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Libya's Long Reach: Transnational Repression and the Infrastructure of Disappearance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authoritarian states increasingly reach beyond their borders to monitor, intimidate, and disappear their critics abroad. Libya is among the states that best exemplify the use of transnational repression, including enforced disappearance, to silence detractors. Libya's two rival authorities, the internationally recognized Government of National Unity in Tripoli and the eastern Government of National Stability dominated by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces, have relied on regional partners to locate and detain opponents in neighboring states and to regulate the political activity of diaspora and exile communities. They do so, as their predecessors did, through formal security cooperation and informal channels of influence, drawing in the armed groups aligned with each. The resulting cross-border infrastructure extends Libya's internal rivalries across North Africa and the Mediterranean while also attracting neighboring governments. The centrality of disappearance within existing security structures conditions not only the behavior of diaspora communities but also the ability of external actors to engage responsibly with Libyan security institutions.

The continuing practice of enforced disappearance degrades the institutions on which a settlement between Libya's rival authorities would depend and distorts the negotiations meant to produce one. A durable political settlement depends on three things: that enforced disappearance is curbed, that accountability is strengthened, and that longer-term institutional rebuilding is supported. As Washington re-engages with Libya through new security and energy partnerships, it has both the interest and the leverage to ensure that its engagement strengthens accountable institutions rather than the structures that sustain disappearance.

Introduction

Across North Africa, authoritarian actors increasingly pursue their critics beyond their own borders. Libya shows how deep the roots of enforced disappearance can run and how broad its effects can be. International assessments estimate that thousands, and possibly tens of thousands, of people remain missing across conflict, detention, migration, and disaster-related contexts, and these assessments have found the institutional, legal, and forensic capacity to account for the disappearances to be severely underdeveloped.¹ Enforced disappearance operates as a technique of governance, and it now extends well beyond Libyan territory into regional systems of surveillance and rendition. It links a fragmented domestic security order of competing militias and intelligence bodies to neighboring states where Libyan factions find exiled opponents. A study of this technique's historical depth gives it context, and an analysis of it reveals the policy choices it forces on external actors engaging with Libya.

Libya's current environment is shaped by the legacies of Italian colonial rule, the institutional imprint of former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's *Jamahiriyya* — his self-styled "state of the masses" — the fragmented political economy that emerged after the 2011 uprising that toppled Gadhafi's regime, and the protracted conflict that followed.² These elements have produced an ecosystem in which disappearances occur via multiple channels. Targeted individuals may vanish into detention sites run by armed groups, many holding nominal state affiliation while operating with considerable autonomy. Targets may be abducted by security forces or aligned armed groups during moments of political volatility, often without knowing who their abductors are. They may be detained abroad through coordinated action with regional security services. Families often navigate long periods of uncertainty about the fate and whereabouts of their missing loved ones in the absence of judicial oversight, with limited access to information and no avenue for redress. This deniability,

1 International Commission on Missing Persons, assessment of Libya's missing persons process, April 2021, <https://icmp.int/news/new-icmp-report-recommends-actions-to-help-libya-account-for-missing-persons/>.

2 The *Jamahiriyya* ("state of the masses") was the system of governance Gadhafi proclaimed in 1977. It nominally abolished conventional state institutions in favor of direct popular rule through people's committees and congresses, while concentrating authority in Gadhafi and a parallel apparatus of revolutionary committees and security services.

sustained by informal and unacknowledged security channels, shapes political behavior and reinforces the authority of those who control information and the means of movement.

Durable Infrastructure: Colonial and Authoritarian Roots

Libya's practice of enforced disappearance rests on an infrastructure more than a century old.³ Under Italian colonial rule between 1911 and 1943, the administration combined custodial opacity at home with surveillance abroad. Detainees in the concentration camps of the Libyan interior were held with their fate deliberately obscured, executions concealed, and custodial status left ambiguous as a method of control. During the suppression of resistance in Cyrenaica between 1929 and 1934, the colonial regime forcibly relocated more than 110,000 Libyans into desert concentration camps such as El Agheila on the Gulf of Sidra, where an estimated 60,000 died from starvation, disease, or execution.⁴ At the same time, Italian consulates in Cairo, Damascus, Tunis, and elsewhere tracked Libyan exiles, intercepted their correspondence, and mapped their political networks, treating opponents abroad as an extension of the colonial security horizon. Transnational repression reached the families of targets as well. Authorities disciplined the relatives of those active abroad by withholding documentation and using administrative instruments to punish kinship networks for the conduct of exiles. From the outset of Libya's state formation, the regulation of citizens abroad was part of the same apparatus that governed them at home.

