

Freedom on the Net 2021 - Libya

Partly Free

48

/ 100

A [Obstacles to Access](#) 7 / 25

B [Limits on Content](#) 25 / 35

C [Violations of User Rights](#) 16 / 40

Last Year's Score & Status

50 / 100 Partly Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Amid the formation of a provisional unity government in March 2021, internet freedom declined in Libya. Local authorities throttled mobile service during protests against corruption and deteriorating living conditions in September 2020. Journalists, activists, and bloggers also continue to face online harassment, arbitrary detention, and, in some cases, physical violence relating to their online activity. While investments are being made to begin to rebuild some of the internet infrastructure damaged during the ongoing conflict, internet penetration remained low.

The transfer of power from Libya's two rival governments to the unity government may resolve the internal divisions that have racked the country in the aftermath of the popular armed uprising that deposed long-time dictator Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi in 2011. A proliferation of weapons and autonomous militias, flourishing criminal networks, and the presence of extremist groups have all undermined security in Libya. The ongoing violence has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, and human rights conditions have steadily deteriorated.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- In October 2020, mobile service provider Al-Madar announced the successful installation of a trial 5G network in Tripoli; the provider plans to launch 5G services in cities across Libya (see A1).
- Local authorities in eastern Libya restricted mobile internet connectivity amid demonstrations against corruption and deteriorating living conditions in September 2020 (see A3 and B8).
- In December 2020, Facebook announced that it had removed a network of accounts that inauthentically amplified narratives in support of Qadhafi and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), the military alliance led by Khalifa Haftar, formerly known as the Libyan National Army (LNA) (see B5).
- At least two internet users—a blogger and an activist—were arbitrarily detained by militias, presumably for their online content, some of which was critical of the LAAF (see C3 and C7).
- In November 2020, Hanan al-Barassi, a prominent Libyan lawyer and women's rights activist, was killed by members of an armed group in Benghazi, one day after she shared comments on social media criticizing the LAAF (see C7).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 2 / 6

Libya's two political authorities, one in the east and the other in the west, have not been able to cooperate effectively to rebuild infrastructure and spur development. Users across the country remain frustrated by the inconsistency of internet service, which is frequently interrupted by power cuts; poor connectivity is due also in part to high demand combined with infrastructure damage, unauthorized construction, sabotage, and theft of ICT equipment.¹

While figures vary widely, internet penetration and speeds appear to be increasing in Libya. There were 3.19 million recorded internet users in Libya in January 2021, according to the *Digital 2021* report, marking an internet penetration rate of 46.2—an increase of 18 percent from the previous year.² Speeds have also been slowly increasing. According to Ookla's Speedtest Global Index, the average mobile upload speed as of June 2021 was 6.78 megabits per second (Mbps), and 13.46 Mbps for fixed broadband. Download speeds were 18.25 Mbps and 17.93 Mbps for mobile and fixed broadband, respectively.³

The reported rise in internet users may be linked to the increase of fourth-generation long-term evolution (4G LTE) networks in major cities and towns in Libya. Mobile operators like Libyana and Al-Madar, both state-owned mobile phone companies, continued providing 4G mobile internet services throughout the coverage period.⁴ There were 11.62 million mobile connections in Libya as of January 2021, a two percent increase from the following year.⁵

In October 2020, state-owned internet service provider Al-Madar announced the successful installation of a trial 5G network in Tripoli, stating that it planned to roll out 5G services in main cities by the end of 2020.⁶ Al-Madar first disclosed the plans in December 2019.⁷ Despite a large decline in the use of fixed-line services due to the conflict, the demand for high-speed broadband has increased.⁸

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 1 / 3

While prices have been reduced in recent years, the depreciation of the Libyan dinar and economic instability in the country has made the internet inaccessible for some people. Fees for internet services, and specifically the 4G mobile services that were launched by Al-Madar and Libyana, were periodically reduced by the Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company (LPTIC) throughout the previous coverage period.⁹

Libyana started offering weekly and monthly packages, including affordable prices from as low as 1 Libyan dinar (US \$.73) for 50 megabytes (MB) of data.¹⁰ Libyana introduced "off-peak" packages directed at high-demand users like gamers and streamers.¹¹

