



LIBYA'S RELIGIOUS SECTOR AND PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report focuses on Libya's religious sector and its current influence—positive and negative—on peacebuilding and the democratic transition there. Drawing on the results of surveys conducted in Libya in 2014 and 2016 by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the report is also informed by the local knowledge of researchers resident in Libya.

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Cover photo: Eid Prayer in Murad Agha Mosque, Tajoura, Libya. (Photo by Nader Elgadi, ©2014)

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[The religious and ideological dynamics of Libya's turbulent transition are fueling debates about appropriate roles for religion in governance and national identity, and about the roles of religious actors in peace and reform efforts.]

Summary

- Since the Libyan Political Accord was signed in December 2015, the country has had three governments. Religious discourse has become both politicized and a source of polarization.
- Interviews conducted in 2014 and 2016 indicate that traditional religious actors could play a constructive role in mediation, reconciliation, and the democratic transition.
- The most influential religious orientations were identified as the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadism, and Salafism. The surveys suggest that these are complex, overlapping, and dynamic.
- Differences in beliefs do not necessarily predict who armed groups will fight for, with, or against. Local experiences and interests are more influential.
- The most influential Libya leaders in terms of religion were identified as the grand mufti Saddiq al-Ghariani, Ali al-Salabi, and Abdel Hakim Belhaj. In 2014, two in three respondents thought that these leaders had a negative influence on peace and justice. By 2016, nine in ten did.
- More than 150 other religious actors were also named as influential, 93 percent of them local, indicating a healthy diversity of decentralized religious leadership.
- Most respondents felt that the grand mufti and his fatwa council were inappropriately engaging in partisan politics.
- Despite such views, Libyan political parties still believe that religion has a role to play in public life and that sharia should be reflected in the constitution.
- A majority of respondents in both 2014 and 2016 felt that traditional religious leaders could play a positive role in calling Libyans to democratic transition.
- Joint tribal and traditional religious leader mediation is perceived to be the most effective form of local dispute resolution.
- Given the potential for religious actors to promote democracy and reconciliation, the international community should engage and support constructive religious leaders and institutions.

Introduction

In December 2015, representatives of Libya's two opposing governments—the “Islamist” General National Congress (GNC) and the self-described civil democratic House of Representatives (HoR)—signed a UN-brokered peace agreement that outlined a Government of National Accord (GNA) and a set of representatives to form a Presidency Council to lead it. Powerful armed groups on both sides reject the agreement, the future of which remains clouded in uncertainty.¹ The challenges to securing stability in Libya are large and complex, and the GNA has so far achieved little beyond installing itself in a heavily defended naval base in Tripoli. Furthermore, many spoilers in the wider Libyan society are determined to wreck the agreement.

The country is polarized, and governance has been paralyzed by the battle between the two parliaments using religious discourse and mixed with social, political, economic, ethnic, and tribal agendas.²

The Islamist GNC is backed by the grand mufti, Libya Dawn, and a conglomerate of factions, militias, and tribal groups. The HoR is backed by General Haftar and Libya Dignity, non-Islamist advocates of the *madani* movement, eastern tribal leaders and militias, and various former military groups. There are religiously affiliated groups on both sides.

Libya is a devout country, and Islam has played a prominent role in its conflicts and upheavals, especially since the country was colonized by Italy in 1911. After seizing power in 1969, Colonel Muammar Gadhafi worked hard to dismantle religious institutions and destroy the possibility of any religious leadership to usurp his own. His efforts, though, only allowed extremism to creep into the vacuum he created.

After decades of authoritarian rule, underlying structural disparities and a variety of ethnic, tribal, resource-driven, and other conflicts are percolating to the surface amid these vast societal changes, complicating the process of rebuilding the country.

The religious and ideological dynamics of Libya's turbulent transition are fueling debates about appropriate roles for religion in governance and national identity, and about the roles of religious actors in peace and reform efforts. Can religion play a constructive part in the development of a more democratic society? Should Islam be an integral part of a new constitutional and legislative order, and should religious figures involve themselves in political debates? Can religious leaders help promote peacebuilding, national reconciliation, and stability, or do they perpetuate and exacerbate divisions within the country? What can local-level religious leaders do to mediate violent conflicts?

To help answer these questions, and in particular to discover what Libyans themselves think about such issues, two surveys were conducted, one in August and September 2014 and the other in April 2016.

Historical Background

Islam came to Libya with the Arab influx into the Berber lands around 642 CE, and the integration of the Berber tribes with Arabs that followed dramatically changed the ethnicity, culture, language, and even structure of tribes in Libya. The country underwent further transformation with the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Another major influence was the al-Murabitin al-Ashraf dynasty of North Africa, which claimed to be descended from the Prophet Muhammed and which founded Sufi orders in Libya in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Sufism—always a religious movement rather than a political one—took deep root.³

When the Italians occupied Libya in 1911, the Sufi Order of the Sannusi became the focal point for the opposition to colonial rule. Italian colonization was seen as an attack against Islam, and the Sannusi responded by declaring jihad against it. Sheikh Omar el-Mukhtar, the head of a Sannusi Zawiyah, led the self-proclaimed movement—under Idris el-Sannusi—against the occupation for nearly twenty years until he was executed in 1931. When Libya gained its independence in 1951, Idris was installed as king. Idris, however, separated the monarchy from the Sannusi order and restricted the inheritance of the crown to his heirs to prevent politicization of the Sannusi Sufi order.⁴

After the 1969 coup d'état by Muammar Gadhafi that overthrew Idris and the monarchy, the Sannusi were suppressed.⁵ Gadhafi's regime declared that all future legal codes would be based on the Quran, that the Quran was the constitution, and that Islam was the center of the life of the people. Yet, beneath these outward trappings of devotion, the regime used religion as an instrument of the state to exert power and control over institutions and the population.

By the end of the 1970s, Gadhafi had rejected any formal interpretation of the Quran other than his own and sought to place religion firmly under the control of the state.⁶ He had established a new political system that claimed religious legitimization and made any opposition to it not merely an attack on the Gadhafi regime but also a threat against Islam itself and thus, by definition, heresy.

During the 1980s and 1990s, various rebel groups tried to oust Gadhafi. Despite an eventual accommodation with Islamist forces, however, the tyrannical regime proved vulnerable to the tide of popular discontent that the "Arab Spring" unleashed across much of North Africa. In February 2011, peaceful demonstrations in Benghazi soon turned into clashes with Gadhafi's brigades that were met with violent opposition. The protests spread across the country and anti-Gadhafi forces established a provisional government based in Benghazi called the National Transitional Council (NTC) that had the stated goal of overthrowing the Gadhafi government in Tripoli. In October 2011, after months of fighting, Gadhafi was found in Sirte and killed by local militias supported by the air power of NATO. Elections were held in 2012, and the GNC was elected to appoint a prime minister who would in turn form a government. Although the Islamists were a minority in the GNC, they outmaneuvered their opponents and took control of the GNC and key government positions.

In February 2014, General Haftar announced a coup against the GNC. In March, he and other leading members of the Libyan Army, along with various militia factions of various tribes, launched Operation Dignity (Karamah). In June, a second round of parliamentary elections was held to elect the HoR, sometimes referred to as the Council of Deputies. The Islamists fared poorly at that ballot box and refused to hand over power to the HoR. Meanwhile, the conflict escalated to what is known as the War of the Airport, where Libya Dawn (Fajr) was formed in September 2014. In December 2014, Libya's Supreme Constitutional Court in Tripoli declared the HoR invalid. The GNC and HoR and their backers have been fighting ever since.

In 2015, the United Nations sought to broker an agreement between the rival governments through a series of negotiating tracks. However, leading religious figures—most notably the grand mufti—have been shifting allegiances, sometimes supporting and other times denouncing various peace processes and the GNA, which exercises very little control.

Islam has always played a strong social and political role within Libya, a society in which Islamic religiosity is ingrained in the ethos and infrastructure of life. Islamic rhetoric

continues to exercise powerful political influence, but since the 2011 revolution the use of Islamic political and ideological divides has contributed to polarization in the country.

Yet the picture is not uniformly bleak. Some religious leaders have made efforts—albeit sporadic and modest ones—to support peacebuilding and a democratic transition. Nonetheless, most national-level religious figures are divisive, embroiled in political struggles. Less polarizing religious actors have largely been sidelined and overlooked, not only by Libyan political forces but also by the international community.

The question presents itself: Should the international community be doing more to engage with constructive forces within Libya's religious sector? If so, how might it best identify and support these individuals and institutions?

Surveying Thought Leaders

A first-round 2013 mapping assessment of Libyan civil society actors and their work for peace and justice in Libya included interviews in the four largest cities: Tripoli, Benghazi, Baydah, and Misrata. The results were intriguing in several respects, including the extent to which religious leaders—not just tribal leaders—were perceived to have the potential to play an influential role in bringing peace and security to local communities.

A subsequent assessment targeted the country's religious sector in hopes of better understanding and evaluating the ongoing and potential contribution of the religious sector to peace and justice. It sought to map existing engagement with and by the religious sector in addressing local security, combating extremism, supporting the democratic transition and human rights, and fostering peaceful coexistence.

In view of the security situation and the time frame, a “purposive, maximum variation sample” included participants most likely to generate useful data for the project yet still representing a varied cross-section of thought leaders, thereby ensuring that the sample would be credible and cover the main groups of interest. The assessment was conducted through qualitative interviews in which the participants were asked thirteen semi-structured questions around three themes:

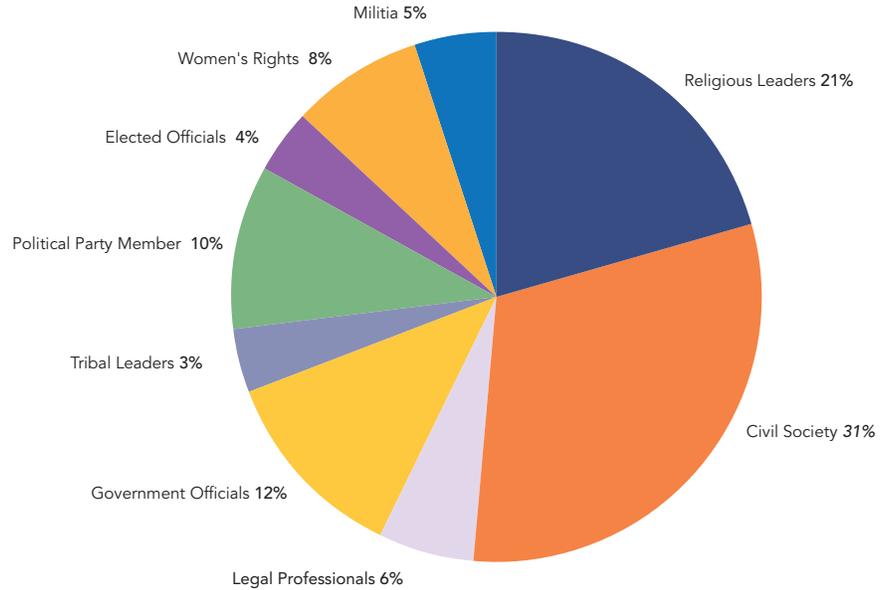
- Who in the religious sector does what in relation to peace, and how?
- What is the religious sector's current and potential influence on peace and the democratic transition in Libya?
- How can we engage the religious sector in current and future peace and justice programming in the country?

A team of local Libyan researchers conducted approximately two hundred interviews, primarily between June and August of 2014—during the HoR elections and the fighting of Operation Dignity. Because of security difficulties, researchers were not able to get all of the interview documents out of the country. As a result, the final number of interviews available for analysis was 134.

Local researchers sought out diverse—indeed, often conflicting—opinions on the role of religious leaders in building peace in Libya. Interviewees included civil society leaders, religious leaders, government officials, political party members, elected members of local government, legal professionals, women's rights activists, tribal leaders, and militia members (see figure 1). The interviews covered four important cities in Libya: Tripoli in the northwest, Sabha in the south, Benghazi in the east, and Derna in the east.⁷

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Figure 1. Identities of Interviewees in 2014 Survey



Eighteen months later, in April 2016, another survey was launched, significantly smaller and different in nature than that in 2014 but designed to explore similar issues. It involved contacting, by email and social networks, about thirty key informants, all of them thought leaders exclusively from civil society. The semi-structured questionnaire from the 2014 survey was converted into a quantitative format more conducive to gathering data online. It included multiple choice questions and answers developed based on the range of answers received in 2014 as well as a few open-ended questions conducive to short sentence responses.

Because of their different methodologies, scope, and nature, the two surveys are not statistically comparable. Nonetheless, they do seem to suggest that perceptions among Libyan thought leaders about the role of the religious sector in Libya's transition have not changed significantly in the past two years: Libyans have not yet lost faith altogether in the potential positive role religious sector can play in the transition, but continue to be disappointed by the performance of religious leaders so far.

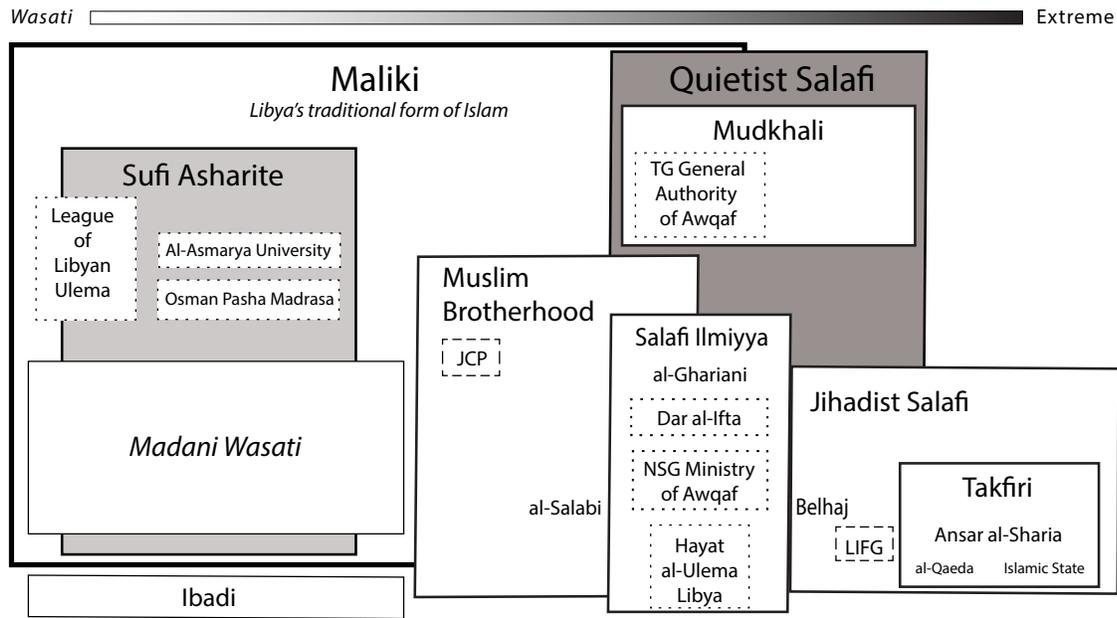
This report maps Libya's religious sector—its primary institutions, orientations, and leaders—and discusses their roles since the revolution. In as complex, diverse, and religious society as Libya, any attempt to map the religious landscape runs the risk of oversimplifying and distorting the shifting reality on the ground. It is possible, however, to tread carefully, using this mapping as a guide to the overall contours, chief features of the landscape, and the spaces between those features, rather than as a precise representation of an unchanging panorama.

Figure 2 depicts the main actors in Libya's religious landscape, the extent to which they overlap, and their approximate place on a spectrum that extends from *wasati* to extreme. It illustrates how far recent imports of jihadi and Salafi ideology extend beyond traditional Malaki practice in Libya.

