

World Watch Research

Libya:

Background Information

September 2024



Open Doors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Libya: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
6,964,000	35,500	0.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Before becoming independent in 1951, Libya had been ruled by the Romans, the pre-Ottoman Islamic dynasties, the Ottomans and the Italians. In 1969, a young army officer named Muammar Gaddafi successfully staged a coup and became Libya's strongman till he was toppled in the revolution of 2011. Since then, attempts to democratically form a central government have failed and the country has become divided among several groups with high levels of lawlessness - see below: *Political and legal landscape*.

Gaddafi's regime was overthrown in 2011 after popular protests developed into armed opposition supported by NATO. The civil war caused the death of at least 30,000 Libyans ([The Guardian, 26 October 2011](#)). On 7 July 2012, Libyans voted in their first parliamentary elections since the end of Gaddafi's rule. The newly-elected General National Congress (GNC), consisting of both secular and Islamist parties and independents, was given the task of drafting a new Libyan constitution to be approved in a general referendum. However, the GNC did not manage to maintain order and radical Islamist groups increasingly grew in influence. In response, Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the so-called 'Libyan National Army' (LNA), launched "Operation Dignity", targeting the Islamists, who subsequently united under the name 'Libya Dawn'.

Haftar accused the GNC of supporting the Islamists and insisted on new elections. Losing popular support, the GNC gave in and new elections were held in June 2014. The new parliament, mainly consisting of anti-Islamist parties, became known as the House of Representatives (HoR), led by its speaker Aguila Saleh Issa ([Geopolitical Monitor, 22 July 2020](#)). However, in August 2014 Libya Dawn captured Tripoli, the capital located in the west of the country, forcing the HoR to relocate to the eastern city of Tobruk. Subsequently, the HoR appointed Haftar as commander of the army in March 2015. Meanwhile in Tripoli, the GNC (supported by Libya Dawn) was restored and set up as a rival parliament, dividing the country between east and west.

In an attempt to reunite the country, the envoy of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), following an accord in December 2015, proposed a new government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), with a 'Presidential Council' being appointed to fulfil the role of Head of State. Recognized internationally as the sole legitimate executive authority in Libya, the GNA managed step by step to take over Tripoli and win the support of most of the groups belonging to Libya Dawn, with the GNC becoming an advisory body called the High Council of State (HCS) ([BIC, 18 July 2018](#)). After initially supporting the GNA, the HoR later withdrew its support, but in May 2018 the major parties agreed on a roadmap that should have led to national elections. However, in April 2019, while preparations for holding elections were underway, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar ordered his Libyan National Army to march on Tripoli. In response, the GNA, joined by Libya Dawn, said they would defend the city at all costs.

In the meantime, on the geopolitical level, the battle for Libya had become a showdown between two opposing blocs which divide the Sunni Middle East: i) The Turkey-Qatar axis, which supports political Islam (Islamism) and Libya Dawn; ii) The United Arab Emirates-Saudi-Arabia-Egypt axis, which views political Islamists as an existential threat to their rule and hence supports Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Russia also supports the latter in a bid to strengthen its influence in the region.

In the course of 2019, Haftar's LNA forces, supported by Russian Wagner mercenaries, managed to capture some of the suburbs of Tripoli. However, Turkey significantly increased its military support for the GNA at the end of 2019, after signing an important economic agreement allowing Turkey to drill for gas in Libyan waters ([Geopolitical Monitor, 22 July 2020](#)). The Turkish assistance included the deployment of at least 2,000 - 4,000 Syrian fighters ([The Guardian, 15 January 2020](#)) and naval and drone support. This enabled the GNA and Libya Dawn to force the LNA to retreat and move the battlefield to Sirte; the city in the middle of the country that controls access to Africa's biggest oil reserves ([The Guardian, 2 August 2020](#)). An official ceasefire was reached on 23 October 2020, followed by promises to hold presidential and parliamentary elections within 18 months ([The](#)

[Guardian, 23 October 2020](#), [Al-Monitor, 12 November 2020](#)). The oil embargo was lifted by Haftar and oil production restarted. In addition, a bilateral commission with representatives from both sides started talks to secure stability.

