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Libya: The Internal Security Agency intensifies crackdown on freedom of expression

The Libyan authorities must order an end to the persecution of young Libyans by militiamen and security agents under the guise of protecting “Libyan and Islamic values” and uphold their right to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today after the publication of alarming videos in which detainees “confess” under apparent duress to spreading “contempt” for Islam and to communicating with foreign organizations, including Amnesty International.

Over the past four months, the Tripoli-based Internal Security Agency (ISA) has arrested at least seven young men for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and detained them arbitrarily with little or no contact with the outside world amid fears for their safety and wellbeing. Other men and women, including those named in the video “confessions” and those who voiced their support for the seven arrested youth, have gone into hiding after being subjected to death threats and smear campaigns on social media.

“The ISA’s release of video ‘confessions’ is a flagrant violation of fair trial rights including the right not to self-incriminate. This unlawful and reckless move has incited hatred against a group of Libyans daring to peacefully express their views,” said Hussein Baoumi, Amnesty International’s Libya researcher.

“The Libyan authorities must stop the ISA’s vicious campaign against people who peacefully exercise their human rights. They must also ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all those detained in this campaign and the safety of those named in the ‘confessions’. Crucially, the authorities must also launch investigations into the crimes under international law committed by the ISA, which include torture and enforced disappearances, with a view of bringing those responsible to justice.”

According to seven sources with direct knowledge of the events, the ISA arrested the seven young men between November and March 2022. Following their arrest, they were detained in the ISA’s Tripoli headquarters before being transferred to either Al-Jadida prison or the Mitiga prison, the latter of which is run by the [Deterrence Apparatus for Combating Organized Crime and Terrorism](#) — a militia notorious for its involvement in prolonged arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture with total impunity.

Between December 2021 and March 2022, the ISA published videos of the seven men “confessing” under apparent duress to communicating with atheists, agnostics, Quranists, feminists, and secularists both online and in person. The men were forced to “confess” under coercive circumstances without the presence of lawyers.

The “confessions” were coupled with statements by the ISA, who congratulated themselves for combatting this “immoral” behavior and said the arrested men were opposed to Libyan and Islamic values. [In the statement published on its Facebook](#) account, the ISA said the detainees were conspiring to spread atheism, incite youth to travel outside Libya and promote “unorthodox” sexual practices in the name of freedom.

In the recorded “confessions”, detainees were coerced into labelling other activists and civil society workers both inside and outside Libya as “atheists, agnostics, Quranists, gays, lesbians or feminists.” Photos of some of those named, and other Libyan activists, were circulated on social media alongside calls for the ISA to arrest them for “undermining Libya’s morality”. In at least one on-camera “confession”, a detainee also made references to communicating with international organizations, including Amnesty International. In another video, a detainee names several diaspora Libyan activists and where they currently reside, as well as Libyan journalists living in Libya, and labels them as supportive of “atheism”. One of the journalists named had criticized the ISA’s repressive campaign days before the video was published.

The ISA has also warned of the “immoral” influence that both local and international organizations have on society, accusing them of exploiting Libyan youth to spread “false ideas”. On 13 March, Tanweer, a Libyan organization that campaigns for LGBTI rights and women's rights, announced its closure after its members were targeted by the ISA.

“The ISA must end its repression and vilification of Libyan civil society and international organizations. Its crackdown, carried out in the name of culture and religion, appears to be little more than a ploy to delegitimize human rights activists and silence calls to hold militias to account. The Libyan authorities must protect activists and ensure that both national and international organizations are able to work freely and without fear of reprisals,” said Hussein Baoumi.

Background

Militia leader Lotfi al-Harari serves as leader of the Tripoli-based ISA, which is nominally under the control of the Prime Minister of the Government of National Unity and receives state funding. Prior to his appointment initially as the deputy head of ISA in September 2020, Lotfi al-Harari was the deputy head of the Abu Salim Central Security Force militia, which has [been involved in crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations since 2011](#), including arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearances. Amnesty International has previously documented violations committed by [ISA armed groups in eastern Libya](#), under the effective control of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, and has since received evidence of increased cooperation between them and the Tripoli-based ISA.

In April 2021, Amnesty International documented the arrest of a Christian man in Tripoli by the ISA. He was accused of attempting to convert others to Christianity.

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ecoi.net summary:



Video footage shows forced confessions by detainees accused of spreading contempt for Islam and communicating with foreign organisations; at least 7 young men arrested over the past months and arbitrarily detained by the Internal Security Agency in connection with peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression

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