During the previous reporting period, Sami al-Fantazi, the head of the General Authority for Communications and Informatics (GACI), issued a decree cutting internet package prices from state-owned telecom companies by 50 percent. According to the decree, internet subscription and data usage fees will be cut in the companies affiliated with the authority in an attempt to "improve the level of communication and information services" to "promote the culture and digital knowledge and to keep pace with the technological development of all age groups in Libya."¹²

The depreciation of the Libyan dinar, part of the economic reform program of the Government of National Accord (GNA)—the Tripoli-based government that controlled western Libya until the transfer of power to the unity government—has led to a hike in the price of domestic and international calls since November 2018.¹³

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity? 3 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to deliberate restrictions to internet service amid demonstrations against corruption and poor living conditions in the fall of 2020.

While restrictions on connectivity are uncommon in Libya, local authorities in the eastern part of Libya—then under the control of the interim government affiliated with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), which was backed by the LAAF—restricted mobile internet connectivity amid protests in September 2020. Demonstrations broke out in early September as people in Benghazi protested against corruption and deteriorating living conditions. The interim government reportedly ordered mobile providers Al-Madar and Libyana to throttle 4G service to hinder protesters' efforts to mobilize.¹⁴

Additionally, there were reports during the coverage period that local authorities in southern Libya disrupted 4G service in the Tabu ethnic areas.¹⁵

In August 2019, after the LAAF took control of the southern city of Murzuq, armed GNA fighters launched a surprise attack to retake the city. During the attack, the local authorities cut off access to the Libyana and Al-Madar networks in an attempt to control the situation.[16](#)

The ongoing conflict in Libya has left internet infrastructure in disarray. For example, about 25 percent of mobile towers have been damaged or stolen.[17](#) Efforts to rebuild infrastructure have largely been stalled due to the political and military disturbances; telecom services are regularly disrupted in the eastern region in particular.[18](#)

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 1 / 6

The state-run LPTIC, formerly the General Post and Telecommunications Company (GPTC), is the main telecommunications operator. In 1999, the GPTC awarded the first internet service provider (ISP) license to Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), a subsidiary of the state-owned firm.[19](#)

Since the fall of the Qadhafi regime in 2011, 25 ISPs and 23 very small aperture terminal (VSAT) operators have been licensed to compete with state-owned ISPs. Many are based in Tripoli, and are owned by individuals with strong ties to governing authorities. LPTIC owns two mobile phone providers, Al-Madar and Libyana, while a third provider, Libya Phone, is owned by LTT.

The LPTIC has been affected by the country's political crisis and de facto split. Separate offices were established in Malta (representing the Tobruk government) and Tripoli (representing the Tripoli government). However, the LPTIC announced in January 2017 that divisions between its board of directors had been resolved in a court case, a ruling that was upheld the same year. In March 2018, the LPTIC head announced that the body had reunified;[20](#) it began holding meetings and announced \$1.7 billion worth of new ICT infrastructure projects.[21](#) In addition to bolstering telecommunication infrastructure projects, the LPTIC planned to launch, in 2019, work on a National Data Centre and "Libya Sat" project,[22](#) though this did not appear to have been initiated at the end of this report's coverage period.

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? 0 / 4

Libya's regulatory environment is plagued by ongoing disputes over the country's political governance.

The ICT regulator is GACI, formerly known as the General Telecom Authority (GTA). During the Qadhafi era, decisions on licensing were made by the government-controlled GPTC (now the LPTIC).[23](#) After the revolution, the transitional government established the Ministry of Communications and Informatics to oversee the telecommunications sector. Officially, the ministry runs the sector through two main bodies: LPTIC and GACI. GACI is nominally responsible for policymaking and regulations, while LPTIC is a holding company for all telecommunications service providers in the country. Libya's top-level domain, ".ly," falls under the responsibility of LTT. In 2017, the Appeals Court in Tripoli ruled that LPTIC chairman Faisal Gergab, backed by the GNA, and his management team were the sole legitimate representatives of LPTIC.[24](#)