However, it became clear that it would be almost impossible to untangle the web of tribal, political and ideological allegiances that permeates both sides in order to unite the country. In other words, those currently in power are mainly concerned with securing their own interests, rather than finding a political solution for the nation as a whole ([Atlantic Council, 25 February 2021](#)). Following a conference in Berlin in January 2020, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) was created, consisting of 75 men and women who "represent the full social and political spectrum of Libyan society" ([UNSMIL, 2021](#)). In March 2021, the LPDF elected Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah as the prime-minister of the new Government of National Unity (GNU) ([Libya Herald, 5 February 2021](#)). This time, the HoR endorsed the GNU, something it had refused to do with the GNA ([Atlantic Council, 2 April 2021](#)). Dbeibah's main objective was to organize presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2021. However, the elections were postponed indefinitely after major disagreements meant that not even a list of candidates could be published ([The Guardian, 21 December 2021](#)).

Following the failed elections, the HoR withdraw support from Dbeibah and installed former GNA interior minister Fathi Bashaga as a rival prime minister instead, as head of the "Government of National Stability" ([SIPRI, 29 April 2022](#)). Bashaga's election was backed by Field Marshall Haftar, despite having been on opposite sides during Haftar's attempt to conquer Tripoli. However, Dbeibah vowed to only hand over power after elections, and attempts to take over government institutions have been foiled by forces loyal to Dbeibah ([Reuters, 18 May 2022](#), [Al-Jazeera, 25 July 2022](#)). In a surprising move in July 2022, Dbeibah made his own deal with Haftar, replacing the head of the National Oil Company with someone loyal to Haftar, in an apparent bid to secure his own position ([Al-Jazeera, 18 July 2022](#)). However, this did not prevent Bashaga from attempting to storm Tripoli in August 2022 with allied forces; an attempt that was quickly defeated and resulted in the neutralization of several key allies of Bashaga inside Tripoli ([Carnegie Endowment, 3 October 2022](#)). Bashaga's failure to swiftly seize power undermined his position, and in May 2023 the HoR replaced him with Osama Hammad, his Finance minister. His ousting was probably forced by Saddam Haftar, the powerful son of Khalifa Haftar, possibly to gain leverage in ongoing negotiations with the Dbeibah-camp ([New Arab, 29 May 2023](#)). In March 2024, the western based presidents of the Presidential Council and the High Council of State, and the eastern based speaker of the HOR proposed to create a new unified government ([CNN, 11 March 2024](#)). However, the absence of both prime minister Dbeibah and Khalifa Haftar shows that the proposal is not supported by key actors.

In the second half of 2023, there were two major incidents: In August 2023, clashes between two local militias took the life of at least 45 persons in Tripoli, making it the deadliest incident of 2023 and signaling that any apparent calm remains superficial ([AP News, 16 August 2023](#)). Another incident took place in February 2024, in which at least 10 persons were killed in Tripoli ([Libya Security Monitor, 18 February 2024](#)). In September 2023, heavy rainfall caused the collapse of two dams, with the water sweeping away whole neighborhoods in the coastal city of Derna. At least 14,000 residents died or were still missing months after the flood ([BBC News, 10 October 2023](#)).

Libya's citizens on both sides of the divide have shown signs of becoming tired of their own leadership. At the beginning of July 2022, protesters stormed the HoR parliament building in Tobruk, while other

protesters took to the street in Tripoli ([Al-Jazeera, 1 July 2022](#)). Local protests have taken place in August 2023 against normalization with Israel, in September 2023 following the Derna flooding and in January 2024 in southern Libya with oil field workers demanding a higher share of the oil wealth ([The Guardian, 28 August 2024](#), [France24, 18 September 2024](#), [Africa News, 5 January 2024](#)).

Libya's political future remains uncertain. If elections are to be held, they will most probably not be free and fair. If a political solution is found in the end, it will most likely consist of a power-and-wealth sharing agreement between the parties, in which the current kleptocracy can continue its practices. Those practices include widescale human trafficking, in which actors in both the Eastern and Western parts of Libya charge high fees for arranging for migrants to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, after which they (try to) leverage substantial sums from the EU parliament and individual European countries to 'stop' the migration flows ([Mada Masr, 8 June 2023](#)).

Christians in Libya

Before Gaddafi fell from power in 2011, many Coptic Christians from Egypt lived and worked in the country. However, since the start of the civil war most of them returned to their home countries. In particular the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians in February 2015, followed by the murder of 30 Ethiopian Christians in April 2015, by Islamic State (IS) militants proved to be a wake-up call. The Coptic Orthodox Church has since canonized the 21 Coptic victims, declared 15 February their official Feast Day and erected a [memorial and museum](#) in their memory (Asia News, 17 February 2020). Nevertheless, economic necessity forces thousands of Egyptian Copts to keep working in Libya. Their Christian identity, physically visible in the tattooed crosses on their wrist, often leads to discrimination, abuse or worse (Tadros, M., [Heritage practices as development's blind spot: A case study of Coptic tattooing in Libya and Egypt](#), 2021, pp. 2, 7, 12, 13).