A note of explanation about the Arabic word *wasati* is warranted here because it is used throughout the report and does not translate to English easily or simply. Most often it is used in the sense of moderate or centrist, but these words have somewhat different meanings in a Western context than *wasati* does in Muslim countries. In the Quran (2:142), *wasati* describes the community of believers. That phrase, *ummatan wasatan*, has been trans-

lated various ways: by Marmaduk Pikhall as “middle nation,” by A. J. Arberry as “midmost nation,” and by many as “just nation.” It thus carries a connotation of justice and fairness. Although it is indeed opposite to extreme, to better convey its use in interviews, this report uses the word *wasati* in its full Quranic sense rather than a translation.

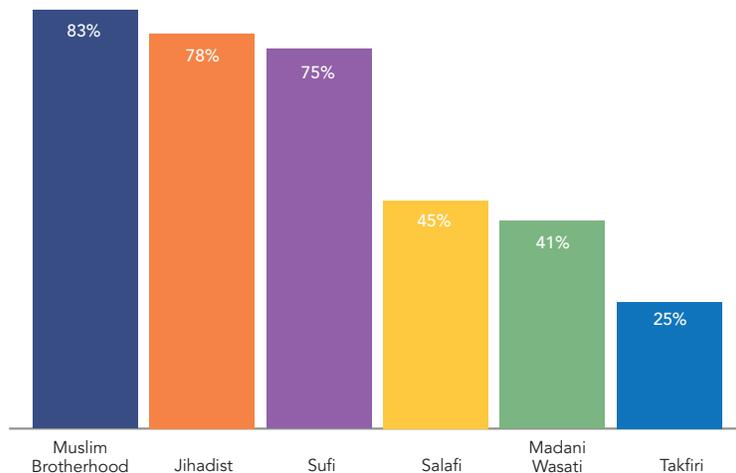
Figure 2. Libya's Religious Spectrum



Major Religious Orientations

When interviewees in Libya were asked in 2014 to identify religious orientations across their country, they responded as follows: Muslim Brotherhood (identified by 83 percent), jihadist (78 percent), Sufi (75 percent), Salafist (45 percent), *madani wasati* (41 percent), and Takfiri (25 percent). Other much less common responses included Ibadi (6 percent), Takfir wal Hijra, and Salafi Sufism.⁸

Figure 3. Frequently Identified Religious Orientations

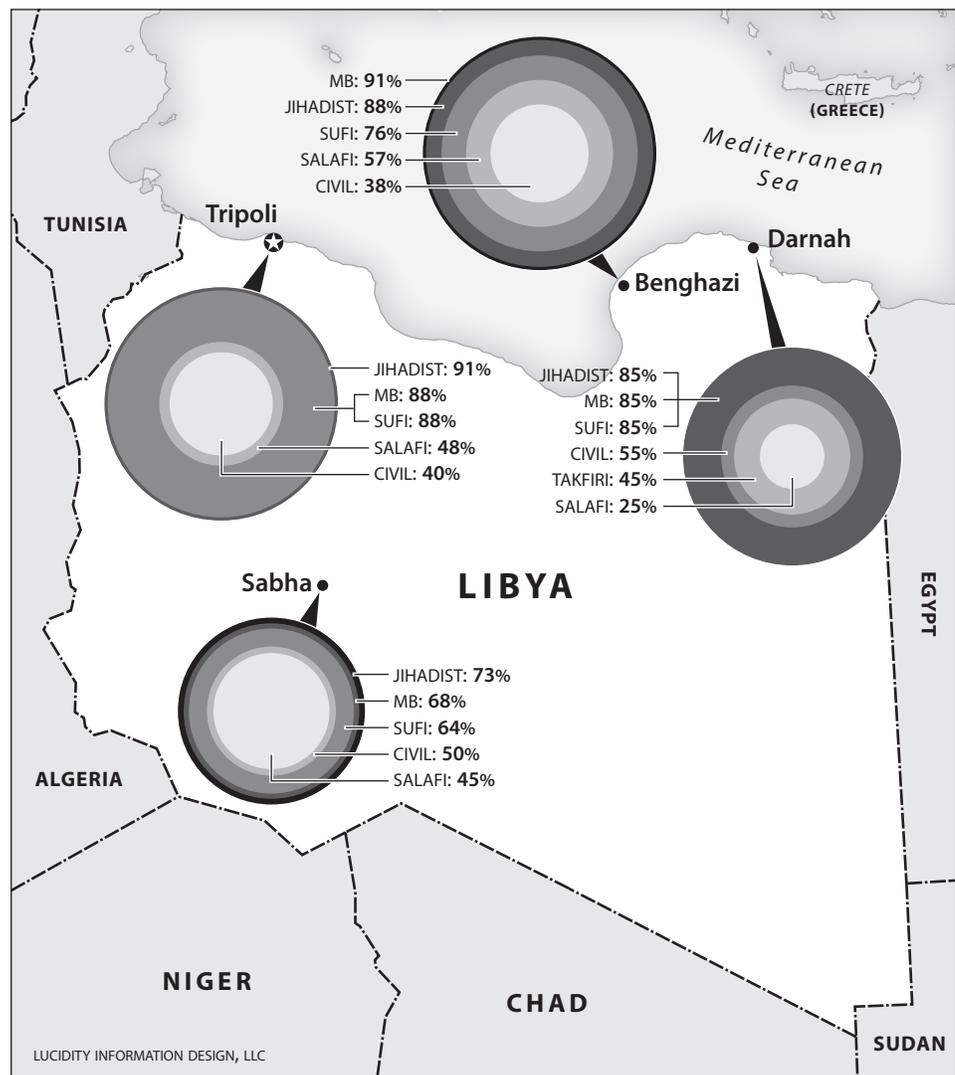


Most of these orientations are associated with particular groups and individuals who have been trying to stake out political influence in one of the contending governments or the wider society. Unfortunately, rather than trying to work together peacefully toward the common good of statebuilding, many have either resorted to violence to pursue their agendas or called on others to do so. For instance, when the 2014 survey was conducted, Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani was publicly calling on militias to take up arms against the opposition—a stance that may explain why the research garnered more negative than positive responses to the roles religious leaders played.

We look at each of these orientations in turn, beginning with Salafism and ending with *mada-ni wasatism*. Figure 2 offers some sense of where the orientations stand in relation to one another and shows that they overlap significantly. Within each orientation are spectrums of opinion and belief. Members of all orientations claim to be *wasati* and aspire to be the just middle nation. Figure 4 illustrates the regional diversity of perception about each of these trends.

Figure 4. Perception of Major Religious Trends in Libya by City.

Modern Salafism began as an intellectual movement in Egypt late in the nineteenth century, at the height of the encounter between Muslim societies and European colonization.



Salafism

Modern Salafism began as an intellectual movement in Egypt late in the nineteenth century, at the height of the encounter between Muslim societies and European colonization. Its followers hoped to usher in a new Golden Age of Islam by reinterpreting religious doctrine to reconcile it with advancements in society and technology. In this modernist approach, the meaning of the text is second to the function it serves. Some respondents explained that Salafi interpretation is a scientific methodology that involves reading the Quran and Sunnah in accordance with the understanding of the early Muslim community, which respondents believed to be the only true understanding of Islam.⁹ This community was (and is) called *Salaf-as-Salih*—the pious predecessors—hence the name Salafi for today's movement. Modern Salafis reject the largest part of the Islamic intellectual tradition from theology to jurisprudence to mysticism and philosophy, asserting that they are “rationally reinterpreting early Islam with the expectation of rediscovering” a religion more resilient to Western incursions.¹⁰ Because they both reject the intellectual tradition and the diversity of the scholastic tradition and embrace instead more fundamentalist reinterpretations, they are often equated with Wahhabis (an ultraconservative branch of Sunni Islam). This attempt at re-Islamization is particularly focused on daily practices rather than on intellectual horizons.

The pioneers of the movement had differing visions of how to reach a modern Muslim community resilient to European colonial advancement. Muhamad Abduh (1849–1905), the Egyptian Islamic jurist, religious scholar, and liberal reformer, wanted gradual change through education and social reform. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) wanted to conquer territory and establish an Islamic state. Thus the two major branches of Salafism—quietist and jihadist—were born. At roughly the same time, Rashid Rida (1863–1935) played a critical dual role: one, in disseminating a Salafi strand prone to activism rather than quietism, and, second, in catalyzing the formation of political Islam by teaching Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The quietist strand—also known as *al-Jami* or *Mudkhali* Salafism—arrived with Saudi scholars during the Gadhafi era. Generally apolitical, quietist Salafis stayed away from politics until the Gulf War in 1990–1991. At that point, they came to differ in regard to securing foreign assistance and allying with non-Muslims (such alliances being contrary to the Islamic doctrine of loyalty and disavowal).¹¹

In response, a splinter group led by an Ethiopian named Muhammad Aman al-Jami formed in 1991. Some Libyan students of sharia who had studied under al-Jami disciple Rabi' Ibn Hadi al-Mudkhali in Saudi Arabia brought his doctrines home with them to Libya when they returned; the movement also spread through satellite TV channels, the internet, and social media.

Those under al-Jami's leadership formed an informal group to defend the religious ruling (*fatwa*)—to seek foreign assistance—by Saudi Arabia's official religious body (*Dar al-Ifta*). Since then, the group has been associated with defending authoritarian regimes and never calls for jihad against them. It is intolerant of movements that are opposed to the religious and political establishment, perceiving them as religiously deviant. In 2011, for example, Rabi' and Mohammed al-Mudkhali—both affiliated with Gadhafi's son Saadi—called for Libyans to stay at home during the uprising against Gadhafi.

Jihadist Salafism, the second branch of the Salafist movement, came to Libya through the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which was established in 1990 on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border by exiled rebels trying to overthrow the Gadhafi regime. Its members fought

alongside jihadis in Afghanistan and formed ties with the international jihadist movement that later spawned al-Qaeda.¹² It is discussed at greater length in the following section.

Four types of Salafism rather than two have in fact been identified in respect to use of violence and promotion of democracy:

The “quietest” tendency in Salafism eschews any participation in politics and is focused on preaching and promoting Islam. The “Jammi/Madkhali” limit their engagement in politics to supporting existing authoritarian regimes claiming to be Islamic, as found for example in Saudi Arabia. They believe that loyalty is owed to regimes that impose themselves and show strong authority (the principle of *ghalaba*), regardless of their politics. The “jihadi” groups are committed to the use of violence to bring about their revolutionary political goals, notably the establishment of an Islamic state. Finally, the participative “Haraki” groups are committed to achieving their political aims through participation in democratic politics. It is the recent growth of this tendency that is of particular significance.¹³

A government official in Derna said in an interview that “the Rabi’ al-Mudkhali trend is intrusive to Libyan society, and accuses those who participate in the election of being infidels.” A young Justice and Construction Party (JCP) activist from Tripoli remarked, “Madkhali in Libya has tens of thousands of supporters and students who are known in Libya as the group of ‘stay at home.’” Some interviewees noted that the quietist Salafis are influenced by external actors, notably, scholars who appear on Saudi satellite television. “The Salafis who follow Sheikh Rabi’ al-Madkhali and Bazmul and Muqbil take their fatwas from outside the country,” a mosque preacher and legal activist from Tripoli observed.¹⁴

Many Salafists, however, are neither extremists (jihadists) nor moderates (quietists). Political Harakai Salafism has undoubtedly experienced the most substantial transformation since the revolution. Political Salafism is an emerging trend within the movement globally. In Libya, the leading political Salafists include former members of the LIFG as well as several Islamic ulema (religious scholars, usually holding an official post). According to an employee at the Ministry of Education, who is also an imam, influential Salafists are both in government and politically active: “The most influential figures, in my opinion, are in the Dar al-Ifta, which includes the grand mufti Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghariani as well as others like Sheikh Ali al-Salabi.” Although motivated by the experience of Salafists forming political parties elsewhere in the region, political Salafists have yet to establish a clear agenda and speak with one voice. An expert on Salafi movements noted that “they are still seeking new ideological ways to explain their perspective and goals.”

A government official in Benghazi explained: “The Salafis are divided into extremist Takfiris and those that are peaceful similar to Sufis and who call for the good and discard the tendency of revenge.”

Some interviewees referred to a type of Salafism not covered by the four-part typology. This fifth type was described by a political activist and congressional candidate from Tripoli as Salafi Sufism. About 5 percent of respondents in the 2014 survey identified this hybrid. Al-Tayeb Abu al-Issad al-Tayeb, a scholar and preacher from Sabha, claimed to belong to the Salafi-Sufi school. Other interviewees claimed to follow his embrace of “*wasatiyya* [centrality], tolerance, and dialogue.” The distinguishing feature of this typology seems to be a commitment to using—in the words of a religious leader from Benghazi—“the scientific [*ilmi* or knowledge-based methodology] to establish tolerant Islam based on the foundations [of the religion].” This may be based on the unique Libyan experience of the Sannusi revivalist movement, which advocated spiritual and moral purity based on Sufi initiation as well as strict adherence to sharia and *fiqhi* rulings. A law student from Sabha remarked that “the most prominent Sufism [referring to Sannusi], the one looked upon

Unlike the Sufis, Salafis seek to return to a pure form of Islam, whereas the Sufis emphasize only spiritual self-purification.

favorably, is that which is based on knowledge [*ilm*] not on superstition, emerging with *wasati* Salafist [thought].”

Unlike the Sufis, Salafis seek to return to a pure form of Islam, whereas the Sufis emphasize only spiritual self-purification. Salafi thought is heavily centered on matters pertaining to Islamic legal rulings from the primary sources of the tradition such as the Quran and the hadith, with a special focus on the hadith as a binding extension of revelation. According to Africa expert Muhammad Fraser-Rahim, although the term *Salafi* is used to refer to a range of ideas, individuals, and movements, the one consistent idea is the emphasis on following the Salaf-as-Salih.¹⁵ Individuals who focus on preserving the ways of the early Salaf and avoiding innovations call themselves Salafis. Their literalist interpretations of Islamic doctrine reject adaptations made over time to reflect changing cultural and societal practices.

For this reason, more mainstream Salafis who are part of the jihadist and quietest movements clash with Sufis and have repeatedly attacked and desecrated Sufi shrines. In 2012, shrines were destroyed in Tripoli, Ziliten, Rajma, Misrata, and Sabha by Mudkhali and jihadist Salafis. In 2013, a renowned Sufi sheikh from Derna, Mustapha Bin Ragab al-Mahjubi, a member of the Supreme Scientific Committee of the Council of Dawa and Guidance, was assassinated, allegedly by radical jihadist Salafis affiliated with al-Qaeda. In May and June of 2014 in Derna, shrines and tombs of the Companions of the Prophet (Sahaba) were bombed and destroyed by jihadist Salafis affiliated with al-Qaeda. Several Sufi sheikhs were also targeted for assassination.