The authoritarian state established after Gadhafi's military coup in 1969, which deposed the Sanusi monarchy of King Idris I, inherited and expanded this repertoire. It built an archipelago of detention sites across the country, including remote desert prisons, operating without judicial oversight or public registers, where prolonged incommunicado detention and the withholding of information from families became routine instruments of rule. The killing of more than 1,200 detainees at Abu Salim prison in 1996, concealed for years while families were left without acknowledgement, remains the period's defining act of custodial erasure.⁵

The transnational dimension of repression in Libya can be traced back to the People's Bureaus that replaced conventional embassies and functioned as intelligence hubs across Europe, North America, and the Arab world. Libyan embassies, rebranded in 1979 as People's Bureaus, served as posts for Jamahiriyya security committees that coordinated intelligence-gathering, monitored political activity, and mobilized loyalist networks against exiles in host countries.⁶ State security operations often weaponized student unions, cultural offices, and social clubs as surveillance networks to intimidate and track exiles, in particular activists of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya and Islamists suspected of having foreign ties. Activists suffered severe consequences, including the denial or revocation of passports, and indirect punishment that involved family members being surveilled, publicly shamed, and detained for their activist family member's political activities.⁷

Each successive order absorbed the practices of the one before, so techniques developed under empire and refined under the Jamahiriyya were available to

3 Gerasimos Tsourapas, Walid Ali, and Iosif Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression: Colonial Legacies and Authoritarian Circulations in Libya's Disappearance Regime," *International Political Sociology* 20, no. 3 (2026): olag029, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olag029>.

4 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression", drawing on Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (London: Routledge, 2021), 81–82, 127–28.

5 Human Rights Watch, "Libya: June 1996 Killings at Abu Salim Prison," June 27, 2006, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/06/27/libya-june-1996-killings-abu-salim-prison>.

6 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression."

7 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression."

the actors who inherited the Libyan security landscape after 2011. The continuity is the point. When militias and competing security agencies today detain critics without record and pursue opponents into neighboring states, they draw on a repertoire more than a century in the making.

Regional Consequences of Enforced Disappearance

Libya sits at the intersection of North African and Mediterranean security systems, and disappearance intersects with cross-border policing and intelligence cooperation, particularly with Egypt, Tunisia, and Türkiye. These relationships allow Libyan security bodies and aligned armed groups to pursue critics well beyond Libyan territory, drawing on informal intelligence and the limited protection afforded to exiles in host states. In February 2025, Egyptian security forces detained the Libyan human rights defender Nasser al-Hawari in Alexandria and withheld information about his whereabouts for over two weeks. This operation on Egyptian soil illustrates how disappearance reaches into neighboring states.⁸ These relationships shape the behavior of diaspora and exile communities while also drawing neighboring governments into Libya's internal rivalries. Any policy framework concerned with repression, migration and mobility, or regional stability must therefore treat disappearance as a transnational infrastructure.

Disappearance shapes security cooperation and the politics of cross-border mobility. Libyan authorities maintain relationships with Egypt, Tunisia, and Türkiye that combine formal security agreements with informal channels of coordination. These arrangements affect how dissidents, activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens move across borders, and they shape the way host-state authorities respond to political sensitivities originating in Libya. This results in a form of extraterritorial control that regulates exile communities and embeds Libya's internal rivalries within the security practices of neighboring states. This dynamic complicates regional stability and creates a shared zone of risk in which decisions made in Tripoli, Benghazi, Cairo, Ankara, or Tunis have immediate repercussions across multiple jurisdictions.

