Libya: Freedom of religion in the land of anarchy

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Contents

1. Introduction

It would be no exaggeration to say that nothing has drawn so much attention to the plight and persecution of Christians in the Middle East today as the shocking and dramatic execution of Christians by Islamic State (IS) militants in Libya. This paper is an attempt to provide background information concerning the context in which such atrocious acts were committed. The paper shows how the anarchic political and security condition in contemporary Libya has created a environment conducive for radical Islamic groups to persecute Christians blatantly and violently with absolute impunity. In the first part of the paper, security in Libya and the current political situation will be discussed, starting from the downfall of the Gaddafi regime. In a second section, the discussion will focus on the situation for Christians under the prevailing political environment in Libya. Finally, the third part of the paper will provide a brief discussion of the future prospects for Christians in Libya, taking into account the current situation and political trends.

2. Security in Libya and the current political situation

In the heyday of the Arab Spring, Libyans who had been ruled for more than four decades by the eccentric dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, started protesting against his regime following the example of protests in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt.[1] When Colonel Muammar Gaddafi took a hardline in responding to the protests against his government, security forces shot at protesters in Benghazi and the protests turned into an armed rebellion against the government.[2] The

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[1] See: Finn, Peter "The rise and fall of Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi", The Washington Post, 25 August 2011, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-rise-and-fall-of-libyan-leader-moammar-gaddafi/2011/02/21/gIQA32NsdJ_story.html, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[2] Black, Ian and Bowcott, Owen, Libya protests: massacres reported as Gaddafi imposes news blackout, The Guardian, 18 February 2011, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/18/libya-protests-massacres-reported, last accessed 11 April 2016.

rebellion against Gaddafi's rule started in eastern Libya, and Benghazi served as the rebellion's stronghold.[3] The conflict between the rebels and the government soon turned into a full-fledged and deadly civil war.[4]

Initially, the better armed and organized government forces had the upper-hand in the armed conflict and it looked as though they would rout and suppress the rebels.[5] At this point, pointing to the need to protect civilians in eastern Libya from indiscriminate attack by government forces, Western powers secured a UN Security Council mandate to intervene in the conflict.[6] This mandate was given in the form of a UN Security Council Resolution under Chapter VII that authorized the use of force to protect civilians in Libya.[7] On the basis of this mandate, western European nations and the USA launched air strikes against government forces under the NATO umbrella.[8] Bolstered by the NATO airstrikes and the material and moral assistance of other Arab countries in the Gulf, the rebels were able to repel the government forces that were advancing towards Benghazi.[9] The rebels who had formed a National Transitional Council were able to take the fight to the stronghold of the government in western Libya and ultimately defeated the government forces.[10] After forces loyal to the National Transitional Council took control of Tripoli in eastern Libya and toppled the government of Muammar Gaddafi, the National Transitional Council ruled Libya as the internationally recognized government of the country and organized elections within a period of ten months after Gaddafi's downfall.[11] Based on the results of the election held on 7 July 2012, the General National Congress of Libya was established and replaced the National Transitional Council of Libya.[12]

The General National Congress was established to serve as the sovereign parliament of Libya for a period of two years with the expectation that it would lead to the adoption of a permanent constitution and to Libya's transition to a constitutional democracy.[13] However, the General

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[3] Schemm, Paul, Battle at army base broke Gadhafi hold in Benghazi, The Associated Press, February 25, 2011, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/25/AR2011022505021.html, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[4] See Battle for Libya: Key moments, Al Jazeera, 19 Nov 2011, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/libya/2011/10/20111020104244706760.html, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[5] Libya: Gaddafi's fighters force rebel retreat, BBC, 30 March 2011, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12906562, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[6] UN security council resolution 1973 (2011) on Libya – full text, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/17/un-security-council-resolution, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Libya: Nato steps up air strikes on Tripoli, BBC, 24 May 2011, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13514788, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[9] Stephen, Chris, "Five years after Gaddafi, Libya torn by civil war and battles with Isis", The Guardian, 16 February 2016, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/libya-gaddafi-arab-spring-civil-war-islamic-state, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[10] Libya fighters take last Sirte escape route, Aljazeera, 12 October 2011, available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/10/2011101013186280505.html?utm_c; see also: Chulov, Martin, Harding, Luke and Borger, Julian, Street fighting rages in Tripoli as Gaddafi loyalists fight rearguard action, The Guardian, 24 August 2011, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/24/fighting-tripoli-gaddafi-libya, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[11] Karadsheh, Jomana, Libya's transitional council hands over power, CNN, 9 August 2012, available at http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/08/world/meast/libya-power-transition/, last accessed 11 April 2016.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Markey, Patrick and Shennib, Ghaith, In standoff, Libyans protest over parliament extension, Reuters, 7 February 2014, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-crisis-idUSBREA161MH20140207, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