In 2014, the Ministry of Communications and Informatics appointed a committee to draft a new Telecommunication Act to set standards for the sector and replace the existing regulations surrounding ICTs. The act, which has been drafted but not implemented,[25](#) also aims to create an independent Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA) to oversee the industry.[26](#)

Separately, in May 2019, the internationally recognized government announced the suspension of 40 foreign firms, including telecoms equipment firm Alcatel-Lucent, now owned by Finland's Nokia, and Microsoft, saying they needed to renew their licenses. While the companies were granted a grace period in which to do so, the move was described by some analysts as a politically motivated decision designed to press for greater support for internationally recognized authorities, as the LAAF was attacking Tripoli.[27](#)

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6 / 6

The blocking of websites for partisan reasons has been infrequent in the post-Qadhafi era. Many pornographic websites were blocked in 2013 by LTT, but during the reporting period the main operators in Libya, including LTT, Libyana, and Al-Madar, did not perform any type of censorship on

pornography content. Only small ISPs may be blocking some websites with pornographic content (see B3).

Separately, many Qadhafi-era government webpages containing information on laws and regulations from before the uprising are inaccessible, as is the online archive of the old state-run Libyan newspapers. Some of these websites may have become defunct after the officials running them were ousted or hosting fees were left unpaid, but others were likely taken down deliberately when the revolutionaries came to power.

In June 2021, after the coverage period, the General Authority for Endowments and Islamic Affairs (GAEIA)—the Libyan religious institution that also manages the assets donated for charitable purposes under Islamic law—wrote a letter to GACI urging the regulator to block websites that “cause great danger and harm to individuals and society.” Specifically, the GAEIA called for the blocking of websites containing pornography, as well as websites about Satan, atheism, terrorism, and Takfirist extremist groups. the religious authority also called on GACI to use Article 35 of the Constitution (see C1), which enables authorities to rely on Qadhafi-era laws to punish those who misuse the internet.²⁸

YouTube,²⁹ Twitter,³⁰ and international blog-hosting services³¹ were freely available during the coverage period. However, in September 2018, Facebook was temporarily inaccessible in Tripoli and several other cities while fighting between militant groups was taking place. Users reported that internet speeds slowed before Facebook became inaccessible, and that other websites remained online (see A1). The LPTIC claimed that technical errors and power outages caused the blockage.³²

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force 3 publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that / is protected by international human rights standards? 4

Authorities do not frequently request that private providers or intermediaries delete content. Rather, there are coordinated efforts to “report” Facebook pages for deletion, particularly for political views against militias.

In previous reporting periods, Facebook, Google, and Twitter have removed content at the government’s request. However, such removals are relatively uncommon, and no takedown requests were made during the reporting period.³³

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to 3 the stated aims, or an independent appeals process? / 4

A 2006 law mandates that websites registered under the “.ly” domain must not contain content that is “obscene, scandalous, indecent, or contrary to Libyan law or Islamic morality.”³⁴ Prior to the war, “indecent” was prohibited by law but sexually explicit sites were not typically blocked. However, blocks of such material have been enforced in the post-Qadhafi era (see B1).

Officials have yet to formulate regulations outlining when sites may be blocked, though relevant Qadhafi-era regulations remain valid officially. In practice, the procedures for the blocking of sites are opaque. When accessing a banned website, users are shown a message from the service provider stating that the site has been blocked. During the reporting period, it appeared that no websites were blocked by state-owned companies, including pornography sites; smaller ISPs may still block some content however the reason for this is unclear (see B1).

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 1 / 4

The 2011 revolution brought a notable increase in the number of bloggers writing within Libya, many of whom expressed hope for the future, discussed political activism, and voiced criticism of authorities. More recently, Libya’s bloggers have increasingly practiced self-censorship due to continued instability, increasing threats, and violence against journalists over the past years.

