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## **Libyan assembly votes to follow Islamic law**

Reuters (04.12.2013) - Libya's national assembly voted on Wednesday to make Islamic law, or sharia, the source of all legislation, in an apparent bid by moderate Islamists to outflank ultra-conservative militants who have been gaining influence.

Two years after the NATO-backed uprising that ousted Muammar Gaddafi, Libya is still in messy transition, with no new constitution, a temporary government and nascent security forces struggling to contain militias and former rebels.

The immediate impact of the statement was not clear in the already overwhelmingly Muslim country, though it could affect criminal and financial legislation.

"The legislative system does not contain many laws that contradict Islamic law so it is easy to say sharia would be the sole source of legislation," said Ibrahim al-Gharyani of the National Forces Alliance party.

But lawmakers suggested at least part of the reason for the statement from the General National Congress (GNC) was political.

As in Tunisia and Egypt, where autocratic leaders were also ousted in the Arab Spring revolts, Libya has seen fierce debate over the role of Islam in its new democracy with the rise of ultraconservative Islamists long suppressed by Gaddafi.

The hardline group Ansar al-Sharia, blamed for the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, has been attempting to extend its influence, and has accused some assembly members of being un-Islamic. Its militants have clashed with the armed forces in the east of the country.

"This statement will close the gap on anyone who says the GNC is not working parallel with sharia law," said Mohammed al-Zaroug, from the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party (JCP) which promotes Islamic law.

The Congress statement said the assembly had agreed Islamic law was the source of legislation and that a special committee would review existing laws to ensure they comply with sharia.

Unlike codified Western law, sharia is more loosely defined moral and legal guidelines based on the Koran, the sayings of Prophet Mohammad and Muslim traditions.

One reform if Libya applies sharia may be a shift to more Islamic finance regulation, based on religious principles which avoid interest and pure speculation.

The Congress's decision came shortly before a vote to form a 60-member committee that will draft a new constitution.

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## **Bombers target Benghazi Catholic Church**

Times of Malta (19.05.2013) - Foreign Minister George Vella has expressed his solidarity with the Catholic community in Benghazi and Maltese priests and diplomats in the region after a bomb exploded outside the main door of the Catholic Church in Benghazi on Friday night.

The bomb went off at around 11.30 pm shattering several glass windows on the opposite side of the narrow road and also several windows in the building adjacent to the church, housing the priests.

Dr Vella phoned Malta's consul in Benghazi, Joe Pirotta, to offer his support.

The Maltese consulate is the only one representing an EU country in Benghazi.

Dr Vella thanked all Maltese diplomats for their service, while calling for increased vigilance.

Dr Vella also spoke to Fr Alan Castillo, a Filipino priest who assists Maltese Bishop Mgr Sylvester Magro. MgrMagro was away from the country, attending a conference in Spain, on Friday.

Fr Castillo said that Church repair work will be done by a Maltese man who lives near Benghazi.

Dr Vella said the situation in Libya was a matter of concern. He said the Maltese government condemned all violence and would redouble its efforts to contribute to peace and stability in the country.

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## **Libya frees S. Korean man held over missionary work**

RTT News (12.04.2013) - Libya has released a South Korean man two months after he was detained for alleged missionary work in that North African country's port city of Benghazi, South Korean media reported.

The man was arrested on February 10 along with three other foreign nationals on suspicion of being a Christian missionary and distributing books about Christianity. He was released on April 11, a Foreign Ministry official said in Seoul on Friday.

The Ministry had been in close contacts with Libyan authorities to get the South Korean released from custody.

A conservative Muslim country, Libya has imposed restrictions on missionary work.

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## **Christians in Libya braced for Easter trouble from Islamists**

The Guardian (29.03.2013) - Catholic priest shot at on Tripoli church steps, and dozens of Christians arrested for proselytising

Palm Sunday at Tripoli's Anglican church is normally a joyous affair, with expatriate Christians parading in the spacious front yard with traditional palm branches. Not this year.

Fearing the attention of Islamist militants after recent attacks on churches and the arrest of dozens of Christians accused of proselytising, the church cancelled last weekend's planned parade.

"We usually celebrate with pomp, but I said no," said the Rev Vasihar Baskaran, vicar of the church of Christ the King, in Tripoli's picturesque Old Town, a popular venue for British, American, African and Asian worshippers. "I thought it was better not to attract the attention of bad elements. I told the congregation: when the service is finished, don't stand in the churchyard and drink tea and have fun, just go home."

It is the same story at the nearby Catholic church of St Francis, which has closed its doors outside service hours after a uniformed gunman shot at a priest on the church steps.

[Libya](#) has no recognised Christian community, but the small collection of churches serving foreign residents are braced for trouble at this weekend's Easter services.