In addition, despite the risks, a constant flow of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom are also Christian, keeps arriving in Libya. Their hope is to reach Europe: Some manage to buy a place on one of the overcrowded boats, but many others get stuck and have to build a life inside Libya, where they become part of a very vulnerable community. Amnesty International (AI) wrote in their 2015 report that "religious minorities, in particular Christian migrants and refugees, are at highest risk of abuses, including abductions, torture and other ill-treatment and unlawful killings, from armed groups that seek to enforce their own interpretation of Islamic law and have been responsible for serious human rights abuses. They also face widespread discrimination and persecution from their employers, criminal groups and in immigration detention centers." (AI, ['Libya is full of cruelty'](#) Stories of abduction, sexual violence and abuse from migrants and refugees, 2015, p.6). In an earlier report, it was noted that Christian women, who made up 70% of the interviewees, "adapt Muslim customs and practice their faith in private", because "Women ... who fail to adopt an appropriate dress code face increased risk of harassment and kidnapping for sexual abuse" ([4M, Living on the Edge, 2017, p. 4](#)).

Although later reports by Amnesty International ([AI, 24 September 2020](#)) and the Mixed Migrant Centre ([MMC, 2 December 2019](#)) do not specifically mention Christians as being particularly at risk, the US State Department in its IRFR 2023 Libya report writes: "Armed groups provided security and administered some detention centers for migrants and refugees in the country, where, according to multiple international human rights organizations, Christians said they faced a higher risk of physical assault, including sexual assault and rape, than other migrants and refugees."

Similarly, Doctors without Borders mentions that Libyan staff of the UN refugee agency allegedly prioritized Arab asylum seekers over Sub-Saharan Africans and Muslims over Christians. In addition, based on field experience, MSF notes that "Christians from Ethiopia, Eritrea, or more generally from Sub-Saharan Africa ... are at heightened risk of religious persecution." ([MSF, Out of Libya, June 2022](#))

Additionally, in its February 2020 report, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime writes: "Christian migrants have faced greater levels of risk in North Africa, and particularly in Libya. ... Migrants travelling along routes to Libya and Algeria have also reported that Muslim migrants receive better treatment from Muslim smugglers and have a better chance of securing employment in these Muslim countries." The latter claims are in accordance with the testimonies provided by local sources on the ground ([Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime](#), 'The Intersection of Irregular Migration and Trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel: Understanding the Patterns of Vulnerability', February 2020, p.41).

Political and legal landscape

With the country and the judicial system in disarray, [Middle East Concern's Libya profile](#) states (accessed 9 July 2024):

- "Libya's interim Constitution of 2011 establishes Islam as state religion and Islamic law as the main source of legislation. The constitution guarantees the freedom for non-Muslims to practice their religious rituals. In 2017 a new constitution was drafted. Contrary to the interim constitution, this document does not recognize other sources of legislation besides Islamic Shari'a. The draft also fails to guarantee freedom of religion and belief. A referendum on adoption of this draft constitution was planned for the first half of 2019, then delayed. In practice, all Libyans are assumed to be Muslim, with no scope for changing religion. Personal status matters are determined according to Islamic law. The Penal Code prescribes harsh punishments for perceived attacks or insults against religion."

Clearly this leaves little space for the small Christian community.

[Human Rights Watch 2024 Libya country chapter](#) reports:

- "Human rights violations and abuses by armed groups and militias remain pervasive, as political elites and myriad quasi-authorities compete for legitimacy and control of territory. Authorities in both east and west Libya are cracking down on the activities of civic groups, harassing and sometimes detaining and prosecuting local staff members of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and imposing obstacles for non-Libyans to obtain entry visas. ... Between January and November 25, Libyan forces intercepted or rescued 15,057 migrants and asylum seekers attempting to cross the Mediterranean and returned them to Libya. ... They faced arbitrary and indefinite detention in inhumane conditions in facilities run by the GNU's Interior Ministry and were held with smugglers and traffickers, where they were subjected to forced labor, torture, ill-treatment, extortion, and sexual assault. "

Christians among the migrants are obviously in danger too.

