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Various Christian communities in Libya, as well as some Muslim groups, have been feeling increasingly under pressure from hardline Islamist groups since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011.

"The level of security remains precarious for all foreigners, especially for Christians, because of the presence of some fundamentalist Islamic groups," Giovanni Martinelli, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Tripoli, told IRIN.

"It is a new phenomenon that emerged during elections last July," he said.

Nearly all Libyans are Sunni Muslims; members of other religious groups tend to be foreign residents, though Christianity has maintained a presence since Roman times.

"I think the [recent] arrests of Egyptian Christians do certainly seem to highlight a mounting issue," said Joe Stork, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division.

"There are different things going on and underlying this are two problems; firstly a problem of lawlessness and the absence of a well-functioning law-enforcement or justice system, and secondly I think there's a real order problem with the militias."

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) issued a [statement](#) last week saying it deeply concerned by recent incidents, including violence against a Coptic Christian church and other religious buildings, as well as attacks on the media.

"The universal values of tolerance, moderation, and respect for differences are deeply rooted in Libyan society's religious and cultural heritage," said Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General Tarek Mitri.

"These values should be the foundation upon which the new Libya is built."

During Gaddafi's 41-year rule the government's surveillance network kept a tight lid on religious extremism and thousands of radical Muslims were imprisoned, but many helped overthrow

Gaddafi, forming armed militia groups across the country.

Since the end of the fighting, some Salafists, who favour a literalist interpretation of Islam, have carried out hundreds of attacks on the mosques, tombs and shrines of other sects of Islam, particularly Sufis.

In the centre of the Libyan capital Tripoli the Sha'ab ad-Dahman mosque was demolished in August along with around 50 Sufi graves, including the tombs of Libyan Muslim scholar Abdullah al-Sha'ab.

Social media footage shows Libyan security forces present during the destructions without intervening. The Libyan Herald news site reported that three journalists from the Al-Assema television station were detained by security forces as they tried to cover the destruction.

The Libyan interim interior minister Fawzi Abdelaei resigned after the incident and the President of Libyan National Congress Mohamed Magarief said "The people responsible for those attacks are unfortunately aligned. The SSC was created at the end of the civil war in October 2011 by the National Transitional Council as a way to provide more centralized security in the capital Tripoli.

Most Libyan experts and media blame the coordinated destructions of mosques and shrines on the Libyan Salafi network Ansar al-Sharia.

In Salafi perspective, the destructions are necessary in order "to avoid idolatry", prevent "religious corruption" and prohibit the spread of other religious deviations such as "black magic".

Insecurity is one of the key concerns of the new government, which is still in the process of setting up a modern police force and national army.

Spate of attacks on Christians

The last few weeks have seen a number of attacks on Christian communities including an incident in Tripoli when an armed man entered San Francesco Catholic Church in Dahara and opened fire on the priest.

"He wanted to kill him as he opened fire with an AK-47 some 2-3 metres away," said Archbishop Martinelli, explaining that the incident is under investigation.

The church gates have now been reinforced, but churchgoers are not feeling very reassured. "I continue to hold tightly the cross on my chest. But I'm afraid," said Sonia (she only gave one name), who originally comes from Aleppo in Syria but has lived in Libya for 35 years. "I am Armenian, one of the few dozen Armenians left in the country since the beginning of the revolution in Libya. We are very concerned about security."

Eastern parts of the country appear to be the worst affected by threats against, and attacks on, Christians.

On 3 March, extremist group Ansar Al Sahri'a (allegedly involved in the attack on the US consulate on 11 September 2012) surrounded the Benghazi European School (BES), and accused the teachers of promoting pornography: Sex education materials given to the students were deemed unacceptable.

Timeline: Attacks on mosques and Muslim shrines since the revolution

October 2011

The mosque at the town of Sidi Masri was vandalized and the remains of two historic Muslim scholars removed. In the same month, the cemetery in Gargaresh, in Tripoli, was ransacked.

November 2011

In Tripoli, Sidi Nasr mosque was desecrated.

On 28 February a gunman attacked a Coptic Orthodox church in Benghazi, assaulting two priests, though they were not injured.

Around the same time, 50-100 Copts in the city (Egyptian workers in Libya) were detained on charges of "spreading Christianity". According to the authorities, they were in possession of bibles, Christian books and sacred images.

On 17 February (two-year anniversary of the revolution) four Christians - a Swedish-American, an Egyptian, a South African and a South Korean - were arrested by a "Preventive Security" unit on charges of proselytizing and distributing religious literature. The four missionaries are awaiting trial and could face the death penalty.

Salafist militias have a strong presence in the city, and Ansar Al Shari'a enjoys widespread support in the region, according to the spokesperson of Local Council in Benghazi, Osama Al Sherif.

The first attack on the Christian community in Libya since the revolution was in September 2012 in the western province of Misrata when four men broke into the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Giorgio Dafniya, burning three icons and Greek and Cypriot flags.

Three months later, on 29 December, grenades were thrown at the same church, killing two Egyptian Copts. The attack was carried out by an Egyptian fundamentalist group allegedly enraged by a controversial film about the Prophet.

Modus vivendi?

There are no official figures on religious communities in Libya. Of the estimated 1.5 million foreigners, about 100,000 are Christians, according to local Christian authorities - mainly Copts and Roman Catholics, with some Greek Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants.

According to Bishop Timotheus Adla Bishara, head of the Orthodox Church in Tripoli, those Copts who fled during the nine months of fighting in 2011 have returned.

"We Copts live peacefully in Libya. After the attack on the Coptic church near Misrata, the local council and the government have given us full support and are committed to guaranteeing greater security to our community," Bishop Adla Bishara told IRIN, adding: "The Copts are safer in Libya than in Egypt nowadays and the authorities are investigating the latest threats."

Immediately after the end of February assault on Coptic orthodox priests in Benghazi, the Libyan foreign ministry [condemned the aggression](#) by what it called "irresponsible armed men", and said the action went against the teachings of Islam and basic rights.

"During the Gaddafi era, the authorities did not issue any restriction on religious minorities as there was a tacit agreement on the ban on proselytizing," said Roman Catholic Reverend Vasihar Baskaran in a sermon following the arrest of four Catholics in Benghazi.

January 2012

The cemetery of Sidi Ubaid in Benghazi was attacked and 31 corpses were stolen.

March 2012

The shrine of the fifteenth/sixteenth-century Sufi, Sidi Abdul-Salam Al-Asmar Al-Fituri, at Zliten in western Libya, was targeted by a large group of armed religious extremists, but defended by local residents.

July 2012

A bomb exploded at the Sahaba Mosque in Derna and the shrine of Zuhayr Ibn Qais Al-Balawi, companion of Prophet Muhammad and Muslim military leader, was demolished. In the same month in El-Tag near Kufra, Salafi activists removed the body of Sidi Muhammad Al-Mahdi Es-Senussi, a supreme sheikh of the Senussi Sufi order, from his mausoleum.

August 2012

On 25th August, in the centre of Tripoli, the Sha'ab ad-Dahman mosque was demolished along with around 50 Sufi graves, including the tombs of Libyan Muslim scholar Abdullah al-Sha'ab. The next day in Misrata, extremists removed the body of famous Muslim scholar Ahmad Zarruq and destroyed the Mosque with bulldozers.

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