Plans to professionalize Libyan special operations and coast guard units, expand maritime and border capabilities, and channel development funds into the energy sector all route support through entities embedded in or adjacent to the detention and disappearance system.⁹

Enforced disappearance also affects the safety and mobility of Libyan civil society, which includes journalists and human rights defenders who engage with international institutions. Many operate from exile and maintain networks across several countries. Their vulnerability to disappearance abroad impacts the ability of international organizations to gather information, support local partners, and monitor and report developments. In this regard, disappearance shapes the informational environment in which external actors operate, limiting the availability of reliable testimony and discouraging participation in public forums.

Finally, disappearance has profound social effects. Prolonged uncertainty reshapes family life and settles into collective memory, embedding layers of trauma and silence into Libyan culture. The persistence of disappearance shows how authority is exercised in Libya and across its borders and sets the terms on which any outside power, including the United States, can engage. It also exposes the risks of engagement that do not account for the coercive infrastructures shaping Libya's political order. The issue is more significant

8 "Amnesty International calls on Cairo to reveal the whereabouts of Nasser al-Hawari, forcibly disappeared after exposing abuses in Haftar's prisons" (in Arabic), by Tamer Hindawi, Al-Quds al-Arabi, 16 February 2025, archived at <https://perma.cc/VJ77-UZH2>; "The release of human rights defender Nasser al-Hawari after 16 days of detention in Egypt" (in Arabic), Libya Al-Ahrar, 26 February 2025, archived at <https://perma.cc/ZXZ4-32TV>.

9 Rose Lopez Keravuori and Maureen Farrell, "The US is reengaging with Libya—and it's the right call" <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/the-us-is-re-engaging-with-libya-and-its-the-right-call/>, Jan. 15, 2026.

In countries where the practice of enforced disappearance is entrenched, the persistent absence of truth and accountability erodes public trust, which fuels political instability.

than an immediate human rights concern. Rather, it is a structural challenge for any hope of national reconciliation and long-term stability. In countries where the practice of enforced disappearance is entrenched, the persistent absence of truth and accountability erodes public trust, which fuels political instability. That instability, in turn, creates incentives for authorities and armed actors to rely even more on repressive tactics, including further disappearances. To break this cycle, states must rebuild the foundations of governance and accountability.

Global Impacts of Enforced Disappearance

The international dimension is reinforced by Libya's persistent domestic institutional vacuum. Since 2011, neither the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) nor the eastern Government of National Stability (GNS) has established unified command over the armed groups nominally under their authority, many of which operate their own intelligence and detention capacities. This fragmentation allows external states pursuing counterterrorism and migration-control objectives — among them European governments and the United States — to work directly with individual Libyan security actors. In this scenario, cooperation proceeds without regard to how detainees are treated given the lack of independent monitoring. Responsibility for a disappearance is correspondingly diffused across multiple bodies, none of which acknowledges custody, which makes accountability difficult to assign and evidence difficult to obtain.¹⁰

European and North American governments prioritize migration management, counterterrorism, security, and energy cooperation in their relations with Libya, often working with the very actors implicated in coercive practices. Disappearance operates within this policy space both as a method of internal control and as a tool for negotiating external relationships. For policymakers, this raises important questions about the long-term consequences of engagement that overlooks the centrality of disappearance within Libya's political order.

The continuing practice of enforced disappearance bears directly on the questions Washington must answer as it re-engages in security and economic relations with Libya after years of limited involvement. In October 2025, the deputy commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) visited Tripoli and Sirte to announce that Libyan forces drawn from the GNU and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) under Khalifa Haftar would participate in Flintlock 26, the command's flagship special operations exercise, at a training site near Sirte in April 2026. The cooperation was made possible by modifying the U.N. arms embargo, which permitted security forces from both the western and eastern forces to train for the stated purpose of military reunification. A U.S. special envoy visited both ahead of the Joint Statement on the Situation in Libya, issued on Nov. 26, 2025, by the United States, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom, which called for closer east-west security and economic coordination and affirmed support for the U.N.-led political process.¹¹ AFRICOM presented this engagement as support for unifying Libya's divided military institutions. The difficulty is that it runs through the very security bodies that have been identified as disappearance operators.¹² For that reason, U.S. policymakers shaping such

10 Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, UN Doc A/HRC/52/83 (March 27, 2023): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/libya/index>. Detailed Findings of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, UN Doc A/HRC/52/CRP8 (March 27, 2023): <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/detailed-findings-independent-fact-finding-mission-libya-ahrc52crp8>

11 U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Joint Statement on the Situation in Libya," Nov. 26, 2025. <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/joint-statement-on-the-situation-in-libya>

12 United States Africa Command Public Affairs, "AFRICOM Deputy Commander Visits Libya, Announces Libyan Participation in Exercise Flintlock 2026," Oct. 14, 2025, <https://www.africom.mil/article/36022/africom-deputy-commander-visits-libya-announces-libyan-participation-in-exercise-flintlock>

engagement must recognize disappearance as a technique of governance and avoid underwriting such practices.