The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) writes in its 2024 report on Libya:

- "Libya is at a politically critical juncture, and the next steps in its political roadmap will have a number of security and economic ramifications. We expect presidential and parliamentary elections to be delayed until 2025, given the wide divisions between the different ruling factions. The eventual polls will remove some political uncertainty, but factional disagreements and a weak security environment will persist to some degree throughout 2024-28, even after a unity government is in place. We expect Libya's oil output to rise in 2024-28, but we expect some disruption to oil production, owing to ongoing political disagreements. State finances and export earnings will benefit from rising output on average and high (albeit falling) global oil prices."

According to the [Fragile States Index 2024 Libya](#):

- Libya ranks 16th (of 179 countries) with a score of 96.5 points, a decrease of one place compared to FSI 2023 (score: 96.1). FSI political indicators show that Libya continues to struggle with state legitimacy and external intervention. A political solution for ending the civil war seems far away, not least because international actors continue to finance their political allies on both sides of the conflict. Turkey and Qatar largely support Islamist groups linked with the Libya Dawn (see above: *Recent History*), while the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Egypt actively support Haftar's LNA.

Gender perspective

The legal landscape facing women and girls is additionally restrictive. Whilst Libya ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1989, it maintained a reservation to Article 16 which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage, and their rights within a marriage, citing its incompatibility with Sharia law ([UNFPA, 2018](#)).

While the 1984 Family Law stipulates that both men and women must be 20 before getting married, it provides that judges can grant permission for marriage at an earlier age. Reliable statistics on the rate of early marriages in Libya are lacking. A recent government 'Marriage fund' is thought to have pushed young girls from poor families into marriages to access much-needed money ([Al-Monitor, January 2022](#)).

A husband has the right to divorce his wife unilaterally, but must do so through the court. Women can only file for divorce under set criteria, and face social stigma should they choose to do so. Following a divorce the mother will ordinarily be granted custody of children until girls are married and boys reach puberty. The father retains guardianship rights and is recognized as the figure with chief parental authority and decision-making power over the child. Neither marital rape nor domestic violence is criminalized under Libyan law (HRW 2023 country chapter Libya). [Article 424](#) of the Penal Code exonerates a rapist if he marries his victim and does not divorce her within three years. If discovered, both male and female converts face the threat of physical violence and death.

Religious landscape

Libya: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	35,500	0.5
Muslim	6,896,000	99.0
Hindu	6,400	0.1
Buddhist	17,400	0.2
Ethnic religionist	550	0.0
Jewish	130	0.0
Bahai	710	0.0
Atheist	230	0.0
Agnostic	3,100	0.0
Other	4,600	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD 2024 estimates, 99% of Libyans are Muslim, virtually all adhering to Sunni Islam. The Amazigh (Berber) ethnic minority include some Ibadi Muslims and there are small Christian communities among Sub-Saharan African and Egyptian migrants. Almost all non-Muslims are foreigners; the number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background remains very low.

The dominance of Islam is given explicit constitutional recognition (Art. 5, Constitution of 1951) while the ancient roots of Christianity in Libya have been almost completely erased. Both the transitional [Constitutional Declaration \(2011\)](#) as well as the [2017 Draft Constitution](#) make clear that nothing has changed in this regard: Both declare that Islam is to be the country's religion and Sharia law the main source of legislation. Although there is the clause stating: "The State shall guarantee for non-Muslims the freedom to practice their religious rituals", theory and practice are two different things. The Freedom of Religion and Belief of converts from Islam to Christianity is not protected under the Constitution. A court ruling sentencing a Libyan Christian to death in September 2022 underlines the complete lack of legal protection for converts from Islam to Christianity ([MEC, 12 September 2022](#)). During 2023, this was further underlined by the arrest and forced conversion of at least six Libyan Christians in March 2023 ([The Guardian, 3 May 2023](#))

Sharia law is applied throughout the country. The military conflict in Libya has helped to increase the influence of radical Islamic thought. Islamic militant groups have gained territory in the anarchy created by the civil war and several areas, both in the east and west of the country, are now home to radical Muslims, especially those linked to Madkhali Salafism ([International Crisis Group - ICG, 25 April](#)

2019). In other areas, local tribal groups enforce their own versions of Sharia law. Thus, levels of Islamic radicalism differ from region to region, with some groups being stricter and/or more violent than others. Yet, the nation-wide campaign against Christmas celebrations at the end of 2021 is telling in this regard ([MEC, 12 January 2022](#)).

