CURRENT SITUATION
Six years after the fall of Muammar Gadhafi, Libya remains in a chaotic state. The United Nations-backed government struggles to exert control over territory held by rival factions, intensifying geographical and political divisions between the East, West, and South. Terrorist groups and armed militias exploit the turmoil, using the nation as a base for radicalization and organized crime, and pose a threat to the region and beyond.

USIP’S WORK
The experience of the U.S. Institute of Peace in conflict zones shows that community-level initiatives that solve local disputes set the stage for national reconciliation and stabilization. Applying this approach in Libya since 2011, USIP is helping to build a foundation for a national peace agreement through local conflict resolution, dialogue, and rule of law initiatives in some of Libya’s most conflict-ridden communities. Recent work includes:

Strengthening the Security Sector and Rule of Law. After the Gadhafi regime collapsed, branches of rival governments and armed groups began providing community security, guarding facilities, and managing prisons, resulting in inconsistent—and sometimes inhumane—law enforcement practices and treatment of inmates. Libya’s dilapidated prisons act as prime venues for radicalization and extremist recruitment.

In response, USIP developed a program to advance rule of law and involve local communities on security issues, supported by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The Institute:
Maps the criminal justice sector, including key figures and institutions, to identify areas ripe for reform

- Fosters dialogue and collaboration among the judicial police and prison directors, who are critical to implementing reforms
- Leads workshops with prison directors, prosecutors, judges, and civil society leaders, helping them establish a unified vision for communities and the nation

During 2016-2017, USIP convened 20 prison directors and leaders of the Judicial Police for discussions on security, infrastructure, and deradicalization—the first meetings of prison officials from Libya’s eastern and western territories since 2014.

Libya’s border with Tunisia also presents challenges due to decades of smuggling, from foodstuffs to weapons, and violence associated with illicit trade. In 2017, USIP hosted a meeting in its regional office in Tunis to increase understanding and coordination among U.S. government, international organizations, and Tunisian civil society on security, economic, and social trends along the border.

Improving Conflict Management Skills. To create a grassroots foundation for peace, USIP is improving the conflict prevention and management skills of civil society leaders, lawyers, and journalists.

The Institute is training ethnic, tribal, and other community leaders in Sebha, a city near the country’s center that serves as a hub for smuggling and transnational trafficking. The national conflict inflated divisions among Sebha groups. USIP is building on recent reconciliation efforts to help local leaders reduce violence with facilitated dialogues and other mediation methods. The work also aims to undermine the appeal of extremism and provide a peaceful model for other Libyan communities.

Informing Policy Through Groundbreaking Research. USIP works with local partners across Libya, producing unique insights valuable to informing U.S., local, national, and international policy about the situation on the ground. Published studies include:

- “Libya’s Religious Sector and Peacebuilding Efforts,” March 2017. Relying on local researchers’ knowledge and 134 surveys of religious, civil society, and military leaders, the Institute mapped the influence of the increasingly polarized religious landscape.
- “Prisons and Detention in Libya,” September 2016. USIP research teams studied infrastructure and the treatment of prisoners across detention facilities, determining that a variety of reforms—from major legislative actions to bureaucratic measures—are urgently needed, especially to counter violent extremism. This study was the first to comprehensively survey Libya’s prison system.
- “Tribe, Security, Justice, and Peace in Libya Today,” September 2016. Qualitative research and a public perception survey showed that tribal authorities hold significant sway over state services and that there is little practical distinction between these informal groups and formal institutions.
- “Illicit Trafficking and Libya’s Transition: Profits and Losses,” February 2014. Drawing from 200 interviews, experts examined how organized crime affects economic and social stability. The results helped define policy options for national and regional development.

Convening Leaders for Peaceful Cooperation. USIP’s unique Justice and Security Dialogue (JSD) model fostered trust and cooperation among officials and community leaders in specific locations, helping them take vital steps toward establishing rule of law. For instance, a series of such dialogues, convened in Zawiya, a coastal city near Tripoli, improved relations and coordination to resolve conflicts peacefully and highlighted existing community strengths and processes that could address communal strife.