

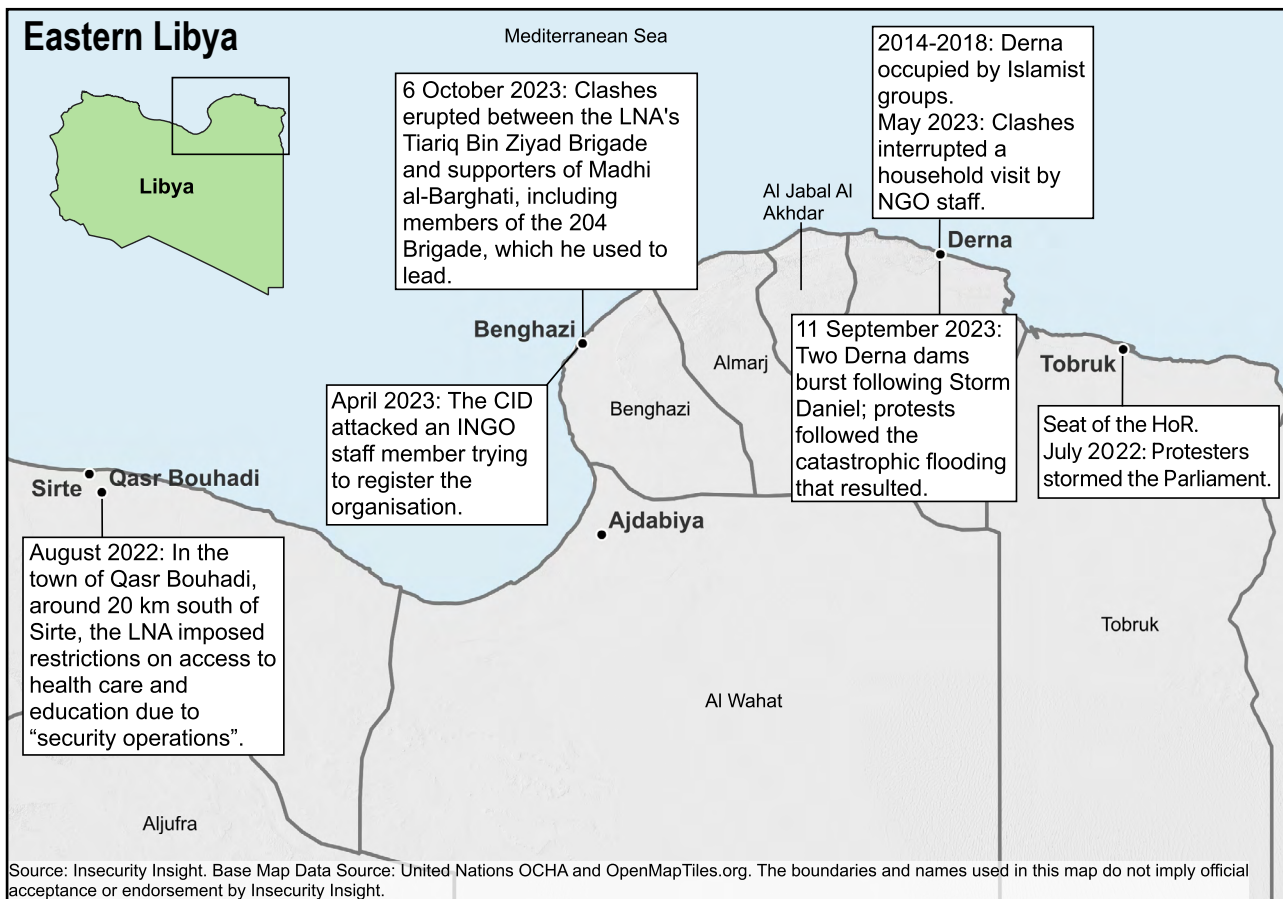
Eastern Libya Situation Report

November 2023

To support the response to the floods in Libya in September 2023, Insecurity Insight is monitoring and analysing [social media](#) and conflict events affecting food security, health care, protection and conflict related sexual violence.