In 2014, various Mudkhali groups joined the conflict, on both sides. In the east Mudkhalis joined Operation Dignity such as Ashraf Mayar's Salafi Tawhid Brigade. The turning point came when jihadist Salafis killed outspoken quietest Salafis of the security sector in Benghazi in 2013. In the west, Mudkhalis joined the Libya Dawn Operation.¹⁶ Tensions between the jihadists and Mudkhalis in Tripoli continued, however. In 2015, the Rada Forces abducted (and later released) the deputy minister of the Ministry of Awqaf on the grounds of alleged affiliation with al-Qaeda. Fredrick Wehrey gives his analysis of the influence of 2015 regional dynamics and its effect on the Salafi Mudkhalis:

Starting in early 2015 a number of local and external dynamics shifted the Salafi playing field. Tawhid's Tarhuni died fighting in Benghazi's Suq al-Hut district in February 2015. Later that month, Rabia bin Hadi al-Madkhali issued a fatwa forbidding participation in the Dawn-Dignity conflict—part of a broader shift in Saudi Arabia's regional policy following the ascension to the throne of King Salman, which included a downgrading of the Muslim Brotherhood threat and efforts to reconcile Libya's opposing camps. The Tawhid Battalion fragmented and its members subordinated themselves to various Libyan National Army units, including the 302 Special Force Battalion, the Marine Special Forces, the 210 Mechanized Infantry Battalion, and others.¹⁷

In 2016, Mudkhalis on both sides followed the Mudkhali fatwa against the grand mufti, escalating their conflict with the mufti and Islamists, including the Brotherhood and al-Qaeda. They did not join forces, however. Those in the east remain loyal to General Haftar, who is opposed to the GNA, and those in Tripoli are loyal to the GNA. Both consider their loyalty to the *wali al-amr* (legitimate state authority): in the east that means Haftar and the HoR government, and in the west it means the GNA.

Jihadism

Libyan jihadism, the second major branch of the Salafi movement, is distinguished by its commitment to establishing an Islamic state by violent revolution. Not all jihad movements

are Salafi, however. In the past, for example, the Sufi mujahideen fought against the Italian colonial occupation. Today's jihadist movements have arisen from the international jihadist movement in Afghanistan, which differs from traditional jihad and mujahideen such as Muhammed Ibn Ali al-Sannusi and Emir Abdel Qader al-Jazairi of Algeria, Omar Mukhtar of Libya, and Shamel Daghestani of Chechnya, whose history is manifest of their principled approach in dealing with their enemies and non-Muslims in a level handed and just way, a far cry from the atrocities of modern-day jihadists. Differentiating between a traditional mujahid and a jihadist, between the traditional spirit of jihad and the ideology of jihad, is critical.

The true warrior of Islam smites the neck of his own anger with the sword of forbearance; the false warrior strikes at the neck of his enemy with the sword of his own unbridled ego. For the first, the spirit of Islam determines jihad; for the second, bitter anger, masquerading as jihad, determines Islam. The contrast between the two could hardly be clearer....Illustrations of authentic jihad should be seen not as representing some unattainably sublime ideal, but as expressive of the sacred norm in the Islamic tradition of warfare; this norm may not always have been applied in practice, but it was continuously upheld in principle, and more often than not gave rise to the kind of chivalry, heroism and nobility....This sacred norm stood out clearly for all to see, buttressed by the values and institutions of traditional Muslim society. It can still be discerned today, through the clouds of passion and despite the distorting prisms of ideology.¹⁸

Currently, several Islamist jihadist groups are aligned with both the vision of political Islam and the Salafi puritan ideology. Many of the militias under the Libya Dawn coalition fall into this category. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the jihadist trend has a relatively long history in Libya, emerging in the 1980s as a threat to Gadhafi's regime. Unlike the Brotherhood, however, Libyan jihadists always dismissed the possibility of a political agreement with the regime.

The largest jihadist group until March 2011 was the LIFG, members of which tried on several occasions in the 1980s and 1990s to overthrow Gadhafi by force and carried out a series of attempted assassinations and other military operations. By 2004, most of its members were in jail. A negotiated agreement with the regime saw the LIFG declare armed struggle against the Gadhafi regime as illegal under Islamic law and set down new guidelines for when and how jihad should be fought. Many leaders and members of the LIFG were released from prison in March 2010.

The LIFG took part in the February 2011 revolution and played an essential role in fighting against the regime. The movement brought a wealth of paramilitary expertise to the Libyan revolutionaries. Subsequently changing its name to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC), the movement was cofounded by Abdel Hakim Belhaj, head of the Tripoli Military Council, an alliance of militias that took over Tripoli in August 2011. Belhaj is well respected for his years incarcerated in Abu Slim prison, though many were surprised by his appointment to head the Tripoli Military Council shortly after Gadhafi's ouster, given reports that he was not present during the fall of Gadhafi's compound.¹⁹

Soon after its name change, however, the LIMC was disbanded. Two political parties were then formed that ran in the 2012 elections, the Hizb al-Wattan, which Belhaj joined, and the Hizb al-Umma al-Wasat, led by Sami al-Sa'adi.²⁰

Less well-organized groups of jihadists have not formed political parties but do have control of territory. Perhaps the largest of these is the Ansar al-Sharia, which used to control territory in Benghazi (where it is known as Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi), and parts of Derna (where it is known as Ansar al-Sharia Derna). The group has tried to provide local services, such as repairing roads and helping with security. It is also known for destroying Sufi

shrines, however, and has been designated a terrorist organization by the United Nations and a number of countries, including the United States.²¹ It is thought to have been behind the attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi in 2012 that resulted in the deaths of four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. The group's leader, Mohammad al-Zahawi, was reported in January 2015 to have died as a result of injuries sustained in an October 2014 clash with Libyan government forces.

According to a journalist and civil society activist interviewed in Benghazi in 2014, jihadists

have a strong active armed presence and maintain military camps. They see the constitution as human legislation that they do not recognize, abiding instead by the Holy Quran and its embodiment in the sharia, which they consider the true rule of God. Their overall political vision is consistent with general jihadist views and close to al-Qaeda. In Derna, the Islamic jihadist trend achieved an active presence and managed to contain the city of Derna and some surrounding areas and declared it an Islamic emirate there.

Toward the end of 2014, the militias in Derna formed a council known as the Derna Mujahidin Shura to implement sharia and to coordinate fighting against the Islamic State or Daesh. Led by a former LIFG member Salem Derby, the council included Ansar al-Sharia Derna, Jaysh al-Islam, and the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade. Accused of terrorism, it earned the opposition of Libya Dignity and General Haftar. By July 2015, the council militias drove Daesh out of Derna, but not before one of its prominent leaders, Naseer Akr, had been killed. Derby was also killed in a subsequent battle with Daesh. A key informant in the 2016 survey remarked that when the Daesh was expelled from Derna, the council members jubilantly waved the Libyan revolutionary flag for the first time, showing that they considered themselves part of the Libyan state, and not a separate emirate, as they had previously claimed. Along with the flag, they waved pictures of al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri, displaying their allegiance to al-Qaeda over Daesh.

Similarly, in Benghazi, a coalition of jihadist militias called the Benghazi Thwar (Revolutionaries) Shura formed at the end of 2014. Its members included Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi, the 17 February Brigade, and the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade. Libya Shield is also said to be a member. Like the various branches of Ansar al-Sharia that pledge different allegiances in different cities, Libya Shield militias are diverse and generally not considered to be ideologically driven. Many are led by former LIFG members. For example, the Benghazi Libya Shield branch, which is part of the council, was led by Wisam Bin Hamid, a member of Ansar al-Sharia who made the alliance with Daesh. The militia's members are neither loyal to Operation Dawn nor Muslim Brotherhood. From March through December 2015, they fought in alliance with Daesh and under the same flag until Daesh criticized Benghazi Shura Council because it was not clear about its primary opponent—the National Salvation Government (NSG), the GNC, Operation Dawn—essentially prioritizing self over religious ideology.

Other Libya Shield militias, however, especially Central Libya Shield, support and protect the GNC and are part of Operation Dawn. In Tripoli, they operate under the guise of being part of the GNC's Ministry of Defense forces.

A third jihadist council is the Ajdabiya Revolutionaries Shura in Ajdabiya, a town along the coast just west of Benghazi, formed in the spring of 2015 between former Libya Shield militias and Ansar al-Sharia militias in an attempt to align with the Benghazi Council and form a similar local structure.²² It has primarily fought against General Haftar but also claims to be defending the oil fields against Daesh attacks. In January 2016, it made a formal public statement to deny what was spread on social media that some of its members had declared allegiance to Daesh, and later was able to repel a Daesh advance on the town.²³

Modern Takfirists have a utopianist vision, hoping to mold the world in their image.

Takfirism

Jihadists justify the use of violence to defend self, home, land, or state. Takfiris, considered a subset of jihadism, claim the right to designate those who do not practice Islam according to the Takfiri interpretation as *kafirs* (infidels, disbelievers, or apostates). Takfiris therefore feel justified in killing them, though doing so has no actual grounds in Islamic jurisprudence or in theological discourse.

Some historians trace the Takfiri movement to Ibn Taymiyyah, a thirteenth-century Islamic scholar. Others emphasize the role played by the eighteenth-century Arabian reformist Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab, who articulated certain ideas later adopted by the contemporary Takfiri movement. However, it would be a grave simplification to equate the movement as it is today with Ibn Taymiyyah or even Ibn Abdel Wahab. Specifically, for example, Ibn Taymiyyah—in his capacity as theologian and heresiographer (heresy scholar) and according to his interpretation of the practice of as-Salif as-Salih—denounced and refuted at length many faith positions pertaining to theology, mysticism, and philosophy as unwarranted by either the Quran or the Sunnah. At the same time, “although critical of the excess of certain Sufi groups,” he “had been committed to a branch of mainstream Sufism.”²⁴ Both Ibn Taymiyyah and modern Takfiris, though they differ in scope, are dogmatic literalists. Put differently, Ibn Taymiyyah exhausted his extremism in theological discourse; modern Takfiri movements are characterized by their activism.

Another simplification is to associate modern Takfiris with Ibn Abdel Wahab, who was a dogmatic purist and conservative, but not a utopianist. His goal was to reinstate what he thought of as orthodoxy and orthopraxis according to Salaf-as-Salih as a condition for salvation rather than as a vision for the future. Modern Takfiris have a utopianist vision, hoping to mold the world in their image. Distinctions between utopia and violence on the one hand, and between puritanism and extremism on the other hand, are critical. A puritan by definition is an extremist, but not necessarily a violent extremist. In the same vein, the utopian activist is known to have no tolerance for opposition and thus is necessarily violent.

Regardless of the movement’s origins, modern Takfiris focus on non-Muslims to expand their control over non-Muslim territories. Wahabis tend to be politically conservative, accepting the status quo and supporting the regime if their social code is adopted. Wahabism has no ideological standpoint, is a social code centered around the repudiation of “grave worship” (Quburiyya) and saint veneration, and offers no critique of the state.

Modern Takfiris, then, are more than puritanical Wahhabis. Khaled Abou el-Fadl explains:

In light of the recent attention focused on the terrorism, it is important to note that bin Laden, Aymen Al-Zawahri, and the Taliban, as well as most extremist Muslims, belong to the orientation that I have called puritan. Bin Laden, although raised in Wahabi environment, is not, strictly speaking, part of the creed. Wahabism is distinctively introverted; although focused on power, it primarily asserts power over the Muslims. Militant puritan groups, however, are both introverted and extroverted: they attempt to assert power over and against both Muslims and non-Muslims. As populist movements, they are a reaction to the disempowerment most Muslims have suffered in the modern age at the hands of harshly despotic governments and interventionist foreign powers....It would be inaccurate to contend that militant supremacist groups fill the vacuum of authority in contemporary Islam. Militant groups such as al-Qai'da or the Taliban, despite their ability to commit highly visible acts of violence, are a sociological and intellectual marginality in Islam. However, these groups are in fact extreme manifestations of more prevalent intellectual and theological currents in modern Islam....while it is true that Bin Laden is the quintessential example of a Muslim that was created, shaped, and motivated by postcolonial experience, he is representative of underlying currents in contemporary Islam. Much of what

constitutes Islam today was shaped as defensive reaction to the postcolonial experience, either as the product of uncritical cheerleading on behalf of what was presumed to be the Islamic tradition, or as an obstinate rejectionism against what was presumed to be western tradition.²⁵

Some historians also trace Islamist ideologies that justify the use of violence against coreligionists back much further, to the seventh century, when a group known as the Kharijites rebelled against two caliphs, accusing them of no longer following true Islam. Many Libyans today, including some of those interviewed for the 2014 survey, consider the Islamic State to be essentially Kharijite.

Other than the Khawarij, there were other extremists such as Qaramites and Assassins, whose terror was their *raison d'être* and who earned unmitigated infamy in the writings of Muslim historians, theologians, and jurists. Again, after centuries of bloodshed, these two groups also learned moderation, and they continue to exist in small numbers in North Africa and Iraq. The essential lesson taught by Islamic history is that extremist groups are rejected from the mainstream of Islam; they are marginalized, and they eventually come to be treated as a heretical aberration to the Islamic message...The problem, however, as noted earlier, is that the traditional institutions of Islam that historically acted to marginalize extremist creeds no longer exist. This is what makes this period of Islamic history far from troublesome than any other, and this is also what makes modern puritan orientations far more threatening to the integrity of the morality and values of Islam than any of the previous extremists movements.²⁶

This assertion, though, should be taken with a grain of salt because Takfiris today are a kind of neo-Kharijite. It would be a grievous error to stop at that and ignore contemporary influences on these movements. They are products of postcolonialism, the failure of modernization, the loss of identities in the context of globalization, historical grievances over the question of Palestine, and the pervasiveness of the vision of political Islamism centered on the idea of a transnational political entity guided by sharia.

As John Gray explains, Takfiri movements such as al-Qaeda today are

a by-product of globalisation. Its most distinctive feature—projecting a privatised form of organized violence worldwide—was impossible in the past. Equally, the belief that a new world can be hastened by spectacular acts of destruction is nowhere found in medieval times. Al Qaeda's closest precursors are the revolutionary anarchists of late 19th-century Europe...Though it claims to be anti-Western, radical Islam is shaped as much by Western ideology as Islamic traditions. Like Marxists and neoliberals, radical Islamists see history as a prelude to a new world. All are convinced they can remake the human condition...[Soviet Communism, National Socialism and radical Islam] have all been described as assaults on the West. In reality, each of these three projects is best understood as an attempt to realise a modern European ideal.²⁷

The Takfiri movement can be traced to the writings of Seyyed Qutab, a leading figure of the Muslim Brotherhood, a revolutionary prototype and a former socialist educated in the West. Imprisoned in the 1960s during Abdel Naser era, he became even more radicalized in prison (where he was executed) and there wrote his famous book *Milestones* (*Ma'ailm fi Tariq*), which is considered a primary reference for modern Takfiris. His Islamic political theory is based on two essential key concepts: *al-hakimiyya* (sovereignty) and *al-jabiliyya* (ignorance). This was the first time a Muslim scholar portrayed Islamic society as *jabiliyya*, implying that it was *kafir* (idolatrous) because Muslims did not establish an Islamic state according to his concept of *hakimiyya*, which he stresses God is the supreme legislator, the ultimate source of governmental and legal authority.

Paul Berman brilliantly notes the revolutionary nature reminiscent of modern Takfiri movements of Seyyed Qutab, whom he describes as the philosopher of terror:

The Islamists and the Pan-Arabists could be compared, in these ambitions, with the Italian Fascists of Mussolini's time, who wanted to resurrect the Roman Empire, and to the Nazis, who likewise wanted to resurrect ancient Rome, except in a German

Afghanistan became a mini-Islamic state in the 1980s and 1990s, a destination to which Takfir wal Hijra followers flocked.

version. The most radical of the Pan-Arabists openly admired the Nazis and pictured their proposed new caliphate as a racial victory of the Arabs over all other ethnic groups. Qutb and the Islamists, by way of contrast, pictured the resurrected caliphate as a theocracy, strictly enforcing shariah, the legal code of the Koran. The Islamists and the Pan-Arabists had their similarities then, and their differences. (And today those two movements still have their similarities and differences—as shown by bin Laden’s Qaeda, which represents the most violent wing of Islamism, and Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party, which represents the most violent wing of Pan-Arabism.)²⁸

Put differently, such movements use a central, state authority to reorder human societies according to a particular and narrow set of values and views. Takfiri beliefs were brought to Libya in the 1990s by fighters in international jihadist groups that later spawned al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. A few of those who mentioned the Takfiri in the 2014 survey also called it the Takfir wal Hijra movement, which was launched in 1971 by Shukri Mustafa, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood who became radicalized in prison. He called for the killing of Muslims who were practicing *kufir*, and for true Muslims to make *hijra* (migration) to mini-Islamic states, where they could regroup before returning to their own lands to fight and rid their country of *kafir* practices and leaders.

