad
- **Arafat (Hajj) Day:** Second day of the *Hajj* pilgrimage (see *Religion and Spirituality*)
- **Eid al-Fitr:** End of Ramadan
- **Eid al-Adha:** Festival of Sacrifice
- **Ra's al-Sana:** Islamic New Year

### Time and Business

Business tends to move much slower in Libya than in the US. Most Libyans prefer to build trust and develop personal relations

before doing business, which requires extra time and communication. While Libyans appreciate punctuality in business, arriving late to a meeting is typically acceptable given prior notification. Most business discussions occur during scheduled office meetings, although less formal meetings in other locations or during meals are also common.

When meeting for the first time, Libyan business associates greet and shake hands (see *Language and Communication*). To



build interpersonal relations, Libyans often begin business meetings by sharing coffee or tea and light conversation on topics such as health, family, and pastimes. During meetings, advisors and others who are not part of the

meeting may enter and exit at will. Libyans tend to be keen negotiators, preferring to spend extra time and energy to secure quality arrangements, while maintaining honor and respect among participants.

Libyans consider formality, respect, and deference to authority as essential within the hierarchical Libyan workplace. While senior officials or upper management tend to run meetings and make most decisions, Libyans also value consensus. Consequently, Libyan business culture often includes consultative and informal discussions among everyone involved, even though managers make most final decisions and delegation is uncommon. Managers generally deliver feedback and criticism in private in order to avoid conflict and embarrassment.

### **Personal Space**

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. In general, Libyans maintain slightly less than an arm's length when conversing with strangers and stand closer to family and friends. Friends of the same gender may maintain very little personal space when interacting.

**Touch:** Close friends and relatives commonly touch one another during conversation. Friends of the same gender may hold hands in public, signaling their deep platonic friendship. The public display of affection between people of the opposite sex is considered inappropriate (see *Sex and Gender*). Unrelated Libyans of the opposite sex do not touch, even during greetings (see *Language and Communication*).

Libyans use only the right hand when eating, gesturing, passing and accepting items, and shaking hands because traditionally the left hand is used for personal hygiene and considered unclean. Foreign nationals should adhere to this custom to avoid offense.

### Eye Contact

Direct eye contact is important during conversation to convey interest, respect, and transparency. While staring is impolite, Libyans may consider reluctance to make regular eye contact a sign of dishonesty or an attempt to conceal information. Nonetheless, men typically avoid extended eye contact when interacting with unrelated women. Libyans tend to do the same with elders as a sign of respect.

### Photographs

Mosques, airports, military or industrial areas, government offices, and similar places generally prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should always acquire a Libyan's permission before taking his photo.

### Driving

Some Libyans have aggressive driving habits, traveling at high speeds, passing vehicles despite oncoming traffic, and ignoring designated traffic signals. At 34 per 100,000 people, Libya's rate of traffic-related deaths in 2021 is no longer the world's highest but is significantly higher than the US rate of 14. Traffic enforcement suffers from corruption, and officials sometimes accept bribes instead of issuing fines.



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Libya's dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect Arabic and Berber cultural and religious traditions along with its history of colonization and dictatorship. While Libyan arts have experienced growth since the fall of Qadhafi, recent civil conflicts have restricted opportunities for both artistic expression and recreation.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Many rural and some urban residents wear traditional clothing on a daily basis. Most city-dwellers reserve it for special events, holidays, and festivals.

Libyan women's traditional clothing covers both the head and body. An uncommon but distinctive style of dress is the **farashiya**, a white sheet that conceals the entire body except one eye. By contrast, the **sudra** comprises a whole outfit consisting of drawstring pants, a loose-fitting top with embroidered sleeves, a vest, striped cloth gathered and draped over the arm, and a matching head wrap. Typically worn by married women on special occasions and by brides, the **sudra** may be white or brightly colored. Regardless of color, all **sudra** wearers accent the outfit extensively with gold jewelry.



Men's traditional wear features a shirt and drawstring pants, typically covered by a long, white tunic or cloak called a **sureeya** or **hawli**. Men often complete the outfit with the **tageya**, a tasseled cap, and a striped vest called a **faramla**. Some Libyan men prefer traditional dress from other Arab countries, such as the long-sleeved, ankle-length **thobe** from Saudi Arabia or Moroccan-style hooded robes.

