

Libya

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Libya, officially the State of Libya ([Libya](#)), is a country in the Maghreb region in North Africa bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Egypt to the east, Sudan to the southeast, Chad to the south, Niger to the southwest, Algeria to the west, and Tunisia to the northwest. It comprises 700,000 square miles (1.8 million km²)¹ and has an estimated population (2021) of 6,989,892.² It is the fourth largest country in Africa and has the tenth largest proven oil reserves of any country in the world. The largest city and capital, Tripoli, situated in western Libya, contains over three million people. Libya is predominantly a desert country with one of the most arid and sunbaked places on earth. Up to 90 percent of the land area is covered in desert.³

Libyans are predominantly Arabic speaking Sunni Muslims of mixed Arab and Berber stock. There is also a small minority of Black Africans (2.2 percent), and a few nomadic groups, Tuaregs, Tebu, and Duwud dwelling in the oases of the southern desert. In addition, Libya has a substantial number of foreign guest workers (estimated at 11-30 percent) mostly from surrounding lands like Egypt, Sudan, Chad, and Northern Africa, but also significant numbers from Pakistan and South Korea.⁴

The country has a long history dating back before the time of Christ. It was originally inhabited by Berbers, but its history has been shaped by outside forces through invasion and domination by foreign powers.⁵ The Phoenicians established the colony of Carthage in the west, the Greeks, the city of Cyrene in the east, then followed the Persians, different Egyptian dynasties, and the Romans. Eventually when the Roman Empire disintegrated, Libya was an easy victim for the Islamic invasion in the seventh century A.D. From 1510 to 1530 it was under Spanish rule, and the Knights of St. John ruled Tripoli from 1530 to 1551. After this the Ottomans ruled Tripolitania for a long period from 1551 to 1911. Then followed the establishment of two Italian colonies, Italian Tripolitania and Italian Cyrenaica from 1911 to 1934, and not without resistance. They were later unified in the Italian Libya colony from 1934 to 1947.^{6 7}

After being under the control of the Allied Forces, Libya got its independence on December 24, 1951 and became the United Kingdom of Libya under King Idris I (Malak Idris Al Sanussi), who in his youth had fought with the resistance against Mussolini. However, on September 1, 1969, a group of rebel military officers led by Muammar Gaddafi launched a coup d'état and took power, and he continued as "the leader of the revolution"

until his overthrow 42 years later in 2011. The latest years have been characterized by wars between different factions, also known as the Libyan Civil War (2014–2020).⁸ In March 2021 the country formed an interim unity government to run the country until elections in December 2021. The legislature of Libya is the unicameral House of Representatives, which meets in Tobruk.⁹ Chaos-ridden Libya has emerged as a major transit point for people trying to reach Europe. Between 2013–2018 nearly seven hundred thousand migrants reached Italy by boat, many of them from Libya.¹⁰

Jews and Christians in Libya

According to the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, many Jews had settled in Cyrene, Libya in the centuries BC.¹¹ We also learn about them in the New Testament, when Simon of Cyrene was compelled by Roman soldiers to bear the cross of Jesus Christ (Matt 27:32) and when Jews from “the part of Libya adjoining Cyrene” (Acts 2:10) were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost when Jesus’ followers were filled with the Holy Spirit. To the Synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem belonged some men from Cyrene with whom the evangelist Stephanus had a lively discussion and who were accusing him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (Acts 6:11). We also learn that some of the early converts to Christianity were from Cyrene and were active as lay missionaries (Acts 11:20).

It seems that Libya had a vibrant, creative Christian community at least for five centuries “that produced a wide variety of key players from early martyrs to great thinkers to arch heretics.” Among them Tertullian (160–225), the great theologian from Carthage, and Sabellius (about 215), the heretic (Modalism).¹² With the Islamic invasion, both Jews and Christians experienced hard times. It is difficult to get reliable statistics on religion in Libya today. There are probably no more Jews left. Some estimate about thirty-four thousand five hundred Christians among the migrant workers and maybe only one hundred fifty Libyan Christians. Libya is listed (2021) as one of the most difficult countries to enter with the gospel.¹³