Despite this growth in radicalism, a 2019 report [commissioned by the BBC](#) found that the number of people identifying as non-religious (probably to be understood as "non-practicing") in Libya had grown from 12% in 2013 to 27% in 2018/19 (BBC News, 24 June 2019). However, the report [has been criticized](#) for using confusing terminology in the questions, resulting in misleading outcomes (Deutschlandfunk, 23 July 2019).

Economic landscape

According to the [UNDP HDR Libya](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and the [World Factbook Libya](#) (accessed 9 July 2024):

- **Real GDP per capita:** 19,800 USD (2022 est.), up from 15,600 USD in 2020 (constant 2017 PPP).
- **Unemployment rate:** 19.3% (2022 est.), with youth unemployment being more than twice as high at 50.5% (2021 est.).
- **Poverty:** About a third of the population are affected by poverty.

According to [World Bank's Libya Country Overview \(October 2023\)](#):

- **Economy:** "The Libyan economy, already battered by conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, will be further impacted by the catastrophic floods in the East. The country's fragility is having far-reaching economic and social impacts. GDP per capita declined by 50 percent between 2011 and 2020, while it could have increased by 68 percent if the economy had followed its pre-conflict trend. This suggests Libya's income per capita could have been 118 percent higher without the conflict."
- **Economic outlook:** "Despite the numerous challenges facing the country, the Libyan economy could recover by leveraging Libya's substantial financial resources, building on four critical pillars. The first is reaching a sustainable political agreement on the future of Libya. The second is the preparation of a shared vision of economic and social development that is evidence based and translates into a national budget to maintain critical infrastructure and build human capital. The third is the development of an accountable, transparent and decentralized public financial management system that ensures adequate sharing of oil wealth and inter-governmental fiscal transfers, as well as effective budget planning, execution, and reporting. The fourth is a comprehensive social policy reform to create a clear distinction between social transfers to those in need and public wages."

During the past decade, the civil war has caused widespread destruction and disruption. While the relatively low population level in relation to the largest oil reserves on the African continent would normally create a wealthy country, it will take many years to rebuild the country's economy. FSI economic indicators ([FSI 2024 Libya](#)) show that the economy is improving, although the indicator remains high. Similarly, the indicator Flight and brain drain shows improvement. However, Economic Inequality deteriorated significantly. Hence, the economy remains under pressure, with high levels of external intervention threatening the country. Libya's economy is heavily reliant on oil exports, but

interrupting oil supply lines has been used on numerous occasions to force concessions from opposing parties, resulting in the loss of billions of dollars.

[Libya's GDP](#) decreased from 93 billion USD in 2012 to 50.5 billion in 2023 (World Bank data, accessed 9 July 2024). In 2018, the GDP level had been at the 77 billion mark. Part of the decrease is the result of oil blockades by the warring parties, including a 9-month oil blockade by the LNA in 2020, which saw GDP decrease to an all-time low of 25 billion ([World Bank Press Release, 22 April 2021](#)). In addition, displacement, high inflation and high unemployment had previously caused the Libyans to lose half of their purchasing power, driving many into poverty (BTI Libya Report 2024, p.30). Following a ceasefire, oil production was restarted in October 2020, but disrupted again in the first six months of 2022, following the election of the eastern rival GNS government. Threats of oil blockades continued in 2023 and 2024, "while especially the oil and gas sector suffers from poor governance" ([Reuters, 24 June 2023](#); [GIS, 17 January 2024](#)). Hence, immense (political) challenges remain and keep threatening the oil exports.

Being economically active as a Christian remains very difficult in Libya. Visible and known Christians will be discriminated against when trying to find employment; Sub-Saharan Christians are known to use Muslim names to avoid discrimination. Most Christians from a Coptic background have left the country after several targeted attacks on Copts and other Christians. It is usual that Coptic Christians, who have to remain out of economic necessity, keep their faith hidden. In addition, tribal and jihadist groups regularly abduct Sub-Saharan Africans to extort them for ransom; known Christians are especially targeted by these groups since they can be abused without having to risk any backlash (which would be likely to occur if they were harassing a fellow Muslim).