Afghanistan became a mini-Islamic state in the 1980s and 1990s, a destination to which Takfir wal Hijra followers flocked. Libyans among them eventually returned to Derna, where they established a stronghold of opposition to the Gadhafi regime and, in 2011, declared the town to be an Islamic emirate with allegiance to al-Qaeda.²⁹ Takfiri groups include Ansar al-Sharia Derna and former LIFG members. Although they run the local government in Derna and provide social services locally, they have not yet formed political parties nor run as candidates for seats in the national assemblies. One, Sofyan Ibn Qamo, is notable for being associated with the 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy and the killing of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three others. After pledging allegiance to Daesh and destroying the tombs at Sahaba, he eventually fled Derna to Sirte.

Daesh and al-Qaeda share a Takfir ideology but remain at odds and continue to fight one another. One of the first militias in Libya to formally pledge allegiance to Daesh was the Shura Council of Islamic Youth in Derna. As of this writing, however, Daesh has not been able to maintain control over the city of Derna due to a coalition of local forces, including Al-Qaeda affiliates, protecting the city. The city, which is primarily controlled by a coalition of Salafi Jihadist militias that includes Abu Salim Brigade, an LIFG affiliate, and other al-Qaeda affiliates managed to expel Daesh. It is still besieged, however, by the Libyan National Army and Operation Dignity forces led by General Haftar. The Libyan National Army claims that Derna—because of its affiliation with al-Qaeda—is still a legitimate target of its war against terrorism. After being pushed out of Derna, Daesh regrouped in Sirte, establishing an emirate until they were defeated by Buyad al-Marsus, a coalition of GNA forces supported by the U.S.

Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by a twenty-two-year-old anti-religious establishment school teacher in Egypt in 1928 named Hassan al-Bana (1906–1949). A disciple of Rashid Rida (in turn a disciple of Muhammad Abdduh, the Egyptian Islamic jurist, scholar, and reformer), al-Bana was also influenced by Jamal Din al-Afghani, the nineteenth-century political activist and Islamic ideologist. The Brotherhood movement espoused pan-Islamism and called for the return of the Caliphate, adopting as its anthem a mantra al-Bana drafted early on: “the Quran is our constitution, the Prophet is our leader

and Jihad is our way.”³⁰ Like previous Salafi movements, al-Bana renounced ascribing to traditional jurist (*fiqhi*) schools (*madhabs*) and claimed authority to address and interpret the Quran and Sunnah directly, rejecting the *fiqhi* corpus built over the centuries. Al-Bana commissioned Seyyed Sabiq, the mufti of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time, to write the book *Fiqh al-Sunna*, which was an attempt to synthesize the diverse traditional *fiqhi* schools and represent them from a non-*madhabi* perspective, of which he claimed represented the “pure” practice of Islam. Al-Bana had a Sufi background in being a follower of the Shadhiliyya Husafiyya Sufi order, which many argue had influenced how he structured the Brotherhood.

Al-Bana’s definition of Islam as *din wa dawla* (religion and state) reflects the centrality of politics and even the role of the modern state in fostering Islam, according to his understanding of it. His *din wa dawla* statement proved to be the catalyst of what is known today as political Islam. The significant nuance is that he made the state equal to religion, in that he believed the state should influence the religion rather than the reverse—the traditional Islamic understanding of the religion influencing the state. His definition was a reaction to the birth of the modern state, the decline of the Ottoman Caliphate, the wave of secularization, and the separation of religion and state. In popularizing this definition, al-Bana accentuated the imperative to establish an Islamic state to fulfill religious obligation.

Joseph Lumbard—author of “Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology”—offers this analysis:

We must delve into the Islamic intellectual history in order to fully address these issues. Historical contextualization of movements in the Islamic world is important for non-Muslims because an inability to appreciate the subtleties and complexities of the Islamic intellectual and complexities of the Islamic intellectual tradition leads to egregious misunderstandings, which can in turn lead to devastating political miscalculations, as is demonstrated by Walid El-Ansary in his essay “The Economics of Terrorism.” It is also of central importance for Muslims because much of the thought now produced in the Islamic world is not in fact Islamic. Western ideologies are presented by both dogmatic literalists and modern “liberal” secularists with a thin veneer of Islamic terms and sayings, while the voice of traditional Islamic thought is often muted and ignored....Stringent reformists, such as the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia, the Jama’at Islami (Society of Islam) in Pakistan, and the more militant elements among the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, propose strict adherence to the Quran and the Sunna, but in doing so arrogantly discard thirteen centuries of Islamic intellectual history, claiming that there is no need for help from the great thinkers of the past in order to understand and interpret the texts which they themselves preserved and transmitted. They then seek refuge in religious fervor, while closing the door to analysis and deliberation regarding the problems which confront the Islamic world. This approach stirs deep passions in the hearts of people who yearn to live a pious Islamic life, but denies many of the forms of guidance by which such passions were traditionally channeled towards the Divine. In the absence of such guidance a narrow ideological interpretation of the faith comes to predominate. Those who fail to adopt this interpretation are then seen as unbelievers, or at best as misguided.³¹

As well as embracing the Salafi component of Hassan al-Bana’s ideology (as a disciple of Rashid Rida), the Muslim Brotherhood formed an alliance with the Salafis over time. This began when members of the Brotherhood persecuted during Abdel Nasser’s regime were offered asylum in Saudi Arabia by King Faisal. Heavily influenced by Salafi and Wahabi thought, they also managed to infiltrate Saudi educational institutions and groomed the next generation of the political elite. However, the distance between the Salafi establishment and the Brotherhood grew after the Second Gulf War on the difference of opinion about the legitimacy of alliances with foreign non-Muslim forces and the concept of loyalty and disavowal (*wal wa’al bara*).

The Libyan arm of the Muslim Brotherhood was established by political asylum seekers from Egypt in the 1950s. King Idris was wary, concerned for the stability of the country, but allowed them a relative degree of freedom and protection, though not enough to spread their ideology or create political parties. Gadhafi took a firmer stance, cracking down on the Brotherhood severely in the mid-1980s and 1990s when its offshoots posed an armed threat to his regime. Around 2006, however, a deal was negotiated that allowed the Brotherhood to exist and function within Libya in return for supporting Gadhafi's ideology and regime.

The Brotherhood claims that its members participated in the February 17 revolution from the outset, but this claim is disputed by many youth who belonged to the militias in the streets. Whatever the truth of the matter, as an educational and community development organization, the Brotherhood had not sought to serve as a government or political party until after the overthrow of Gadhafi later in 2011, at which point it established the JCP as its political wing and participated in the 2012 elections for the GNC. Although the Brotherhood was perhaps the most organized, well-funded, and well-established of the political groups, boasting an international network stretching from North Africa and Middle East to Europe and the United States, the JCP won only seventeen of the eighty seats on the GNC.

The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya was not only through the JCP, but also through influential political leaders, who included Ali al-Salabi (a noted religious scholar imprisoned under Gadhafi and later exiled to Qatar), Salem al-Sheikhi (former Awqaf minister during the NTC period), and Wanis al-Mabrouk (an activist and politician). Members of the Union of Muslim Ulema, they engaged in a discourse to religiously legitimize the international intervention in 2011.³² Since Ramadhan of 2016, when the Mudkhalis announced their war on the grand mufti and the Brotherhood, Salem al-Sheikhi and Wanis al-Mabrouk have been attempting to dismantle the Mudkhali Salafi discourse that is recruiting armed insurgents away from the political causes of the Brotherhood.

Before the revolution, the Libyan Brotherhood had an estimated one thousand members within Libya and two hundred in exile. Today, the numbers are higher. Indeed, JCP leader Mohammed Suwan claimed in December 2012 that the organization now has more than ten thousand members. The party is seen by the Brotherhood as a national party with a membership that includes both Islamists and nationalists.

Muslim Brotherhood officials generally supported the NTC, several members of which were said to be Brotherhood members, and which appointed Sadiq al-Ghariani as the grand mufti. According to a civil society activist from Benghazi, the public was surprised that the Muslim Brotherhood became a political movement after the revolution and was disturbed by the appointment of al-Ghariani, who as grand mufti "diverted from the context of the fatwa and started talking of politics." "Armed revolutionaries," the activist said, "follow the orders of the Muslim Brotherhood of Libya, listen to him, and walk in the guidance of his fatwa," one of which urged them to fight the al-Karamah's men [Haftar's army fighting for Operation Dignity] and declared that killing them is halal [religiously permissible]."

In 2012, the Brotherhood was said to be closely associated with a coalition of self-described revolutionary brigades (the term is used interchangeably with militias), including the Revolutionary Brigades Coalition, an alliance of more than twenty in the east of Libya.³³ Later, the Brotherhood became part of the Islamist bloc that supported the GNC.

On March 30, 2016, JCP head Mohammad Swaan publicly announced the Brotherhood's support for the GNA, but added that the Brotherhood did not believe that the

Sufism is the essence of the religion where the human meets the divine. It is the kernel of the creed and sharia is the shell. Sufism shares the general and ritual religion fully.

UN-brokered peace agreement had been signed in the interest of the future of Libya. The GNA, he said, has a great responsibility to bring Libya on track. Other groups that supported the now-defunct GNC, however, continue to call for the GNA to be dissolved. The GNA has yet to take control of all the physical structures of the government and does not have freedom of movement in Tripoli or the country.³⁴ Most Misratan JCP members supported the GNA but other Brotherhood members did not. The split in alliance went along regional lines because more Misratans were part of the political dialogue that led to the GNA, whereas most of the Tripoli Islamists were opposed to it. Swaan (a Misratan) became a member of the Political Dialogue Committee and like-minded Misratan former GNC members became members of the High State Council, a consultative body, a product of the Libyan Political Accord.

Sufism

Sufis, though some accuse them of being antiorthodox, do not in fact reject orthodoxy or sharia, but simply balance a more spiritual side of Islam that literalists often neglect.

Titus Burckhardt explains the essence of Sufism: “The esoteric or inward (*batin*) aspect of Islam is to be distinguished from exoteric or ‘external’ (*zahir*) Islam just as contemplation of spiritual or divine realities is distinguishable from the fulfilling of the laws which translate them in the individual order with the conditions of a particular phase of humanity.”³⁵ Its followers “must continually restore between the body and the spirit, and between religion as it was established on earth and its inner reality.”³⁶ Put differently, if Islam is a soul, Sufism is the spirit that instructs it. Sufism is the essence of the religion where the human meets the divine. It is the kernel of the creed and sharia is the shell. Sufism shares the general and ritual religion fully. Yet its teachings go to the kernel or to the essence of the rituals. Sufism, as Burckhardt puts it,

must be identified with very kernel (al-lubb) of the traditional form which is its support. It cannot be something super-added to Islam, for it would then be something peripheral in relation to the spiritual meaning of Islam...[In history], many of the most eminent defenders of Islamic orthodoxy like Abu Hamed Ghazali, Abdul Qader Gilani, and Salah ad-Din (Saladin) were connected with Sufism.³⁷

Historical mainstream scholars of Islam were in fact Sufi. Sufism has also played an important role in inspiring a great variety of literature deeply rooted in Islamic tradition. As William Chittick explains,

The Shaykhs and spiritual guides knew the Quran, Hadith (prophetic sayings), jurisprudence, theology and often Islamic sciences as well. They produced popular books, addressed to the uneducated and enormously erudite books as well, on such topics as theology, metaphysics, cosmology, spiritual psychology, the stages of spiritual growth, and the inner meaning of the law. They also produced much of the best and most widespread beloved poetry in the Islamic languages—Rumi is far from being an isolated example.³⁸

Fundamentally tolerant, Sufism contrasts sharply with Takfirism. It has a long history in Libya. The most influential order is the Sannusi, established in the eighteenth century by Imam Muhammad Ibn Ali Al-Sannusi, who “did not tolerate fanaticism.”³⁹ The Sannusi Sufis who ruled over eastern Libya did not persecute “those who were not in agreement with Sufism as adhered to and practiced by those in power.”⁴⁰

The Sannusi legacy is that it not only was *wasati* and thus tolerant of other religious movements, but also managed to build a cohesive political order that reconciled various traditional units of identity (such as the tribe).⁴¹ It had neither intimidated nor alienated

the tribe in the formation of the state. The Sannusi model is the best application of Ibn Khaldun's theory of state formation in Bedouin societies, according to which tribes willfully submit to the state if the state is affiliated to a religious call (*da'wa diniyya*) such as prophecy or sainthood. Ibn Khaldun observes that "when there is religion through prophecy or sainthood, they have some restraining influence on them."⁴² The Sannusi order was also fundamentally peaceful and picked up arms only when forced to defend their country from foreign occupation.

Although the Sanusiyya is often portrayed as a politico-military organization, as-Sanusi originally established his brotherhood as a strictly religious order, characterized by teachings and devotional practices aimed at strengthening the faith of the Sufi initiate and inculcating within him a spirit of moral purity. It was only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when French, Italian, and British colonialism in Saharan Africa was at its peak, did the Sanusiyya adopt a position inclined toward military struggle.⁴³

After independence, the Sannusi order resumed focusing on the internal ("greater") jihad of the self and ended the military jihad. Idris was explicit in separating the Sannusi order from the politics of the state and ending the practice of military jihad, a fact differentiating the Sannusi movement from militant modern political Islam and the current militias that refused to disarm after the fall of Gadhafi.

Sufism has far deeper historical roots in Libya than Sannusism, and the Libyan landscape is marked with hundreds of sites significant to historical and contemporary Sufis. The Sannusi movement developed and became influential in places not under Ottoman control, specifically, in the eastern coastal region and the south rather than at traditional religious centers of learning. Three especially significant centers of Sufi learning are in the west, specifically, Misrata, Zliten, and Tripoli.

The Misratan center was established in the mid-1400s by Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn 'Isa al-Zarruq, who was both a legal scholar and spiritual Sufi leader. He followed and taught focusing on sharia, *tariqa* (the Sufi path), and *haqiqa* (truth).

The Zliten center was formed in the late 1400s and early 1500s by the *zabid* (ascetic) Sidi Abd as-Salam al-Fayturi al-Asmar, a student of al-Zarruq. When he died in 1575, his tomb became a place of pilgrimage. A large masjid constructed in his remembrance eventually became one of the most respected and renowned educational institutions (madrassa) teaching theology, jurisprudence, Quranic exegesis, hadith, logic, and *tassarwuf* (spiritual purification) in Libya. Later named the Al-Asmariya Islamic University, it has developed into one of Libya's oldest and largest libraries.

The most significant religious center in Tripoli was established in 1654 by Othman Pasha Segizly, governor of Tripoli under the Ottoman caliphate, after the Spanish-backed Maltese Knights of St. John's destroyed the Mustansiriya madrassa, Tripoli's oldest, to replace it. The Othman Pasha Madrasa taught theology, *fiqh*, and spiritual purification.