**Modern:** City residents, especially youth, usually wear Western clothing for both work and leisure. For example, male office



workers often wear suits and ties, changing to short- or long-sleeved shirts and jeans during their leisure hours. While they may prefer Western attire, many Libyan women incorporate traditional accessories into their styles. For example,

women may don brightly colored Western-style dresses, blouses, or jeans and cover these outfits with a loose black robe called an **abaya** when in public. Other women may prefer a **hijab** or headscarf with their Western attire.

## Recreation

Libyans enjoy spending their free time with family and friends. Since Libya has few commercial entertainment venues, residents often entertain themselves at home watching television, listening to music, or playing computer games. Some Libyans also enjoy spending their leisure time outside the home. In the evening, men often gather in parks or coffeehouses to play cards, backgammon, chess, or dominoes while smoking **shisha** (water pipes). Libyan men enjoy meeting in cafes to enjoy Italian and Arabic coffee or tea served in an elaborate ceremony (see *Sustenance and Health*). Women typically socialize at home. Finally, Libyans often enjoy visiting scenic locations such as the Mediterranean beaches, although Libya's recent civil conflict has restricted some domestic travel (see *History and Myth*).

## Festivals

Libyans enjoy several religious holidays and festivals (see *Religion and Spirituality*). During the 3 days of **Eid al-Fitr** at the end of Ramadan (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Libyans typically wear their finest traditional dress, exchange gifts, feast, and give alms to the poor. Libyan Sufis (see *Religion and Spirituality*) also celebrate **Mawlid al-Nabi**, the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, with public readings, parades, music, dancing, and fireworks.

Other significant non-religious holidays include Revolution Day, Martyrs' Day, and Independence Day (see *Time and Space*). In the town of Ghat, Tuareg (see *Political and Social Relations*) gather during the **Acacus** festival to sing, play music, eat, share handicrafts, race camels, and wrestle. The city of Ghadames hosts a 3-day festival of music and horse and camel races. Oasis communities throughout Libya's desert hold festivities to celebrate the date harvest. Some of the celebrations accompanying the **Awessu** sea festival held in the coastal city of Zuwarah trace to ancient, pre-Islamic ritual cleansing practices. Today, festivities mainly consist of swimming and sailing races, folk dance, music, and feasting.

## Sports and Games

**Soccer:** Soccer, or "football," is Libya's most popular sport. In addition to following European leagues, Libyans enjoy the top-flight Libyan Premier League and several other domestic leagues. The Libyan men's national team had its greatest success when reaching the final against Ghana at the 1982 African Cup of Nations, hosted in Libya.

**Other Sports:** Racing has a long history in Libya, and residents today still enjoy watching horse, camel, chariot, and automobile races. In northern coastal areas, water sports like swimming are popular. In recent years, young men and women have begun to play volleyball, basketball, and table tennis in greater numbers.



**Traditional Games:** Libyans of all ages enjoy playing board and card games. Two popular card games are **romeeno**, a variation of gin rummy, and **shkubbah**, a game in which 2 pairs of players compete to win hands. Popular board games are **kharbga**, similar to Reversi or Othello, and **seeg**, in which players toss a stick then move pieces on a board while avoiding certain obstacles.

## Music and Dance

**Traditional Music:** Libya has a rich history of folk music, customarily played at festivals and weddings. Libyan traditional music shares some common features with styles from other North African countries, predominantly Tunisia and Morocco. Certain Berber styles incorporate particular rhythms and call-



and-response patterns common in sub-Saharan Africa.

Similar to a Tunisian style with the same name, the Libyan **ma'louf** normally features multiple instruments and includes vocal parts.

The **mriskaawi** style originates in the interior of Fezzan and inspires some modern compositions. Traditional instruments include drums such as the **tende** and **darbuka**, and wind instruments such as the **gheeta**, similar to an oboe or clarinet, the **nay** flute, and a bagpipe-type instrument called the **zakra**. Violins, tambourines, and a stringed lute called an **oud** are also featured in traditional music.