Gender perspective

Against this precarious economic background, women are typically the most vulnerable, due to both low education and employment rates, and patrilineal inheritance practices. Education has been impacted by the ongoing fighting for both boys and girls, particularly in active conflict regions ([ACTED, 10 June 2021](#)), and also by COVID-19 ([UNICEF, 25 January 2023](#)). Girls have been prevented from attending school by an increase in gender-based violence and sexual assaults during the conflict, and by early marriage. According to the World Bank, 34.4% of women are in the [labor force](#), compared to 60.4% of men (World Bank data, accessed 21 June 2023).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Libya](#), accessed 9 July 2024:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Libyan population (97%) are from Arab or Berber decent. Other ethnicities include Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Italian, Turkish and Tunisian, among others
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with several Berber languages also being spoken. English and Italian are widely understood in major cities.
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 81,6% of the population lived in urban areas, with an annual urbanization rate of 1.45%.
- **Literacy rate:** 91% of the population can read and write; with a significant difference between men (96.7%) and women (85.6%) (2015)

- **Population/age:** Immigrants make up 12% of the total population (2019). The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up almost 49% of the population, making it another African country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** 77.7 years on average; women (80.0 years), men (75.5 years) (2024 est.).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Around 150,000, including 126,000 IDPs. Most refugees are from Sudan (6,000), Syria (12,000) and Eritrea (8,000).

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Libya](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Libya ranks #92 out 192 countries, improving from #104 in 2023. Despite the ongoing war, Libya remains one of the most developed countries on the African continent. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.746 on the Human Development Index (HDI).
- **Education:** On average, Libyans are expected to have 12.9 years of schooling. Before the civil war, social services were state-subsidized and education was compulsory and free under Gaddafi's rule; but this has ended.
- **Gender inequality:** with a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.975, women are slightly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Libya is one of the least populated countries on earth ([World Population Review](#), last accessed 4 July 2024). A large part of the country is covered by the uninhabitable Sahara Desert, which is why the majority of the population live in the fertile northern coastal region.

The ongoing civil war testifies to the deeply conservative and tribal Libyan culture where primary loyalty lies with one's family, clan and tribe. Libya is home to more than 30 different tribal groups. For example, the cities Tripoli, Misrata, Benghazi and Bayda have their own tribal militias, often linked to a specific political figure ([Reuters, 25 August 2011](#)). FSI social indicators ([FSI 2024 Libya](#)) show that stress on the social fabric is also coming from large numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees entering Libya.

Gender perspective

Within Libya's tribal and Islamic context, women typically have a lower position within Libyan family life, in accordance with Islamic tenets. There is an explicit restriction on a woman becoming head of the household or head of the family. In light of the pervading honor-shame culture, women and girls are expected to uphold sexual purity; should they be sexually assaulted, shame will fall on the whole family and some women risk being arrested for 'adultery' or becoming victims of so-called 'honor killings' ([Amnesty International, March 2021](#)). Women are careful not to leave the house without a veil.

Libya's very conservative society makes it almost impossible for nationals to convert from Islam to the Christian faith. In almost all cases, Christians from a Muslim background keep their faith hidden from their families out of fear of possible violent reactions. If discovered, converts face significant pressure from both their families and local community. Known female converts may be married to a strict Muslim or isolated within the home and denied means of communication. Women stand little chance

of escaping danger as there is no scope for them to live autonomously within Libyan society. Male converts face physical and mental abuse, as well as social ostracism.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Libya](#) (updated 23 February 2024):

- **Internet usage:** 88.4% penetration - survey date: January 2024
- **Social media usage:** 85.2% of the total population - survey date: January 2024
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 179.1% of the total population

According to [Napoleon Cat \(June 2024\)](#): 60% of Facebook users in Libya were male, compared to 40% female.

As [reported by GSMA Intelligence](#) in 2023, the gender gap in mobile internet usage in the MENA region averages at 15% (GSMA, 2023, “The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023”). This restricts women’s access to both information and community networks. However, [Georgetown research](#) indicates that there has been a major increase in recent years in women’s mobile phone usage in Libya, reporting that now 100% of women have access to them ([Georgetown, Women, Peace and Security Index, 2021/22](#), p.21). Mobile phones are [cheap](#) in Libya, making them widely accessible (Media Landscapes/Libya, accessed 21 June 2023).