Many parties to the ongoing conflict have made clear their hostility to critical and independent journalism, and those who voice dissent, criticism of militia groups or leaders, or other controversial views (such as religious commentary) risk retaliation. Press freedom groups have documented many cases of disappearances, abduction, and torture of journalists (see C7). In a reflection of the extreme risk of speaking out in Libya, many journalists and their family members have requested that rights groups not identify them by name when they report on such abuses.³⁵

Activists and journalists seeking to cover the ongoing clashes between militia groups also risk being injured or killed, and there is no authority capable of legally holding perpetrators accountable. Many journalists continue to leave Libya rather than risk their lives by reporting within its borders (see C7).³⁶

Due to the political nature of the conflict in Libya, users and online journalists experienced hostility for content they post online during the reporting period.[37](#) Some activists use fake accounts or self-censored on social media to avoid repercussions by the government, especially when posting content relating to the current conflict.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 2 / 4

Some Facebook pages serve as propaganda outlets for warring parties. These pages are generally opaque about their ownership, editorial policy, and publishing guidelines.[38](#)

In December 2020, Facebook announced that it had removed a network of accounts originating in Russia and Libya that sought to shape online narratives in Libya through inauthentic behavior. The network, which was active on Facebook and Instagram, mobilized support for the LAAF, shared pro-Qadhafi and pro-LAAF narratives, and attempted to disrupt the November 2020 Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, which sought build consensus on a national elections framework.[39](#) Twitter removed a similar network. The accounts were linked to LAAF media operatives and Libyan media professionals.[40](#)

The posts of some Facebook users known as “keyboard warriors” manipulate information to widen ethnic divides, or weaken state institutions such as the central bank.[41](#) In March 2019, a Twitter campaign, #تأمين العاصمة (#SecuringTheCapital) advocated for Haftar to take control of Tripoli. According to the Stanford Internet Observatory, it was reportedly part of “foreign-initiated pro-Haftar social media campaigns.”[42](#)

In June 2020, LAAF forces withdrew from Libya’s long civil war. Following the withdrawal, social media platforms were flooded by propaganda and hate speech. Accounts loyal to the GNA and the LAAF attempted to spin the events on the ground in their favor.[43](#)

Foreign governments may have sought to shape online narratives in Libya to align with their interests in the civil war. Researchers have identified disinformation targeting Libyan audiences linked to Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, all of which have been involved in the conflict. Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, France, and others have lent support to the LAAF, while Turkey and Qatar have been the most prominent supporters of the GNA.[44](#)

The main political parties use hate speech, including aimed at tribal and regional prejudices, as propaganda in the conflict (see C7). Furthermore, the media and online news are often used to mislead people for the interest of a certain side of a conflict. A British correspondent who covers Tripoli reported that her article, which appeared in Al-Marsad, an online newspaper, was rewritten in a way that made it seem supportive of Haftar and his forces. Additional propaganda tools include fake websites and Twitter trolls that manipulate the online narrative to favor certain political factions.[45](#) Both GNA forces and the LAAF use “victory propaganda and disinformation” on social media to mislead citizens about the direction of the conflict.[46](#) According to a report by the Institute for Security Studies, the conflict in Libya is not only dominated by military power but by propaganda and disinformation that the GNA and LAAF use to shape public opinion to their advantage, largely through social media.[47](#)

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online? 3 / 3

There are few economic or regulatory constraints that inhibit the ability to publish content online. However, under Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj, some journalists have experienced difficulties in securing visas and permits to gather information.[48](#) Journalists reporting on the conflict in Tripoli have also had difficulty obtaining visas, as local authorities in every region require special procedures that differ from region to region.

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 3 / 4

Even as self-censorship increases and support for journalism remains scarce, the online media landscape is much more diverse than it was under the Qadhafi regime.[49](#) However, in recent years the information landscape has become a “fragmented vacuum” where content and news is largely controlled by armed groups and foreign actors.[50](#)

Facebook hosts hundreds of active pages dedicated to national and local news, and serves as the main source of news about Libya for a large number of users inside and outside the country.[51](#) Some of these pages are affiliated with professional television, radio, or print news outlets, while

others lack professional standards. Likely due to the risk of reprisals for speaking freely, private Facebook pages are more likely than their public counterparts to host political debates.[52](#)

As of March 2020, Google was the most visited website in the country, followed by Facebook and YouTube, according to the SimilarWeb website rankings.[53](#)

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, 4 / particularly on political and social issues? 6

Libyans have used Facebook and Twitter to mobilize around a variety of causes. While social media continues to be a vibrant forum for discussion, there appears to be both a noticeable shift to less overtly political issues over the past few years, as well as a growing skepticism of the ability of digital activism to shape the political landscape amid the country's ongoing turmoil.

