

Could Libya Become Africa's Afghanistan?

by [Khalil El Hasse \(/experts/khalil-el-hasse\)](/experts/khalil-el-hasse)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Khalil El Hasse \(/experts/khalil-el-hasse\)](/experts/khalil-el-hasse)

Khalil El Hasse is a freelance Libyan writer and journalist. His writings focus on Libyan domestic political affairs, human rights, and criticism of religious heritage.



Brief Analysis

As political figures vie for influence in Libya, Islamist groups have been empowered to crack down on religious freedoms, women, and minority groups across the country.

In recent years, the socio-religious environment in Libya has deteriorated dramatically with the oppression of women on religious grounds and increased arrests of atheists. Medieval punishments have been handed down to Christian converts—as was the case with [Diaa al-Din Balao \(https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-62928391\)](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-62928391), who was sentenced to death for converting to Christianity—and various young people who are active in civil society organizations have been subject to [arbitrary detention \(https://www.newarab.com/analysis/libya-jailing-progressive-youths-charges-atheism\)](https://www.newarab.com/analysis/libya-jailing-progressive-youths-charges-atheism) on charges of promoting atheism.

Even more recently, an American language teacher was [arrested \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-us-citizens-arrests-over-christian-proselytising\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-us-citizens-arrests-over-christian-proselytising) on charges of Christian proselytizing, and a group of Libyans were likewise [charged \(https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/03/six-libyans-face-death-penalty-for-converting-to-christianity\)](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/03/six-libyans-face-death-penalty-for-converting-to-christianity) with converting to Christianity and proselytizing. Even bloggers and content creators have not been spared. The Salafist RADA Special Deterrence Forces, which control Mitiga International Airport in Libya, [arrested](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/entertainment_media/%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%91-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-)

[\(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/entertainment_media/%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%91-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/entertainment_media/%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%91-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-)

%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%88%D8%AF) an Iraqi blogger in February for posting a video in which she smokes a cigarette. In Benghazi, a popular singer was **arrested** (**<https://apnews.com/article/libya-cybercrimes-rights-chaos-blogger-singer-42991edba48716c3b21acc4311625ada>**) on charges of violating public morals in April, while several TikTok activists were detained for insulting the values of Libyan society.

Islamists in Tripoli and Benghazi have systematically targeted many other groups including women, the Amazigh community, secularists, and civil society activists. Now, these Islamists enjoy political backing from the Libyan authorities vying for power since 2021. More specifically, public funding has been allocated to three entities in particular: the General Authority of Islamic Endowments in Benghazi, the Dar al-Ifta and Authority of Islamic Endowments in Tripoli, and Libya's Internal Security Agency, which serves as the operational arm of the first two institutions.

To understand how the trajectory of Islamization has played out in Libya, we must ask the following question: How did these three non-elected religious entities gain the power to target women and religious liberties, isolating Libyans through social and security policies?

This Islamization movement can be traced back to the no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh in September 2021, after which Dbeibeh led a march to storm the parliament in eastern Libya. At the time, prominent religious leader Sadiq al-Ghariani—who some have called the “Libyan Khomeini” and who previously advocated for Islamic jihad against the Americans and French—watched Dbeibeh's anti-parliament actions with great satisfaction. That same parliament had removed Grant Mufti al-Ghariani from his post in 2014, though he **remained in power** (**<https://libyaupdate.com/belhajs-return-coordinated-with-dbeibah-sources-say/>**) with help from militants in Tripoli.

In trying to subsequently reestablish his legitimacy beyond the rival institutions of the House of Representatives and the High Council of State in Libya, Dbeibeh appealed to al-Ghariani's religious clout as head of the Dar al-Ifta and obtained his blessing to continue as Prime Minister—a move that allowed him to reestablish some power in Tripoli without making political concessions. This alliance was unprecedented in Libya, as al-Ghariani's extremist religious stances were not previously aligned with the governments led by Fayez al-Sarraj or Abdullah al-Thani, and Dbeibeh's mutual **endorsement** (**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzZ_It5w2G4**) of al-Ghariani as “sheikh and teacher” opened the door for an Islamist cultural crackdown.

In essence, the Dbeibeh government gave al-Ghariani the green light he wanted to begin implementing precepts of Islamic sharia. Almost immediately, the Grand Mufti launched an extremist religious campaign against Libyan women, issuing a **fatwa** (**<https://ifta.ly/%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85-%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85/465/>**) prohibiting women from traveling alone without a chaperone.

Libya's Internal Security Agency responded to this extremist fatwa by **imposing** (**<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/srsg-abdoulaye-bathilys-remarks-security-council-19-june-2023>**) the humiliating regulations and gender discrimination at Mitiga International Airport, provoking an outcry from human rights advocates and feminists in Libya. After the fatwa, women traveling alone are required to provide the details of their trip to authorities and the reason why they want to travel without a male chaperone.

Even before this, the Internal Security Agency had been cracking down on citizens in line with al-Ghariani's Islamist vision. In April 2022, the agency published a video clip containing the confessions of a Libyan citizen who was arrested on charges of atheism after the agency began **monitoring** (**<https://www.newarab.com/analysis/libya-jailing-progressive-youths-charges-atheism>**) Libyan atheist chat rooms on the Clubhouse platform. This

individual was later forced to reveal the names of leading youth activists who opposed Salafist jihadist control in Libya, which led to a series of arrests of young Libyan men and women on charges of atheism, blasphemy, and conversion to Christianity. During that time, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives in Tobruk supported these repressive arrests.

