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Libya: The LAAF is 'brutally crushing' freedom of expression and peaceful assembly

The Internal Security Agency (ISA), a collection of powerful armed groups operating in areas under the control of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), is arbitrarily detaining at least nine peaceful protesters and a journalist incommunicado after they participated in a demonstration in Sirte, Amnesty International said today.

On 19 March, around 30 people took part in the protest in Sirte, which called on the international community and local authorities to provide compensation for victims of the 2011 NATO airstrikes. Examination of three videos of the protest and eyewitness testimony indicate that the protest was peaceful. Within the next week, one journalist and at least 10 protesters were seized by armed men.

"The arbitrary detention of these peaceful protesters for demanding justice and reparation in connection to the 2011 armed conflict shows just how intolerant LAAF and affiliated armed groups are of any independent activism, even if not critical of their rule. The LAAF must immediately ensure the release of all those detained simply for exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and expression," said Diana Eltahawy, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

"The LAAF and its affiliated armed groups have tightened their grip over territory under their control. In the past few years, suspected opponents and critics have either been gunned down in the street, forcibly disappeared or are languishing in jail. Yet, ISA in eastern Libya continues to be on the government payroll, instead of being held to account."

On the night of the protest and throughout the following week, armed men affiliated with the [ISA](#) arrested 10 members of the Gadadfa tribe, who make up the majority of the population of Sirte, the hometown of Libya's former ruler Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi, for participating in the demonstration, before detaining them at an undisclosed location, according to eyewitnesses and relatives of detainees.

Sources told Amnesty International how ISA armed men seized men from homes and public places, in some cases covering their heads, beating them and taking them to unmarked cars. The ISA released one detainee a few days after the protest, citing health reasons.

Ali al-Refawi, a reporter who was covering the protest for Libyan [TV channel 218](#), is among those currently detained. He was arrested by armed men on 26 March and taken to an undisclosed location.

The ISA also summoned and questioned other protesters, including women, over their involvement in the protest. A member of the Gadadfa tribe said the ISA told him they had received orders from the LAAF to crack down on the protest.

This is the third wave of arrests against residents of Sirte since the LAAF takeover in 2020. In November 2021, the ISA [arrested](#) at least 13 men over their alleged participation in a protest in support of Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi's candidacy in the now indefinitely postponed presidential elections. They were released on 19 November. In January 2020, the LAAF arrested several protesters following demonstrations against LAAF commander Khalifa Heftar.

Sirte residents also voiced concerns to Amnesty International about reprisals from the ISA for speaking to international organizations. Others refused to speak, citing surveillance fears.

On 20 February 2022, an Amnesty International delegation visited Sirte. Mokhtar al-Ma'dani, the mayor of Sirte, flanked by several plainclothes ISA and other Libyan intelligence agents, told the organization's delegates shortly after their arrival that local authorities would not allow them to meet

with or speak to residents in private. For the entire duration of the delegation's visit, they were accompanied by numerous plainclothes members of the ISA and intelligence agents, who harassed them and prevented them from speaking to anyone privately.

The UN Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, established by the Human Rights Council to investigate violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed in Libya since 2016, released its [second report](#) on 28 March 2022, which outlined a litany of human rights abuses committed across the country with impunity, including restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, citing the arrests in Sirte.

"The reality in Sirte offers just a frightening glimpse of life under LAAF and affiliated armed groups, which have brutally crushed the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and silenced all dissenting voices. The international community must extend the UN's Fact-Finding Mission beyond June 2022 so it can continue to investigate such abuses," said Diana Eltahawy.

Background

Since the uprising against former leader Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi in 2011, Sirte has witnessed multiple armed conflicts including against the so-called Islamic State armed group.

The LAAF and affiliated armed groups took control of Sirte in January 2020 and have since exercised effective control over the city.

A separate entity also named ISA, led by [Lotfi al-Harari](#) nominally under the authority of the Government of National Unity (GNU) Prime Minister, operates in western Libya.

After the Libyan authorities failed to organize elections in December 2021, Libya's parliament voted on 1 March to bring in a new government led by Fathi Bashagha, amid [controversies](#) surrounding the voting process. However, the Tripoli-based GNU Prime Minister, Abdelhamid al-Debibah, remains in office and promised to organize elections in 2022.

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Sirte: At least 9 peaceful protesters and one journalist detained incommunicado by the Internal Security Agency (ISA) of the alliance Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)

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