Earlier this month jihadist militants set Benghazi's Coptic church ablaze with the priest inside it; his life was saved by local Muslim residents rushing into the flames. That followed the killing of two Egyptian worshippers in the bombing of another Coptic church in Misrata earlier this year. Tripoli's Coptic church has a 24-hour police guard; the Greek

Orthodox church has closed, its priest returning to Greece after he was shot at outside his home.

Meanwhile, Libya's defence ministry has begun a crackdown on Christians accused of proselytising, beginning in February with the arrest of an American, an Egyptian, a South African and a South Korean accused of spreading Christian literature in Benghazi.

A further 48 Egyptian Copts were arrested in the same city, triggering protests and the burning of the Libyan flag in Cairo when one of the arrested died in custody.

The arrests were made by the Office of Preventive Security, a defence ministry unit tasked with defending Libya's Islamic culture.

At its military compound on the outskirts of Benghazi, preventive security commander Abdul Salam Barghathi showed off a collection of Bibles and Christian tracts in English and Arabic that he said were among 55,000 books seized in a raid on an evangelist warehouse.

"They were printing these in the city. Some of these books were given to children," he said.

Barghathi said the arrested Christians were shortly to be released as a "diplomatic gesture". "Anything that comes from abroad can be an invasion against our ideas and our thoughts, which can be a danger to homeland security," he said. "David Cameron has a famous saying. He said, 'Concerning the homeland security, don't ask about human rights'. I saw it on Facebook."

A few miles away the city's Coptic church is a blackened, abandoned ruin. Inside, wrecked furniture lies amid smashed stained glass and charred pews, reeking of smoke and rotting fruit from the ransacked kitchen.

Neighbour Abdul Muhammad said local Muslims saved the life of the priest after militants set the building ablaze. "We didn't know the priest was inside, then we heard him shouting. One of our guys took his gun and threatened to shoot anyone harming the priest, and we managed to get him out and drive him to the [Egyptian] consulate."

It is far from clear that jihadist militants enjoy widespread support; rather, they operate in a security vacuum in a country hamstrung by weak and divided government. The Benghazi church attack, like that by Islamists who killed US ambassador Chris Stevens at the American consulate in September, has triggered revulsion in a city which was the cradle of Libya's Arab spring revolution. "Trust me, the Christians are our friends, we get on with them," said Muhammad. "Our revolution was about freedom."

Meged Labib, an Egyptian Christian market trader, who showed a small blue cross tattooed on his wrist, agreed. "Really, we have no troubles with most people in Benghazi, I have Muslim friends here."

But he admitted being nervous. "Our priest fled to Egypt; I don't think they will repair the church. For now, we hold services at home."

Barghathi insisted his forces would protect churches, and condemned the militant attacks, but advised Christians not to attempt to spread their faith in Libya. "They should be careful. Anything that touches our [religion](#) offends us very badly. I don't really advise the Egyptians to get another church now."

Back in Tripoli, Baskaran insists Easter services will go ahead, albeit with the church door closed. "We will use the Easter services to pray for Libya. There is so much good in this country," he said.

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## **Sufi shrine blown up in latest religious attack in Libya**

Reuters (29.03.2013) - Unknown assailants blew up a major Sufi shrine in the Libyan capital on Thursday, residents said, the first such attack since several last year in the North African country.

Ultra-conservative Islamists have targeted sites belonging to Islam's Sufi tradition, which they brand idolatrous, since the end of a 2011 war that ousted Muammar Gaddafi. There were about a dozen attacks on Sufi shrines last spring and summer.

Thursday's bombing took place in the early morning and struck the Sidi Al-Andlusi mausoleum in the Tripoli suburb of Tajoura, residents said. The shrine of a Sufi theologian from the 15th century is protected under law as a national monument.

"It was a bomb attack. The doors and windows were blown out, the inside is charred," said one witness who lives near the shrine and declined to give his name.

"Everyone is very saddened by what has happened."

He said one person had been arrested in connection with the attack and was now under investigation.

The head of Tripoli's local council, Sadat al-Badri, condemned the attack, saying it was "against the ways of the Islamic religion", state LANA news agency reported.

In July, conservative Islamists blew up the tomb of a 15th century Sufi scholar and burned down a library in the Libyan town of Zlitan.

Attackers bulldozed a mosque containing Sufi graves in the center of Tripoli in broad daylight in late August, in what appeared to be Libya's most blatant sectarian attack since Gaddafi's overthrow.

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## **Libya's Christians tense as Easter celebrations commence**

Bloomberg (29.03.2013) - Churches in Libya's capital, Tripoli, are tightening security measures before Easter celebrations on concern that Christians will be targeted by Islamist militants.