National Congress was not able to accomplish this task within the original timeframe.[14] While the Congress tried to unitarily extend its mandate and stay in power, due to the pressure of armed brigades that were dissatisfied with its rule, it was compelled to organize an election on 25 June 2014.[15] The results of the election led to the formation of the House of Representatives.[16]

However, Islamist political factions challenged the legitimacy of the election and the Supreme Court ruled the new House of Representatives to be unlawful.[17] These groups reconstituted the General National Council and claimed that it was Libya's legitimate parliament.[18] The contention for supremacy between the armed factions supporting these two rival parliaments resulted into the second Libyan civil war.[19] When forces loyal to the New General Council got the upper hand in the armed confrontation to control Tripoli, the House of Representatives made its seat in the eastern part of Libya, in Tobruk.[20] The second Libyan civil war pitted two large coalitions of armed groups against each other, each allied to one of these two parliaments.

The coalition that supports the General National Council based in Tripoli, in western Libya, is composed of various regional and communal militias as well as Islamist armed groups.[21] Indeed, the armed forces supporting the General National Council are largely perceived as being dominated by Islamist forces.[22] On the other hand, the armed forces loyal to the House of Representatives are largely perceived as being dominated by the national army and various communal or ethnic militias.[23] In addition to these two rival governments, other major groups involved in the civil war include the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries and the Islamic State (IS).[24] Exploiting the chaos and security vacuum created by the civil war, IS as well as other jihadist groups have established a foothold in Libya.[25] Based on a UN-backed peace plan, there is an attempt (at the time of writing) to bring together the two rival governments and form a single Unity Government to stabilize the situation in the country and to ensure that Libya does

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Libya begins election amid violence, Aljazeera, 25 June 2014, available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/libya-prepares-vote-amid-tensions-201462411369559322.html, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[16] Abdallah, Kamel, Libyan parliament convenes, Al Haram, 7 August 2014, available at http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/6917/19/Libyan-parliament-convenes.aspx, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[17] Libya supreme court rules anti-Islamist parliament unlawful, Associated Press, 6 November 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/06/libya-court-tripoli-rules-anti-islamist-parliament-unlawful, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Fahim, Kareem, Torn by Factional Fighting, Post-Revolt Libya Is Coming Undone, New York Times, 27 July 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/28/world/africa/fighting-for-control-of-airport-in-tripoli-post-revolt-libya-is-coming-undone-us-embassy-evacuating-staff.html, last accessed on 11 April 11 2016.

[20] Hassan, Amro, Libya's parliament ducks fighting to meet in eastern city of Tobruk, Los Angeles Times, 2 August 2014, available at http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-libya-parliament-tobruk-20140802-story.html, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Stephen, Chris, War in Libya - the Guardian briefing, The Guardian, 29 August 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/29/-sp-briefing-war-in-libya, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[23] See: Guide to key Libyan militias, BBC, 11 January 2016, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Gaouette, Nicole, U.S. general: Number of ISIS fighters in Libya doubles, CNN, 8 April 2016, available at http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/08/politics/libya-foreign-fighters-isis-doubles/index.html, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

not continue to be a safe haven for groups like IS and al-Qaeda.[26] Although the General National Congress and the House of Representatives accepted the UN peace plan and formed a Unity Government to be led by a Presidential Council, its actual implementation is far from guaranteed.

3. The situation for Christians in Libya

The situation of Christians in Libya since the start of the first civil war in 2011 has been very precarious. According to estimates published by the Washington Post in 2014, there were possibly as many as 300,000 Coptic Christians and 80,000 Roman Catholics in Libya before the fall of Gaddafi.[27] Most of the Christians in Libya are foreigners who have come there from various countries (particularly from sub-Saharan African countries as well as Egypt) in search of jobs or attempting to transit to Europe through Libya.[28] Even before the onset of the civil war and the fall of Gaddafi, Christians in Libya did not fully enjoy freedom of religion and belief. However, each Christian denomination was allowed one place of worship in each city and Christians were legally allowed to worship in public.[29] Furthermore, Christian workers were allowed entry into Libya and the state tolerated the importation and distribution of Christian literature as long as it was not in Arabic.[30] However, the activity of Christian groups and organizations was closely monitored and even if there was no legal prohibition on the conversion from Islam to Christianity, any attempt at proselytization was prohibited.[31] State authorities used to arrest and persecute Christians suspected of proselytizing.[32] The pressure on the converts was enormous.