Economic Impacts

U.S. interest in Libya is concrete and increasingly economic. Libya produces between 1.2 million and 1.4 million barrels of oil per day and aims to reach 2 million by 2030.¹³ European buyers are increasingly treating Libyan crude as an alternative¹⁴ to Russian energy supplies as sanctions tighten, and major western oil companies have returned to the country, with ExxonMobil signing an exploration memorandum in 2025 and others re-entering after an 18-year absence.¹⁵

These investments are tied to two security concerns Washington takes seriously: the entrenchment of Russia's Africa Corps around eastern airbases, logistics hubs, and desert routes into the Sahel and the persistence of Islamic State and al Qaeda-aligned networks along Libya's southern frontier. Washington's energy and security priorities have increasingly aligned it with Libyan forces responsible for protecting critical infrastructure and conducting counterterrorism operations. Many of these same actors also oversee and operate the detention and disappearance system. Assistance that strengthens Libyan capabilities without addressing these systemic issues risks formalizing the infrastructure of repression.¹⁶

Judicial Impacts

Disappearance crucially undermines the emergence of legitimate institutions. The absence of reliable information on detainees and the proliferation of unregulated detention sites erode the authority of formal judicial bodies and obstruct even minimal procedural accountability. This environment constrains the ability of Libyan actors to construct political arrangements that may be grounded in transparent decision making and predictable legal processes. It also dims the prospects for any future transitional-justice process, which would depend on documentation and the sort of institutional memory that routine disappearance erodes.

The scale compounds the problem. International assessments claim thousands of people in Libya are missing due to enforced disappearance as well as conflict- and disaster-related migration.¹⁷ Unresolved disappearance at that scale becomes a long-term barrier to institutional reconstruction, particularly where documentation gaps and custodial ambiguity persist. In settings where disappearance is routine, these foundations are difficult to establish and may leave the society in a state of limbo, often for decades.¹⁸ Moreover, the transnational character of disappearance combined with decentralized perpetrators diffuses accountability and obstructs efforts to seek justice and meaningful reform.

Political Impacts

The phenomenon also shapes the behavior of Libya's political elites. Individuals who control detention facilities or manage information gain leverage

13 U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief: Libya," <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/LBY/>; on the 2030 target, National Oil Corporation statements reported in "Libya Opens Oil and Gasfields in Bid to Attract Multi-Million Dollar Investments," *The National*, Dec. 23, 2025.

14 Rose Lopez Keravuori and Maureen Farrell, "The US Is Reengaging with Libya, and It's the Right Call," *Atlantic Council*, Jan. 15, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/the-us-is-re-engaging-with-libya-and-its-the-right-call/>; production figures from US Energy Information Administration, "Libya," (country analysis).

15 "Libya's NOC Signs Memorandum of Understanding with ExxonMobil," *Reuters*, Aug. 4, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/libyas-noc-signs-memorandum-understanding-with-exxonmobil-after-decade-2025-08-04/>.

16 UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, UN Doc A/HRC/52/CRP.8 (March 27, 2023); OHCHR, *Abuse Behind Bars: Arbitrary and Unlawful Detention in Libya* (April 10, 2018).

17 International Commission on Missing Persons, *Libya missing persons assessment*, April 2021 (see note 1).

18 Iosif Kovras, *Grassroots Activism and the Evolution of Transitional Justice: The Families of the Disappeared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Critics of Libya have been detained in Cairo, Tunis, Istanbul, and elsewhere for engaging in media appearances, public political discussions, or organizations that document armed activities inside Libya.

within local and national power structures. They occupy central positions in negotiations and serve as indispensable intermediaries when bargaining with international partners. Disappearance, thus, has become part of Libya's political economy by consolidating the influence of armed groups and security bodies that already dominate the landscape. External engagement with these actors can, whether intentionally or not, strengthen the institutions that sustain disappearance and narrow the space for institutional reform.