The doors of the Christ the King Church in the city's Old Town will be closed during services, Reverend VasiharBaskaran, vicar at the Anglican church, said in an interview. In previous years they were left open, with people free to come and go, he said.

"I asked the congregation not to linger in the courtyard, and just to go home after the service," Baskaran said. "We do not want to provoke any distractions."

Baskaran said he also cancelled a Palm Sunday parade through the streets. Police guards are stationed around the capital's Coptic Church. Further east, the Vatican closed the Congregation of the Holy Family of Sapoletto, a 100-year-old monastery on the coast at Derna, and evacuated the Franciscan Sisters of the Child Jesus convent at nearby Barca.

Islamists, suppressed under the 42-year rule of Muammar Qaddafi, have been flexing their muscles in the security vacuum that emerged after his ouster in 2011. Much of the violence has been directed at the minority Sufi sect, through the ransacking of their libraries and destruction of their mosques and shrines.

More recently, militants have attacked churches and cemeteries. In February, a gunman shot at Catholic and Greek Orthodox priests in Tripoli. Christians account for an estimated 1 percent of the population of 6.5 million and are mostly foreign workers.

Dozens of people have also been arrested on charges of proselytizing.

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## **Attacks and arrests in Libya**

***The leader of Catholics in north-east Libya has said he and his faithful will stand firm and continue undeterred despite an arson attack on a church and the arrest of Christian evangelists***

Aid to the Church in Need (22.03.2013) - Speaking to Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Bishop Sylvester Magro of Benghazi described how the Church was providing "silent testimony" through its charitable and pastoral activities.

Asked about the torching of St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in Benghazi on Thursday, March 14th, he said, "No one was expecting a reaction like that."

Explaining the attack, the bishop said, "There was a protest in Cairo [Egypt's capital] and this looks like a retaliation for that protest."

The attack came in response to an anti-Libyan protest in Cairo following the death of Ezzat Atallah, an Egyptian Christian, aged 45.

Mr. Atallah reportedly died of natural causes in a Benghazi prison on March 10th, after being arrested with three other men in February on a charge of proselytizing.

He was suffering from a heart condition and had diabetes.

Bishop Magro described how, despite such setbacks, the Church was continuing its mission.

He said, "Notwithstanding the difficulties that may crop up every now and then, we strive to continue with our silent testimony of worship, of faith, of trust, of confidence and growth in the Word of God."

His comments come after reports of 48 Coptic Orthodox traders kidnapped late last month after complaints about their religious imagery on vendors' boards and stalls in Benghazi.

In a video seized by police, the traders appear locked in a small room, watched over by men with long Salafist-style beards.

Many of those kidnapped have cuts, bruises and shaven heads.

The bishop, a member of the Franciscan order which has been working in the country since 1628, praised the work of the Sisters of Immaculate Conception of Ivrea who help poor Christians.

Most Catholics in Libya are from the Philippines or North Africa and many earn less than others in the country.

Bishop Magro who oversees the Apostolic Vicariate of Benghazi, said, "This apostolate run by Sisters from Tanzania provides the Church with a living image of interesting itself in the poor, as Pope Francis said at his installation."

"In all situations we try to help [using] the donations provided by the Holy Father himself; we have much pastoral work, also, and humanitarian or charitable activity."

ACN provided the vicariate with a vehicle enabling priests to offer Mass in remote areas at least twice a month.

Bishop Magro said, "Our Vicariate extends from Marsa al BurayqahMisratah on the gulf of Sirte up to Tubruq in the east, close to the Egyptian border, and the towns on the coast road, like Al Marj, Al Bayda, Tubruq itself, have Christian Catholic communities in each town and we are always traveling... to these mission stations."

"From Burayqah to Benghazi there are 300km roughly from Benghazi to Tubruq there are 500km, so 800 in all, and that makes the car work very hard."

The bishop thanked Aid to the Church in Need for its support.

He said, "I would like to thank all the benefactors that contribute through ACN because it is only through them that we can operate in our mission."

"And may God reward all those who generously donate their support, because their names are known to Him alone, but we offer our prayers in supplication to the Lord for their intentions."

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## **Coptic Christians say they were tortured in Libya**

AP (15.03.2013) — Dozens of Coptic Christians were tortured inside a detention center run by a powerful militia in eastern Libya, two of the recently released detainees told The Associated Press on Friday amid a wave of assaults targeting Christians in Benghazi and the latest instance of alleged abuse by Libyan security forces.

The two, among an estimated 50 Egyptian Christians who have been detained in Libya on suspicion of proselytizing, told of being rounded up in a market by gunmen who checked their right wrists for tattoos of crosses.

"They first checked our wrists searching for the crosses and if they found them, we (had to) get into their cars," said 26-year-old Amgad Zaki from the southern city of Samalout in Minya province, 220 kilometers (135 miles) south of Cairo.