According to [Freedom on the Net 2023 Libya](#):

- **Internet freedom:** Libya is ranked as "partly free". Gaddafi's fall from power in 2011 ended an era of suppression and initially people gained far more freedom to express themselves, for instance on social media. However, the situation has worsened in recent years and in the current state of anarchy, journalists and bloggers have to remain careful, since ruling groups threaten anyone posting online criticism. The report states: "The newly enforced Anti-Cybercrime Law [which the House of Representatives decided to bring into force in [September 2022](#) - Article19, 10 November 2022] includes harsh penalties for online speech and gives authorities power to block websites and criminalize the use of encryption tools. Internet users continue to face harassment, arbitrary detention, and, in some cases, physical violence relating to their online activity."
- "The ongoing conflict has left the country’s internet infrastructure in disarray. For example, about 25 percent of mobile towers have been damaged or stolen. Efforts to rebuild infrastructure have largely stalled due to the conflict; telecommunications services are regularly disrupted in the east in particular."

Christians in Libya have to be careful when using the Internet. Christians from a Muslim background have to be particularly cautious when accessing (online) Christian content in order not to be discovered by their family members; openly posting Christian content would bring very high risks, both from family members as well as from tribal and/or radical Islamic groups. Foreign Christians also cannot openly post Christian content on social media without risk. If they do, they could be targeted for harassment or even abduction by criminal groups.

Security situation

The current security situation in Libya is unstable. During the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, President Gaddafi was ousted without a clear idea of how the future should be shaped. Since then, Libya has ended up in a nightmarish scenario in which a patchwork of militant groups control different parts of the country and vie for supremacy. Currently, the country is more or less divided into an Eastern and Western bloc. On the geopolitical and ideological level, the country has become an international battlefield in which different military superpowers try to gain influence (i.e. Turkey-Qatar Islamist axis versus Emirati-Saudi-Egyptian dictatorship axis, with Russia playing a major role in favor of the latter). The internationally recognized GNU is now being rivalled by the eastern GNS. Many actors, both national and international, are primarily concerned about protecting their own interests, making the country vulnerable for renewed armed conflict. [See also above: *Recent History*].

A problem remains the presence of foreign fighters on both sides: The Russian Wagner mercenaries supporting the LNA, and the pro-Turkish Syrian auxiliaries and Turkish troops supporting the western Islamist groups. Russia and Turkey are in a deadlock, both stating that they cannot leave, as long as the other party has not withdrawn first ([RFI, 24 June 2021](#)). In reality, both foreign powers want to protect their economic interests and influence. In 2024, Turkey continued its support for allied (Islamist) groups ([Nova News, 9 February 2024](#)) and Russia withdrew some of its Wagner mercenaries to support its invasion in Ukraine, but has retained control of key positions in Libya's oil network ([Foreign Policy, 8 July 2022](#)). Even after the demise of Wagner's head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, its activities have continued in Libya under new Russian command ([Al-Jazeera, 25 February 2024](#)). Despite that all Libyan factions seems to dislike the foreign fighters, their presence might well help to keep the right balance and prevent further large-scale fighting ([Megatrends, 10 July 2024](#)).

The region controlled by the GNU is limited to the cities of Tripoli (capital) and Misrata with surrounding areas, making up approximately 15% of the country ([Libya Live Map, accessed 4 July 2024](#)). In order to keep control of these cities, the GNU has linked up with various militias which act as the de facto local authorities where they are situated. The LNA controls the majority of the country including the cities of Tobruk and Benghazi. Groups linked to both sides appear to have involvement in taking hostages, torture and other (war) crimes ([Amnesty International, Libya 2023](#)).

The overall state of anarchy, especially in the GNU-controlled area, is well suited for human traffickers to carry out their operations. Their victims are mostly migrants from Sub-Saharan countries and the Middle East who are determined to cross the Mediterranean Sea and reach Europe.

Gender perspective

Libya performed poorly on security in the Georgetown Gender Index ([GIWPS country profile Libya - 2023 data](#)); 43% of women reported feeling unsafe walking at night and 18.3% had experienced intimate partner violence within the reporting year. Within the context of COVID-19, domestic violence reportedly worsened ([UNPF, 13 August 2022](#)). Women navigating the migration route from Sub-Saharan Africa through Libya are vulnerable to sex trafficking and sexual abuse, particularly within the context of detention centers ([Trafficking in Persons Report, July 2022](#)). Several reports reveal that thousands of these migrants in Libya, including pregnant women, are held in "overcrowded and unsanitary" conditions and are likely to be expelled without screening or due process ([Barron's, 12 June 2023](#)). Men following the same migration pathways are also vulnerable to abuse in the form of

[forced slavery](#) and [sexual abuse](#) (Grow Thinktank, January 2021; Euronews, 2019). In general, men face higher risks of physical violence, abduction and militia recruitment, whilst women are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Christian origins

The most important part of ancient Roman Libya was Cyrenaica, named after the city of Cyrene. The Roman Emperor Trajan virtually depopulated the cities of Cyrenaica after extensive Jewish uprisings occurred (115-117 AD). He then repopulated the area with military colonies.