For instance, the Article40ly Facebook campaign gained popularity after the end of the war on Tripoli in June 2020. Social media users in Libya who participated in the campaign highlighted the need for social peace, the preservation of cultural heritage, and called for a "unifying national identity of the homeland and the sovereignty of the Libyan nation." The campaign, which started on Facebook, has carried out many projects and awareness-raising sessions with participation from civil society organizations and local communities.[54](#)

In September 2020, authorities in Benghazi ordered mobile providers to throttle 4G services amid anti-corruption protests (see A3).[55](#) Previously, authorities rarely disrupted access to the internet or social media to restriction mobilization.

In March 2018, young activists from across the country joined a Facebook page called the March 30th Movement, which called for peace and the reunification of Libya. Following a November 2018 attack in Tazirbu, a town under control of the LAAF, that was claimed by the Islamic State (IS) militant group.[56](#) Digital activists focused on peace, safety, and security and circulated photos of around ten kidnapped citizens after they were first published by the Tazirbu Media Center on Facebook.[57](#) Several other campaigns have focused on supporting peace or movement toward a unity government, or on promoting various social-justice causes, defending freedom of expression, and commemorating individuals murdered for their activism. Most of these campaigns started and spread through social media hashtags.

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, 1 access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they / enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 6

Freedom of opinion, communication, and the press are guaranteed by Libya's draft constitutional charter, released by the Libyan Transitional National Council in September 2011.[58](#) However, delays in the drafting of a constitution and the general absence of law enforcement have contributed to weak rule of law in the country.[59](#) Perpetrators of crimes against journalists and activists enjoy impunity, and the judicial system faces functional difficulties.[60](#) Article 35 of the constitutional declaration states that "all provisions established in the existing legislation shall remain in force in so far as they are not inconsistent with the provisions of this Declaration until they are amended or repealed."[61](#)

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, 1 / particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 4

Several repressive Qadhafi-era laws remain on the books due to the absence of significant legal reforms in the country since the revolution. These include measures carrying harsh punishments for those who publish content deemed offensive or threatening to Islam, national security, or territorial integrity. A law on collective punishment is particularly egregious, allowing the authorities to punish entire families, towns, or districts for the transgressions of one individual.[62](#) Because of their vague wording, these laws can be applied to any form of speech, whether transmitted via the internet, mobile phone, or traditional media. There are no laws that explicitly criminalize online activity.

There are a number of laws that assign criminal or civil penalties for speech, presumably including online speech and expression. The Libyan Penal Code of 1953 criminalizes various forms of speech and expression, and includes penalties for those who "insult public officials, the Libyan nation, offend or attack religions, insult a person's honour, or cause discord." In addition to the penal code, the Publications Act Law 76 of 1972 governs the media in Libya. In previous years, authorities have used the Publications Act to ban publications or issue certain reporting orders or decrees.[63](#) The Law on Combatting Terrorism of 2014 includes vague language that criminalizes "terrorist acts" including

expression that “disrupts public order or endangers peace of the society.” Critics have argued that this law could be used to restrict freedom of expression and online mobilization, particularly around demonstrations or protests.[64](#)

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected 3 / under international human rights standards? 6

While reports of arrests in response to online activity are uncommon, at least two people were arrested or detained for their online activity during the coverage period.

Muhammad Ba'ayo, head of the Libyan Media Corporation and a prominent Qadhafi-era media official, was detained in October 2020 after he spoke out forcefully against Islamic groups and the armed forces competing for control of Tripoli, including on Facebook. Ba'ayo was reportedly detained by GNA-aligned militias, and it is unclear if he has been released as of the end of the reporting period.[65](#) In April 2020, activist Majdi al-Khashmi was arrested by militias loyal to Khalifa Haftar, relating to views al-Khashmi shared on social media. As of June 2021, it is unclear whether he has been released.[66](#)

In June 2020, LAAF forces in Benghazi kidnapped a member of the National Peace Initiative, prominent activist Khaled al-Sakran, from his home in the city (see C7). It is believed he was forcibly arrested and has been held in detention ever since. This was not the first time that al-Sakran has been detained. He was arrested in early 2020 and was kept under surveillance after his release.[67](#) Al-Sakran has been a vocal activist, calling for peace and rejecting the war in his online posts.[68](#) It is unclear whether he was released as of June 2021.