Zaki said a group of men — some in uniform and some in civilian clothes — rounded up Egyptians selling clothes in a market called el-Jareed in Benghazi on Feb. 26. He and other Christians climbed into SUVs that he said carried the sign of Libya Shield One, one of the most powerful militias in Benghazi that is under the command of Islamist and ex-rebel Wassam Bin Hemad.

"They shaved our heads. They threatened to sever our heads in implementation of Islamic Shariah (law) while showing us swords," said Zaki, who was interviewed on the telephone from his home after returning to Egypt earlier this month.

"They dealt with us in a very brutal way, including forcing us to insult our Pope Shenouda," Zaki said, referring to the former Coptic pontiff who died last year.

He said that during four days of detention they were flogged, forced to take off their clothes in cold weather and stand at 3 a.m. outdoors on floor covered with stones.

"I was taken to clean a bathroom, and the man pushed my head inside the toilet and sat on me," he said. "I was dying every day, and at one point I thought death is better than this."

Militias have been targeting Christians, women, journalists, refugees and those considered former loyalists of Moammar Gadhafi, who was toppled and killed in Libya's 2011 civil war. The state relies on the militias to serve as security forces since Libya's police and military remain in shambles.

Egypt's foreign ministry said that its embassy in Libya was investigating the allegations of torture.

The militia that held the group claimed it treated the Coptic Christian detainees well.

However, Atef Habib, 34-year-old vendor who is also from Minya province, also alleged mistreatment in the detention center.

He recalled how a Coptic Christian priest was beaten up and his head and mustache were shaved by the captors. Habib said that an aide to the priest also was beaten. "His face was blackened and bleeding from beating," Habib said.

Fathi Ubaidi, one of the top commanders of Libya Shield, denied abusing the Coptic Christians. He said in a phone interview that the Egyptians were treated "very well" and "if there is any rights organization who would like to talk to them, they are more than welcome."

The family of one Coptic Christian who also was arrested in Benghazi for allegedly spreading Christianity said he was tortured to death in a detention center in the Libyan capital, Tripoli. His wife, Ragaa Abdallah, and his relatives blame his death on torture, but the Egyptian Foreign Ministry said that the man, Ezzat Atallah, who suffered from diabetes and a heart ailment, likely died of natural causes.

Earlier this week in Cairo, demonstrators burned a flag belonging to the Libyan Embassy to protest Atallah's death.



Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians are working construction and trade jobs in Libya, a nation of 6.5 Muslims with no significant religious minority. Hundreds are believed to have killed in crossfire during the war and many others have lost their jobs.

Benghazi witnessed a series of assassinations of top security and military officials and diplomats' convoys have come under fire, prompting Western countries to urge their citizens to leave. On Sept. 11, U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens was killed along with three other Americans during an assault on the U.S. mission in Benghazi. An Islamic militia group named Ansar al-Shariah was blamed for the attack.

The first word that dozens of Egyptian Christians had been detained spread after a video clip surfaced last month showing a Libyan militiaman in uniform holding a group of Christian Egyptians. The militiaman said that the detainees, whose heads were shaved, were among nearly 100 Coptic Egyptians being held for allegedly spreading Christianity in Libya.

The video showed Bibles and Christian books next to the detainees. It surfaced only few days after authorities announced the arrest of an Egyptian, South Korean, South African and Swede, who had an American passport, for allegedly spreading Christianity. The Libyan police chief behind that case, Abdel-Salam el-Barghathi, said that the two cases are separate.

The story of the Coptic Christian detainees come at the same time that the Libyan parliament has halted its sessions after being attacked by militiamen. The head of the parliament escaped an assassination attempt during last week's attack.

Moreover, two days ago, Hassan al-Amin, the head of the human rights committee of the parliament, fled to London in self-exile after receiving death threats to him and his family.

He told a private-owned Libyan network Al-Assima — which was raided by unidentified gunmen more than a week ago — that he was resigning from parliament. Al-Amin is a longtime opposition figure who has been on the run from Gadhafi's regime for nearly 30 years. His resignation came after speaking against militias and warning of their human rights abuses.

In an audio clip that was widely circulated on social media, al-Amin said he had seen abuses taking place in prisons that are "much worse than those that took place in the days of Gadhafi."

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## **Egyptian 'missionary' tortured to death in Libya**

RT (11.03.2013) - An Egyptian Christian suspected of trying to convert Muslims in Libya was tortured to death while in police custody, an Egyptian human rights lawyer said.

Ezzat Hakim Attallah "died after being tortured with other detainees" in Libya's second largest city Benghazi, Naguib Guebrayel, a Coptic Christian lawyer who heads the Egyptian Union for Human Rights, told AFP.

