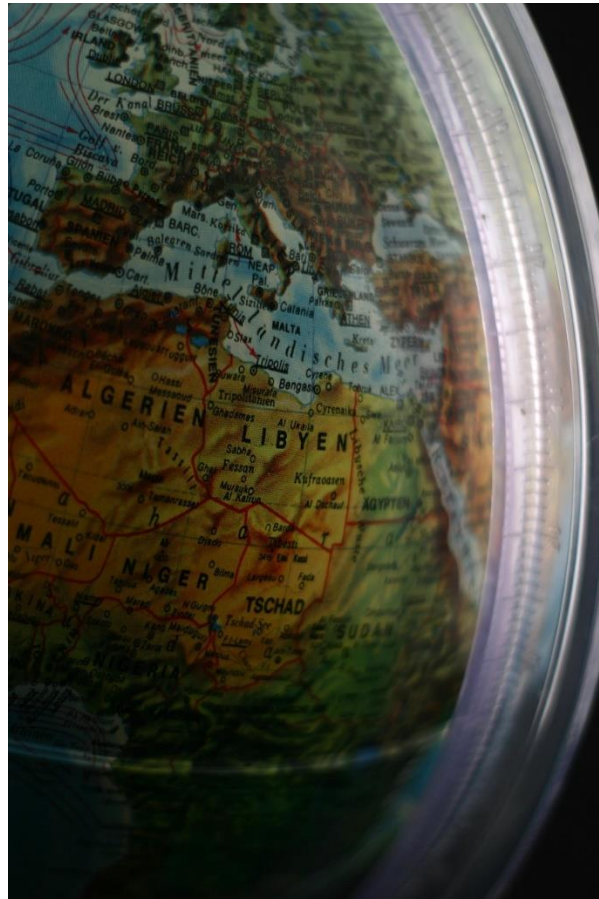


LIBYA COUNTRY REPORT

Libya in Context: From Past Legacies to Future Prospects

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Introduction

Libya, situated in North Africa, is celebrated for its profound historical heritage and cultural richness. This country has long served as a meeting point for various civilisations, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Tunisia and Algeria to the west, Chad and Niger to the south, and Egypt and Sudan to the east. This report explores Libya's precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, providing an overview of the nation's history, economy, and political landscape. In doing so, it aims to offer essential insights for those considering business or social initiatives within the State of Libya.

Understanding Libya – A Look into Its History, Culture, And Socio-Political Landscape

Libya's precolonial history is a complex tapestry of influential civilisations, with the indigenous Amazigh community playing a foundational role. The term "Amazigh" is preferred over the more common "Berber" due to its more respectful connotations, and the Imazighen (plural of Amazigh) have a profound and ancient presence in Libya, stretching back thousands of years. Indigenous to North Africa, Amazigh communities span across Libya and neighbouring regions, including Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, and parts of the Sahel, contributing a cultural and linguistic heritage among the oldest in North Africa (Aïtel, 2014; Youcef, 2020). Archaeological evidence suggests that Imazighen have inhabited the Libyan region since prehistoric times, leaving an enduring cultural footprint. Their roots intertwine with the various civilisations that traversed and settled in the Maghreb and Sahara, from Carthaginian traders to Greek settlers in Cyrenaica, who founded cities like Cyrene in the 6th century BCE (Ferguson & Muscato, 2023). These influences contributed significantly to the historical development of coastal and desert communities, creating a unique Libyan identity that predates recorded history and has helped shape the nation's legacy.

Following this early period, Libya became a focal point for foreign empires drawn to its strategic Mediterranean location and rich resources. After the rise of Carthage along the North African coast, Libyan cities like Leptis Magna, Sabratha, and Oea flourished as part of a thriving trade network connecting Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. In 146 BCE, with Rome's defeat of Carthage, Libya fell under Roman influence, marking the beginning of a new era. Roman rule brought foreign infrastructure, architecture, and agriculture to the region, as seen in the grand remains of Roman theatres, baths, and temples that still stand today. Libyan cities became centres of Roman culture and commerce, and Leptis Magna, in particular, grew into a prominent metropolis under Emperor Septimius Severus, a native of the city. Arab expansion into North Africa in the 7th century marked a transformative period for Libya, bringing Islam and the Arabic language to a region historically inhabited by indigenous Amazigh communities. The Amazigh communities adapted to these changes, embracing Islam in later centuries during the Arab expansion while preserving their distinct cultural identity. This rich precolonial heritage, marked by the resilience and adaptability of the Amazigh, set the stage for Libya's complex and dynamic historical narrative, a legacy deeply embedded in the region's identity even as it transitioned through subsequent empires and influences.