In June 2021, after the reporting period, Mansour Atti—a prominent human rights defender, journalist, and blogger—was kidnapped in the city of Ajdabiya (see C7). In August, the LAAF confirmed that Atti was detained in an LAAF-controlled prison.[69](#)

During the previous reporting period, two members of the National Peace Initiative were arrested by the Military Intelligence Service in Benghazi. Fahd al-Bakoush and Muhammad bin Zablah were arrested at the public prosecutor's office after they had gone there to file a complaint about continued harassment they had experienced since starting the initiative. Before their arrests, the National Peace Initiative had posted a statement rejecting weaponized violence in the country. As of June 2021, it is unclear if al-Bakoush and bin Zablah have been released from detention.[70](#)

In December 2019, Reda Fahil al-Bom, a prominent Libyan journalist and founder of the Libyan Organization for Independent Media, was detained by intelligence agents. The Libyan Organization for Independent Media works to document rights violations faced by Libyan journalists and advocates for independent news media as a way to combat violence online. The reason for the detention was not clear, and the interior ministry denied playing any role in the arrest.[71](#) Libya's intelligence body issued a statement arguing that the arrest met “all legal standards and was coordinated with the country's public prosecutor.”[72](#)

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 3 / 4

There are generally not onerous registration requirements or restrictions on anonymous communications in Libya.

In 2017, Libyana deactivated foreign subscribers' cell phones, reportedly over concerns that people were using the company's mobile services to commit crimes and organize radical groups, through plans registered to migrants passing through the country. Libyana said it would allow foreign residents to reactivate their SIM cards if they were able to produce a valid visa and passport.[73](#) Al-Madar, the other mobile operator in the country, took similar action.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy? 2 / 6

The surveillance capabilities and activities of domestic intelligence agencies are unclear, as is the LPTIC's involvement in any such activity.[74](#) There are concerns that powerful surveillance tools left over from the Qadhafi era may have been reactivated. Given the lack of an independent judiciary or procedures outlining the circumstances under which the state may conduct surveillance, there is little to prevent the government, security agencies, or militias who have access to the equipment from abusing its capabilities.

The Qadhafi regime had direct access to the country's DNS servers and engaged in widespread surveillance of online communications. Sophisticated equipment from foreign firms such as the French company Amesys,[75](#) and possibly the Chinese firm ZTE, were sold to the regime, enabling intelligence agencies to intercept communications on a nationwide scale and collect massive amounts of data on both phone and internet usage. Correspondents from the *Wall Street Journal*

who visited an internet monitoring center after the regime's collapse reportedly found a storage room lined floor-to-ceiling with dossiers of the online activities of Libyans and foreigners with whom they communicated.[76](#)

Following the arrest of Ashraf al-Maghrabi in September 2017 over his posts on Facebook, the body that arrested him—Benghazi's Information and Antiterrorism Room—warned social media activists that it was watching their activity and suggested that they could be arrested for disturbing national security.[77](#)

In a 2018 report by Citizen Lab, a Canadian internet watchdog, Libya is listed as one of 45 countries worldwide in which devices were likely breached by Pegasus, a targeted spyware software developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli technology firm. Pegasus is known to be used by governments to spy on journalists, human rights defenders, and the opposition, though it is unclear whether the Libyan government is a Pegasus client.[78](#)

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy? **3 / 6**

Because state authorities own all of Libya's mobile phone operators (see A4), presumably it would be relatively easy for the authorities to obtain user information. At the same time, militias have exerted less pressure on ISPs to conduct surveillance than Qhadafi-era security forces.[79](#)

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities? **1 / 5**

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to an increase in physical attacks against internet users, and because a prominent activist and lawyer was killed shortly after criticizing the LAAF on social media.