Guebrayel's claim contradicts an Egyptian Foreign Ministry official who said on Sunday that Attallah, who suffered from diabetes and heart ailments, had likely died of natural causes.

Attallah was among five Evangelical Christian Egyptians detained in Libya for allegedly attempting to seek religious converts in the predominantly Muslim nation.

His death follows the March 1 detention of four dozen Egyptian Christians in the city.

"Forty-eight Egyptian traders who worked in the Benghazi municipal market have been arrested based on reports of suspect activities," a Libyan security official told the agency in Benghazi on condition of anonymity.

The source said the Copts were primarily arrested for entering Libya illegally, they also had large quantities of religious texts and paraphernalia which were not for "personal use."

The men were reportedly rounded up by a group claiming allegiance to be Ansar Sharia, the notorious Islamist militia implicated in the death of American Ambassador Chris Stevens last September, the UK Telegraph reports.

They were later handed over to a government-backed group in what the daily reports is a "wider purge of hundreds of Egyptians" in the restive city.

Ragaa Nagah, the wife of one of the detainees, told the paper her husband "was afraid to tell us how he was tortured, but he couldn't see out of one of his eyes."

"They were standing over him and beating him while they asking him to confess and when they were about to give him an electric shock he said, 'Don't do that and I will say anything you want me to say.'"

Four other foreigners - an Egyptian, a South African, a South Korean and a Swede with a US passport - were also arrested in Benghazi in mid-February on suspicion of proselytizing.

Proselytizing - which was banned under the secular regime of Muammar Gaddafi - remains illegal in post-revolutionary Libya.

Guebrayel says that Egypt's Islamist government had done little to aid Egyptians arrested in Libya.

However, Egypt's Foreign Ministry intervened to secure the release of 55 Egyptians who were also arrested on suspicion of trying to convert Muslims to Christianity. Thirty five of them were deported for illegally entering the country, while 20 more were allowed to stay in Libya.

Church officials say pre-revolutionary Libya had up to 100,000 Christians, though their numbers have dwindled to a few thousand since.

Since the 2011 revolution that resulted in Gadhafi's ouster and subsequent death, the fear of Islamic extremism has rattled the country's small Christian minority, most of whom are expatriates.

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**Libya Islamists gaining strength: Libyans concerned by sectarian violence**

The Media Line (19.03.2013) - When a group of Islamic terrorists with links to al Qaeda assaulted the American consulate in Benghazi killing Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans, many Libyans hoped it was an aberration. But 18 months later, religious violence is growing and the emerging government seems paralyzed.

Radical Islamists have unleashed a string of attacks on foreign and Christian targets. These actions include threats, beatings, public lashings and desecration of holy sites.

In early March, a Coptic church in Benghazi was assaulted and damaged by unidentified armed men. An eyewitness reports seeing the black flag of al Qaeda raised above the church in the aftermath of the attack.

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry has called for a swift investigation into the incident, which is the third such attack on a Coptic church in recent months, according to the Egypt Independent.

Some suspect that the attack may have been retaliatory.

"The burning of the church was a response to Egyptian Copts burning the Libyan flag in Cairo and the painting of crosses on the Libyan Embassy in Cairo," Salem, a Libyan from Benghazi who is working with the National Transitional Council told The Media Line. He refused to give his last name, citing security concerns.

About the time of that attack, two Coptic Christians told the Associated Press that they -- along with dozens of others -- had been abducted by a militia and taken to a detention center in east Libya. There, they claim, they were tortured, threatened with death and forced to make statements insulting Coptic figures.

The men were accused of evangelism, which is illegal in Libya. In early March, Libya attempted to deport 50 Egyptians for printing books encouraging conversion to Christianity. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry intervened successfully on their behalf.

Persecution has extended, as well, to the Sufi community, which some Muslims consider to be heretical. Last year, several Sufi shrines were desecrated or destroyed by Islamic militias. The Libyan government was accused of being complicit, and the resulting uproar almost led to the resignation of the Interior Minister, Fawzi Abdel Aal.

Most scholars say religious persecution is condemned by the Quran and Islamic tradition.

"Muhammad considered Christians and Jews possessors of divine revelations -- ahl al-kitaab, "people of the Book," or dhimmis -- entitled to protection in return for submission and tribute," Najib Saliba, a Middle East Studies professor at Worcester State College wrote in an article entitled "Christians and Jews Under Islam."

"Accordingly, Muhammad established and recognized treaties with both Christians and Jews assuring them peace, and tolerance to freely work, trade and worship in the same community of Muslims."

The persecution continues, however, and affects Muslims as well.

Last week, a video was uploaded to YouTube depicting the public lashing of a group of men in Sirte. In the video, bearded men take turns tying the men to a tree and whipping them for over 15 minutes each. The men were accused of violating sharia, or traditional Islamic law.

