

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

16 January 2015

LBY105035.E

Libya: Situation of Christians, including treatment by the current regime, various armed groups, and society. (2012-January 2015)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources indicate that the vast majority of Libyans are Sunni Muslims (UN 15 Mar. 2013; US 28 July 2014, 1). Sources also report that the non-Muslim population is comprised mainly of foreign residents (ibid.; St John 11 Jan. 2015; BBC 30 Dec. 2012). Sources vary in their account of the number of Christians in Libya: citing estimates by "local Christian authorities," the United Nations' Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), indicates that the Christian foreign resident community is made up of approximately 100,000 people (UN 15 Mar. 2013). The CIA *World Factbook* estimates that Christians comprise 2.7 percent of Libya's total population of 6.2 million (US 20 June 2014). Other sources state that there are an estimated 50,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians in the country (US 28 Jul. 2014, 2; ECLJ 2014, 4). According to a joint report on vulnerable groups in Libya prepared by country analysts from the governments of Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, there is "no indigenous community of Christians in Libya" (Belgium et al. 19 Dec. 2014). A February 2013 article in the *Guardian* similarly states that Libya has "no known Christian minority" and that churches are "the preserve of foreign residents" (*The Guardian* 17 Feb. 2013).

2. Treatment of Christians

The Guardian quotes a Libyan security officials' observation that "we are a 100% Muslim country" (ibid.). In the joint report on vulnerable groups in Libya, the authors state that

we find it likely that people who [convert to Christianity] publicly - and who will be considered apostates - may face problems with their family and their local community. There is also a considerable chance they would face aggression from extremist [I]slamists, based on the numerous attacks on foreign Christians in Libya, which are sometimes justified by claims that the victims were involved in missionary activities. (Belgium et al. 19 Dec. 2014, 22)

The same report indicates that, although various sources affirm that there are Libyans who have converted from Islam to Christianity, there are "no reports of publicly known cases of conversion" (ibid.).

Sources report the following incidents involving Christians in Libya:

- In February 2014, seven Egyptian Christians were found dead on a beach near Benghazi, having been shot in the head (BBC 24 Feb. 2014; AP 3 Jan. 2015; Reuters 24 Feb. 2014). Reuters reports that the victims had been abducted from their homes by gunmen who were specifically targeting Christians, although no group claimed responsibility for the "execution-style" killings

(ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

- In late December 2014 a Coptic couple working as doctors in Sirte, and their daughter, were killed (AP 3 Jan. 2015; Reuters 3 Jan. 2015).
- On 3 January 2015, 13 Egyptian Coptic Christians were abducted in Sirte from a residence by unknown gunmen (ibid.; AP 3 Jan. 2015). A witness interviewed by the Associated Press (AP) indicated that the gunmen had gone from room to room to separate the Christians from the Muslims before abducting them (ibid.). Sources report that on 12 January 2015, a Libyan affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed to have abducted 21 Christians in Libya and released photos of some of the captives (AFP 12 Jan. 2015; AP 12 Jan. 2015). AP suggests that the ISIS captives include the Egyptians abducted from Sirte in early January (ibid.). However, Agence France-Presse (AFP) notes that, as of 12 January 2015, ISIS had not indicated where the men were abducted nor had it made any demands for their release (12 Jan. 2015).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Bruce St John, an independent scholar who specializes in the North Africa and the Middle East, indicated that

[f]ollowing the successful conclusion of the February 17 Revolution [of 2011], the ensuing political chaos and mounting economic uncertainty resulted in more...expatriate Christians returning to their country of origin. In addition, Salafists and other militant Islamists have targeted Christians, Christian churches and Christian cemeteries. (St John, 11 Jan. 2015)

Media sources have also reported attacks on Christian churches in 2012 and 2013, including the following:

- In December 2012, an explosion at a Coptic church near the city of Misrata killed two people and injured two more (BBC 30 Dec. 2012; Bloomberg 31 Dec. 2012).
- In Benghazi, unknown gunmen reportedly assaulted and injured two priests at a Coptic church (Reuters 3 Mar. 2013; UN 15 Mar. 2013).
- In 2012, at least a dozen armed men attacked and damaged 200 gravestones and a cross at a war cemetery for Commonwealth soldiers in Benghazi, and a video of the incident was posted online (BBC 4 Mar. 2012, Al Jazeera 5 Mar. 2012).

3. Legislation

Sources note that while Libya's 2011 interim constitution protects religious freedom, it also designates Islam as the state religion and Sharia law as the principal source of legislation (ECLJ 2014, 1; US 28 Jul. 2014, 2). The US *International Religious Freedom Report* for 2013 notes that although there is no law prohibiting proselytizing,

the practice of detaining suspected proselytizers and deporting them is not uncommon. Some Christians accused of disseminating religious material have reportedly been charged with crimes of "instigating division" and insulting Islam or the Prophet Muhammad, charges that could carry a maximum sentence of death. (ibid., 3)

In contrast, other sources indicate that proselytizing was illegal under the Gaddafi regime and that the prohibition remains in place (St John 11 Jan. 2015; *The Guardian* 17 Feb. 2013). The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), an international NGO dedicated to "promoting and protecting human rights around the world," states in its report titled *Universal Periodic Review 2014: Religious Freedom in Libya* that there is an "unstated policy preventing proselytizing by non-Muslims" (ECLJ 2014, 1). In an interview with the *Guardian*, Benghazi lawyer and human rights activist Bilal Bettamer expressed his opinion that proselytizing is "disrespectful" and indicated that the maximum penalty is death (*The Guardian* 17 Feb. 2013).

Sources report that in March 2013, four Christian foreign nationals were detained by officials on charges of proselytizing and distributing Christian literature (*The Guardian* 17 Feb. 2013; UN 15 Mar. 2013). The US Department of State's *2013 International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that the four were detained in Benghazi and jailed for a total of two months (28 Jul. 2014, 4).

4. State Protection

Sources indicate that the interim government is limited in its capacity to enforce laws (Al Jazeera 28 Aug. 2014; UN 15 Mar. 2013; US 28 July 2014, 1) including attacks on religious minorities (ibid.; UN 15 Mar. 2013). The *International Religious Freedom Report* highlights the authorities' limited ability "to prevent violent extremist groups from taking advantage of the post-revolution security vacuum to attack religious

minorities" (28 Jul. 2014, 1). For further information on the security situation in Libya, please see Response to Information Request LBY105017.E.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral Sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Canada – Embassy to Tunisia; a researcher specializing in Libyan minorities from the Institute for Social Anthropology; Libya Mission to the United Nations; Libya – Embassy to Canada.

Internet sites, including: *The Christian Post*; *ecoi.net*; Egypt – Middle East News Agency; Factiva; *Foreign Policy*; Global Security; Human Rights Watch; *The New York Times*; United Kingdom – Country of Origin Information Service; United Nations – High Commissioner for Refugees.

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