**Modern Music:** In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Libya's music scene experienced significant growth and innovation as musicians experimented with modernizing **mriskaawi** and other traditional forms. During his regime, Qadhafi extended his societal control (see *History and Myth*) over the arts, restricting the activities of many artists, while favoring the works of musicians who supported his regime. Since Qadhafi's 2011 ouster (see *History and Myth*), artists have used both traditional and modern styles, from **mriskaawi** to hip-hop, to express themselves. Libyan rap and reggae have recently enjoyed widespread popularity in the region, although much of this music is available only via social media or in underground venues. Many Libyans enjoy the music of UK-based Libyan rapper Ibn Thabit, rapper MC Swat, and Egyptian pop stars.

**Traditional Dance:** Traditional dance is a key component of many celebrations, community meetings, and Sufi ceremonies



(see *Religion and Spirituality*) in rural areas. In some cities, professional troupes and dance schools keep dance customs alive. In one popular tradition, dancers link arms and sway, skip, hop, and glide in a line or circle. A dance common among the Tuareg (see *Political and Social Relations*) features women playing drums, while men on camels circle them. The most famous Libyan dance, the ***haggallah***, is a coming-of-age celebration performed by a single female dancer before a line of clapping, chanting men.

## Literature

Libya has a long and rich tradition of oral folklore, history, and poetry. Poetry remains especially popular today, with radio broadcasts and local festivals featuring poetry recitation.

Written literature grew in prominence during the 1960s, with authors like Khamel al-Maghur, Khalifa al-Fakhri, and Muhammad al-Shaltami writing about religion, politics, and love. In 1977, Qadhafi seized control of Libya's only publishing house and subsequently regulated writers' output, imprisoning some and forcing many others into exile.

While some writers like Maryam Salama continue to work from Libya today, others live abroad. These expatriates include the poets Khaled Mattawa and Ashur Atwebi and the writer and speaker Ali Omar Ermes. Notably, American-born Libyan novelist Hisham Matar's memoir *The Return* won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography in 2017.

## Arts and Crafts

Traditionally, certain Sunni Islamic teachings (see *Religion and Spirituality*) have prohibited the lifelike portrayal of humans and animals. Instead, traditional Libyan artists and artisans have used geometric designs, repetitive patterns, and calligraphy to produce highly complex decorative motifs. Libyan handicrafts consist of textiles, pottery, baskets, silver and gold jewelry, leatherwork, and other items.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Libyan meals are typically informal occasions enjoyed by family and close friends within the home. Generally simple and hearty, dishes usually feature locally-available ingredients.

### Dining Customs

Most Libyans supplement 3 daily meals with an afternoon snack. The entire family usually eats their main meal, either lunch or dinner, together at home. The eldest male customarily begins eating first. In some families, men may finish their meals before women begin to eat. Dining customs sometimes change when guests are present. Hosts typically invite their guests to begin eating first as a sign of respect. Female family members usually greet and serve unrelated male guests but do not dine with them.

While some Libyans eat from Western-style dining tables, most families dine while sitting on floor cushions. Family members typically eat from the same **sofra**, a large, centrally-placed tray or a low table containing communal dishes. Before eating, Libyans customarily pass around a bowl of perfumed water for each diner to ritually cleanse his fingers. Libyans also tend to recite a short prayer or the word **Bismillah** (in the name of God) before eating.



Libyans customarily scoop food with the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger of their right hand (see *Time and Space*), though some diners may use spoons for certain dishes. While older Libyans usually converse little during meals, younger Libyans often disregard this custom. Following the meal, Libyans routinely say **al-hamdu lillah** (thanks be to God) to indicate their enjoyment of and appreciation for the food.

## Diet

Libyan cuisine reflects the nation's geographic location in central North Africa and its multi-cultural history (see *History and Myth*). Italian-style pasta is common in Tripolitania, while eastern Libyan cuisine is strongly influenced by neighboring Egypt. Observant Muslims in Libya consume neither pork nor alcohol. In addition, they observe particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law.