More than three in four interviewees identified Sufism as a major religious orientation in Libya. Some connected it with the history of the Sannusi movement. Others identified religious leaders who are part of the Libyan League of Ulema as having Sufi tendencies. A female legal professional and activist in Tripoli said that the members of the Libyan League of Scholars were viewed as enlightened and *wasati* but did not note the extent to which they positively or negatively influenced peace and justice efforts.

Sufism is not associated with any particular political party. Still, some Sufi-leaning religious leaders who have been involved in politics are seen in a positive light, according to the 2014 survey. For example, a municipal council member from Sabha noted that "there

are very capable Libyan religious figures like Aref Nayed and Sheikh Abdul Rahmand al-Asmar [both members of the League of Libyan Ulema] who are *wasati* advocates and influencers of all age groups and their influence is very positive.”

Several of those interviewed referred to a culture of Sufism, “which owns a huge legacy of advocacy and presence” and is seen as crossing religio-political borders and having the potential to unite Libyans. As an imam from Derna reflected, “Although there are different religious orientations in Libya, including the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadist, and others, Libyan society grew up on the breezes of tolerant Sufism. The presence of this current in the west of the country is strong.” He continued: “Strengthening Sufism in Libya, and facilitating and supporting its leaders, will reflect positively in the society because Sufism is based on tolerance and asceticism and the rejection of violence and murder. [Sufis] do not like to take advantage of power and positions, and that is what the Libyan society needs today.”

Madani Wasatism

When asked to identify religious orientations, two in five interviewees (41 percent) used the words *madani*, *civil*, *liberal*, and *wasati* to refer to the same group of people. We deemed a respondent to be referring to this trend when he or she used at least two of those words. The designation might seem surprising for a group that does not advocate a particular religious doctrine or represent a particular sect or theological school. It makes sense, however, in the context of Libya’s being polarized between Islamists and advocates of the *madani* movement *at tayar al madani*, and thus the latter are seen as being involved in the battle over the role of religion in politics. Interviewees rejected using the word *secular* because it was seen as connoting negativity about religion rather than referring simply to the separation of powers between state and religious institutions. In May of 2014, non-Islamists started using the term *at tayar al madani* movement to differentiate themselves in preparation for the second parliamentary elections. Because political parties are considered negative, they called it a movement rather than a political party.

The word *madani* originates from the Arabic for city—Medina. In Islam, the city of Yathrib where the Prophet Muhammad made the great migration called the *hijra* was renamed al-Medina al-Munawarah, the Enlightened City. Over time this became simply Medina—the City. To establish order, the Prophet established a charter or a constitution (*sabifa* or *dustoor al Madina*), which was the basis for rule of law and protection of rights, life, and property in a diverse city whose residents included farmers, merchants, immigrants, Bedouins, Jews, Muslims, and pagans. The city thus became the standard for understanding civic responsibility; in turn, the word for civic and civil comes from reference to it. Although *madani* has been associated with the concept of civility in the modern sense and thus misconstrued into a dichotomy with tribal, tribes in Libya were part of the political order after independence. Contemporary political orientations, including Arab nationalists and Islamists, have been antagonistic to the idea of including tribes, however. Given that *madani wasati* is now considered a religious orientation, the explanation of the religious context of civil rule of law gains significance in how the term is used and perceived in Libya today.

One of the reasons interviewees may have felt that the phrase *madani wasati* was more appropriate is that the group is not opposed to religion. The *madani* movement seeks to establish a civil state, whereas Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood want a state governed by Islamic law. This distinction is key. The word *liberal* was also used to describe the same group even though those within the group consider the term to be derogatory.

“The liberal approach,” a media civil society activist from Benghazi remarked, “hoped and aspired for a civil state with institutions that are civilized, with an effective army and police to maintain national security. They all do not see the establishment of a civil [madani] state as contrary to their religious commitment, nor do they feel it contradicts their religious beliefs.”

Although in some of the 2014 interviews, *madani wasatism* was associated with Mahmoud Jibril and what was referred to as “his” party, the National Forces Alliance (NFA), the *madani* movement is far more expansive. Immediately, after the 2011 revolution, Jibril served as interim prime minister for seven months and then, in February 2012, was elected president of the newly formed NFA. Described as a liberal party but not a secular one, the NFA pledges to run the country as a civil democratic state. Declaring that sharia should be a primary source for legislation, it describes itself as a moderate movement that recognizes the importance of Islam in political life while advocating for a democratic government favoring globalization, social security for citizens, and liberal trade policies. Although the NFA is against federalization, it supports decentralization of education, health care, and transportation. It has also proposed that local councils decide how locally collected taxes are spent. In the 2012 elections, the NFA received 48 percent of the popular vote and won thirty-nine of the eighty party seats in the GNC; twenty-five independents also aligned themselves with the NFA.

The *madani* movement was formed in 2014 as the NFA became less popular because of its involvement in the GNC and the ideological stalemate between political parties in the GNC was seen as the obstacle to Libya’s stability. The NFA was also accused of engaging in violence for its affiliation with the Zintani brigades that attacked the GNC in 2014 and threatened to close it down during the controversy over the extension of the mandate of GNC.

In the June 2014 elections for the HoR, the *madani* movement won the majority of the votes and the Islamists did very poorly. The GNC refused to hand over authority to the newly elected parliament. This result led to the establishment of the two rival parliaments, the defunct GNC, dominated by Islamists and backed by Operation Dawn, and the HoR, dominated by the *madani* coalition of NFA and other political groups such as the federalists and backed by Operation Dignity.

The terms *madani* and *wasati* are still contested and debated, however. Wasati cannot be reduced to a certain religious group, let alone a political one, because many groups aspire and claim to be *wasati*. A government official working in Benghazi’s religious affairs department explained in a 2014 interview: “I rely on those with a *wasati* methodology, which is the Salafi methodology, at an equal and parallel distance from all parties.” A religious leader interviewed in Benghazi put it this way: “[Among others] the *wasati* Sufis specialize in identifying, interpreting and protecting religion from incursions of extreme ideology that is harmful to Muslims.” In sum, *wasati* is also an aspirational term for all groups in the Quranic sense that is just and not extreme.

Which Religious Orientations Resonate?

The religious orientations identified in the 2014 survey were those that interviewees considered the most active and visible across the country. That they did does not necessarily mean that they are considered the most influential or that they enjoy the most support among the interviewees.

Most Libyans identify themselves as Malikis, Libya’s Sunni form of Islam. This does not include Amazigh or Tawareg, who follow the Ibadhi *madhab* (jurisprudence school). Liby-

ans, however, do not dwell in strictly and sharply divided religious orbits. The majority do not follow only one religious leader or school of thought as strictly and sharply divided sectarian communities in some other countries do. Moreover, especially in tribal areas, Libyans have been wary of embracing ideologies that dismiss their tribal traditions and culture. Consequently, Islamist ideologies and groups that have foreign roots and ties and are intolerant of other views do not appeal to many Libyans. Jihadi Salafism, for example, does not generally resonate strongly, especially not in geographically concentrated tribal communities because tribal elders are capable of expelling those who threaten social cohesion. It fares better in less tribal and more marginalized urban areas, such as Derna. Similarly, quietist Salafism has taken root in cities such as Tripoli and Misrata. A further nuance is the tension between modern Islamist movements and traditional units of identity such as the tribe. This is especially true for the Muslim Brotherhood, whose relationship with the tribe has always been problematic: it sees the tribe as an obstacle to its monopoly of power and attempts to control public consciousness, especially that of the younger generation. This tension has in fact derailed the advancement of Muslim Brothers in Libya, especially in predominately tribal or Bedouin cities.

Sufism is embedded in the popular culture, but Libyans in fact identify most with the Shar'i Sufism (the sober orthodox school as opposed to its intoxicated ecstasy counterpart), which influenced Libyan centers of traditional religious learning and Sufi orders. All orientations seem to embrace the concept of *wasatism* as just and moderate rather than *ghulo* or extreme. Although many orientations have foreign roots, the foreign beginnings are resented. Local religious authority originating from Libyan centers of learning resonates most with Libyans.

Religious Institutions

A variety of government and nongovernmental institutions seek to regulate religious practices and beliefs, to advocate for specific interpretations of Islam, or to encourage and guide Islamic scholarship. The term *religious institutions* is used to describe entities made up of religious scholars or leaders—ulema, imams, *faqih*s—chiefly and explicitly concerned with regulating, articulating, or promoting specific religious practices and beliefs, rather than pursuing explicitly political goals. The research for this report focused on formalized entities, typically with physical structures and elected or appointed officials.⁴⁴ During the Gadhafi era, such institutions were tightly controlled or silenced by the regime. Amid the contested political and ideological space of the post-revolutionary period, government control has weakened significantly and new institutions have emerged to participate in the struggle for influence.

The 2014 survey revealed that most interviewees believed religious institutions and scholars had a positive role to play in government and peacebuilding. Four in five (81 percent) said that they felt religious institutions had an important role in the government in promoting human rights and social justice. Three in four (73 percent) saw religious institutions having a positive role in promoting peace. Three in four (75 percent) also said that religious scholars still had a role in interpreting the Quran and Sunnah for legislation or the constitution.

Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs

As of the time of writing, at least two competing authorities cover religious endowments (*awqaf*) and Islamic affairs, each aligned with a different government: the Ministry (or

During Gadhafi's regime, religion was integrated into political and social life and the government closely monitored and regulated religious practices.

General Authority) of Awqaf and Religious Affairs under the defunct GNC, and the General Authority of Awqaf under the HoR. During Gadhafi's regime, religion was integrated into political and social life and the government closely monitored and regulated religious practices. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs administered mosques, supervised imams, and ensured that all religious practices within the country conformed to the state-approved form of Islam. Even mosques endowed by prominent families generally conformed to the government-approved interpretation.

The ministry survived the fall of the regime but its staff were purged and, according to a number of interviewees, it stopped exercising the same tight control over mosques and ceremonies.

GNC

The website of what the defunct GNC now calls the General Authority of Awqaf and Religious Affairs in Tripoli still describes its efforts as supervising and unifying the religious discourse and preserving the religious identity of Libyan society. It identifies its short-term goals as promoting national reconciliation, unifying religious discourse, ending misuse of weapons, activating the role of mosques, inventorying and documenting the assets of endowments, issuing relevant fatwas, and liaising with media.⁴⁵

The former GNC Awqaf minister was Ali Mohamed al-Bashir Hamouda, appointed in July 2013 to replace Mohamed Abdulsalam Mohamed Abusada, who had been appointed by Prime Minister Zidan and approved by the GNC after the fall of Gadhafi. Abusada, however, was unable to fulfill his duties, in largest part because Islamist militias barred him from entering the ministry because he is Sufi rather than Salafi. The Awqaf committee within the GNC in 2013 appeared to embrace the Muslim Brotherhood ideology.

Since 2014 and the start of the Libya Dawn Operation, the National Salvation Government established its own Awqaf ministry, which was mainly Salafi. In 2015, deputy Awqaf minister Tariq al-Daqil was arrested by the Radaa forces (Mudkhali Salafis) under the same government's Interior Ministry accused of being a sympathizer with the Islamic State. In 2016 the tensions between the Ministry of Awqaf under the NSG and the Mudkhali Salafis has been escalated.

HoR

The HoR and its Transitional Government Authority, established in Baydah, also demoted the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs to the level of a general authority. This Baydah-based General Authority of Awqaf is supported by the Higher Council of Ifta, which was established by the Transitional Government and appointed by the HoR to oppose the grand mufti and Tripoli-based Dar al-Ifta. The distinction between them is indistinguishable.

According to a respondent in 2016, "this Higher Council of Ifta [and by extension the General Authority of Awqaf] supports General Haftar and was established to be the counter opponent to the mufti." Surprisingly, it too is mostly Salafi but of the Mudkhali branch that opposes the political Salafi party of the mufti. They call Rabi' al-Mudkhali their authority and religious reference. The General Authority of Awqaf made strong statements on Mawlid against the celebrations of the birth of the Prophet. On women's issues, it has issued a fatwa banning women from traveling without a *mahram* (male relative) even to *hajj* or *umrah* (the greater or lesser pilgrimage to Mecca). Similar to other Salafis, it is against

demonstrations, which it declared as haram (sinful) “even if the demonstration is in support of the army,” which it clearly supports.

Dar al-Ifta

The Dar al-Ifta—or Fatwa Council, the supreme religious institution—is responsible for interpreting Islamic laws and issuing fatwas. In 2012, the National Transitional Council passed Law No. 15, expanding the powers of the Dar al-Ifta and concentrating significant authority in the position of the grand mufti. It also appointed Saddiq al-Ghariani to the position of grand mufti, giving the position full legal immunity and the power to authorize or veto fatwas of the council. The Dar al-Ifta does not have any real authority, however; its members simply support and echo the decisions of the mufti. The NTC then called for a council to be established to rule on questions of Islamic jurisprudence, rather than concentrating all such authority in the hands of a single grand mufti. Al-Ghariani rejected the proposal. Because the NTC could not legally contradict the mufti, it established the Council of Islamic Scholars, which stands by the idea that “the religious authority in Libya must reflect the diversity of Libya’s Muslims, including the Sufis.”⁴⁶

In 2012, the GNC passed Resolution No. 7, which gave the local government of the town of Bani Walid, a traditional pro-Gadhafi stronghold, ten days to surrender suspects accused of torturing and killing a “revolutionary hero” from Misrata or face being invaded by the GNC chief of staff and allied militias.⁴⁷ When no agreement was reached, Bani Walid was attacked and besieged. Some Libyans called this an unauthorized use of force, but the mufti publically affirmed the action, which resulted in many deaths, injuries, and human rights abuses. In the 2014 survey, three in five respondents (60 percent) felt that the Dar al-Ifta had played a prominent and negative role in this siege as well. Rather than calling for restraint and dialogue, some respondents commented, the mufti unjustly justified the violence. Many saw the Dar al-Ifta and the mufti as synonymous and indistinguishable.

The Dar al-Ifta, with support and backing from militias and political factions and the mufti leading the way, has exerted certain political influence. It has been able to ban modern banking systems on the grounds that they do not comply with sharia, for example, and has convinced the government to deter Libyan women from marrying foreigners by having to seek judicial permission, the fear being that Syrian men would bring Shiism to Libya.⁴⁸ The 2014 survey revealed that 72 percent of respondents felt that the Dar al-Ifta had been influential in ensuring passage of the Political Isolation Law in 2013, which banned anyone involved in the Gadhafi regime from participating in or working for the new government.⁴⁹ Three in five respondents (61 percent) felt that this was an unfortunate and inappropriate role for the Dar al-Ifta to play.

In the 2014 survey, a majority of respondents felt that the role and authority of the Dar al-Ifta needed to be limited. When asked about its role in religious education, one in four (25 percent) felt that it should not have any role, more than half felt that it should be overseen by another religious institution within the government, and the remaining 25 percent felt that it should not be overseen by any religious institution.

Such sentiments have been echoed by many Libyans, including influential individuals. For instance, in 2014 “religious scholar and former GNC member Abdul Latif al-Muhalhil commented that the powers granted to the Mufti place him above both the judiciary and the executive branch, and urged the authorities to make the Mufti accountable to the Higher Judicial Council to protect the principle of a civil state.”⁵⁰

In the 2014 survey, a majority of respondents felt that the role and authority of the Dar al-Ifta needed to be limited.

Nevertheless, in 2015 and 2016, the Dar al-Ifta reviewed all Libyan legislation according to its interpretation of sharia and instructed the defunct GNC to amend the laws to be compatible with sharia. The 2015 amendments to the Personal Status Law (Law no. 10) is one such example.