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Libya's colonial history began in the early 20th century when Italy, seeking to expand its influence in North Africa, invaded and colonised the region in 1911. This occupation was met with fierce resistance from Libyan communities, who organised prolonged guerrilla campaigns against Italian forces. The resistance was famously led by figures such as Omar Mukhtar, nicknamed the 'Lion of the Desert', whose resilience and leadership became symbols of Libyan defiance (Momin, 2024). Italian rule was marked by policies of forced settlement, agricultural exploitation, and attempts to "Italianise" the population, leading to significant displacement and suffering among Libyans (Momin, 2024). During the 1930s, Mussolini intensified these policies, attempting to create a "Fourth Shore" of Italy along the Mediterranean, which brought further hardships through military repression, concentration camps, and land confiscations (Moore & Philipps, 1940: 129). Libyan resistance remained strong despite this brutal period, ultimately drawing international attention and support. Italian rule ended during World War II, as British and French forces took control of Libya, marking the beginning of a new phase in the country's history (Barbour, 1950: 97; Koloğlu, 2008: 280). This colonial experience left deep scars but fostered a sense of national unity and pride that would be instrumental in Libya's eventual push for independence in 1951 (Ballinger, 2016: 813).

From Independence to The Gaddafi Era and Beyond

Following Libya's hard-won independence in 1951, it emerged as the United Kingdom of Libya, with King Idris I as its monarch (H.G, 1952: 193). Libya's early years of independence were characterised by a fragile economy and limited infrastructure, heavily reliant on foreign aid and grants, especially from the United States and the United Kingdom, who maintained military bases in the country (Fasanotti, 2017). This period of relative stability shifted dramatically in 1959 when substantial oil reserves were discovered in Libya, transforming the economy almost overnight. The newfound oil wealth brought rapid modernisation, urbanisation, and a higher standard of living for some Libyans. However, it also led to growing dissatisfaction with the monarchy, which was increasingly seen as corrupt and unable to distribute the nation's wealth equitably. Social inequality and political unrest simmered, setting the stage for significant change.

In 1969, a young Libyan army officer named Muammar Gaddafi seized power in a bloodless coup, overthrowing the monarchy and declaring the establishment of the Libyan Arab Republic. Gaddafi promoted a revolutionary ideology rooted in Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and socialism, later encapsulated in his "Green Book," which outlined his vision for an alternative political system he called "Jamahiriya" or "state/government of the masses" (John, 2008: 76; Fasanotti, 2017: 97). Under Gaddafi's rule, Libya adopted a highly centralised system, dismantling traditional institutions and creating local councils meant to empower citizens directly. However, in practice, this system concentrated power in Gaddafi's hands and those of his inner circle. The government took control of Libya's vast oil resources, using the revenue to fund domestic welfare programs, infrastructure projects, and educational reforms while also supporting anti-imperialist movements and liberation struggles worldwide. Gaddafi's foreign policies, however, led to strained relations with Western nations, and Libya faced economic sanctions and international isolation for much of his rule, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.



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By the 2000s, international dynamics shifted, and Gaddafi sought to reintegrate Libya into the global community, renouncing weapons of mass destruction and accepting responsibility for past attacks. These moves lifted some sanctions, and Libya began attracting foreign investment, leading to a brief economic revival. Yet, discontent with Gaddafi's authoritarian rule, financial mismanagement, and lack of political freedom grew, particularly among younger Libyans and marginalised communities. In 2011, during the wave of protests across the Arab world, widespread demonstrations broke out in Libya, quickly escalating into an armed uprising. The conflict drew intervention led by NATO, ultimately resulting in Gaddafi's fall and execution later that year (Fasanotti, 2017: 96).

Gaddafi's death did not bring relief, as post-Gaddafi Libya faced severe challenges (Fasanotti, 2017: 97). Various factions vied for power amid an absence of strong central governance. The country descended into political fragmentation and intermittent multi-factional civil wars, with rival governments in the east and west competing for legitimacy and control over Libya's resources (Fasanotti, 2017: 97). International efforts to stabilise Libya have struggled, hampered by internal divisions, regional rivalries, and the involvement of foreign powers with conflicting interests. Despite these challenges, Libya remains a nation of resilience and potential, with ongoing efforts to build a unified government to deliver peace and prosperity to its people. The struggle to achieve stability and national unity continues as Libyans work toward a future free from the shadow of past authoritarianism and colonial legacies.