In addition to such restrictions on freedom of religion from the side of the authorities, there was also significant persecution and pressure on Christians from society.[33] The potential for such societal or horizontal persecution was partly restrained because the state repressed militant and radical Islamic views.[34] The regime viewed militant Islam as a threat to its survival and control of political power. As a result, the state monitored clerics and tried to clamp down on teachings it viewed as promoting militant and radical versions of Islam.[35] The tight control that the state

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[26] Kingsley, Patrick, Libyan politicians sign UN peace deal to unify rival governments, The Guardian, 17 December 2015, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/libyan-politicians-sign-un-peace-deal-unify-rival-governments, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[27] Nzwili, Fredrick, Christians in Libya cast anxious eye at religious freedom, The Washington Post, 10 January 2014 available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/christians-in-libya-cast-anxious-eye-at-religious-freedom/2014/01/10/eda2c72c-7a26-11e3-a647-a19deaf575b3_story.html, last accessed on 17 February 2016. Note: Open Doors statistics differ in this respect. According to WWL 2012 there were only an estimated 23,500 Christians in the country in 2011.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Libya, International Religious Freedom Report, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, And Labor, available at http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2001/5613.htm, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] See Ibrahim, Raymond, How The West Destroyed Libya, Frontpage, 12 January 2015, available at http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/249242/how-west-destroyed-libya-raymond-ibrahim, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[35] Ibid.

exercised on all groups and society accorded Christians in Libya a degree of protection from societal persecution and the threat from radical Islamic groups that would have been intense. Therefore, the unintended consequence of a strong autocratic control under the dictatorship of Gaddafi provided security and a degree of freedom of worship for Christians in Libya. In a way, the period before the fall of Gaddafi could be likened to a situation where a Hobbesian leviathan guaranteed security and order while offering little by way of civil and political liberty. The situation after the fall of Gaddafi (and especially since the onset of the second civil war) could be likened to a Hobbesian state of nature where everyone seems to be in war with everybody else. What makes this state of affairs particularly nightmarish for Christians is the prominent role which violent Islamic groups like the IS have been playing in the conflict.

During the second civil war, the internationally recognized government of Libya controlled only a small percentage of Libyan territory and was confined to eastern Libya.[36] Even though a peace accord was signed by the rival governments in December 2015 and a Unity Government has been established, most of the territory of the Libyan state is controlled by various militant groups which are not subject to a centralized command hierarchy and structure. Some of the militant groups that are major players in the Libyan civil war include the Libya Dawn, the Libya Shield and other pro-General National Council groups as well as the national army and the Zintan, al-Sawaiq, al-Qaqa Battalions.[37] These groups are largely tribal and regional armed forces. In addition to such groups, the ongoing conflict in Libya is also fueled by jihadist groups such as the Islamic State (IS), Ansar al-Sharia (al-Qaeda's Libyan affiliate), Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Derna Mujahidin Shura Council, Ajdabiya Revolutionaries Shura Council.[38] In this melee of armed groups and jihadi outfits, the situation for Christians in Libya has become difficult beyond imagination. Christians in Libya have been subjected to the most violent and horrendous forms of persecution.[39]

A report by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada evaluating the situation of Christians in Libya (including their treatment by the internationally recognized government, by various armed groups, and by society in general), highlights the following incidents which occurred between 2012 and January 2015[40]:

- 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.

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[36] Ibid.

[37] See: Guide to key Libyan militias, BBC News, 11 January 2016, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[38] Ibid.

[39] See for example Black, Ian, Isis claim of beheading Egyptian Copts in Libya shows group's spread, The Guardian, 15 February 2015, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/15/isis-21-egyptian-coptic-christians-beheading-libya, last accessed on 17 February 2016; see also Mclaughlin, Eliott, ISIS executes more Christians in Libya, video shows, CNN, 20 April 2015, available at http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/19/africa/libya-isis-executions-ethiopian-christians/, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[40] Libya: Situation of Christians, including treatment by the current regime, various armed groups, and society. (2012-January 2015), Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 16 January 2015, available at http://www.refworld.org/docid/54ca21654.html, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

- 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 (AP, 3 Jan. 2015; Reuters, 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.
- On 12 January 2015, a Libyan affiliate of IS 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 captives include the Egyptians abducted from Sirte in early January.

