



Libya

Area: 679,362 sq. miles
Population: 7.49 million (2025 estimate)
Capital city: Tripoli
Ethnic Groups: 92 % Arab; 5 % Berber (Amazigh); 3% other.

Languages: Arabic (official).
Religion: 96% Sunni Muslim; Ibadi Muslim (Amazigh), Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions.
Life Expectancy: 73.7 years (2025).
Literacy: 91.2 % (2022)
Economy: Oil and gas dominate export production; state-owned sectors, with limited private enterprise.
GDP: \$45.10 Billion (2023); per capita around \$6,800 to \$7,500 (2024).
Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 55.9 (2019) and 33.43 (2023), suggesting a decline in urban poverty.
Gender Inequality Index: 0.266 (ranked 65 out of 166 countries).



A Crossroads of Cultures, Religions, and Violence

“The night has ears and the day has eyes.” --Libyan proverb

The fourth largest nation in Africa, Libya is part of the region known as the Maghreb (“west” in Arabic). Approximately 90% of its land today encompasses the Sahara Desert, which was once well-watered and rich in resources attracting conquerors and violence over the centuries. The coastal region came under the control of Greeks in Cyrene, later Persian and Egyptian rulers, and the Phoenicians, who were based in Tripoli (Oea) by the 7th century BCE. Early Roman colonization around 146 BCE brought Christianity to the region dominated by Berber/Amazigh farmers and merchants. Since its arrival in the mid-7th century CE, Islam was intertwined with Amazigh culture when Arab conquests largely replaced Christianity with Shia beliefs and integrated Tripoli and the surrounding region into the Muslim world. With the help of Libya, militant reformers known as the Moors spread the faith to Spain and Portugal (al-Andalus), beginning in 711 CE until the early 11th century, a golden age of learning that made Tripoli a global city.

Despite this high level of integration, imperialism, piracy, and political turmoil continued during the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire (1551-1912). When the Ottomans clashed with other empires in the 16th century, the Spanish were briefly able to capture key North African ports, including Tripoli and Oran. Eventually, with Ottoman help, the Europeans were ousted. Although Ottoman rule was often indirect (especially between 1711 and 1835), the cultural and intellectual impact was profound and included the era’s introduction of Sufism, an expression of Islam that emphasized the independent mystical pathways to Allah and the operation of brotherhoods (*turuq* pl./*tariq*, sing.). The U.S. Navy fleet (as well as military forces from Sweden, Sicily, and the Netherlands) waged wars with Barbary pirates (known as corsairs, 1801-1805 and 1815-1817). Amidst the disarray, the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II reasserted his authority. An indigenous mass movement Senusiyya forged a program of resistance in 1837 that transcended the boundaries of nation states in North Africa and the Sahara well beyond the 1880s, creating the basis for modern political identity.

In 1911, Italy began its invasion and colonization of Libya (the provinces of Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica) that continued through the era of fascism until World War II and the aftermath of

Allied occupation. Following independence in 1951, Libya became a kingdom that ended with a bloodless army coup led by Muammar Qaddafi (c.1942-2011) in 1969. Qaddafi has been described as the nation's "modern technocrat," who combined Islamic practice with Arab socialism in a highly revolutionary Third Way. Qaddafi was killed by American forces in 2011. Although since riddled by the chaos of civil wars between 2011 and 2020, Libyans have also used oil resources to restructure the economy and improve their society's standard of living.

Shaping Art, Identity, and Resistance Through Film

Two films from the Qaddafi era reflect the attempt to mirror history and cinema. Moustapha Akkad's monumental 3-hour classic "The Message (1976)" was being aired annually on Libya's state-owned television. The expensive and expansive film chronicles the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and its completion was supported by the Libyan government after the production was deemed controversial in its portrayal of the Prophet through the on-camera faces of others with whom he interacted. Qaddafi then personally commissioned Akkad to make a film about the Libyan struggle against the Italians. That film was "The Lion of the Desert (1981)" that followed closely the real-life resistance of Bedouin guerilla fighter Omar al-Mukhtar, who was eventually publicly executed by the colonizers in front of 20,000 staged onlookers in 1931.

While the 1981 film was banned in Italy between 1982 and 2009, like "The Message," that film also was broadcast annually in Libya. Neither film was a Libyan production, but their impact was profound in an otherwise cinema-barren state that outlawed possession of a camera. Muhamnad Lamin, the great-grandson of Fadeel (a key figure in the resistance portrayed in "The Lion in the Desert") and a Libyan film director himself based in Tunis, grew up watching those films in his family home and the world around himself through the lens of a camera. Much like the figure of "Donga" in his debut documentary, in which the camera becomes a weapon in the right hands, the Libyan filmmaker was empowered to reveal the world as it is. As Lamin points out, "Filmmakers from Libya, as well as those from across the broader Middle East and North Africa, find themselves navigating the balance between the stories they want to tell, the stories they need to tell and the stories they experience firsthand" (Lamin 2024). Still, as ever, the night has ears and the day has eyes.

----Candice Goucher, December 2025

Suggested Readings and Viewings

Ahmed Mohamed Ashiurakis, *Libyan Proverbs* (Tripoli: Dar al-Farjani, 1975)

Mohannad Lamin, "How 'The Message' and 'The Lion of the Desert' Forever Shaped How Libyans See Themselves," *New Lines Magazine* (March 13, 2024)

<https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/how-the-message-and-the-lion-of-the-desert-forever-shaped-how-libyans-see-themselves/>

Mohannad Lamin, dir., "Donga" (Feature Documentary, 2023). This 90-minute film views the impact of the 2011 uprising and recent war through the eyes of a Libyan youth with a camera.

Frances Robinson, *Cambridge Illustrated History of The Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).