Attitudes on Social Media to International and Local Aid in Libya

Reactions on Social Media

November 2023

To support the response to the floods in Libya in September 2023, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing **social media monitoring** to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in Libya in the aftermath of Storm Daniel with the aim of contributing to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community sentiment.

Summary

This social media monitoring brief presents the findings from a review of more than 2,500 Facebook comments posted as part of public online discussions related to the provision of international and local aid in Libya following the flooding in eastern Libya in September 2023. The aim is to understand online sentiment towards key issues and subjects that could help aid agencies in their programming and security risk management.

Main findings:

- In a context of difficult access to affected areas, Libyan social media users perceive the United Nations (UN) as being indifferent to the situation in Derna and other areas impacted by Storm Daniel.

- The Libyan Red Crescent enjoys high levels of trust and positive sentiment on social media as a key organisation on the ground that was quick to respond to the flooding disaster.

- The humanitarian crisis in Gaza and perceptions of double standards at the expense of Arab societies has increased mistrust of and anger towards the UN and the "West" among Libyan social media users.

- Nevertheless, despite general mistrust towards external actors and aid, Libyan social media users think international aid is necessary to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in eastern Libya.

Context

On 10 September 2023 Storm Daniel devastated the eastern Libyan coastal region, resulting in significant damage to a number of towns and cities, including Al Bayda, Al Marj, and Derna. The worst-hit area was Derna, where two dams collapsed. According to the International Organisation for Migration, the number of internally displaced people affected by the flooding in eastern Libya surpassed **43,400** in early November 2023.

Mailing List

This humanitarian disaster unfolded in a context of continued political and military division in **Libya**. Currently, the country is deeply divided between two organisations claiming to be the country's legitimate government, namely the House of Representatives in opposition-held Tobruk, which controls eastern Libya, and the UN-recognised High State Council in Tripoli, which controls the western part of the country.

In the past decades several regional and global actors have **interfered** in Libyan internal disputes to support different conflict parties, exacerbating the civil war and the country's internal conflict.

As a result of the protracted civil war and the country's political divisions, state capacity to deal with crises has been **eroded**, while infrastructure in Libya remains underfunded and dilapidated, significantly **aggravating** the humanitarian consequences of Storm Daniel.

Following the humanitarian disaster, aid actors have mobilised to bring relief to people affected by Storm Daniel. By mid-November 2023 **humanitarian partners** had reached 203,000 people with assistance since the onset of the crisis **response**.

Findings from social media

- **Social media users' perception of the UN as being indifferent to the situation in Derna and other storm-affected areas**

Despite the magnitude of the disaster, access to Derna and other affected areas remained a significant challenge in the aftermath of the flooding, severely affecting the UN's and international agencies' delivery and administration of aid. As a result, social media users perceive the impact of international aid and aid agencies' presence in the disaster area as marginal at best.

Social media users repeatedly singled out the UN – probably identified as a proxy for the international aid sector and community – for being indifferent to the consequences of the disaster in Derna and other affected areas. For example, on 10 October a male user claiming to be in Derna wrote the following comment:

"Peace be upon you. I swear to God, we are in Derna in Libya, the floods swept us away and our homes were destroyed. And the United Nations is aware of this and no one from inside and outside Libya has done anything."

- **Positive sentiment towards the Libyan Red Crescent on social media**

In the period following the disaster, it is clear that the Libyan Red Crescent was the most visible aid organisation on social media – and the most positively perceived. Coverage of the local organisation's activities in affected areas attracted significant attention on social media and confirmed the organisation's critical importance in the aid and rescue operations. This coverage included photos of heroic Libyan Red Crescent employees operating waist-deep in brackish water in Derna at the time of the disaster on 10 September, as well as the news of the tragic death of several on-duty volunteers in the floods. In one of many comments praising the organisation, a user commented: *"May God protect you and reward your good deeds, knights of humanitarian work"*.

Social Media Monitoring

In this context, sentiment towards the Libyan Red Crescent was particularly positive among social media users, with comments expressing approval (with rare exceptions) of the organisation's activities. The positive sentiment towards the Libyan Red Crescent contrasts with the mistrust shown towards the Syrian and Turkish Red Crescents following the February earthquake in **Türkiye** and **Syria**, where social media users criticised the organisations' proximity to mistrusted local authorities and pointed to alleged corruption.

