

LIBYA

Snapshot

History

Once part of the Greek and Roman empires, Arab armies conquered Libya in 643 CE and spread Islam throughout the region. Libya became part of the Ottoman (Turkish) empire in the 16th century. Italy colonized the country in 1911, but Allied forces defeated Italian forces in 1943 during World War II. The French and the British then each claimed and administered part of the country. The UN passed a resolution to make Libya independent in 1951. When large oil reserves were discovered in 1959, Libya went from a very poor country to a wealthy one.

People

Libya is a large country with a small population. 90% of the population lives along the northern coast, with a large percentage living in urban areas such as Tripoli and Benghazi.

Population: 6.5 million (est. 2011)

Major cities:

TRIPOLI (1.1 million)

Benghazi (est. 1 million)

Language: Arabic (official), Italian, English

Religion: Sunni Muslim (official) 97%, other 3%

Ethnic groups: Berber and Arab 97%, other 3% (includes Greeks, Italians, Egyptians, Pakistanis, Turks, Indians, and Tunisians)

Government

After independence, Libya became a constitutional monarchy under the rule of a king. Many Libyans became frustrated that wealth was concentrated in the hands of the elite. **Colonel Mu'ammur Qaddafi** led a military coup and took over the government in 1969, abolishing the monarchy and promising to establish a more equal distribution of wealth. Colonel Qadhafi's authoritarian leadership exercises control over nearly all major government decisions. During the Cold War, he pursued foreign policies friendly to the Soviet Union and supported terrorist activity (including the 1988 bombing of a flight over Scotland that killed 270 people). The UN imposed sanctions (economic penalties and restrictions) that were lifted in 2003 after Libya accepted responsibility for its terrorist activity. Libya also agreed to end programs to develop weapons of mass destruction. The US normalized diplomatic relations with Libya in 2009. The protest movements that began in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt spread to Libya in February 2011.

Sources: "Libya." *U.S. Department of State*. 7 July 2011. Web.

"Libya." *CIA World Factbook*. 14 July 2011. Web.

"BBC News - Timeline: Libya." *BBC News - Home*. 21 May 2011. Web.