Staple grains, such as wheat, barley, and rice, are often made into **kesrah** (a flat, unleavened bread) or noodles. Of note, desert-dwellers bake bread by burying it in sand alongside hot coals. Found throughout

North Africa, Libya's most famous grain dish is **couscous**, steamed balls of semolina (a wheat product) often served with a spicy meat and vegetable stew.

The most popular sources of protein are lamb and mutton, though chicken and beef also are eaten throughout the country. Meat may be grilled in chunks as kabobs or stewed and served alongside rice or *couscous*. Despite Libya's long coastline, few Libyans consume seafood regularly. Additional sources of protein include chickpeas and beans. Goat's milk is prevalent in many rural, desert communities.

Common vegetables and fruits include potatoes, peas, onions, tomatoes, peppers, dates, apricots, figs, watermelon, and oranges. Many Libyan dishes incorporate spices and herbs like saffron, ginger, chili peppers, and cinnamon to add flavor.

## Popular Dishes and Meals

Breakfast is typically light, consisting of some combination of milk, eggs, bread, cheese, olives, and tea or coffee. While both lunch and dinner typically include cooked vegetables alongside

grains, families may reserve meat for dinner or special occasions.

Popular entrées include **sharba libya** (a spicy soup of lamb, chickpeas, vegetables, lemon mint, and tomato curry); **shatshouka** (chopped lamb and vegetables in tomato sauce and egg); **mouloqiyah** (steamed mixed vegetables); **couscous bil-bosla** (couscous with sautéed onions); and **makaruna mbakbaka** (spiced pasta simmered in tomato and lamb stock). While lamb is generally the preferred meat, variations of these dishes incorporate other meats, like **sharba dajaaj** (chicken soup).

Common deserts include **baklaw** (a rich, flaky, honey pastry filled with nuts), **basbousa** (a semolina-almond cake served with yogurt), and **asida** (a serving of cooked wheat dough topped with butter and date syrup).

## Beverages

Libya historically produced its own wine, beer, and spirits until alcoholic beverages were prohibited following Qadhafi's 1969 seizure of power (see *History and Myth*). Alcohol is still prohibited today. Libyans enjoy various types of black, green, and mint tea throughout the day. Tea is also enjoyed in an elaborate ceremony featuring 3 versions: a frothy, sweetened brew, a mint version, and poured over peanuts and almonds. Coffee is also popular, both in Arab and European varieties. Libyans drink nonalcoholic beer, carbonated fruit juices, and sodas, such as the Austrian-produced "Bitter Soda" or **Bitter Nemsawi**.

## Eating Out

Libyans tend to socialize over coffee or tea in cafes (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) and generally do not eat out on a regular basis. This tradition is changing somewhat in urban areas, where restaurants and fast-food chains offer a range of options, from typical Libyan cuisine to international dishes.



## Health Overview

During Qadhafi's decades in power (see *History and Myth*), the government established a generally well-functioning healthcare infrastructure staffed primarily by foreign nationals. Since his 2011 ouster (see *History and Myth*), the quality of healthcare has decreased considerably. Besides physical damages resulting from conflict, the healthcare system suffers a lack of funding, shortages of essential medicines and equipment, growing demand from Libyans displaced and wounded by conflict, and



ongoing emigration of trained medical professionals.

Despite these shortfalls, Libya achieved significant improvements in the last few decades. Between 1990-2024,

infant mortality decreased from 36 to 11 deaths per 1,000 live births, while maternal mortality increased from 39 to 72 deaths per 100,000 live births. Libyan life expectancy at birth is currently about 78 years, lower than European Union (EU) and US averages of 81 years, but higher than neighbors Chad (60), Niger (61), Egypt (75) and Tunisia (77).