Enduring Impact of Colonisation and Libya's Global Positioning

The enduring impact of the various civilisations that have traversed Libya has profoundly shaped the nation's identity, governance, and role on the world stage, leaving a complex legacy that continues to inform its current geopolitical positioning. Over several centuries, indigenous communities, which had long-established traditions, language, and social structures, faced significant cultural and demographic shifts as Arab settlers gradually influenced the region. Islam became central to the religious and social fabric, integrating Libya into the broader Islamic and Arab world. Many Imazghen adopted Arabic as their primary language and Islamic customs became deeply ingrained in local governance and social norms. However, the spread of Arab culture and Islam also led to the marginalisation of indigenous customs and languages. This legacy still affects Libya's Amazigh communities, who advocate for cultural and linguistic recognition today.

The Ottoman Empire assumed control over Libya in the 16th century, formally bringing the region into an Islamic imperial framework (Koloğlu, 2008: 275). Although governed by Constantinople, Libya retained a degree of autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, mainly through regional governance, which allowed local leaders to play a significant role in administration. The Ottomans reinforced the Arab-Islamic identity established by earlier Arab settlers and maintained Islamic law as a foundation of governance. Economically, the Ottomans engaged Libya's coastal cities in Mediterranean trade networks, connecting them to Europe and the Middle East. While the Ottomans attempted to establish centralised control, many rural areas, particularly in the southern and mountainous regions, maintained their local governance systems, reinforcing the regional divisions in Libya today. Ottoman rule lasted until the early 20th century, providing a base for later colonial and post-colonial Libyan governance structures (Libyan Heritage House, 2024).

Italy's colonisation of Libya began in 1911 and was far more disruptive, with the colonial administration focusing on aggressive economic exploitation and social restructuring aimed at serving Italian settlers. Under Mussolini's fascist regime, the Italian occupation intensified, leading to forced displacements, widespread land confiscation, and brutal repression of Libyan resistance (Momin, 2024). The Italian government's "pacification" campaigns devastated entire communities, and the use of concentration camps further compounded the suffering of the Libyan population (Momin, 2024). Libya's land and resources were systematically repurposed for Italian agricultural and industrial projects, marginalising the local population and imposing economic hardships that stymied development for years. This period left a deep scar on Libyan society and engendered a powerful anti-colonial sentiment, fuelling the nationalist movements that eventually led to independence in 1951.

Post-independence, Libya was strategically positioned due to its oil resources and location along Mediterranean migration and trade routes. Initially, Libya's monarchy maintained a pro-Western alignment; however, Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power in 1969 reoriented the nation toward a pan-Arab and later pan-African stance. Gaddafi leveraged Libya's oil wealth to assert influence across Africa and the Middle East, often in opposition to Western powers. Similar to Algeria and Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s, Libya under Gaddafi depended on oil revenues to maintain its repressive regime, which diminished the motivation to diversify the economy (Randall, 2015: 202). Under Gaddafi, Libya pursued a foreign policy that positioned it as both a leader among post-colonial nations and a challenger to Western intervention in the region (Randall, 2015:

200). This anti-Western stance, shaped by the legacies of colonial exploitation, resonated with other countries seeking independence from foreign control. However, Gaddafi's unpredictable policies, combined with his support for militant groups, eventually isolated Libya internationally and brought about sanctions and, ultimately, military intervention from NATO in 2011 during the "Arab Spring" uprisings.

The 2011 intervention, which led to the collapse of Gaddafi's regime, triggered a period of intense instability marked by competing factions vying for control (Randall, 2015: 199). Libya's regional divisions, dating back to Ottoman times and exacerbated by subsequent colonial rule, reemerged as local militias, tribal groups, and political entities vied for influence. The ensuing civil conflict has invited various forms of foreign intervention from regional and global powers, each seeking to shape Libya's future for their interests, often through the support of rival factions. In this fractured political environment, Libya remains strategically significant, mainly due to its vast oil reserves, Mediterranean coastline, and position as a gateway for African migration into Europe (John, 2008: 83). As Libya attempts to rebuild and stabilise, it faces the dual challenge of overcoming its colonial legacy and navigating the complex web of regional and international interests that continue to influence its path (Randall, 2015: 199). The current situation reflects the resilience and the challenges of a nation with deep historical roots and a unique position in global geopolitics.

Libya's current political structure is marked by fragmentation and competition between rival administrations and militia groups, resulting in ongoing instability since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 (Fasanotti, 2017: 95, 101; Salyk-Virk, 2020: 11). Following NATO's intervention, the National Transitional Council (NTC) initially took charge but struggled with corruption and militia influence, setting a precedent for weakened governance. In 2012, the General National Congress (GNC) was elected to lead the transition but faced public backlash for extending its mandate, prompting Khalifa Haftar's "Operation Dignity" against Islamist groups and escalating conflict (Salyk-Virk, 2020: 20). This led to the creation of the House of Representatives (HoR) in the east, forming the two rival governments that persist today: the UN-backed Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli and the HoR, allied with Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), in Tobruk.