Grand Mufti al-Ghariani has also asked Dbeibeh's government for special allocated funds to combat Christian converts and has requested control over schools, universities, and educational institutions in Libya. Now, the Dar al-Ifta receives monthly funding from the Central Bank of Libya, allocated by the Ministry of Finance. This funding comes in spite of the fact that Dar al-Ifta openly **hosted** (<https://alwasat.ly/news/libya/376499>) Zabihullah Mujahid, the official spokesperson for the Afghan Taliban, as part of al-Ghariani's desired normalization plan with the Taliban.

Publicly funded and politically influential, al-Ghariani's Salafist jihadist current has been able to retake control of a significant number of mosques in Tripoli which it had lost to a rival Salafist group, the Authority of Islamic Endowments. Moreover, al-Ghariani's numerous attacks and fatwas against Libyan civil society organizations have finally paid off, with the Libyan Supreme Judicial Council's legal department **issuing a fatwa**

(<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/6-%D8%A2%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A8%D9%91-%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>) in March 2023 stipulating that all civil society

(<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/6-%D8%A2%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A8%D9%91-%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>)

and non-governmental organizations formed after 2011 are illegal. It is no coincidence that the state's legal rulings are now aligned with earlier religious ones, a clear indication of the extent of Dar al-Ifta's influence within the judiciary.

To make matters worse, the intense rivalry between the Salafist Authority of Islamic Endowments led by Mohammed Alabani and al-Ghariani's Dar al-Ifta has escalated. This escalation was evident in the recent **disagreement** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/this-is-madness-libyas-bitter-divisions-split-eid-holiday-2023-04-21/>) over the correct timing for the 2023 Eid al-Fitr announcement, which ultimately meant that half of Libyan Muslims ended their Ramadan fast on one day, while the other half waited for the following day.

In recent months the two sides have been vying to demonstrate their extremist Islamic fundamentalism, leading to increasingly harsh treatments of non-Muslims, women, and other vulnerable groups. The Authority of Islamic Endowments established a **security police force** (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230601-libya-moderate-islamic-interpretations-under-threat-as-more-radicals-penetrate-government-institutions/>) in Tripoli known as the "Guardians of Virtue" in order to cleanse the country of secularism and combat atheists, Christian converts, and Sufis. This apparatus is a chilling parallel to the Iranian Basij, and it has the absolute authority to track citizens through their social media accounts and arrest anyone suspicious without a judicial warrant, according to the objectives and plans published by the Authority on its official website.

Sufis in particular have been targeted by the Guardians of Virtue, and many Sufi leaders and followers have been imprisoned and prevented from giving sermons at mosques. The Guardians of Virtue have also been able to hunt down intellectuals and writers, including in the **notorious attack**

(<https://www.218tv.net/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%AD-3-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AB%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%91-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A/>) on Benghazi's Tanarout cultural center, whose most prominent figures were accused of apostasy, Christian proselytizing, atheism, and freemasonry. This put the intellectuals of Tanarout in real danger and forced them to **shut down** (<https://www.al->

(<https://www.al->

[monitor.com/originals/2017/11/libya-crackdown-comic-books-video-games-arrest-youth-freedom.html](https://www.monitor.com/originals/2017/11/libya-crackdown-comic-books-video-games-arrest-youth-freedom.html)) the pioneering organization. In another incident of symbolic importance, Salafists converted (<https://www.maghrebvoices.com/libya/2022/04/18/%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D9%85%D8%B3-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE>) an abandoned historic Italian cathedral in Benghazi into what is now known as the Malik ibn Anas Mosque, despite opposition from civil activists and intellectuals.

Official political institutions in Libya have remained silent as Salafists have targeted other branches of Islam. In July 2017, the Higher Council of Ifta in Benghazi issued a fatwa (<https://www.state.gov/report/custom/eee21f98a5/>) declaring followers of the Ibadi legal school to be apostates. Ibadism is the form of Islam practiced by most Amazigh in Libya, and human rights groups have raised alarm bells (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/20/libya-incitement-against-religious-minority>) about what this fatwa will mean in terms of Amazigh discrimination. In May 2022, Tariq Durman, a member of the Higher Council of Ifta, likewise issued a fatwa that called the Amazigh “unbelievers” and compared them to the Kharijites.

What is happening now in Libya is a social, cultural, and religious backsliding unlike anything the country has seen before. The ruling political class in both east and west Libya are content to watch the oppression continue as long as it supports their hold on power and distracts from their political maneuvering.

Libyans now seem to be living out the Afghan experience in confronting a religious state similar to the one that the Taliban formed in the 1990s. In light of Libya’s decade of civil war and fragmented economic, social, and political life, many analysts have argued that it is not currently possible to move forward in talking about Libyan religious liberties—most would consider this to be an elitist issue imported from abroad. Achieving religious liberties in Libya, therefore, will be dependent on reaching an effective political compromise among warring factions and forming a unity government that could establish a truly democratic system respectful of the principles of citizenship and equality. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Iran Deal’s October Sunsets: Sanctions Without Snapback](#)

Jul 28, 2023



Henry Rome,
Louis Dugit-Gros

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[The Wrong Message at the Wrong Time](#)

Jul 27, 2023



Dennis Ross

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BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Sabina Henneberg,
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