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Libyan medicine relies on the use of medicinal plants consumed fresh or prepared as infusions, powders, or juices. For example, umbrella thorn acacia is used to treat skin infections, while the leaves and flowers of a horehound variety are used in cases of coughing and asthma. These remedies sometimes are combined with folk traditions, such as the wearing of amulets inscribed with Qur'anic verses (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

## Modern Healthcare System

Although Libya's Ministry of Health officially provides free healthcare to all Libyans, the system is unable to meet its mandate. In 2022, Libya spent just 4.7% of GDP on health

services, a rate far below the US (17% in 2022) average but comparable to neighboring Egypt (4.7% in 2022) and that of the MENA region (4.9% in 2022). While wealthy Libyans may purchase treatment at private clinics both at home and abroad, poorer Libyans must seek alternative support, such as from programs run by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations. Most public hospitals have modern equipment, though poor maintenance and lack of funds for repairs have resulted in large-scale equipment breakdowns. Further, most facilities suffer shortages of basic supplies of vaccines, antibiotics, and insulin.

### Health Challenges

Rates of communicable, infectious, and parasitic diseases decreased significantly in previous decades due to substantial healthcare investments and improved access to sanitation systems. Today, the most common causes of death are chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases and injuries. In 2021, the most common causes of death were heart disease, COVID-19, cerebrovascular disease, and traffic-related injuries (see *Time and Space*). Though nutritional deficiencies remain a problem among some groups, roughly 37% of Libyan adults were considered obese in 2022, lower than the US rate of 42%. Despite governmental anti-smoking programs, almost 47% of Libyan men smoke daily.

### HIV/AIDS in Libya

For decades, the Libyan government refused to openly discuss HIV/AIDS prevention or treatment. Following the accidental infection of over 400 children in a Benghazi hospital in the late 1990s due to lax medical standards, the government convicted 5 Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor of intentional conspiracy. As of 2022, an estimated 13,500 Libyans (less than 1% of the population) are HIV-positive, a rate on par with that of neighboring Tunisia and Egypt. In Tripoli, over 50% of injecting drug users are HIV-positive.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, Libya's regional residents subsisted as small farmers along the coast or in desert oases, as nomadic herders, or as traders on trans-Saharan trade routes. Between the 16th-19th centuries, the elite classes thrived on the slave trade and piracy (see *History and Myth*). By contrast, most residents remained subsistence farmers, herders, or small traders.

Under Italian colonial rule from 1911-43, few Libyans reaped the rewards of heavy investment in coastal infrastructure and farm development (see *History and Myth*). After Libya supported the Allied cause in World War II, the country received much of its income from foreign aid and British-American investment in military bases, an arrangement that continued even after Libya achieved its independence in 1951. As one of the world's poorest countries during the 1950s, Libya mainly exported scrap metal from the war, esparto grass (indigenous to North Africa), and castor oil.



In 1959, the American oil company Esso (subsequently Exxon) made the first commercially viable oil strike in Libya, leading to the development of a prosperous oil industry in the 1960s. The Libyan government distributed much of its oil wealth to residents via subsidies, infrastructure investment, and educational programs. Nevertheless, Libya developed a split economy: while the highly lucrative oil industry employed foreign nationals and a few Libyans with technical expertise, most Libyans remained small-scale traders or farmers.

After Qadhafi's 1969 seizure of power (see *History and Myth*), Libya's economy continued to expand as the new government secured profitable deals with international oil companies (IOCs).

In the 1970s, the state took control of the economy and nationalized most private enterprises. Of note, the government was unable to nationalize the oil industry fully due to its dependence on the expertise and superior technology of IOCs. Libya invested its oil revenues in a growing industrial sector, agriculture, and a welfare state that heavily subsidized utilities,



healthcare, and education, becoming one of the region's wealthiest countries.

In the 1980s, a decrease in oil prices combined with a US trade embargo resulted in steady economic decline that halted some large

development projects and industrial investments. In 1992, the United Nations (UN) joined the US in imposing sanctions on Libya for its involvement in terrorism (see *History and Myth*), resulting in immense economic hardship. As food and consumer goods became scarce, quality of life declined, resulting in widespread discontent and emigration.

While maintaining economic control, the Libyan government introduced some limited reforms and privatizations beginning in 1999. In the early 2000s, the UN lifted sanctions as Libya took bids for new oil concessions. High oil prices and increased foreign direct investment (FDI) between 2002-08 allowed the economy to grow rapidly. Seeking normalized trade relations and economic stability, Libya applied to join the World Trade Organization in 2004, although as of 2025, it still holds observer status. In 2006, Libya declared free trade zones in Misrata and Zuwara to further boost FDI, as the US lifted its embargo. By 2008, Libya's average per capita income peaked above \$14,000.