Transnational Disappearance Today

Enforced disappearance — now a central feature of Libya's contemporary environment — does not follow a single chain of command. Rather, it is carried out by Libya's eastern and western authorities, armed groups with intelligence capacities, and networks of intermediaries who manage information, movement, financing, and local access. Disappearance abroad now exists as part of a wider set of practices through which Libyan actors pursue critics, restrain dissent, and regulate exile politics — using channels positioned between formal diplomacy and informal coercion.¹⁹

Egypt, Tunisia, Türkiye, Sudan, and Jordan have become sites where Libyan political and security actors request detentions or coordinate transfers. Some of these interactions take place through recognized security agreements; others rely on personal ties, factional alignments, or the discretionary authority of local intelligence officers. The result is a landscape in which arrests and disappearances outside Libya carry political meaning but no clear institutional signature. Individuals targeted abroad are typically believed to be able to shape public narratives by documenting abuses or mobilizing politically significant networks. Not surprisingly, their treatment reflects the interests of Libyan actors seeking leverage in regional capitals.

Critics of Libya have been detained in Cairo, Tunis, Istanbul, and elsewhere for engaging in media appearances, public political discussions, or organizations that document armed activities inside Libya. In several cases, local security forces detained individuals at airports and held them without charge while communication was established with Libyan contacts. The cases of Nasser al-Hawari, detained in 2025, and Hamza al-Tihami, detained in 2020, illustrate this pattern.²⁰ Both had criticized actors in eastern Libya shortly before being detained in Egypt, and both were held for periods during which their whereabouts were unclear. Such incidents reflect a wider practice in which host-state authorities respond to political sensitivities originating in Libya through opaque security channels.

Border crossings have also become sites of vulnerability. It is not surprising that Libyan travelers moving through the Cairo, Tunis-Carthage, and Istanbul airports encounter scrutiny that reflects how security perceives their political affiliations. Some have been denied entry, escorted into secondary screening rooms, and held for questioning by officials who possessed detailed information about their public activity. Researchers and nongovernmental organizations have documented cases in which individuals were questioned about their social media posts or contacts with figures linked to rival Libyan factions.²¹ Although these interactions seldom produce formal charges, they generate uncertainty and reinforce the sense that emigration and exile do not provide distance from Libya's political conflicts.

19 Freedom House, *Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, April 2026), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2026/collaboration-and-resistance-tracking-transnational-repression-2025>.

20 On al-Hawari, see Al-Quds al-Arabi, cited above; on al-Tihami, see Ean Libya, "Egyptian security forces arrest media figure Hamza al-Tihami" (in Arabic), 30 March 2020, archived at <https://perma.cc/Y752-DVH7>.

21 Freedom House, "Libya," *Freedom in the World*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/libya>.

Coercion-by-proxy remains integral to this system. Families inside Libya report being summoned by armed groups or security offices after a relative abroad appeared on television or published material critical of a particular authority.²² Some were instructed to contact relatives and request a halt to their activities; others were subjected to temporary detention or restrictions on movement. Although these patterns align with earlier means of political control, the post-2011 landscape has expanded the number of actors who employ such methods. This produces a competitive field in which multiple factions draw on similar tools to shape the behavior of Libyans abroad.

Diaspora informant networks — called antennas — contribute further to this environment.²³ Libyan communities in Egypt, Tunisia, and Europe include individuals who maintain ties to specific factions and report on gatherings, discussions, and public statements. These networks are often informal and do not always follow a hierarchical structure. Rather, they operate within the political economy of exile settings, where local power brokers mediate access to favors or business opportunities. Information circulates along these lines, sometimes generating consequences for individuals unaware that they are under observation. This produces a diffuse system of monitoring that, again, echoes earlier patterns of relational surveillance embedded within Libyan society.