The civil war, marked by intense clashes, shifting alliances, and significant international involvement, inflicted devastating loss of life, displacement, and infrastructure damage. In October 2020, a formal ceasefire agreement brokered by the United Nations was reached, effectively ending the active phase of the civil war (Salyk-Virk, 2020: 20). This agreement set the stage for a political roadmap toward national elections and established a temporary unity government, the GNU, tasked with uniting Libyan factions and preparing for elections (Fasanotti, 2017: 103). However, despite this progress, deep-rooted rivalries and the influence of foreign backers have continued to delay a sustainable political resolution, prolonging Libya's fragmented governance and ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Current Challenges and Future Trajectories

Libya faces a complex set of challenges that hinder its path toward stability and development, with the ongoing political fragmentation and security concerns at the forefront (Fasanotti, 2017: 95). The primary obstacle is the continued division between the two rival governments, the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), each with competing alliances and militia support (Pusztai, 2019: 2). This fractured political landscape has made it nearly impossible to establish a unified national government, hampering the formation of a cohesive national policy and leaving governance largely ineffective (UN, 2024). Without a centralised power structure, militia groups and tribal factions operate autonomously, frequently clashing over territorial control and resources, especially in oil-rich regions. This lack of security has exacerbated the daily struggles faced by Libyans, including a collapsing healthcare system, failing infrastructure, and a stagnating economy (UN, 2024).

Another pressing challenge is Libya's reliance on its vast oil reserves, which contribute to over 95% of its export revenues. This dependence has left the economy highly susceptible to disruptions from internal conflicts and international market fluctuations. Oil facilities are frequent targets of conflict, with various factions seizing control as a means of financing their operations, further destabilising the national economy. International actors, including Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and the UAE, have a stake in these oil resources, providing support to rival factions, which has intensified regional tensions and prolonged the conflict (Pusztai, 2019: 5). To understand the unique dynamics of post-Qadhafi Libya, it is crucial to recognise the intersection of the country's fragmented governance structures (Randall, 2015: 221). The continued exploitation of Libya's oil fields by armed groups underscores the urgent need for economic diversification to reduce dependency on oil, but achieving this is challenging amid political instability and a lack of investment in other sectors.



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Looking ahead, the trajectory of Libya's future will depend mainly on its ability to achieve political unity and peace. The success of peace talks and transitional elections, though repeatedly delayed, will be pivotal in determining Libya's stability. If a consensus government can emerge from these talks and establish control, it could pave the way for a more cohesive governance structure, crucial for rebuilding public institutions and fostering economic recovery. International mediation efforts, such as those led by the United Nations, will be important in facilitating this process. However, the extent of foreign influence in Libya's internal affairs is a double-edged sword; while international involvement could aid in conflict resolution, competing interests' risk further entrenching divisions. A positive trajectory would likely require Libya to implement robust measures to assert national sovereignty, balance international relationships, and prioritise inclusive governance representing all regions and communities.

Libya's potential as a significant player in North Africa, bolstered by its strategic Mediterranean position and natural resources, remains substantial. A stable Libya could serve as a conduit for trade and investment between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, leveraging its energy sector and its geographic advantage. However, the path to such a future is fraught with challenges that demand both local commitment to peace and responsible international cooperation. Addressing internal divisions, implementing economic reforms, and fostering a strong national identity that respects Libya's diverse population will be crucial steps towards ensuring that the country can overcome its current crises and chart a more stable and prosperous course (Randall, 2015: 202).

Conclusion

Libya's history is one of resilience amid complex cultural, colonial, and political challenges that have shaped its trajectory and continue to influence its present. From the early influences of the indigenous Amazigh communities and Arab expansion through Ottoman and Italian colonialism to the post-Gaddafi struggles, each phase has left lasting impacts on Libya's identity, governance, and economy. Today, the country stands at a crossroads where ongoing political fragmentation, regional divisions, and the competing interests of international actors have made unity and stability difficult to achieve. These challenges, compounded by Libya's reliance on oil, underscore the urgent need for political cohesion, economic diversification, and international support that respects Libya's sovereignty, which is crucial for the country's future.

Despite the collapse of state institutions, militia control in the West, and the unfair distribution of revenues, Libyans still cling to hope for a better future. The struggle for credible elections reflects this desire, as citizens overwhelmingly call for political agreement and unity to restore legitimacy to the country's institutions. The influence of external actors, often lacking nuanced understanding, complicates these efforts, making Libyan-led solutions essential. If Libya can navigate these challenges and reduce dependency on oil through economic reform, it holds the potential to become a key player in regional stability and international networks, contributing positively to Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

Success will depend on fostering a unified national identity honouring Libya's diverse populations, strengthening institutions to meet citizens' needs, and ensuring that its people's aspirations guide Libya's future.

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