Bruce St John, an independent scholar who specializes in the North Africa and the Middle East, indicated that…..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 British Commonwealth soldiers in Benghazi, and a video of the incident was posted online (BBC, 4 Mar. 2012, Al Jazeera, 5 Mar. 2012).

The above incidents are just a few cases showing what is happening to Christians in the country. Robin Phillips, a Christian author who has written about the challenges Christians face in current day Libya, notes that "Christians living in the country have become particularly vulnerable, as militant Islamist groups, including ISIS, have taken advantage of the instability and made Christians a target of attack".[41] In a 2015 report focusing on the human rights violations that migrants and refugees in Libya face, Amnesty International has also noted that Christian migrants are particularly vulnerable to the worst forms of human rights violation and are subjected to the cruelest forms of persecution.[42] The report states:

"Christian migrants and refugees in Libya are at particular risk of abuse from armed groups aiming to impose their own interpretation of Islamic law. People from Nigeria, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt have been abducted, tortured, unlawfully killed and harassed because of their religion. Most recently a total of at least 49 Christians, mostly from Egypt and

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[41] Phillips, Robin, Challenges Facing Christians in Libya, Salvo, 13 June 2015, available at http://www.salvomag.com/unpragmatic-thoughts/?p=1616 , last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[42] Libya is Full of Cruelty: Stories of Abduction, Sexual Violence and Abuse from Migrants and Refugees, Amnesty International, 11 May 2015, available at http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/libya-is-full-of-cruelty-stories-of-abduction-sexual-violence-and-abuse-from-migrants-and-refugees, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

Ethiopia were beheaded and shot in three mass summary killings claimed by the group calling itself the Islamic State (IS)."[43]

The persecution against Christians is not only being perpetrated by organized Islamic militant groups. Christians face harassment and persecution in their everyday life from ordinary Libyans as well. A 29 year old Nigerian recounts his experience in Libya as follows: "I've had some scary interactions with men on the street….One day I was attacked because I was wearing a cross. The men said I should have covered it".[44] While the focus of the international press has largely been on the dramatic executions carried out by IS, other militant groups that are taking part in the conflict in Libya have also targeted Christians for ill treatment and abuse. For instance, there have been reports in 2013 that Libyan Shield, one of the powerful militant groups based in eastern Libya, detained Egyptian Coptic Christians it accused of proselytizing and has subjected them to torture.[45] Recounting such an ordeal, 26 year old Amgad Zaki stated:

"They shaved our heads. They threatened to sever our heads in implementation of Islamic Shariah (law) while showing us swords…..They dealt with us in a very brutal way, including forcing us to insult our Pope Shenouda…..I was taken to clean a bathroom, and the man pushed my head inside the toilet and sat on me…I was dying every day, and at one point I thought death is better than this"[46]

He also recalled that he and those detained with him were; "flogged, forced to take off their clothes in cold weather and stand at 3 a.m. outdoors on floor covered with stones."[47] The number of Egyptian Christians arrested for alleged proselytization in one single instance is estimated to be 100.[48] The fact that the arrest of Christians comes on the heel of attacks against the houses of worship of Christians has led some to argue that there is intent to "fully eliminate the presence of Christians."[49]

4. Future prospects

As the preceding parts of this paper show, the situation for Christians in Libya since the fall of the Gaddafi regime is very precarious. In addition to the routine harassment and persecution they faced when the regime of Gadhafi was in place, Christians in Libya have been exposed to

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Al-Ghanae, Tareq and St. Clair, Roman, Christians in Libya face rising Attacks, The Christian century, 24 Febrary 2015, available at http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-02/christians-libya-face-rising-attacks, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[45] Coptic Christians say they were tortured in Libya, USA TODAY, 15 March 2013, available at http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/03/15/coptic-christians-tortured-libya/1991753/, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Jones, Ryan, Egyptian Christians arrested in Libya, besieged in Egypt, Israel Today, 4 March 2013, available at http://www.israeltoday.co.il/NewsItem/tabid/178/nid/23708/Default.aspx?hp=article_title, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

[49] Ibid.

very violent and deadly forms of persecution over the past few years.[50] The overall state of disorder and anarchy that prevails in Libya due to the civil wars which have involved various militia forces - some of which advance a militant Islamic agenda - has made the life of Christians in Libya very dangerous in recent years. The risk of being kidnapped, tortured or abused has been and is high for Christians in Libya. Christians have been sought out and targeted for dramatic and brutal treatment and execution.