Foreign security services play a significant role in enabling such practices. Egypt's relationship with eastern Libyan authorities and its broader counterterrorism posture have created channels through which Libyan armed groups request cooperation.²⁴ Tunisian authorities have acted in response to Libyan security concerns during periods of heightened tension, particularly when smuggling or militant activity becomes prominent. Turkish engagement has also shifted in accordance with changing alliances within western Libya. In all cases, domestic priorities and bilateral relationships shape the decisions of local security actors. The opacity of these systems allows disappearance to occur within a gray zone situated between official cooperation and informal alignment.

Individuals who disappear abroad often move through multiple jurisdictions before re-emerging or being located: Some are transferred to Libyan authorities; others are held temporarily and released without explanation. Families frequently travel between cities seeking information, only to receive contradictory accounts from officials and intermediaries. These journeys illustrate how disappearance functions as a regional phenomenon shaped by the embeddedness of Libyan conflicts within neighboring states. It extends the internal security logic across borders and links Libya's fragmentation to the coercive practices of regional states. Politically, the effects are wide-ranging: Exile communities have grown cautious about appearing in media and avoid being associated with sensitive topics. Activists alter travel patterns to minimize exposure to regional surveillance networks. Journalists documenting Libyan affairs report heightened pressure, including receiving messages from Libyan actors and warnings from host-state authorities. Taken together, these dynamics shape how Libya is represented internationally and influence the public sphere surrounding the country. They also strengthen the ability of armed groups and political authorities to project influence into environments where their territorial reach is limited.²⁵

22 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression."

23 Dana M. Moss, *The Arab Spring Abroad: Diaspora Activism against Authoritarian Regimes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 76–77.

24 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression."

25 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression."

From 2014 onward, former security and intelligence officers positioned themselves within militias, police units, and administrative bodies across both eastern and western Libya.

The Institutional Enablers: Post-2011 Fragmentation

Enforced disappearance was a defining instrument of the Gadhafi regime.²⁶ It did not diminish after his fall in 2011. Rather, it adapted to a fragmented political landscape and became embedded within the competing authorities that emerged from the conflict that followed the 2011 uprising. Since 2014, the division between the western authorities under the GNU and the eastern authorities under LAAF has allowed armed groups to proliferate, marked by overlapping jurisdictions and minimal oversight.²⁷ Within this context, disappearance continued as an established method through which actors asserted authority, as they also sought to regulate political behavior and control movement. Two mechanisms drove this persistence: the absorption of former regime personnel into new structures and the reactivation of institutions that carried forward earlier methods.

From 2014 onward, former security and intelligence officers positioned themselves within militias, police units, and administrative bodies across both eastern and western Libya.²⁸ Their presence was initially informal, in essence a response to the collapse of central institutions and the need for individuals with technical expertise, but over the following years, this integration was formalized. In the east, armed groups that emerged under the LAAF after 2014 absorbed former Gadhafi-era Internal Security Agency (ISA) officers and revived the agency's repressive methods. In 2018, the prime minister of the eastern interim government, Abdullah al-Thinni, issued Decision No. 291 of 2018, which abolished the designation of the General Investigations Agency and restored the Internal Security Agency name;²⁹ the House of Representatives legislated on the body five years later in Law No. 6 of 2023 on the reorganisation of the Internal Security Agency, which recites that decision in its preamble.³⁰ A separate Internal Security Agency operates in western Libya, nominally under the Tripoli government and likewise staffed in part by officers who had held security and intelligence posts before 2011.³¹ These parallel agencies reproduced earlier norms of secrecy, centralization, and discretionary coercion.

Detention facilities that expanded during this period embodied this continuity. Sites such as the Mitiga airbase prison in Tripoli and the Kuweifiya prison in Benghazi acquired reputations for prolonged, unacknowledged detention and systematic restrictions on access to information. At Mitiga, the RADA Special Deterrence Force, a Madkhali-Salafi armed group nominally under the interior ministry that controls the airbase and functions as a de facto police and detention authority in the capital, operated what was likely the largest detention complex in western Libya, holding some 2,600 detainees as of late 2017.³² In eastern Libya, at least 1,800 were held at Kuweifiya as of 2017, across three sections: one under the Judicial Police, one under the direct control of Haftar's LAAF, and one run by the intelligence agency commonly known as the Internal Security Agency, where U.N. monitors have documented prolonged incommunicado detention, torture and inhuman conditions.³³ These facilities drew on custodial practices developed in earlier decades and relied on personnel

26 Human Rights Watch, *Delivered into Enemy Hands: US-Led Abuse and Rendition of Opponents to Gaddafi's Libya* (2012); Amnesty International, *Libya: Time to Make Human Rights a Reality*, MDE 19/002/2004 (2004).