The breakdown of the rule of law and the growing influence of militias have resulted in a worrying uptick in politically motivated threats and violence against journalists and activists since 2011. Human rights defenders, activists, social media users, and bloggers have been physically attacked, detained, threatened, harassed, and disappeared by armed groups, some of whom are affiliated with the state authorities, in Tripoli and elsewhere in Libya.

In November 2020, Hanan al-Barassi, a prominent Libyan lawyer and women's rights activist, was killed by members of an armed group in Benghazi, which was then controlled by the LAAF. Al-Barassi was killed just a day after she shared comments on social media criticizing the son of Haftar's son and other LAAF figures.[80](#)

Prominent activists, journalists, and bloggers have been kidnapped by state and non-state actors due to their online activity. In June 2021, after the reporting period, Mansour Atti—a prominent human rights defender, journalist, and blogger—was kidnapped in the city of Ajdabiya (see C7). In August, the LAAF confirmed that Atti was detained in a LAAF-controlled prison.[81](#) Before the kidnapping, Atti had been raising awareness about the upcoming December 2021 elections.[82](#) In June 2020, the in Benghazi kidnapped prominent activist Khaled al-Sakran from his home in Benghazi. It is believed he was forcibly arrested and has been held in detention ever since (see C3).[83](#)

In July 2018, Moussa Abdel Karim, a journalist with the newspaper *Fasaniah*, based in the southwestern city of Sebha, was abducted by "criminal groups," tortured, and ultimately murdered, according to the International Federation of Journalists.[84](#) Mohamed Ben Khalifa, a photojournalist who had worked with the Associated Press, was killed in January 2019 while reporting on skirmishes between militias in Tripoli; he was hit by a bomb's shrapnel. [85](#) In May 2020, blogger and activist Youssef Shafter was wounded and hospitalized after he was attacked in Bin Walid city after he wrote a post announcing his lack of support for all parties in the recent conflict.[86](#)

Online journalists and rights activists operate in an extremely violent environment, especially for women's rights and LGBT+ rights activist. For example, a Facebook group has been used to coordinate the online harassment of women's rights and LGBT+ rights defenders. Activists have reported that the group defames them and has shared their personal data in an attempt to expose them to danger.[87](#) The LGBT+ community is consistently exposed to harassment and violence online, but recently there has been an increase in harassment perpetrated by local authorities. For instance, a lesbian woman was outed on Twitter, and then directly threatened on Facebook by websites that publish propaganda. The woman was ultimately forced to leave the country, with the help of local civil society networks.[88](#) Facebook users have also targeted secular LGBT+ and atheist activists with harassment, reportedly with links to Tripoli-based militias.[89](#)

A March 2021 report by Lawyers for Justice in Libya, a human rights organization, called on the Libyan authorities to stop the widespread and dangerous pattern of online violence against women. The report documents the scale of the online harassment, stalking, doxing, and other online violence that women in Libya experience. According to the report, online harassment has led to women being intimidated and silenced.⁹⁰

Various actors have harnessed the power of social media to target or smear people, organizations, and events that they do not approve of or agree with—a particularly worrying form of online bullying that can have far-reaching consequences in a country without laws or security. In a severe example of such behaviour, in 2014 anonymous users set up a Facebook page featuring the names, photos, and addresses of Benghazi activists, and calling for their assassination and kidnapping. The page was taken down after online activists reported it.⁹¹ Facebook is still used by various armed groups to monitor and identify dissenters, some of whom are ultimately arrested, killed, or driven to flee.⁹²

Hate speech has also increased during the reporting period, with political supporters targeting tribal and regional minorities to push their propaganda (see B5).

C8 0-3 pts

**Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users
subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?**

2
/
3

While cyberattacks are not common, a number of Libyan entities and individuals have been targeted by cyberattacks including malware and phishing in recent years. Many of the attacks exploited a network vulnerability within a Microsoft protocol.⁹³ Weak services, such as file transfer and remote-desktop protocols, also create openings for cyberattacks.⁹⁴

Hackings and cyberattacks have been used by the warring parties in Libya's conflict to further their agendas. For example, in August 2019 the GNA Twitter account was hacked by an unknown source and a false statement was posted declaring the defeat of the GNA to the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF). Additionally, LAAF documents and personal identification information were leaked after a hacking attack.⁹⁵

Footnotes

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