● **Events in Gaza increasing mistrust of and anger towards the UN and the "West"**

The ongoing humanitarian disaster in the Gaza strip, including the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians and children, appears to be amplifying a sense of mistrust and anger towards the "West".[1] Indeed, Libyan social media users view the West's response to the crisis in Gaza as a blatant example of double standards that invariably penalise Arab countries and communities. Such sentiments are also directed at the UN, which some social media users clearly see as serving the interests of the West. For example, in reaction to a post related to the UN and human rights, a user posted the following comment, which was echoed by many others:

"Where are the human rights of the state of Palestine whose rights are violated every day? Where are the human rights when Gaza is bombed, when thousands of people are killed every day? Where are the human rights when no water, no electricity, no diesel arrives in Gaza?"

In general, online perceptions that the UN and the international community are indifferent to the plight of Libyans tend to be accompanied by expressions of sadness, resignation, and frustration about the focus of the UN's work. For example, one user commented that *"the UN only counts the dead"*. Such expressions probably result from a general feeling of abandonment and neglect, with users often comparing the international and regional response to disasters elsewhere in the region to that in Libya.

• **Social media users' perception that international aid is necessary despite potential mistrust towards external actors**

Despite mistrust towards external actors, most social media users appear to be against the idea of Libya not accepting external aid, believing that this would punish civilians who are in need in the aftermath of the humanitarian disaster in Derna. For example, in reaction to a comment which suggested that Libyans do not want aid from the US and Turkey, most fellow commentators rejected this view. A female commentator, for example, replied in the following way:

"You are sitting lying in your yard next to your mother and you say [that we Libyans] don't want anything. You don't want anything because nothing has happened to you, but someone else is in need of help. [Change your comment] and write that we want [aid]."

In view of this, it might be the case that the mistrust described above towards Western countries and poorly perceived international organisations may have little impact among those who are in need of aid and who are grateful for any aid, including foreign aid.

Eastern Libya Situation Report

Recommendations for agencies

Understand perceptions:

- Be aware that the intentions behind aid are frequently discussed in relation to the geopolitical interests and nature of past colonial and military or political involvement in the conflict in Libya of the actors associated with funding the provided aid.

- Note that in the context of discussing aid, social media users make few distinctions between "Western" actors and countries or regional groupings such as the US and European Union (for example, users rarely single out specific European countries).

- Be aware of the reputational risks to aid organisations associated with foreign partners, especially those who have some role in Libya's internal politics or who are associated with foreign policies elsewhere, including in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Work with trusted partners:

- Identify and work through positively perceived partners, such as the Libyan Red Crescent. Such due diligence in terms of reputation is important in politically unstable and contested environments.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data was first collected in Libya for the period 10 September-15 October 2023 using key words in Arabic linked to or referring to aid and to international and local aid organisations. These include the Libyan Red Crescent, Doctors Without Borders, the World Food Programme, the UN, Caritas, the International Rescue Committee and UNICEF. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent public data on Facebook and other social media platforms. The analysis presented above relied exclusively on Facebook comments. This selection was made because humanitarian-aid-related Facebook posts had a much wider reach than those on other social media platforms and attracted higher volumes of reactions in the form of comments, thus allowing for a richer qualitative analysis of public sentiment. Moreover, the wider population tends to use Facebook more than other platforms. To focus on the immediate public reactions to the disaster on social media, the above analysis is based on more than 2,500 comments shared via Facebook generated in the weeks following the floods. From the available information about social media profiles, it appears that the comments cited in this brief came from people without formal links to Libyan authorities of whatever kind. If such links exist, they were not made explicit. The research has a number of limitations. Firstly, it relies on a relatively small data sample, and in view of the unavailability of large-scale data, the available data could not be controlled for social media users' sex, location, and other characteristics such as political affiliation. Secondly, only public social data features for which users had given their consent for public viewing were included. Therefore, this analysis excludes possibly pertinent data from encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

[1] On social media platforms, Libyan users appear to employ the term "the West" or الغرب to refer to the United States and its associated partners, such as the European Union.