On a parallel track with the GNC, the Transitional Government backed by the HoR established the Higher Council of Ifta in Baydah, which supports and is inseparable from its General Authority of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

The Higher Council of Ifta uses religious discourse to describe its opposition to political groups, such as equating the Muslim Brotherhood–Ikhwan with *khawwan* (those who betray), who were those historically rejected by the Prophet. Similarly it equates the Islamic State with the Kharijites (ultraconservatives, sometimes fanatics).⁵¹ The Higher Council's most recent fatwa is that the draft constitution is un-Islamic. It has also heavily criticized al-Ghariani for advocating the writings of Seyyed Qutab, whom it considers to be a Takfiri and a Kharijite.

In August 2016, the Higher Council of Ifta called on Libyans to reject the draft of the constitution and call for sharia committees to correct it. One member of the drafting committee explained: “The problem seen from the perspective of the Higher Council of Ifta’ affiliated with HoR is that the draft calls for citizenship, and the Council rejects the term of citizenship and direct election of the president [of the country].” The Higher Council believes that the president can be elected only by Ahalul Hal wal ‘Aqd—in essence, an electorate that emerged in the eleventh century.⁵² It also objects to the concept of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, calls for monitoring all legislation and that no law should be passed unless the Higher Council reviews and approves it as sharia compliant, and denies the concept of equality between men and women in public roles.⁵³

League of Libyan Ulema

The League of Libyan Ulema (Rabita al-Ulema Libya) is an association of approximately 250 senior traditional Muslim scholars that has counterbalanced the grand mufti's fatwas and statements. Growing from an informal network of Muslim scholars—the Network of Free Ulema—that emerged during the early days of the Libyan revolution, it was one of the first religious groups to publicly come out against the Gadhafi regime, issuing a statement in February 2011 declaring revolution to be a religious duty. It was formally inaugurated in Tripoli on February 6, 2012.

Headed until 2014 by Omar Abdul Hamid al-Mawlud, a member of the Dar al-Ifta, the League represents the traditional, rationalist Azhari line of the Ash'ari and Maliki schools, though it includes scholars from the Ibadī minority. It is also affiliated with the Higher Council for Islamic Sufism in Libya, which has similarly sought to counterbalance extremist religious views.⁵⁴ The League describes its goal as to preserve the traditional cultural heritage and national religious identity manifested in the *madhab* of Imam Malik, his theology (*aqeeda*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and practices. It also calls for the protection of its theology from foreign doctrines, establishing the methodology of *wasatiya*, and warning people of extremism. It highlights the inclusivity and flexibility of sharia to time and place and its adaptability to the changes of circumstance in a person's life, and seeks to revive Islamic *fiqh* through guidance and outreach. Its goal is to preserve Libyan cultural heritage and the religious national identity embodied in Imam Malik. The League seeks to spread *wasati* and tolerant thought in Libya and to counter the rise of radicalization and violent

extremism. A lawyer and women's rights activist from Tripoli said in 2014 that the League was viewed as enlightened and *wasati*.

However, the League split in two along ideological and regional lines in 2014. When the HoR was not formally recognized and the Islamist remnants of the GNC—supported by the mufti—did not step down, the group within the League that staunchly opposed the mufti sided with the HoR and established an eastern branch of the League. The members of the eastern branch have retained control over media messages published in the League's name. Those who sided with the mufti became the western branch led by al-Mawlud, and it seems have been trying to regain their legitimacy with the mufti and Dar al-Ifta or the NSG and the Libya Dawn movement.⁵⁵

The eastern branch still holds regular meetings and regularly issues media statements to television, radio stations, and social media. These statements comment on current events and fatwas, calling for respect for the right to assembly and protest, urging reconciliation, and condemning violence. The League is more influential in the east and south of the country, less so in the west.

Libyan Ulema Authority

The Libyan Ulema Authority (Hay'at Ulema Libya) is a larger council of religious leaders, formed a few months after the League of Libya's Ulema, that supports the Dar al-Ifta and the grand mufti and is opposed to the League of Libya's Ulema. Considered Salafiyya 'Ilmiyya (scientific Salafi), this group describes itself as peaceful and *mu'tadil* (moderate), focuses on the belief of *tawhid* (monotheism), denounces *shirk* (idolatry), follows Sunnah (the body of the Prophet's teachings), discourages *bida* (religious innovation), and seeks learning and studying all that is related in the Islamic sciences of *tafseer* (Quranic interpretation), hadith, and *usul al fiqh* (jurisprudence). It is particular to Sahel and North Africa and strives to reconcile or accommodate Salafi and Maliki doctrine. Although being Salafi means rejecting traditional *madhabs*, the group claims to be both Salafi and Maliki. It manifests its difference in rejecting the celebration of the birth of the Prophet, which traditional Malakis of Libya and all North Africa permit, for example. Traditional Maliki scholars further pointed out the group diverged from the Maliki school when it issued fatwas to demolish the tombs of the saints.

The group is led by Gaith al-Fakhari (from Baydah), professor of sharia and law at Benghazi University and deputy of the mufti in the Dar al-Ifta. Salim al-Jabir is a member and a well-known religious figure from Benghazi who is now based in Misrata and father-in-law of Wisam bin Hamaid, the head of the Benghazi Shura Council.

In late November 2016, after being abducted allegedly by the Rada' brigade in October, the group's general secretary, Nadir al-Omarani, was assassinated, allegedly by Mudkhali Salafis.⁵⁶ The conflict then escalated to armed clashes between mufti supporters, Belhaj, and Salafi Jihadists against Mudkhali Salafis loyal to the GNA, which is perceived as the legitimate state authority.

Religious Educational Institutions

Gadhafi undermined the role of religious educational institutions as part of his effort to eliminate the power of the Sannusi sheikhs and traditional ulema. For example, the University of Mohamed Bin Ali el-Sannusi—Islamic University of Libya—established in 1961 as the first university in the country for Islamic sciences and studies, was closed in the 1970s and all its

books were burned. Its name was changed to Omar el-Mukhtar University and it became an institution for human and social sciences. Destroying Sannusi University created space for extremist and Salafi ideologies to rise in Libya. After the fall of Gadhafi, the former Ministry of Higher Education decided to revive the university and rebuild its rich library. This never came to fruition, however. From the beginning, tensions between the Salafis and the traditional Maliki scholars over control of religious education institutions have been palpable.

At the higher education level, a number of schools teach Islamic studies, among them Al Asmarya University for Islamic Sciences in the city of Zliten, in western Libya; the School of Islamic Sciences in al-Baydah; the School of Sharia Sciences in Sabha; and the School of Sharia Sciences in Msallata. However, on August 25, 2012, the Asmarya mosque—part of the Asmarya University for Islamic Sciences—was destroyed and the library that had housed its old manuscripts burned. The adjacent shrine, tomb, and mosque were also bombed and burned.

The attacks were a result of a fatwa issued by Rabi' al-Mudkhali directing his followers to destroy the tomb of Sheikh Abd Salam al-Asmar. The League of Libyan Ulema (the Rabita) denounced the act immediately but the mufti refrained from commenting, which was taken as a sign of consent. Only later, when the attacks on Sufi shrines reached Tajura, the mufti's home town, did he make a statement denouncing the desecration without the permission of the *wali al-amr*. Tajura witnessed armed clashes between radical Salafis who attacked both the tombs of the mufti's grandfather and other saints as well as traditional mosques.

Also in August 2012, following the bombing of the Asmari mosque, another renowned and historic religious educational center, Zawayyia Sidi Ahmad az-Zarauq in Misrata was destroyed and the tomb of the great Maliki Sufi imam Sidi Ahmed Zarruq desecrated.

The Osman Pasha Madrassa in the old city of Tripoli, where the Quran, Arabic, logic, law, and theology were taught, had been reviving its historical links with Al-Azhar University in Egypt and Ez-Zitouna University in Tunisia through scholarly visits and exchanges. It too was desecrated in August 2012, its hundred-year-old tree cut down, its tombs desecrated, and its library sacked and destroyed.

Religious Leaders

When interviewees in the 2014 survey were asked to name “the most influential leaders in Libya, positive or negative,” one person dominated in the responses. Two others were also mentioned often. Grand Mufti Saddiq al-Ghariani was identified by 60 percent. After him came Ali al-Salabi (32 percent), followed by Abdel Hakim Belhaj (13 percent). Only one in three of those interviewed thought these leaders had a positive influence on building peace and justice in their communities. Two in three (66 percent) considered their influence negative. As many as nine in ten believed that religious leaders were contributing to the conflict by instigating more violence.

In the 2016 update survey, al-Ghariani again dominated responses, 61 percent citing him as the most influential leader. Al-Salabi and Belhaj were each named by 10 percent. Negativity about their leadership role at the national level was higher, at 90 percent, than two years earlier.

These three leaders were by no means the only individuals mentioned, but others tended not to be cited by more than a handful of respondents. In 2014, no fewer than 162 other religious leaders were mentioned as having influence at the local or national level, but most of these were mentioned by fewer than ten interviewees. Similarly, in 2016, a number of Madkhali and Salafi sheikhs were mentioned, but no one featured prominently.

Saddiq al-Ghariani

Libya's grand mufti, Saddiq al-Ghariani, a PhD holder from Exeter University and a leading figure of Salafiyya Ilmyya, has been one of the most powerful and influential figures in the Islamist spectrum since the 17 February Revolution. Portrayed by his followers as an icon of that uprising, he acts as both spiritual guide of the revolution and its protector. He therefore often speaks of what he calls counterrevolutionary forces, which takes on a derogatory religious meaning as well. As noted earlier, many among the Libyan public see him as synonymous with the highest religious institution in government, the Dar al-Ifta. His influence is mainly in the west of Libya, particularly in Tripoli, Zliten, and Misrata. Some observers contend that his support is greater in rural areas than in cities. He also has a strong influence on the self-described Thuwar (revolutionary groups), Islamist militias, and the Libya Dawn Operation that backs the NSG.⁵⁷ In 2014, he went to Britain for medical treatment, but had to leave that August when British authorities discovered that he was broadcasting extremist rhetoric on Tanasoh TV and directing the Islamist Libya Dawn militia takeover of Tripoli.⁵⁸

Al-Ghariani is affiliated with Tagmu al-Asla, a Salafi political movement that won eight of the fourteen seats for independents in the elections of the GNC in 2012, most of them in greater Tripoli. Nevertheless, he is accused by Salafis for being a Brotherhood sympathizer because he advocates for the books of Seyyed Qutb, a radical Muslim Brother leader. He was allied with JCP, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, though he disagreed with their approach to the UN-led peace process and its outcome (the Libyan Political Accord and the GNA). He is also connected with former leaders of the LIFG.⁵⁹ Indeed, al-Ghariani was one of the religious scholars who contributed to the LIFG ideological revision, which culminated in the group's denouncing violence in 2009. That role, however, did not stop him from quickly backing the February 2011 uprising by issuing fatwas in support of demonstrations against Gadhafi.

The NTC decision, soon after the fall of Gadhafi, to appoint al-Ghariani as the grand mufti struck many observers as sensible in light of the fact that al-Ghariani had been at one time head of the Supreme Council for fatwas and a faculty member at Al-Fateh University's Department of Islamic Studies. His appointment by an unelected body created controversy, however, especially because he was appointed for life and discussion of his fatwas in the media was prohibited.⁶⁰

Al-Ghariani's statements and fatwas after the revolution had a great impact on Libyan politics. Some of his actions before 2014 seemed designed to discourage violence and promote reconciliation. He issued fatwas condemning desecration of tombs by radical Salafis and the killing of officers from Gadhafi's security forces without the authority of the state. Relatedly, he issued statements and gave talks on the importance of national reconciliation and the sharia-based principles of reconciliation. He spoke on the crisis of Tajoura refugees and played a role in mediating the conflict between Misrata and Tajoura militias in March 2013.

Some of the fatwas stirred considerable controversy, however. The day before the elections to the GNC, al-Ghariani declared that it was un-Islamic to vote for Mahmoud Jibril's NFA party, claiming that it intended to restrict the scope of sharia. Despite his calls for national reconciliation, he supported calls for a broad ban on former regime officials through the Political Isolation Law, and even went so far as to call for demonstrations in favor of this law to be a religious obligation (*fard*) for Libyans. He campaigned vigorously

Al-Ghariani's fatwas regarding women attracted considerable attention and seem to have weakened his support, especially among the educated elite.

for an Islamic banking system in Libya and reiterated his calls for a Libyan constitution based on sharia.

Al-Ghariani's fatwas regarding women attracted considerable attention and seem to have weakened his support, especially among the educated elite. In October 2013, for instance, he said that female teachers in schools and colleges must cover their faces if they are teaching males who have reached puberty. He also called on the government to ban Libyan women from marrying non-Libyans to avert the alleged danger of Shiite infiltration into Libya from Syria.

The mufti has made plain his distrust of the UN-led peace process. When the peace agreement was signed, he declared that any government that resulted from the agreement would serve the West and target Libya's revolutionaries. He has subsequently repeatedly criticized the GNA, often using the television station of the Dar al-Ifra, Al Tanasoh, to voice his concerns that the GNA is working against sharia. In April 2016, he issued a statement urging the unity government to leave the capital city of Tripoli "before we open the door of jihad on them," and warning that Libyans will not "recognize a government that arrived in a foreign ship backed by foreign troops."⁶¹ Al-Ghariani has pressed for the UN peace agreement to be renegotiated and for General Haftar and members of his army who were part of Operation Dignity to be excluded from negotiations.

A number of those interviewed in 2014 believed that al-Ghariani deserved respect for his religious position but felt that he had overstepped the mark politically and was abusing his position to promote a partisan political agenda and an intolerant version of Islam. "The grand mufti [has the opportunity] to influence things that go beyond religious matters in a very negative way," said one interviewee. Another remarked that al-Ghariani has a "negative influence in Libyan affairs and serves only specific parties in a positive manner: those parties that strive to power." An engineer and lay religious leader from Benghazi said that the mufti "had a positive effect in some situations and a negative impact in others," and that many people do not recognize his "political legitimacy." One judge faulted al-Ghariani for being too involved politically, and felt that the mufti would throw his support wherever it might help to maintain his political standing.

Recently, acting on statements of the mufti, the Benghazi Defense Brigade, headed by Lieutenant General Mustafa al-Sharkasy, which includes many of the senior members of radical Islamist militias in Benghazi (such as Ismail al-Salabi), launched an operation to liberate Benghazi from Haftar's control. A week after this, in Ramadhan 2016, Rabi' al-Mudkhali issued a statement that all the Salafis of Libya should fight the mufti.

On the celebration of Islamic New Year, al-Ghariani compared—for the media—the *al-muhajirin* (refugees) who made *hijra* (migration) from Mecca fleeing prosecution by the *kuffar* (infidels) Quraysh (a merchant tribe) to Medina with those who fled Benghazi because they oppose the Operation Dignity headed by Haftar. The mufti called on the citizens of Tripoli to be generous to refugees from Benghazi.

Ali al-Salabi

Ali al-Salabi is a noted religious scholar and Islamist politician, born in Benghazi in 1963, who joined the Muslim Brotherhood at an early age and because of it was imprisoned in Gadhafi's notorious maximum security prison in Tripoli for eight years. After his release, he finished his bachelor's degree from the Islamic University in Medina and his master's

degree and doctorate from Omdurman Islamic University in Sudan. He has written books on hadith and early Islam, lived in Yemen before settling in Qatar, visited Libya to start an Islamist deradicalization program, and facilitated the negotiations between Gadhafi's regime and the LIFG.