27 UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, UN Doc A/HRC/52/CRP.8 (March 27, 2023).

28 Tsourapas, Ali, and Kovras, "The Origins of Transnational Repression."

29 Almarsad, "Al-Thinni renames the General Investigations Agency as the Internal Security Agency" (in Arabic), 26 June 2018, on Decision No. 291 of 2018, archived at <https://perma.cc/E32B-RDZ2>.

30 Law No. 6 of 2023 on the reorganisation of the Internal Security Agency (in Arabic), Official Gazette 2023, no. 8, issued 2 April 2023, archived at <https://perma.cc/QQ79-CF7M>.

31 UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, UN Doc A/HRC/52/CRP.8, cited above. The full citation precedes it earlier on this page.

32 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in cooperation with the UN Support Mission in Libya, *Abuse Behind Bars: Arbitrary and Unlawful Detention in Libya* (Geneva: OHCHR, April 2018), 18.

33 OHCHR, *Abuse Behind Bars*, 20.

familiar with the administrative techniques associated with disappearance. The presence of such personnel shaped the operational environment across the country. Individuals trained in pre-2011 interrogation, detention, and intelligence procedures possessed detailed knowledge of how to conduct arrests without record, maintain custodial opacity, and manage information flows. Their skills aligned with the needs of armed groups and de facto authorities seeking to consolidate power in a context of political uncertainty. The broader fragmentation of the state, combined with the absence of unified legal oversight, created permissive conditions in which these practices were able to continue largely unchallenged.

The rare instances of accountability have originated outside Libya. In December 2025, German authorities surrendered Khaled El Hishri, a senior officer of the RADA Special Deterrence Force accused of crimes against humanity and war crimes at Mitiga, to the International Criminal Court, the first Libyan suspect transferred to the Court in the 15 years since the Security Council referred the situation; his confirmation-of-charges hearing followed in May 2026. That the first such transfer required a suspect to leave Libyan-controlled territory underscores how little domestic challenge these practices face.³⁴

The extraterritorial dimension of enforced disappearances demonstrates how Gadhafi-era practices extend beyond Libya's borders, whether by reaching critics directly in neighboring states or by targeting their relatives at home. Nasser al-Hawari, an Egyptian-Libyan human rights activist and TV anchor, was forcibly disappeared in Alexandria, Egypt, in February 2025, shortly after his TV show highlighted human rights violations by Haftar's forces.³⁵ Similarly, in March 2020 Egyptian security forces reportedly detained Hamza al-Tihami, a Libyan broadcaster, at his residence in Cairo, after he criticized the chief of staff of Haftar's forces on air.³⁶ In addition, the case of the brother of Hussam al-Gomati, a Sweden-based Libyan activist who criticizes armed groups in both the east and west, illustrates a related mechanism. In March 2025, al-Gomati's brother Mohammed, who has no political involvement, was abducted from his home in Tripoli by a security apparatus. Al-Gomati attributed the act to an effort to intimidate critics abroad via their relatives at home.³⁷

Taken together, these developments reveal a post-2011 environment in which disappearance persists as a technique adapted to shifting institutional arrangements and competing power centers. Fragmentation, legacy institutions, and regional linkages have all produced a system in which individuals remain vulnerable to unacknowledged detention and extraterritorial targeting.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are framed for the current moment of U.S. re-engagement with Libya. Each attaches conditions to the security and economic instruments Washington is already considering, so that engagement strengthens accountable partners and avoids underwriting the infrastructure of disappearance. They identify actions for the United States and, where relevant, for the wider group of governments that issued the joint statement on Libya on Nov. 26, 2025, among them the United States, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom, which affirmed support for east-west security and economic coordination and for the U.N.-led political process.^{38,39}

34 International Criminal Court, "El Hishri Case" (ICC-01/11), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/libya/el-hishri>; on the surrender, see Amnesty International, "Libya: 15 Years After Uprising Against Gaddafi's Rule Impunity Reigns," Feb. 19, 2026.