The global financial crisis of 2008-09 caused Libya's economy to contract by just over 2% before it returned to 4% growth in 2010. When political and civil conflict erupted in 2011 (see *History and Myth*), the ensuing violence and instability resulted

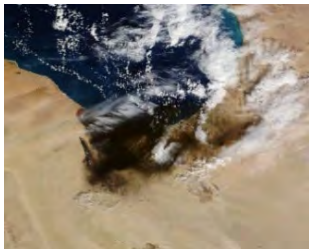


in severe fluctuations in oil production and economic activity. Libya's economy contracted by a devastating 62% in 2011, although relative stability the next year enabled a remarkable recovery of 104% growth in 2012. Nevertheless, the economy contracted every year between 2013-2016, with oil production remaining well below pre-crisis levels. However, GDP grew 64% and 8% in 2017 and 2018, respectively. In 2019 and 2020, GDP declined again due to the COVID-19 pandemic but rebounded in by 153% in 2021, and grew by 10% in 2023.

Libya's economic outlook largely hinges on its political situation (see *Political and Social Relations*), global oil prices, and oil production levels. While Libya's oil production rate had improved to over 1.25 million barrels per day (b/d) in 2023, it remains below its 2012 production rate of around 1.3 million b/d. Libya is further challenged by a high unemployment rate of about 19% and youth unemployment around 50%, an inefficient public sector, unstable inflation, ineffective taxation, and low FDI. The latter is likely in part due to Libya's difficult business environment, rated one of the world's worst.

### Services

Accounting for about 25% of GDP and 68% of employment, the services sector is the second-largest segment of Libya's economy. Significant services sub-sectors include public administration, transportation and storage, wholesale and retail trade, financial services, telecommunications, and tourism.



**Tourism:** Despite some significant investments in the tourism industry during the first decade of the 21st century, Libya again offers Americans tourist visas, but the US Embassy in Tripoli has suspended operations due to Libya's ongoing conflict. While Libya still receives a few thousand tourists primarily from North Africa and the Middle East, tourism accounts for approximately 3% of GDP and employs about 49,200 people. Nevertheless, Libya's tourism industry has enormous potential with 1,100 mi of Mediterranean coastline and several world heritage sites that

include Roman, Greek, and Berber ruins in Sabratha, Leptis Magna, Cyrene, Apollonia, and Ghadames.

## Industry

The industrial sector accounts for about 77% of GDP and just 23% of the labor force. The extraction and production of oil and gas (commonly called “hydrocarbons”) dominates the sector.

**Oil and Gas:** Libya currently has some 48.4 million barrels of proven crude oil – the world’s ninth-largest oil reserves and more than any other African country. While oil production fell below 300,000 b/d in mid-2016, it had recovered to over 1.25 million b/d by 2023. Libyan oil is in constant demand due to its high quality, low sulfuric content, and Libya’s proximity to European markets, which imported about 78% of Libya’s oil and condensates in 2023.

While Libya has Africa’s fifth-largest proven supply of natural gas, its gas industry is smaller and less efficient than the oil sector. For years, Libya did not collect the gas, instead venting, flaring, or otherwise using it as a byproduct of the oil extraction process. While Libya consumes about 1/2 of its natural gas production today, it exports the rest through the 370 mi Greenstream pipeline connecting Libyan gas fields to Sicily, Italy. Libya’s hydrocarbons production – including auxiliary transport, refining, export, and other services – accounts for over 90% of Libya’s export revenue.

**Manufacturing:** Libya primarily manufactures hydrocarbon and petrochemical products such as fertilizer, oil drums, pipes, and urea, a chemical used in fertilizers. Other manufactured



products include cement, iron, steel, aluminum, textiles, and food products. Libya’s manufacturing sector accounts for about 7% of GDP.