Seventh-day Adventist Work

In 1928 the unentered territory of Libya was assigned to the newly formed Southern European Division.¹⁴ Colporteurs selling Italian publications were sent in to visit the Italian colonies of Tripoli in Tripolitania and Benghazi in Cyrenaica.¹⁵ The following year Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were organized as part of the North African Union Mission comprising Algeria, Morocco, Tunis, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Tangier.¹⁶ Over the next period of twenty years there is no record of any decided attempts to establish organized mission work in the Libyan territory. In 1948 Libya was assigned to the Middle East Union, which was attached directly to the General Conference.¹⁷ When the Middle East Division was organized in 1951, Libya was assigned to the Nile Union Mission of that division.¹⁸

At this time Libya had just gained independence as the United Kingdom of Libya, and decided efforts were set in motion by the church to establish a Seventh-day Adventist presence in the country. An exploratory visit was made in early 1952, and in 1953 the Seventh-day Adventist representatives were granted a permit to open medical work—the first time a Protestant organization was allowed work in Libya. All evangelistic activity or proselytizing among the Libyans, however, was prohibited.¹⁹

Subsequently Dr. Roy S. Cornell from the United States accepted a call to help establish a hospital. He arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, on February 2, 1955, with his wife and two of their sons. Fakhry Naguib, an Egyptian pastor who spoke the Arabic language and was familiar with the local culture, had been asked by the union committee to assist Dr. Cornell in this new venture.²⁰ Elder Neal Wilson, president of the Nile Union, gave an encouraging progress report a few months later: “A definite lease has been signed for a building, and plans are soon to go into effect for remodeling it, to suit the needs of a hospital.... The medical staff is being made up, and several calls are in for the necessary nurses, technicians, et cetera. Dr. and Mrs. Cornell and family are now in Libya taking up their important duties there.”²¹ When Pastor Fakhry Naguib left for Libya, he took with him many supplies including the doors, windows, and woodwork for the new hospital. With the purchase of every item, the new hospital was about to become a reality.²²

The Benghazi Adventist Hospital was officially opened on May 21, 1956.²³ As we shall find, the work of the Adventist church in Libya was closely connected with this hospital, and a more detailed description of the work and its mission can be found in the article on Benghazi Adventist Hospital featured in this encyclopedia.

Shortly after opening, the hospital developed a welfare program at the beginning of 1957 that distributed food and clothing, as well as free medicine and clinical treatment.²⁴ Temperance lectures and films were presented throughout the country during December 1957 and January 1958.²⁵ Wadie Farag, executive director for the International Temperance Association for the Middle East, gave a glowing report of these visits that garnered the attention of Libyan government officials and the king himself.

In the *Middle East Messenger* he writes: “The support that the Libyan government gave the work carried by the International Temperance Association ... was most remarkable. The officials were most keen in helping the association in its work of pointing out the dangers of intemperance. ... All the top officials whom we interviewed wrote us testimonials for our Arabic ‘ALERT.’” Elder Farag listed by name and title The Prime Minister for the Federal Government, the President of the Senate, the President of the House of Representatives, and governors and other high officials. He continued: “His Majesty King Idris, who is a shrewd and well-informed judge of current affairs, was in his palace in Tobruk, about a thousand kilometers round trip from Benghazi. We arranged with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to secure a testimonial from him.”²⁶

On August 13, 1960, the first Adventist Church in Libya was organized by the Nile Union Mission. Connected to the hospital, it consisted of 17 members, all of whom were part of the hospital staff.²⁷ As the staff increased, the membership of the church also increased, reaching a peak of 61 by 1968. A small church school opened for the

expat children and by 1967 enlisted 14 students in eight grades.²⁸ In 1964 a Periodical House also began operations, with Rafic Issa as its first manager, followed by Cleo Johnson in 1966.²⁹

The first Vacation Bible School ever held in Libya was conducted in 1964. In 1965 a health education campaign was administered by workers at the hospital, which resulted not only in the increase in the circulation of the magazine *Call to Health* but also letters of appreciation from government officials, as well as a number of Libyans requesting health lessons by correspondence.³⁰

In the 1967 quadrennial report from Benghazi Adventist Hospital given to the Middle East Division, it stated that permission was granted to hold five-day plans and temperance films in all the schools, motion picture theaters, and many other locations throughout Libya. A health program was aired every week, and frequent articles were published in local newspapers and magazines.³¹