Though unidentified in the video, the men responsible for the lashing are reported by al-Arabiya to be members of Ansar al-Sharia ("Partisans of Islamic Law"), a militant Islamic group that has also claimed responsibility for the assault on the American consulate.

Women are particularly threatened by the fundamentalist interpretation of sharia that these militants seek to enforce.

Aicha al-Magrabi, a poet and university lecturer, was recently stopped by a militia as she rode home from work in Tripoli. The men beat her male driver and threatened to punish al-Magrabi for "being alone in a car with men without a male relative as a guardian."

Radicalism has been growing in Libya since the early days of the revolution, back in February 2011. Throughout the year, Islamic militants were sighted in several cities throughout the country, fighting alongside their secular counterparts to overthrow Muammar Qadhafi. Now, militias -- both secular and Islamic -- compete for power in the weak state.

With this history in mind, some see recent events in Libya as the natural consequences of a combination of instability, a power vacuum and an influx of jihadist militants.

"Secular regimes, such as the one that existed under Qaddafi, kept Islamist sentiment in check," Barak Barfi, a research fellow at the New America Foundation, told The Media Line. "The collapse of his government, in addition to nonexistent security, has allowed such groups to flourish. With no pervasive intelligence services to persecute them, they are today able to establish virtual states within a state."

Despite reports of al Qaeda sightings and Islamic fundamentalist activity throughout the past two years, the Libyan National Transitional Council denied the presence of terrorism in Libya until the Sept. 11 attack on the American consulate. This hesitancy to act may have given the militias and religious groups time to establish a foothold in the fledgling government.

"These militias could take matters into their own hands at any point. Some of them are loyal to certain politicians and political groups, and can be mobilized on their orders. There are al Qaida [members] in the General National Congress (GNC)," an anonymous source close to the Libyan GNC told The Media Line. The source asked not to be named due to security concerns.

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## **Benghazi, 48 Egyptian Christians arrested on religious grounds**

AsiaNews (02.03.2013) - Islamists in Benghazi continue their hunt of Christian workers in the country accusing them of proselytism. The latest case concerns the arrest of 48 Egyptian Coptic Orthodox traders arrested last week in the capital of Cyrenaica. They were detained after a complaint by some Libyans, suspicious of the religious imagery on the vendors boards and stalls in the market of Benghazi. In a video immediately seized by police they appear locked in a small room watched over by men who have the typical beard worn by Salafists (see photo). From the pictures the 48 appear in an obvious state of physical deterioration, many show bruises and abrasions. Each of them had their head shaved.

The case has sparked outrage among the population of Benghazi, which in October rose up against the Salafi militias accused of having organized the attack on the U.S.

consulate in which Ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed. Yesterday, the authorities issued a statement in which they declare that the hawkers were arrested for violating immigration laws and not for religious reasons. However, this is yet another case of discrimination against Christians living in Libya. [In mid-February four foreigners](#) - an Egyptian, a South African, a South Korean and a Swede with a U.S. passport - were arrested on charges of distributing Bibles and other religious material.

The spread of Islamic extremism is also affecting the Catholic religious orders present for decades on Libyan territory, engaged in hospital work and looking after the elderly. In January, the Islamists prompted the flight of the Franciscan Sisters of the Infant Jesus from Barce and the Ursuline Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from Beida. [In October](#) instead it was the turn of nuns from the Convent of the Holy Family of Spoleto in Derna, forced to leave Libya due to continuous threats from Islamic extremists, despite the opposition of the inhabitants of the city.

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## **Four missionaries arrested in Benghazi may face death penalty**

Christianity Today (01.03.2013) - AFP reports that 48 Egyptian Christians [have been arrested](#) in Benghazi on illegal immigration charges. They are accused of attempting to evangelize Muslims, but "the main charge was illegal entry into Libya."

Our prayers have been requested following the arrest of an Egyptian Christian businessman in Benghazi, capital of Cyrenaica province, eastern Libya.

Sherif is a businessman who runs a bookshop in Benghazi. The stock includes Christian books, intended for sale to the many expatriate Arabic speaking Christians living and working in Benghazi and the surrounding areas.

We regret to report that Sherif was arrested on 10th February. He remains detained and, to date, has not been charged before a court. He has been physically mistreated repeatedly.

Other Christians in Benghazi have also been arrested, including several Egyptians and three non-Arab expatriates. They were working as language teachers or businessmen. They have been accused of proselytising, although no formal charges have yet been made against any of them. It is likely they were arrested because they have done business with Sherif or know him socially.