**Construction:** Although construction employs

some 45,000 Libyans, it also provides jobs for a much higher but unknown number of foreign nationals (see *Political and Social*

*Relations*). Construction's 2% share of GDP is far less than that in many other oil producing countries. Nevertheless, the construction sector is expected to expand again once Libya's present conflict ends and oil production resumes pre-conflict levels.

**Mining:** Libya has significant reserves of gypsum, natron, iron, salt, and sulphur. Due to the dominance of hydrocarbons and Libya's harsh geography, much of the country's potentially vast mineral resources – such as gold, silica, and other industrial minerals – remain uncharted or undeveloped.

### **Agriculture**

As Libya's smallest economic component, the agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry and accounts for about 2% of GDP and 9% of employment.

**Farming and Livestock:** Only about 1% of Libya's land area is dedicated to cultivation and around 8% herding. Although most farms are small, traditional family-owned enterprises, Libya has sought to modernize its agricultural sector through improved farming and irrigation techniques aided by large-scale projects like the Great Man-Made River (see *Technology and Material*). Major crops include wheat, barley, olives, citrus, grapes, peanuts, sorghum, and vegetables grown along the coast, with dates and figs grown primarily in desert oases. Poultry, sheep, goats, and cattle are the most common livestock varieties.

**Fishing:** In 2022, Libya's small fishing industry consisted of nearly 4,534 vessels, mostly small boats, that harvested around 32,000 tons of tuna, sardines, mullet, mackerel, and sponges. Worth about \$36 million, the fishing industry employs around 51,000 people. Of note, in 2005, Libya declared a Fisheries Protection Zone extending 62 nautical mi from its coast that requires a government-issued permit for all fishing activity.



**Forestry:** Only about 0.1% (217,000 ha) of Libya's land area is forested. Beginning in the 1960s, Libya's government planted trees in an attempt to protect farmland from the encroaching desert, although forestation efforts have stalled in recent years.

### Currency

Libya's currency is the **dinar** (د.ل or LD), issued in 5 banknote values (1, 5, 10, 20, 50) and 2 coin values (1/4 and 1/2). A dinar subdivides into 1,000 **dirham** (cents), issued in 2 coin values (10, 100). With fluctuations in exchange rates, \$1 has been worth between LD1.39 and LD4.83 in recent years. Some businesses accept credit cards, although smaller vendors generally accept only cash in small denominations.



### Foreign Trade

Libya's exports, which totaled \$32.38 billion in 2023, primarily consisted of crude petroleum, natural

gas, refined petroleum, gold, and scrap iron sold to Italy (23%), Germany (15%), Spain (9%), and France (7%). In the same year, Libya imported \$25.41 billion of refined petroleum, broadcasting equipment, tobacco, and garments from China (17%), Turkey (15%), Italy 8%), and the UAE (8%).

Of note, Libya has been a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) since 1962. OPEC is an inter-governmental organization that coordinates petroleum production levels among its 12 members in order to influence world oil prices.

### Foreign Aid

For years after the discovery of oil, Libya was an aid donor. In response to the 2011 conflicts, the US provided \$120 million in aid to Libya, while the European Union (EU) contributed €150 million. In 2022 and 2023, Libya received \$264.93 and \$339.28 million, respectively, in official development assistance (ODA) and official aid. In 2023, the top donors were the EU, the US, Italy, and Germany. In 2023, the US provided \$60.42 million in foreign assistance with a majority of the funds directed to governance, conflict, peace, and security initiatives.

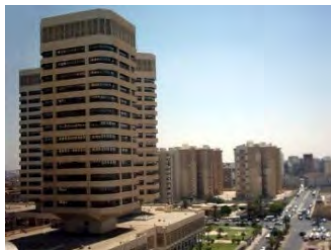
## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Although Libya has some of Africa's most developed infrastructure, years of mismanagement and ongoing conflicts have caused the deterioration of its telecommunications and transport networks. Similarly, Libyans have suffered from a recent setback in the protection of free speech and media.

### Transportation

Since Libya has one of Africa's highest rates of vehicle ownership, private auto is a primary mode of transportation. Libyans also travel by minibus, bus, taxi, or foot. Large coaches offer inter-city connections, and 4-wheel drive vehicles and camels are common on the unpaved roads and desert routes of Libya's rural areas.