The years 1968 and 1969 showed the Adventist Church and hospital continuing to make progress and inroads in connecting with the community through health and outreach activities. Jerald Whitehouse, pastor of the church and head of the Health Education program, arranged a booth on the evils of smoking and alcohol at the Tripoli International Trade Fair. The first junior camp was held in 1969 at a camp site located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea on the floor of an ancient stone quarry near the ruins of the city of Talmeitha. Twenty-two campers pitched their tents and got settled for a week of work, study, swimming, and spiritual activities. Of this number only eight were from Adventist homes.”³²

Wanting to build closer contacts and lasting relationships with the local people, the church applied to the Ministry for Youth and Sports in 1969 to establish recreation and health centers in local communities. They were given approval, but these plans never came to fruition due to subsequent events in the country that soon followed.³³

In 1968 the new 60-bed hospital that was financed principally by the oil companies in Libya opened its doors, with D. Clifford Ludington as the medical director. However, by the time the hospital was functioning well, had a fine reputation in the country, and the possibilities to build relationships with the local people looked the brightest, there was a sudden change in national leadership that badly affected the mission in Libya.

In the summer of 1969 Muammar Gadhafi took over the country. The hospital was nationalized by his Revolutionary Command Council on November 23 of the same year.³⁴ After the nationalization all workers had to leave Libya and the work closed down except for the occasional visits of literature evangelists. Jerald Whitehouse tells in an interview that he tried to no avail to stay on as a pastor for the expat community. On March 8, 1970, he and his wife, Judy, left the country as the last officially employed church workers. Until then they would gather some of the remaining members in their home for Sabbath worship. He also visited every Libyan hospital worker with a small tract “Your friends the Adventists” (written specifically for the local population) and prayed with them as a last testimony of the Adventist presence there.³⁵

After 1970

In 1970 the territory of Libya was again assigned to the Middle East Union (MEU) under the newly organized Afro-Mideast Division,³⁶ and continued as such until 1981 when MEU became attached directly to the General Conference.³⁷ For about twenty years or so there were no records of any mission efforts in Libya, most likely due to the shock from the Gaddafi takeover, as well as the political turmoil in Lebanon (1975–1990) where the union administration was headquartered.

In the beginning of the 1990's after the union administration had relocated to Cyprus, efforts were set in motion to reach the Arabic speaking population in the Middle East and North Africa by means of radio broadcast. In 1992 the Adventist Media Center Middle East was set up in Nicosia. Programs in Arabic were produced and broadcasted by Adventist World Radio (AWR) under the name "Voice of Hope." Listeners were invited to join the AWR club and would receive a quarterly magazine. Bible and health correspondence courses were also offered. The media center received many letters, a good number of these from Libya. They were easily recognized since almost all the stamps were oversized and featured Gaddafi with an unusually exaggerated scene and as protector of children and civilians. The caption was always the same: "Tenth anniversary of American aggression." The years were increased on the stamps accordingly. All letters were, of course, handled confidentially, whether the listeners were Christians or Indigenous. Around 2002 the correspondence was moved to the AWR office in France.³⁸

After the Middle East Union office headquarters moved back to Beirut, Lebanon, a television studio was set up on the Middle East College premises. From February 2010 the first broadcasts could be viewed by the Arabic speaking world on satellite television. The director, Amir Ghali, tells that many emails were received from Libya in response to the programs.³⁹

As in other Arabic speaking countries, a certain number of foreigners were working in Libya in hospitals, industries, and business. Among them were some Adventists—often without knowing of each other but giving their silent witness. In 1997 a group began meeting for Sabbath services at the registered Anglican Church premises in Tripoli. By 2003 there were up to 90 in attendance from different nationalities including families, children, and visitors. In 2004 a Ghanaian Adventist group began meeting on Sabah in Southern Libya. Small groups meeting in other places became officially noticed by the church group in Tripoli. In Benghazi a small group began worshipping in an apartment.

Christians are not restricted from gathering or going to church, and there are no restrictions on Sabbath keeping since the weekends are on Friday and Saturday. When Gadhafi was overthrown in 2011, a civil war began. Due to intermittent bombings, schools closed and most of the members disbursed, with only a few remaining. However, as of 2021, an estimated 60-80 believers worship in Tripoli on Sabbath, mostly Ghanaian members. There are unconfirmed reports of others meeting in Misrata.⁴⁰

Libya has been served by different church entities. In 1995 it was transferred from the Middle East Union to the Trans-Mediterranean Territories in the Euro-Africa Division.⁴¹ In 2011 it became part of the Maghreb Section (later North Africa Region) in the new Middle East North Africa Union (MENAUI).⁴²

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