Cyrenaica is mentioned in the earliest Christian literature: One example is the reference in the Bible's New Testament to Simon of Cyrene, who was made to carry Jesus' cross directly before the crucifixion. Cyrenians are also one of the people groups mentioned in the Book of Acts. For Libyan Christians today, it is a great encouragement to know there is such a long history of Libyans following Christ. The first recorded bishop in Libya was Ammonas of Berenice (260 AD). Four bishops from this area attended the Council of Nicea (325 AD). At this council, Cyrenaica became a province of the Coptic Church of Alexandria in Egypt. Arius and Sabellius, two theologians remembered as heretics, were from Cyrenaica.

Christianity remained a matter mainly for Latin and Greek speakers in Cyrenaica; the Saharan Imazighen ('Berbers') were not interested. The decline of the Roman Empire, hastened by invading Vandals, saw the cities and the Roman political and social order fall into ruin. The Byzantine Empire returned to revive the region in the 6th century, but Cyrenaica's cities became like armed camps to ward off Imazighen raids. By the beginning of the 7th century, Byzantine control over the region was weak, Amazigh ('Berber') rebellions were becoming more frequent, and there was little to oppose the Arab invasion of 681-683 AD. In Cyrenaica, Coptic Christians who were treated as heretics by the Byzantine armies, welcomed the Arabs as liberators from Byzantine oppression. However, when the process of Islamization began, many of the Christians emigrated to the safety of Italy and Egypt. The Amazigh tribes gradually accepted Islam.

Tripolitania, the western part of Libya, was briefly in the hands of Normans from Sicily in the period 1146-1159. In the Middle Ages there was extensive trade between Tripolitania and Europe. From 1510-1551, Spain ruled over Tripoli. In 1911, Italy colonized Libya; about 150,000 Italians moved to Libya, forming 20% of the population. This meant a return of Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church. Some Protestant mission work was also carried out. From 1943, Britain ruled over Libya until the country became independent in 1951. Due to its rich oil reserves, many expatriates, including Christians from Europe, the USA and Africa came to work in Libya. Those Christians could worship freely.

In 1970, Muammar Gaddafi staged a coup and steered the country in a radical direction which forced many churches to be closed down. In 2011, civil war erupted and Gaddafi was killed. Since then, the political situation in Libya has been chaotic and dangerous.

Before the civil war began in 2011, there were an estimated 80,000 Roman Catholics, mostly Italian and Maltese Libyans. They were only allowed to use one church in Tripoli and one in Benghazi. Before 2011, about 60,000 Coptic Orthodox Egyptians worked in Libya, served by three churches, in Tripoli, Benghazi and Misrata. Beside this, thousands of Protestant expatriates, mainly from Sub-Saharan

Africa, held various forms of church meeting. However, due to the revolution, the security situation deteriorated badly. When the Islamic State group beheaded 21 Coptic Christians near Sirte in 2015, large numbers of Christians fled the country. The situation remains volatile, both for native Libyan and foreign Christians.

Church spectrum today

Libya: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	21,500	60.6
Catholic	10,000	28.2
Protestant	1,500	4.2
Independent	1,000	2.8
Unaffiliated	1,400	3.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	35,400	99.7
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	800	2.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	2,400	6.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Almost all expatriate Christians working in the country have left; the main Christian groups in Libya currently consist of Sub-Saharan migrants and some Egyptian Copts.

- The Egyptian Coptic Orthodox church had three church buildings, one in Tripoli, Benghazi and Misrata, but these are not functioning anymore at the present time.
- A few Sub-Saharan African groups are currently able to meet for worship, but they have to operate very carefully.
- The Roman Catholic church has two church buildings left in Libya - one in Tripoli in the West and one in Benghazi in the East, but only the Roman Catholic church in Tripoli is currently still functioning. According to the Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli, [Bishop George Bugeja](#), the church serves around 3,000 remaining Catholics in Libya, although their number is dwindling. All of the parishioners are foreigners - mostly Filipinos, Indians and Pakistanis. There are also Catholics from Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone (ACN Malta, January 2020).

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Libya>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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