While Libya has a relatively well-developed transport system, recent conflicts (see *History and Myth*) have damaged infrastructure, delayed

construction and repairs, and caused frequent delays on public transit. Infrastructure repairs and new construction are expected to be postponed until Libya's security situation improves (see *Political and Social Relations*).

**Roadways:** In 2021, Libya had about 21,126 mi of roadways, 46% paved. While most major highways and primary roads in urban areas are paved, many rural and secondary roads are not. A 2-lane 1,100 mi coastal highway connects Libya's largest cities to the Egyptian and Tunisian borders. Highways also connect Tripoli and Benghazi to inland cities. Of note, sections of some roads damaged during recent conflicts remain in a state of disrepair.

**Railways:** Libya has lacked a railway system since the Italian-built colonial railway halted service in the 1960s. While Libya has

planned to develop a new railway network since the 1990s, a lack of funds and other issues have caused constant delays. Libya contracted Chinese and Russian firms to build over 2,000 mi of railways along the coast and inland to Sabha, yet by 2010, just 9 mi of track between Benghazi and Sirte had been laid. Since 2011, conflict has disrupted further railway construction.

**Ports and Waterways:** Tripoli, Tobruk, Brega, R'as Lanuf, and Zawia are Libya's primary Mediterranean seaports. Other ports in Zuwara and Misrata function as free trade zones (see *Economics and Resources*).

Since Libya has no rivers, in 1984 the government began construction of the Great Man-Made River (GMR) to transport water from aquifers in southern Libya to the coast for drinking and irrigation (see *Economics and Resources*). As one of the world's largest civil engineering projects, the GMR supplied 70% of Libyans with water when NATO's 2011 bombings (see *History and Myth*) halted construction. The pipeline remains incomplete.



**Airways:** Libya has 146 airports, 68 with paved runways. Since the largest, Tripoli International Airport, was severely damaged by war in 2014, Mitiga International Airport now services flights to and from Tripoli. In 2023, Libyan airports served around 1.5 passengers, far fewer than the 4.97 and 26.2 million served in Tunisia and Egypt. Although Libyan Airlines is the national flag carrier, Afriqiyah Airways and Buraq Air are Libyan carriers that also offer services to international destinations.

## Energy

While Libya has the world's ninth- and 21st-largest reserves of oil and natural gas, in recent years production has been erratic. In 2023, Libya ranked 18th in the world for oil production and 39th for natural gas. Libya generates about 99% of its energy needs from hydrocarbons (see *Economics and Resources*), although it has begun to invest in renewable energy sources. In late 2016, Libya announced a deal with Greek companies to develop solar fields in eastern Libya near Al Jaghbub.

## Media

Libyans' freedom of speech and press improved following Qadhafi's ouster (see *History and Myth*) before deteriorating amidst recent conflict and security issues. Journalists in Libya are regularly threatened, censored, detained, and killed, often with impunity. Due to ongoing threats, some journalists report facing pressures to self-censor or suspend their publications entirely.

**Print Media:** The Libyan press includes both local and national periodicals published primarily in Arabic and English. *Libya al Jadida* is a popular daily printed in Tripoli, while *Al Kalima* is a popular Benghazi daily. The *Tripoli Post* is a national weekly English-language publication, and the *Libya Herald* is a popular online daily English-language news source.

**Radio and TV:** Libya has several public and private radio and TV broadcasters. Libyans have access to satellite TV services that provide international content in Arabic, English, and other languages.

## Telecommunications

While Libya has an extensive telecommunications network that is one of Africa's most advanced, recent conflict has caused intermittent service interruptions. In 2022, Libya had 17 landline and 205 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people.

**Internet:** The ratio of Libyans using the Internet has increased from 14% in 2010 to 89% in 2023, yet connections are prohibitively expensive and slow. Libya's average mobile and fixed broadband rank low on the global index due to speed and quality. Despite low-quality service, mobile internet access is common but primarily limited to urban areas. Conflict impacts Internet availability, as various actors have attacked and imprisoned bloggers and blocked or interrupted website access, prompting some Libyans to self-censor their online postings.





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