In order for this situation to change, it is very important that at least a semblance of law and order and civil government is restored to Libya. Unless a government is in place that has a monopoly of the means of coercion and has effective control of most of its territory, the tragedy and chaos in Libya is likely to continue. Fortunately, there have been some rays of hope in the country since December 2015. The UN-backed peace process has given rise to a Unity Government led by a Council of Presidency.[51] At the time of writing, the Unity Government seems poised to replace the two rival governments based in western and eastern Libya and has managed to establish itself in the Libyan capital Tripoli successfully.[52] This is a significant development when one considers the fact that the previous internationally recognized government of Libya was driven out of Tripoli to western Libya and had at one point been based on a ferry.[53] Yet, it is also important to be cautious as to whether any form of government in Libya will take up the issue of protecting Christians seriously: a policy of appeasement may well be employed by the new government, tacitly if not explicitly, in order to gain the support of some radical groups.

Obviously, the Unity Government faces an enormous challenge. It has to balance the interests of various armed factions, rebuild state institutions and revive the economy. The depressed international oil price, the existence of various militant groups with extremist religious ideology, the fact that there are thousands of foreign jihadists in the country and the increased and easy access of weapons in the country makes the situation particularly complicated. The sheer number of armed factions makes it enormously difficult for the Unity Government to balance the demands and interests of the various warring groups. Even if the Unity Government succeeds in establishing itself as the sole government of Libya and in gaining the loyalty of the majority of the armed militias operating in the country, it could take a long time before it can emerge as a strong government with effective control of its own territories. In the short term, the Unity Government seems to be at the mercy of the militias who are unlikely to lay down

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[50] See: Alarming Growth Of Violence And Targeting Of Christians In Libya, Open Doors International, 18 March 2016, available at https://www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/tag-prayer-updates-post/alarming-growth-of-violence-and-targeting-of-christians-in-libya/, last accessed on 20 April 2016.

[51] Jawad, Rana, Libya: Can unity government restore stability? (4 April 2016, BBC) available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35959847, last accessed on April 11, 2016.

[52] Libyan unity government moves to take power, asserting sole authority to rule, The Guardian, 12 March 2016, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/13/libyan-unity-government-moves-to-take-power-as-sole-ruling-authority, last accessed on 11 April 2016; see also: Stephen, Chris, Libyan parliament takes refuge in Greek car ferry, The Guardian, 9 September 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/09/libyan-parliament-refuge-greek-car-ferry, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

[53] Taher, Rim, Libya unity government bolsters control despite setback, AFP, 7 April 2016, available at https://www.yahoo.com/news/head-tripoli-authority-refuses-cede-power-libya-unity-155828525.html, last accessed on 11 April 2016.

their weapons in the near future. Therefore, while the current trend seems to indicate that the second Libyan civil war is almost over, it could take years for Libya to emerge from its current state of chaos. In all likelihood, the most ardent jihadists will continue some form of insurgency and attempt to derail the peace and transition process.

With the end of hostilities among the major armed factions and a decline in the intensity of the conflict, there is a cause to be optimistic and to expect that atrocities perpetrated against Christians in Libya will come to an end or, at least, become increasingly less likely to happen. At the same time, there is reason for caution: Islamic militant groups will no doubt have much influence in the young Unity Government and in the process of creating a new and more permanent political order. That brings with it the risk that a more permanent, institutionalized and state orchestrated form of persecution against Christians could become the new norm. The nature and content of the constitution that will be adopted in the transitional process could be very decisive in this regard.

5. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is clear that the persecution of Christians in Libya is pervasive and very serious. Christians are vulnerable to the most serious and violent forms of persecution in contemporary Libya. They have little experience of security and freedom of worship and belief. While Libya was never an exemplary country from the perspective of freedom of religion under Gaddafi, after the 2011 Libyan revolution the subsequent civil war and state of anarchy has exacerbated the problem of Christian persecution in Libya. The violence has reached such levels that, today, Libya could be considered one of the most dangerous places to be a Christian. Any hope for an improvement for Christians is contingent upon the political and security condition in the country improving. Hopefully, the Unity Government formed in in January 2016 will be able to assert more and more authority and restore law and order in the country. If this happens - even though it would not necessarily guarantee freedom of religion for Christians in Libya - such a state of affairs could help Christians become less vulnerable to the most egregious forms of persecution. However, in the long run, it will be the nature of the permanent political and constitutional order emerging from the current peace and transition process that will be the most decisive factor for the freedom of religion of Christians in Libya.