Al-Salabi was also associated with the Benghazi-based militia known as the February 17 Martyrs Brigade, which was commanded by his brother Ismail al-Salabi, who also had close ties to Abdul Hakim Belhaj. In November 2011, Salabi formed what he described as a moderate party, the National Gathering for Freedom, Justice and Development (NGFJD), to take part in Libya's 2012 elections. Belhaj was among those who joined. Shortly before the election, the party was renamed al-Wattan (Homeland). Many accused the party of being backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar. The party had some following in Benghazi but could not compete in Tripoli with Jibril's NFA party, which won many seats in the 2012 elections. Al-Wattan failed to win a single list seat in the GNC elections; only five independents associated with the party gained seats.

Salabi had originally proposed creating a political coalition that would include the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists, but the Brotherhood decided against such a move, wishing to have complete control of its political arm and to avoid inciting an international outcry, and so the Brotherhood formed its own party, the JCP.⁶²

Although Salabi has opposed the UN peace agreement and worked to build regional support for the Libya Dawn Operation, he has nonetheless been perceived as pro-dialogue. He calls unequivocally for national reconciliation, criticizes the attempts at a sweeping exclusion of former officials, and condemned the use of force against Bani Walid, the former Gadhafi stronghold. Such positions being unpopular within Islamist currents, Salabi's influence has declined since the revolution. He is also widely seen as too close to Qatar, and in Salafi Jihadi quarters is criticized (not perhaps entirely fairly, given the mufti's role in the same endeavor) for mediating on behalf of Gadhafi's son in persuading the LIFG to recant its ideology.⁶³

"In keeping with Brotherhood strategy, Salabi portrays himself as a harmless *wasati*," a former member of the Tripoli Municipal Governing Council remarked. "However, he is just hiding his intentions. He says one thing to the BBC and another to Al-Jazeera. If you believe him, then you don't know the Muslim Brothers."⁶⁴ An interviewee in 2014 commented that, like Grand Mufti al-Ghariani, al-Salabi's "effect comes from exploiting religion in politics . . . and their influence unfortunately is negative in the political and religious sectors."

Abdul Hakim Belhaj

A jihadist who fought in Afghanistan, Abdul Hakim Belhaj returned to Libya and helped found the LIFG. As Gadhafi's regime gained the upper hand in its fight against the LIFG, Belhaj moved with other LIFG leaders in the mid-1990s to Sudan, where they were welcomed by, among others, Osama bin Laden.

As for the LIFG and its relationship to al-Qaeda, the UN Security Council designated the LIFG as an al-Qaeda affiliate shortly after the 9/11 attack. The LIFG probably entered into a direct alliance with al-Qaeda prior to 9/11 and at a time when Belhadj was with bin Laden in Afghanistan.⁶⁵

In 2004, Belhaj was arrested in Malaysia, put in the custody of the CIA, which flew him to Libya, where he spent the next seven years in Abu Salim prison.

Belhaj played a prominent role in the fighting during the revolution, leading the LIFG. He was appointed to head the Tripoli Military Council—an effort to unify the militias fighting in the capital—shortly after Gadhafi’s ouster. He “was instrumental in capturing” Gadhafi and Tripoli, though some revolutionaries reported that Belhaj was not present when Gadhafi’s compound was taken, and arrived only shortly afterward, in time to deliver the victory speech.⁶⁶ Belhaj also faced accusations that Qatari funding for the armed revolutionaries was funneled directly to him, triggering concern within the transition government that his party had an unfair advantage over other parties.⁶⁷

He resigned as leader of the Tripoli Military Council in May 2012, and—as noted—sought out a political role, joining the NGF JD shortly before it was renamed al-Wattan. Belhaj, however, not only stayed with the party but also became its leader. In spring 2014, he warned his enemies—Western, domestic, and Egyptian—that “we refuse the interference of any international side that imposes guardianship or agendas on us.” The party would, he declared, use weapons if required to “protect the February revolution.” At the same time, however, he publicly (if not necessarily sincerely) condemned the “attempts to revive dictatorship, inciting violence and [the use of] force by certain sides, who are trying to forcefully impose their political agenda.”⁶⁸ When General Haftar launched Operation Dignity to liberate Tripoli and aligned militias attacked the GNC in May 2014, the Islamists united with other groups to form Libya Dawn. Belhaj became one of its key figures and is believed to provide it with arms.

Belhaj has been opposed to the UN agreement even though he was brought into the Algeria talks in 2015 by then UN Special Envoy Bernardino Leon. This move caused considerable controversy, and many liberals in the country urged the HoR to end participation in the negotiations because of his presence. Belhaj is the owner of al-Nabaa TV channel, one of the most popular in western Libya, and used it to spread propaganda against the Libyan Army and Haftar’s Libya Dignity Operation. Given the nature of his military efforts and alliances, he is seen as propagating Jihadist Salafi ideologies.

Although Libyans are currently redefining the boundaries between religion and the state, a morality rooted in religion is still recognized as important to political involvement.

Attitudes on the Roles of Religious Figures

However, although Libyans trust traditional religious leaders more than they do religious ideologues, this trust needs to be further analyzed because some results indicate that it is limited. In the 2014 research, some interviewees noted that they did not welcome a role for ulema in politics. A civil society member from Benghazi, for example, commented that although religious scholars are traditionally held in high regard in Libya, “they always have no business in politics.” Almost two in three interviewees (65 percent) in 2014 had a negative view of the role of religious scholars in politics. Approximately nine in ten (88 percent) said that they knew of religious scholars being involved in politics. The majority (64 percent) felt that the scholars’ role was negative. In the 2016 survey, more than three-quarters of the informants (78 percent) also had a negative view. Only half thought that religious scholars were involved in politics, but even the other half was just as likely to think that scholars would have a negative impact if they were involved. Yet, although many wanted to see religious scholars stay out of state politics, they still believed that traditional religious leaders, who have moral rather than coercive authority (which they associate with the state), can play a significant role in mediation and national reconciliation. The reality is that the political and the religious remain at once problematic and heavily intertwined in Libya. Although Libyans are currently redefining the boundaries between religion and the state, a morality rooted in religion is still

recognized as important to political involvement. When religion promotes good moral behavior and peaceful coexistence, the role of religion is considered positive.

A former member of the fatwas committee in the office of the General Authority Awqaf and Religious Affairs in Derna remarked that the effectiveness of a religious leader's role in democratic consultation depended "on the leader: if he is known to be of high morals and honest, his role will be effective and influential."

But how does one define good moral behavior? The question becomes stark when it is defined as violence against others in the name of injustice, such as pronouncements from jihadists and Takfiris as well as some of the grand mufti's fatwas. Many interviewees indicated strong opposition to having religious leadership connected to politics or the state if that leadership was abusive and oppressive—a danger that many saw embodied in the person of the grand mufti.⁶⁹

Other respondents took a more positive view. After asking about local religious leaders and those whom the interviewees turn to for religious guidance, the 2014 survey asked whether the religious leaders the interviewees knew were involved in Libya's democratic transition processes.⁷⁰ More than half (60 percent) said yes, and most of those (80 percent) felt that the traditional religious leaders were having a positive impact. Overall, respondents were evenly divided between positive and negative assessments. In the 2016 survey, most (70 percent) said that traditional religious leaders had a role in democratic transition processes and of this 70 percent, most all felt that their role had been positive (85 percent). Overall, 65 percent of informants in 2016 were positive and just 35 percent negative. In 2014, most respondents (70 percent) also saw the opportunity for traditional religious leaders to play a constructive role in national reconciliation. But in 2016, when asked about national religious leaders, only one in ten was optimistic, one in three thinking that religious leaders were playing a benign role and one in two (55 percent) as negative.

Interestingly, this pessimism did not extend to the local level. When asked whether religious leaders could play an important role in mediating between militias, most respondents answered that they could, at least if they worked with tribal or local leaders. In 2014, a majority (71 percent) felt that traditional religious leaders did have an important role in that regard, though more than half of these respondents (58 percent) felt that they were effective only when they worked with tribal leaders. Only 14 percent felt that religious leaders were effective on their own, whereas 21 percent thought that tribal leaders would be. In the 2016 survey, almost half (45 percent) felt that tribal leaders would be effective by themselves. No one thought that religious leaders would be effective by themselves, 30 percent felt that tribal and traditional religious leaders would be effective together, and 25 percent thought neither would be effective.⁷¹

This belief in the ability of local traditional religious leaders to help mediate local disputes, when seen alongside the belief that national religious ideologues have contributed to the conflict in Libya, highlights an apparently widespread tendency to hold local leaders in higher regard than national ideologues. Indeed, the negative perception of Libya's current preeminent religious leaders should not obscure that, generally, Libyan society respects religion and religious authority. Traditionally, religious authority was never personified in individuals but instead was expressed in abstract ways. Religious authority—meaning persuasive or moral authority rather than institutional—has been blended with local authority (in cities) and tribal authority (in Bedouin places). Observant pious local and tribal elders enjoy both. By the same token, in certain circumstances religious authority has been blended with ethnic authority. Observant pious ethnic elders again enjoy both. In short, tradition-

ally and culturally, religious and cultural authority and traditional local, tribal, and ethnic authority are largely inseparable—at national as well as local levels. Ethnic groups such as the Amazigh, for example, were always hesitant about openly accepting modern Salafism or Wahabism given that most of them follow the Ibadi *madhab*. Although Amazigh brigades joined the Dawn Operation, which is predominately Islamist, Amazigh did not entirely accept the Salafist ideology. Research is still needed in studying the role of Ibadi *madhab*—if there is one—in influencing modern Islamist movement in such societies and how it blends or conflicts with Salafi ideology, and how has that helped or hindered the development of the modern Salafi movement (including the Muslim Brotherhood).

The Transitional Government elected in 2012 frequently sought the assistance of tribal elders in mediating disputes, and these individuals were constructive in the conflicts between militias and local communities in the oil ports. The country’s best-known religious leaders have not played such a role. One judge interviewed in 2014 said that the religious leaders most trusted by the people are the sheikhs at the mosques because the trust of the average person will always be in the people they know. Another interviewee, citing national figures, argued that the role of religious leaders “is definitively negative, because their methods are negative, namely the use of violence. Most of those in the arena now have a negative role, starting with the Mufti, and their political fatwas serve one party and are biased in favor of one against others.” Some leaders, such as al-Zahawi, he added, “are not religious scholars, but...[simply] claim to be religious and supporters of Islam. They have a specific [thinking] that they want to apply by force.”

Yet another interviewee observed that “the figures who lead the struggle under the umbrella of religion are [essentially] warlords who exploit religion so that they can have authority in society. Their role is effective as a result of the absence of a strong state component. With the presence of the state, they will have no presence, because, actually, they have no specific objectives or political programs to sustain them in the political game. They are, in fact, a group of outlaws who can only survive in a place void of the state of law and institutions.”

This perception was not unanimous. For instance, one JCP member was positive about religious leaders and peaceful democratic change: “Religion plays a big role in achieving stability, and the figures who participated during the revolution and after the liberation had a very effective role.” They had issued, he added, “the correct fatwas against injustice.” Another interviewee declared, “I believe that the Muslim Brotherhood is the most open-minded group intellectually. They believe in pluralism and dialogue, and in women working in all aspects and fields, including politics.”

More common, however, were comments such as this from a young preacher at the Ministry of Awqaf and a former member of the Salafist trend in the south: “You cannot generalize [about] the negativity [that religious leaders provoke]....But you can say there is a certain bias for a certain political ideology, and that is negative.” A doctor and activist was less reluctant to generalize, and did not believe that the current religious figures in Libya had “any positive output on any sector of the state.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The surveys of 2014 and 2016 reveal a complex set of views about the impact of religious actors on the country’s current political and security situation. Clearly, many are generally negative. The religious landscape did not seem entirely dark and forbidding to all respondents,

The surveys of 2014 and 2016 reveal a complex set of views about the impact of religious actors on the country’s current political and security situation.

however. Some religious actors were seen as playing a positive part in peacebuilding, and others were believed to have the potential to do so.

Could and should the international community be doing more to engage with constructive forces within Libya's religious sector? If so, how might it best identify and support these individuals and institutions? We highlight five areas of promise and recommend how the international community might best approach them.

Local Thinking

Although the 2014 survey revealed that the three most influential religious leaders identified—al-Ghariani, al-Salabi, and Belhaj—are believed to have a negative influence (66 percent in 2014 and 90 percent in 2016), each respondent identified at least one religious leader or scholar who was exercising a positive influence. The 134 respondents to the 2014 survey identified 162 others, almost all of whom (93 percent) were local.

This positive influence, respondents believed, could be put to good, practical use. Almost three in four (71 percent) felt that their local religious leaders could play an important role in mediating local conflict. More than half (58 percent) felt they would be more effective if they were to co-mediate with tribal leaders.

The 2016 survey also revealed some optimism toward local religious leaders and scholars co-mediating with tribal elders (30 percent), though more (45 percent) believe that tribal elders would be effective at this point.

- A local religious leader from Benghazi acknowledged the need to co-mediate with tribal leaders, noting that “tribal leaders accompanied by Salafi students and *wasati* Sufis are the only ones who can have a main role in any mediation.”
- A Tuareg tribal leader interviewed from Sabha declared, “The *wasati* religious leaders have a very significant role in ending conflict, not just mitigating it, because they can attract conflicting parties through moderation and equality and therefore achieve peace.”
- A tribal leader from the al-Shurafa tribe interviewed in Sabha said, “Maybe in the future if a *wasati* religious figure emerged I would support working with him, and the people will choose it, too.”
- Another tribal leader, part of the Tabu tribe and a local council member in Sabha, agreed that if there were *wasati* religious figures working toward reconciliation, they could mediate and achieve national reconciliation.
- However, a militia leader interviewed in the south noted that *wasati* scholars who can command the respect and trust of both sides have not been present to mediate. By taking political sides, influential religious leaders have lost the trust of the people to be able to mediate neutrally.

Recommendation: In local mediation, engage both traditional religious and tribal leaders, especially tribal leaders who are also perceived as religious.⁷² Local traditional religious leaders can have a significant role in calling parties to peacebuilding. Locally credible traditional religious leaders co-mediating with tribal leaders are perceived as most effective in mediating between armed groups.

Potential of Religious Leaders

Traditional religious leaders are believed to be able to play an important role in local mediation between parties in conflict. Do they have a role at the national level in supporting the efforts of a democratic transition and national reconciliation?

Skepticism seems to prevail. In 2014, almost two in three (65 percent) respondents had a negative view of the role of religious leaders or scholars then involved in politics. In 2016, just over three in four (78 percent) did. For example, a civil society activist from Benghazi said, “most of those in the [political] arena now have a negative role, starting with the Mufti, and their political fatwas serve one party and take bias in favor of one against others.”

However, when questioned about whether religious leaders and scholars should be involved in the democratic transition, more than four in five (85 percent) in 2014 said the religious leaders should be involved in a positive way. Yet only half felt that they had been. In 2016, three in four (75 percent) said the same, and only a little over half felt that they had been. A civil society activist from Sabha, for example, believed that “Religious discourse should be used to talk about issues like democratic transitions and national reconciliation.... The mufti, however, is currently taking more of a political turn than a religious role in guiding and this is very negative taking the side of one political party over another and calling other [political parties] ‘infidels.’”

On national reconciliation, again most 2014 respondents (70 percent) were optimistic that religious leaders could play a positive role. An additional question was the type of support or tools religious leaders needed. The biggest cluster of answers (25 percent) related to trust.