In the period leading up to the second anniversary of the start of the revolution (17th February), several communities of Catholic nuns decided to leave the country following threats against their safety. Those affected were in the towns of Tobruk, Beida, el Merj and Derna, all within Cyrenaica province. One group located in Benghazi chose to remain.

Four foreign missionaries were arrested in Benghazi, Libya, last week on charges of printing and distributing materials that promote Christianity. One is an American citizen.

The Associated Press, which [broke the news](#), reports that Benghazi police claim to have "found 45,000 books in [the missionaries'] possession and that another 25,000 have already been distributed."

"They were arrested on Tuesday at a publishing house where they were printing thousands of books that called for conversion to Christianity," Hussein Bin Hmeid, spokesman for Libya's Preventative Security, [told](#) Reuters. "Proselytizing is forbidden in Libya. We are a 100 percent Muslim country and this kind of action affects our national security."

The arrests were announced as Libyans [celebrated the second anniversary](#) of their revolution against former ruler Muammar Gaddafi. However, a holdover law from Gaddafi's reign makes proselytizing for any religion other than Islam [potentially punishable by death](#).

The missionaries are from South Africa, Egypt, South Korea, and Sweden. (The Swedish missionary has dual American citizenship and was traveling on a U.S. passport.)

Most Christians in Libya are foreigners, some of whom have been [pressured to leave](#) by extremists.

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## **Foreign 'Christian Missionaries' arrested in Libya, charge with publishing Biblical texts, which carries death penalty**

The Huffington Post (18.02.2013) -Four alleged Christian missionaries have been arrested in Libya for distributing Biblical literature, an offence that could carry the death penalty.

The four were arrested in Benghazi on suspicion of printing books about Christianity, security official Hussein Bin Hmeid said.

He told Reuters: "They were arrested on Tuesday at a publishing house where they were printing thousands of books that called for conversion to Christianity.

"Proselytising is forbidden in Libya. We are a 100 per cent Muslim country and this kind of action affects our national security."

The private security firm, Preventative Security, which is affiliated to the government, arrested an Egyptian, a South African, a Korean and a Swedish-US citizen.

He said the four would be interrogated and then handed over to Libyan intelligence authorities in a few days.

There is small Christian population in Libya, with tough restrictions on religious practice. Inter-marriage with Muslims is forbidden unless the Christian partner converts to Islam.

There are estimated to be around 300,000 Christians in the country, many of them immigrant workers from Europe and the rest of Africa. But churches in the country, of which there are five in Tripoli alone, have rarely been attacked or Christians targeted, unlike in Egypt or Tunisia.

But many in the country are worried. A church bombing in December killed two people in the Mediterranean town of Dafniya.

Last week, Dalmasso Bruno, caretaker of the Italian cemetery in the Libyan capital told AFP: "Not a day goes by without tombs being vandalised.

"Human bones have been taken out of their tomb and scattered across the cemetery.

"The Libyan authorities came and took pictures. They promised to take measures but nothing has been done."

Father Dominique Rezeau of the Catholic church of Saint Francis near central Tripoli, attended by congregants mainly from India, the Philippines and African nations, told the news agency there church took no special security measures and worshippers could enter and move around freely.

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## **Benghazi, the Coptic Church of St. Mark is torched**

***The attack took place last night. Authors of the act still unknown. The building had been attacked a few weeks ago.***

AsiaNews (15.03.2013) - Unidentified persons have set fire to the Coptic Orthodox Church of St. Mark in Benghazi. This is confirmed in a statement by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. There the authors of the act are as yet unknown. This is the second attack on the religious building. The first took place a few weeks ago. In December a group of Salafists planted a bomb near another Christian complex in Misrata. The explosion left two dead and dozens wounded.

Abdel-Salam al-Barghathi, a security official in Benghazi said that his forces tried to stop a group of men as they attacked the building on fire. According to the agent this gesture was a kind of response to the anti-Libyan protest that took place in Cairo after the death of Ezzat Atallah, a Christian of 45 who died March 10 in a prison in Benghazi.

Ali al-Ashiry, Foreign Ministry secretary points out that Libya is in chaos, especially Cyrenaica, where Islamic militants are exploiting the security vacuum to carry out attacks against religious minorities.

Since Gaddafi's fall, the number of attacks against foreign residents has increased. The most affected are Egyptians, especially Catholic and Orthodox Copts. On 3 February, an armed group attacked a religious building in the capital of Cyrenaica and assaulted two Coptic clergymen, Fr Paul Isaac and his assistant. Last month, **four foreigners** from Egypt, South Africa, South Korea and a Swede with a US passport were arrested for allegedly circulating Bibles and other religious material. They are currently in a Tripoli jail waiting for trial. **On 28 February**, the authorities arrested 48 Egyptian peddlers on charges of proselytising. Twenty were eventually sent home following the intervention of Egyptian authorities. Under pressure from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry 44 of them were released. On returning home they confessed that they were beaten and tortured.

