

The Daily Struggle of Libyans in Tripoli



Libyan chef Zainab Mohammad cooks for rebel fighters in Libya. Photo Flickr.

Libya was, for centuries, a poor country with very small cities and little productive land. The discovery of oil in the 1950s changed the situation, transforming Libya from a needy country into an oil-rich kingdom that literally did not know where to spend its cash. [Muammar Gaddafi](#), in his [1969 coup](#), aimed to transform the country into a welfare state and make it a platform for his coveted international revolution.

The bizarre [Jamahiriya](#) system created by Gaddafi had many drawbacks, but it did have its accomplishments, such as inexpensive or free (if poor) healthcare, education, housing, water, and power. Many Libyans grew up like privileged kids, aiming only for good jobs and delegating unskilled, lower-paid tasks to foreign workers. Work was not a pressing priority for Libyan youth, as the state was expected to provide its citizens with work.

With the [fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011](#) and the continuation of [Libya's civil war](#), these rights,

which had been taken for granted, began to disappear. The country's **de facto partition in 2014** and its subsequent gradual fragmentation only put salt in the wound. It is in Tripoli, still the official capital of the country and its largest city, that these problems are felt most acutely.

The provision of basic necessities, such as running water and electricity, has become uncertain. Gaddafi had created a system that drew fossil water from deep in the earth and distributed it to remote areas of the Libyan desert. The "Great Man-Made River" has now been partly destroyed, and the threat of thirst looms for several isolated regions. Even Tripoli is affected by weekly cuts in its water supply. Citizens buy bottled water, often imported from **Tunisia** through the black market.

A lack of electrical power was inconceivable under Gaddafi: Libya was one of the world's largest oil producers, which made electricity and fuel available to every citizen. In 2015, daily power failures last for hours in Tripoli, affecting all modern services. During the summer, when temperatures can exceed 40°C, dwellings become hellish as air conditioners lose power. There are also frequent shortages of fuel, which cause long queues in front of petrol stations, recalling **Iraq after 2003**. The health sector—Libya's main hospitals are located in Tripoli—is affected severely by these problems, especially because most international staff have fled the country.

Ninety per cent of the wheat used to produce bread, a major part of the Libyan diet, has been imported from abroad and subsidised by the state, but, now that the central state has collapsed, the two governments **plan to cut subsidies**. Libyans face the prospect of bread disappearing from their tables, if the state can no longer import wheat. Many fear that the state will halt all imports, which could lead to a nutritional crisis alongside the water shortage. Security and travel create nightmares that Libyans have to live with daily. Roads in Libya are a major issue. Gun battles erupt sporadically between the warring militias, but even local conflicts involve rifles and heavier weapons.

Kidnapping for ransom is another developing menace, making it difficult for Libyans to leave their hometowns. Hanan, a 28-year-old woman who was supposed to travel to **Egypt** from Tripoli in September 2015 to give a lecture, had to cancel her trip because she thought her father was lost. "He left Tripoli in the morning and did not come back at night," she said. "We could not reach him for more than 24 hours. He came back the following night and said that he had been at his cousin's farm 40 kilometres outside of Tripoli, with no cell-phone coverage and no electricity to charge the phone's battery. Because of a fight between two militias on the road, he had been unable leave the farm. I had to cancel my trip to the conference in Egypt because of that uncertainty."

Mohamed Saleh, a Libyan student in Tunisia, recounts his journey from his hometown of Zawiya to his university in Tunis: "It used to be an easy trip; sometimes I would spend the weekend in Zawiya and go back to school on Monday. Now it is a total mess if I want to travel both ways. Planes are usually packed, with lots of delays and cancellations. It leaves the land road as an alternative, but that is dangerous now, and very long (around ten hours), and border customs are unpredictable, with last minute rules often imposed."

The economic crisis contributes to the woes of a nation already in distress from a lack of security and basic necessities. Libya's central bank has been drained of cash, as **oil production is at its lowest levels** and the influx of cash from Libya's state institutions abroad is **blocked by embargo**. Informal trade, on the other hand, is booming because of subsidised goods that are bought up and then **sold at competitive prices** in the internal and external markets. Subsidies are becoming a heavy burden on the Tripoli government, which is now considering cutting all subsidies. This is not only a retrenchment necessitated by war but also a requirement imposed by **international institutions** since Libya was a unified country in a transitional process.

Issues in the central bank are affecting other banks, as well as salaries. A university professor who

also directs an NGO in Tripoli recounts how money transfers from abroad are taking weeks, and sometimes months, to arrive. This is partly the result of the central authorities' suspicion—Tripoli wants to track every penny, in order to counter terrorism and narcotrafficking—but there is also inefficiency and confusion throughout the banking system. The professor has been waiting for two months for his public salary to arrive.

Living in Libya in 2015 is a daily struggle; no one knows what the next day will bring. Every time the United Nations announces that an agreement has been reached, the pact immediately falls apart.