- As a civil society activist from Benghazi observed, “To achieve reconciliation and peace among the Libyan sects and groups, [religious leaders] must be supported on several fronts, including strengthening trust with the people, among the various tribes, working with the media on religious front.”
- A civil society activist from Sabha commented, “Religious leaders have a significant role in national reconciliation . . . but the tools they need to learn is how to be a neutral party and not be drawn emotionally or ideologically toward one direction or another.”
- A militia leader from Sabha advocated that religious figures involved in national reconciliation should not be involved in politics but represent religious ideas on reconciliation. The support they need, he said, was to “link the media with their [reconciliation] work and teach them [religious figures] the principles of neutrality” in promoting conflict resolution.
- A tribal leader of the al-Shurahfa tribe in the south observed that “The support they [religious leaders] lack is trust that their institutions have good faith and the willingness to initiate real reconciliation.”
- A religious leader from Benghazi said, “The religious leadership may play an effective role in achieving national reconciliation provided neutrality is observed. They should have the ability to negotiate and convince [people to reconcile]. Presence and direction should be through the minarets of mosques, with discussion groups and dialogue to bridge the gap and use the media.”

The religious and tribal leaders interviewed for the 2014 survey, many of whom have been involved in local mediation and reconciliation efforts, wanted security for those leaders call-

ing for reconciliation help in communicating effectively with the media to call for national reconciliation, and support in coordinating effectively with government and rule of law.

Recommendation: Support local traditional religious leaders' contributions to democratic transition and national reconciliation by helping them foster working trust in communities through dialogue and joint action across divides.⁷³ This includes building effective communication strategies that foster trust through transparency of action both with the media and with local councils and law enforcement. To build sustainability and increase the number of local leaders willing to take on this work, mechanisms to protect those working on reconciliation and local mediation need to be established.

Beliefs and Allegiances

The multitude of armed groups that emerged in the aftermath of 2011 are still active. Some are playing an effective role in the absence of security and law and order, but others have been accused of human rights violations and of taking the law into their own hands. It is tempting but unwise to associate a particular militia with a particular religious ideology. The 2014 survey showed that parties to conflict—militia members, politicians, and so forth—had overlapping affiliations with religious groups and ideologies. It is therefore difficult to determine any clear and consistent correlation between a given religious ideology and a given militia's allegiance during the conflict.

It is not true that all Salafis are aligned with the HoR, General Haftar, and Libya Dignity, nor is the opposite true, that Salafis are all aligned with the GNC, Libya Dawn or GNA. The religious leadership of Islamist militias is decentralized, and each militia tends to have its own sheikh, who not only provides religious guidance but also leads the militia. Even a radical Islamist militia such as Ansar al-Sharia is not aligned with the GNC, though one might assume that to be so. In Benghazi, the local Ansar al-Sharia militia aligns one way, in Tripoli another, and in Derna yet another. And at any moment, a local incident, a commander's death, or a tussle over resources can shift allegiances. The same is true of Mudkhali Salafis in the east and Mudkhali Salafis in the west. Neither pure religious ideology nor tribal or geographical affiliations have been able to describe allegiances, local peace treaties, or conflicts.

Recommendation: In supporting peace and reconciliation efforts, assumptions about possible alliances or allegiances should be avoided. Local perspectives and experiences are more influential drivers of alliances. More research on Salafi changes and alliances is needed before working with groups on peacebuilding. Working with local partners to identify the local nuances of the conflict and to plot where alliances and lines of conflict exist is critical. A person able to mediate conflict in Benghazi would not necessarily be able to do the same in Derna, even if the parties to the conflict seem similar.

Role of Religious Institutions

Although the majority of respondents (71 percent) in the 2014 survey felt that the Dar al-Ifta had not helped promote peace, most (73 percent) felt that religious institutions do have an important related role, primarily through education. Many respondents commented, whether explicitly or implicitly, on the positive contribution that religious institu-

In supporting peace and reconciliation efforts, assumptions about possible alliances or allegiances should be avoided.

tions could make if they propagated a *wasati* religious doctrine that promotes tolerance and reconciliation. Almost three in four respondents (74 percent) in the 2014 survey felt that a government institution of religion should be involved to some extent in regulating religious education, promoting *wasati* views, and countering violent extremism.

- A government employee of Benghazi's Department of Endowments and Religious Affairs explained: "Religious institutions can be the most influential and powerful [way] in order to entrench the process of building peace through *wasati* tolerant religious teachings and by correcting concepts erroneous of jihad."
- A tribal militia leader who is part of the Libyan border guards in the south put it this way:

Religious institutions have a large role in the dissemination of *wasati* concepts through education to the youth, but they are not [fulfilling this role], and, therefore, we see many extremists due to brainwashing and lack of awareness....But all the religious institutions are supposed to cooperate to use educational and religious platforms to promote national reconciliation to do more good.

- A civil society member from Sabha wanted to see cooperation between the Ministry of Education and religious institutions in developing *wasati* curriculum:

The correct Islamic foundation will produce the right sheikhs and scholars that seek reform and reinforce *wasati* religion. I think cooperation must be made between the religious institutions and the Ministry of Education to develop one integrated educational program that will produce a young generation that is *wasati* and responsible.

Recommendations: To reclaim the religious discourse, a new *wasati ijtihad*, based on the diverse traditional schools, is needed to reinterpret the Quran and hadith.⁷⁴ Long-term alternative narratives should be developed and implemented through educational institutions. Short-term alternative narratives should be developed using social media. In supporting *wasati* religious education and the dissemination of alternative narratives, the international community should not be directly involved, because such foreign involvement will undermine the credibility and efficacy of the *wasati* message. It is therefore critical to promote and support coalitions between Libyan religious institutions and recognized credible Islamic institutions such as Al-Azhar University and Ez-Zituna University to develop curricula that promote tolerance and peace while preventing violent extremism.

Religious and Civil Society Actors

The 2014 survey asked respondents to identify ways in which religious leaders have been building tolerance and promoting inclusive peace processes. Of those who answered, just over half felt that religious leaders played a positive role in women's rights (55 percent) and in the rights of ethnic and religious minorities (54 percent).

- A militia member and professor of political science in Benghazi remarked that religious groups and their leaders have "developed an understanding of women issues. Women are dealt with as partners if the issue concerns an election issue related to voting."
- A civil society activist and professor of education from Derna explained it this way: "The religious figures that base [their actions] on true Islam do not find any problem in achieving gender equality and giving women their rights because Islam preserved women's dignity and freedom. As for the minorities and foreigners, the religion of Islam preserves their rights as well."

Although civil society activists and religious leaders are often at odds over human rights, most respondents (75 percent) felt that human rights activists should engage and cooperate with traditional religious leaders on peacebuilding.

- A women's rights activist from Benghazi took an opposing view:

Of course, the present religious figures have a role in the war against women in Libya these days. The current religious trend, and those in the name of religion, are fighting women and call for her return to the home front. Moderation and diversity of approaches are very important in Libya. As for the minorities, their role has not surfaced yet.

Although civil society activists and religious leaders are often at odds over human rights, most respondents (75 percent) felt that human rights activists should engage and cooperate with traditional religious leaders on peacebuilding. Only one in ten (10 percent) thought that it was not possible, given the current circumstances, to work together.

When asked whether social cohesion and peace and justice in Libya were possible, three in four were optimistic in 2014 about achieving social cohesion, and only one in ten took a pessimistic stance. Most in 2016 (85 percent) were also optimistic that social cohesion could be achieved if the leadership changed in Libya; only 5 percent thought it was not possible.

- A JCP member and activist from Sabha commented, "To achieve a cohesive social structure toward a peaceful and just Libya, ensure everyone participates. Then there will be no marginalization or exclusion, therefore, decision making becomes strong and peace is achieved."
- A civil society respondent from Sabha argued that

All spectrums of society should work together without exception; otherwise there will be no fruitful outcome for any endeavor...[Building a] cohesive social structure in pursuit of a peaceful and just Libya means working together, without exclusion or absenteeism of any party; [this approach] will bring us to safety and peace through collective participation and thus satisfy everyone.
- A militia member from Sabha remarked, "I believe social cohesion can be achieved through serious and constructive dialogue, which will create a solid ground for peace and stability, and this will happen when there is cooperation."
- A women's rights activist from Benghazi agreed:

[It is a good idea to] communicate with religious leaders to open a door for dialogue to include international conventions on human rights and women through workshops in which the views of all the parties will be presented to reach an understanding on these general principles. Adopting the principle of dialogue and [setting up] meetings with various parties of different religious orientations and of civil society and specialized academics will open new channels of multiple perspectives. Through [this approach, we] can reach a compromise . . . and ease the conflict, especially if these actions are supported by the media.

Recommendations: Recognize that Libyans are open to a civil-religious partnership. Support such a development between civil society (especially women's rights and youth activists) and traditional religious leaders to work on national action plans on human rights, women's rights, and peace and mediation. Support a nation-building process by establishing a platform for dialogue between traditional religious leaders and civil society leaders, particularly women and minorities, to achieve an inclusive peace process and social cohesion.

Notes

- 1 Rana Jawad, “Libya Conflict: Rival Lawmakers Sign Deal in Morocco,” *BBC News*, December 17, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35121414.
- 2 Amr Ali Bennis, “Libya: Factors of an (Un?) Democratic Transition” (thesis, Harvard University, March 2015), 8.
- 3 Much of this information and other background information presented in this report is from Mona Saleh’s unpublished 2014 “Preliminary Desk Report on Libyan Religious Sector,” which was commissioned by USIP’s Religion and Peacebuilding Program.
- 4 Originally based on a manuscript of King Idris’s memoir this separation of the Sufi order from politics is described in many historical sources on Libya. These include *Haqiat Al-Malik Idris: Wathaiq wa Surwar wa Asrar* (Tripoli: Munshaa al ‘Amaa Lilnashar wa Tawzi’, 1976); Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Denis Sammut, “Libya and the Islamic Challenge,” *The World Today* 50, no. 10 (1994): 198–200.
- 5 Ronald Bruce St. John, *Historical Dictionary of Libya*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006); Karim Mezran, “Constitutionalism and Islam in Libya,” in *Constitutionalism in Islamic Countries: Between Upheaval and Continuity*, ed. Rainer Grote and Tilmann Roder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 6 Saleh, “Preliminary Desk Report”; Lisa Anderson, “Religion and State in Libya: The Struggle for Legitimacy and Power,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483 (1986): 61–71.
- 7 Deteriorating security conditions imposed limitations on the survey. For instance, some of the interviews were conducted over Skype and email instead of being face to face. And in the increasingly polarized atmosphere of the time.
- 8 The Arabic word used in the semi-directive questionnaire was *al-itijabat*, which can be translated as trends, orientations, directions, movements, tendencies, or persuasions. Although the majority of Libyans identify themselves as Sunni Muslims, a minority of Amazigh identifying as Ibadi, the study wanted to understand the prevalence of other levels of religious thought in Libyan society. The semi-directive questionnaire provided examples for the researchers, such as Salafi, Sufi, and Muslim Brotherhood, to help them understand the level of religious thought that the study was trying to identify. Most of the trends were at the intersection of religious and political, which is why the civil liberal trend, which we did not expect to be named, was identified.
- 9 The Sunnah is the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet and the records of his companions.
- 10 Trevor Stanley, “Understanding the Origins of Wahabism and Salafism,” *Terrorism Monitor* 3 no. 14 (July 15, 2005), www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=528#V3Fe18_4_cs.
- 11 The Arabic term—*al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*—connotes holding fast to all that is pleasing to God and withdrawing from and opposing all that is displeasing to God, namely, the *kafirs* (nonbelievers) who are to be hated for the sake of Allah.
- 12 Omar Ashour, “Libyan Islamists Unpacked,” Brookings Policy Briefing, May 2012, www.brookings.edu/research/libyan-islamists-unpacked-rise-transformation-and-future/.
- 13 Jean-Nicolas Bitter and Owen Frazer, “Promoting Salafi Political Participation,” *Policy Perspectives* 4 no. 5 (April 2016), www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/PP4-5.pdf. The Jammi/Madkhali groups are not necessarily nonviolent. In Libya, such groups recently formed armed groups in support of General Haftar.
- 14 Sheikh is a title used for a range of religious figures.
- 15 Muhammad Fraser-Rahim, email to the authors, October 8, 2015.
- 16 The Rada Brigade—a Mudkhali Salafi group, who continues to be a self-appointed police of Vice and Virtue—imprisoned those who were caught drinking, with drugs or trafficking. This made them popular until they desecrated Sufi tombs, and went too far killing some of their prisoners.
- 17 Fredric Wehrey, “Quiet No More?” *Diwan* (Carnegie Middle East Center), October 13, 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846>.
- 18 Reza Shah Kazemi, “Recollecting the Spirit of Jihad,” in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Press, 2004), 121–42.
- 19 Fraser-Rahim, email to the authors.
- 20 Camille Tawil, “Tripoli’s Islamist Militia Leader Turns to Politics in the New Libya,” *Terrorism Monitor* 10, no. 11 (June 2012), www.jamestown.org/program/tripolis-islamist-militia-leader-turns-to-politics-in-the-new-libya/.
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- Al-Monitor Iraq Pulse*, January 8, 2015, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/islamic-state-kjarijites-continuation.html.
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- 64 J. Millard Burr, "Libya-Ali al-Salabi and the Re-Emerging Muslim Brotherhood" (New York: American Center for Democracy, October 13, 2014, <http://acdemocracy.org/libya-ali-al-salabi-and-the-re-emerging-muslim-brotherhood/>).
- 65 Ibid.
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- 69 A number of interviewees voiced a distaste not just for oppressive religious leadership but for the very notion of a hierarchy of religious leadership. In the opinion of an imam from Benghazi, "There is no single, dominant religious leader in Libya, but there are preachers and theologians who advocate for Islam and for applying it, and who give their opinions when asked."
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to have a political ideology. Also, trust in tribal and traditional religious leaders differ from one region to another. For example, in the South or predominately tribal societies such as Sabha, trust is higher than in more urban and cosmopolitan societies such as Tripoli and Benghazi.

- 72 “Religious discourse” in the 2014 interviews was analyzed based on the criteria that interviewees used explicit “God language” to describe events and people’s roles, including reference to verses of the Quran, references to God and God’s relationship to creation, and references to traditions of the Prophet. Religious discourse used by individuals interviewed shows their perception of a religious worldview, not necessarily religiosity. The analysis was not limited by the societal position of designation as a religious leader, scholar, or authority but based on the language the interviewees used. See Palwasha Kakar and Melissa Nozell. “Engaging the Religious Sector for Peace and Justice in Libya: Analysis of Current Discourses,” *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4, no. 1 (May 2016): 59–83.
- 73 Lauren Van Metre, “Resilience as Peacebuilding Practice: To Realism from Idealism” (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015), www.usip.org/insights-newsletter/resilience-peacebuilding-practice-realism-idealism.
- 74 *Ijtihad* is a term of Islamic jurisprudence to mean using independent reasoning and logic to develop new rulings or laws that are not directly contained in the Quran or Sunnah. Here, *ijtihad* refers especially to the need for new rulings to be developed to meet the changes in new circumstances and challenges the global Muslim *ummah* is facing.



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Since the February 2011 uprising, civil wars have transformed Libya's relatively homogeneous political landscape into a patchwork of competing and highly politicized religious ideologies. Violence continues to escalate. Traditionally, Libya's dominant religious forces have been moderate, but under Gadhafi, and especially since his overthrow, far less tolerant groups have mushroomed alongside the politically influential Muslim Brotherhood. Drawing on surveys conducted in 2014 and 2016, this report maps this dynamic landscape, present the views of Libyan thought leaders on the contributions of different religious trends, institutions, and leaders to peacebuilding and democratic transition. Libyans remain convinced that religion and religious actors have a critical role to play in mediating disputes, promoting national reconciliation, and shaping the country's political and constitutional identity.

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