Catholic religious orders have also been targeted by Muslim militias despite operating in the country for decades in hospitals and nursing homes. In January, Islamists forced the Ursuline Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus out of the city of Bayda. In **October**, the same thing happened to the Sisters of the Convent of the Sacred Family of Spoleto in Derna who felt they had to leave the city even though local residents wanted them to stay. (S.C.)

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## **Benghazi, Coptic Christians denounce torture and attempts to convert them to Islam**

**44 of the 48 Christian vendors arrested in the market of Benghazi in February on charges of proselytizing have returned home. The Salafis forced them to say the prayer of conversion to Islam and spit on the images of Pope Shenouda III. Four of them are still in the hands of the Libyan police.**

AsiaNews (13.03.2013) - Libyan Salafis are responsible for torture, attempts to forcibly convert and desecration of Christian imagery. This is according to 44 of the 48 Egyptian Coptic vendors on their return home. "They forced us to pronounce the al-shahaadatayn - said one of them - the proclamation of the Islamic faith and spit on images of Pope Shenouda III." So far, the Egyptian government has not reacted to the episode that involved its citizens nor charges of religious discrimination. However, the relatives of the victims are demanding justice and accuse the Islamist government of protecting the Libyan Salafists.

Arrested in mid-February in the Benghazi market, accused of publicizing religious images and illegal immigration, the Coptic Orthodox were held for several days in a jail guarded by Salafi armed guards. They were released after several days of negotiations between the Egyptian and the Libyan governments accused on several occasions of failing to protect foreign nationals in its territory. Currently four Christians are still detained in Libya for further investigation.

The case has also sparked outrage among the population of Benghazi, which in October revolted against the Salafi militias accused of having organized the attack on the U.S. consulate in which the US Ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed.

Further aggravating relations between Cairo and Tripoli, but also between the Government of Benghazi and its people, is the case of Ezzat Atallah, also Egyptian and Christian, who died last March 10 in a prison in the Cyrenaica capital in mysterious circumstances. Like his 48 fellow vendors, he was arrested by a Salafi militia on charges of publicizing religious images. According to the Libyan authorities the man, 45 years old and father of two, suffered from diabetes and heart problems and likely died of natural causes. To date, the family has denied the statements made by the government in Benghazi. In an interview with the *Christian Middle East News Agency* (Mcn-direct), Atallah's sister points out that "my brother never had diabetes or heart."

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi cases of aggression or attacks on foreign minorities living in Libya have increased. The communities most affected include the Egyptians, Coptic Christians especially Catholics and Orthodox. In February, an armed group raided a church in the Cyrenaica capital and attacked two Coptic priests, Fr. Paul Isaac and his assistant. At the end of February, [four foreigners](#) - an Egyptian, a South African, a South Korean and a Swede with U.S. passport - were arrested on charges of distributing Bibles and other religious material. They are imprisoned in a prison in Tripoli, awaiting trial.

The presence of Islamic militants is also affecting the Catholic religious orders present for decades on Libyan territory, engaged in healthcare and looking after the elderly. In January, the Islamists prompted the flight of the Franciscan Sisters of the Infant Jesus from Barce and the Ursuline Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from Beida. In [October](#) it was instead the turn to the nuns of the Convent of the Holy Family of Spoleto based in Derna, who were forced to leave Libya due to continuous threats from Islamic extremists, despite the opposition of the inhabitants of the city. (S.C.)

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## **S. Korean man arrested for illegal missionary work in Libya**

Yonhap (17.02.2013) - A South Korean man was arrested in the Libyan city of Benghazi and is under investigation for being involved in illegal missionary work along with three other foreigners, Libyan police and the South Korean embassy there said Sunday.

The Libyan police arrested the South Korean, an Egyptian, a South African, and a Swede who was traveling on a U.S. passport, on Tuesday on suspicion of printing and distributing books which called for conversion to Christianity, according to the officials.

Spreading Christianity is a criminal act in the predominantly Muslim North African county.

"Proselytizing is forbidden in Libya. We are a 100 percent Muslim country and this kind of action affects our national security," security official Hussein Bin Hmeid said.

Some 45,000 books were found in their possession and another 25,000 have already been distributed, he added.

The arrestees have gone through an interrogation, and will be handed over to the intelligence authorities "in a couple of days," said the official without elaborating further.

While the identities of those arrested are not known, the South Korean embassy said the Korean man has resided in the city for about a year with his family, and does not appear to be as a professional missionary.

"The Libyan authorities suspect the Korean man was indirectly connected to the activities. He is under investigation, but not as a suspect," said an embassy official, while vowing to maintain close contact with the Libyan police to protect the overseas Korean.

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