35 Amnesty International. 2025. Egypt: Authorities must immediately reveal whereabouts of Egyptian-Libyan activist Nasser al-Hawari. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/egypt-authorities-must-immediately-reveal-whereabouts-of-egyptian-libyan-activist-nasser-al-hawari/>

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- 1** **CONDITION SECURITY ASSISTANCE ON DETENTION TRANSPARENCY AND UNIT VETTING**
- 2** **ATTACH THE SAME CONDITIONS TO ENERGY SECTOR FINANCING**
- 3** **BUILD A SHARED MONITORING SYSTEM THAT INFORMS THESE DECISIONS**
- 4** **TARGET INDIVIDUAL PERPETRATORS DIRECTLY**
- 5** **PROTECT THOSE TARGETED ABROAD**
- 6** **SUPPORT THE DOCUMENTARY RECORD**
- 7** **EMBED DETAINEE DISCLOSURE IN THE POLITICAL TRACK**

As AFRICOM expands training, special operations professionalization, and maritime and coast guard support, the U.S. State Department should apply Leahy vetting rigorously to every recipient unit. Under the Leahy Law, U.S. security assistance may not go to a unit of a foreign security force where there is credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights; the State Department counts enforced disappearance among those violations. Vetting is conducted at the level of the specific unit designated to receive assistance, and of its commander, rather than of the security forces. Vetting should also make continued assistance conditional on verifiable detainee registers and disclosure of detention sites beyond basic procedural guarantees. Units that cannot meet these conditions should not receive U.S. training, equipment, or operational partnership.

Where the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation or the Export-Import Bank support pipelines or natural gas processing, financing should be tied to published transparency and anti-corruption benchmarks that include disclosure of detention practices by the security actors guarding energy infrastructure. U.S. support for National Oil Corporation reform should carry the same requirements. This ensures that protecting investments does not quietly underwrite the forces that operate the disappearance system.

The United States and its European partners should maintain a common record of disappearance cases, including extraterritorial detentions, and feed it directly into Leahy vetting, sanctions designations, and human-rights reporting for any program involving Libyan security actors. Ideally, the records should be updated continuously rather than compiled annually, so that they can inform decisions as they are taken.

The U.S. Treasury and State departments should use Global Magnitsky sanctions, a targeted authority under which the United States freezes the assets of, and denies entry to, named foreign individuals responsible for serious human rights abuse, and Section 7031(c) visa restrictions against commanders and officials responsible for enforced disappearance, including those involved in the extraterritorial detention of Libyan critics in Egypt, Tunisia, and Türkiye. Designations should name individuals and units rather than institutions in the abstract and should be paired with published criteria for removal so that they operate as leverage toward disclosure and release.

The State Department, through the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and any U.S. diplomatic presence in the region, should expand protection and relocation pathways for Libyan activists, journalists, and civil society figures at risk, while establishing a rapid-response procedure for individuals detained or threatened outside Libya, including emergency relocation and coordinated consular support across the region.

U.S. and partner assistance should help Libyan civil society organizations build secure repositories of testimony, custody records, and detention data. Beyond its value for transitional justice procedures, this record supplies the evidentiary basis for vetting and sanctions decisions and reduces U.S. reliance on the very security actors implicated in disappearances.

The 10 governments that issued the joint statement reaffirming their support for the Libyan people should make detainee disclosure, custody access and release a standing aspect of the U.N. Support Mission in Libya's roadmap, including any ceasefire or security arrangement. The United States and its partners should tie deeper recognition, security cooperation, and reconstruction

support to measurable progress on these commitments. They should make disclosure a condition of the engagement that Libyan authorities are now actively seeking.

Conclusion

Libya must address the historical origins and current structure of enforced disappearance before it can build credible institutions and envision sustainable national stability. Dismantling a system of disappearance transmitted across generations cannot be easily undone. It can, however, be constrained and documented and deny the external resources and recognition on which its current operators depend. Policies should not aim to eliminate disappearance at once but instead, narrow its scope and create space for institutional arrangements grounded in transparency, oversight, and public accountability. Libya's political trajectory will depend on these foundations and the willingness of domestic and external actors to confront the coercive infrastructures that have shaped the country for more than a century.

AUTHORS



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