Since an international coalition ousted former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's regime in 2011, Libya has been in a near-permanent state of political instability and conflict. Contested parliamentary elections in 2014 saw the country effectively split into two areas with competing governments – the Tripoli-based High State Council (HSC) in western Libya and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) in the eastern half of the country.¹ Politically, the Tobruk-based government continues to strengthen its parallel state institutions following the collapse of the Government of National Unity in early 2022, while the HSC is trying to counter this process by, among other things, deploying Criminal Investigation Department (CID) agents outside the areas of direct HSC control.

This report covers eastern Libya, which is currently under the control of the Tobruk-based HoR led by Osama Hamad, and which receives support from the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar. It discusses the implications of this complex political context for aid agencies working in eastern Libya in the aftermath of the devastating floods in September 2023.



Summary

Generally, eastern Libya has so far seen less conflict between different militia groups than Tripoli and its surrounding areas. However, Benghazi and Al Wahat have seen repeated clashes between rival factions of militia affiliated with the HoR/LNA that can affect aid

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agencies when they are in the wrong place at the wrong time and from the consequences of interrupted communications that can accompany such confrontations. Such clashes and their impact on daily life have been most frequent around Benghazi, but have also occurred in Derna. The political rivalry between the HSC and HoR can directly affect aid agencies when the competition for authority between the rival political structures extends to conflict over the right to regulate and control non-state actors in Libya. In such circumstances, aid agencies can become the target of violence or interference. The city of Derna was very adversely affected by Storm Daniel in September 2023, and any reactions to the resulting aid response are most likely to occur in this area.

Violent clashes between rival factions

On 6 October 2023 clashes were reported to have broken out in Benghazi between the LNA's Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade (led by Khalifa Haftar's son Saddam Haftar) and supporters of a militant leader, Mahdi al-Barghati (former defence minister in the Government of National Accord, 2016-2018), including members of the 204 Brigade, which al-Barghati used to lead. Since then, the HoR/LNA has blamed the Tripoli-based HSC for causing the clashes, although tensions appear to have decreased following Khalifa Haftar's meeting with the Awaqir tribal leaders (with whom al-Barghati was affiliated) on 14 October.

Box 1: Libyan National Army (LNA)

- The LNA emerged in Benghazi in eastern Libya in early 2014 following a failed coup attempt by Khalifa Haftar against the government in Tripoli. Haftar has described himself as anti-Islamist who helped Muammar Qaddafi seize power in 1969. Allegedly he assisted the US Central Intelligence Agency in the 1990s after breaking with Qaddafi.
- In practice, the LNA consists of several disparate militias that number an estimated 25,000 fighters in total. The regular core forces with direct loyalty to Khalifa Haftar are estimated to have below 7,000 men under arms. The remainder of the LNA consists of approximately 18,000 auxiliary forces that include Chadian and Sudanese military personnel as well as tribal militias.
- The LNA is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia (including the now-dissolved Wagner mercenary group).
- The LNA's declared objectives include removing the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates (including jihadists) from Libya and asserting authority over various militias in the country. This is to be achieved either through eliminating these militia groups, demobilising them, or integrating them into the LNA's patronage networks and command structures. These goals have remained consistent since mid-2014.
- The LNA relies on the support of traditional business families and former Qaddafi-era military officers, which often leads to clashes between LNA factions over smuggling, property, or the arrest/killing of a member of a rival militia.
- The LNA is directly affiliated with the HoR and controls most of eastern and central Libya, with western Sirte serving as the dividing line between the LNA and the forces affiliated with the Tripoli-based government.

Despite Haftar’s interventions, concerns remain over this incident due to the complexities of the tribal politics that could lead to further conflict in the area between the Awaqir and allied tribes and Haftar’s militia groups. The incident may increase tribal tensions in north-eastern Libya around the HoR-held areas. The HoR has used this incident to accuse the HSC of expanding these tensions.

The clashes led to several arrests and resulted in widespread [communication](#) and [internet](#) outages.

Competition for authority to regulate and control NGOs

The rivalries between the Tripoli-based HSC government and Tobruk-based HoR can affect the work of NGOs in any part of Libya, particularly when the CID is directly involved in this political conflict.

The CID Tripoli department appears to have been active for at least the past two years, although there is limited information on the actual history or objectives of the unit. It is part of the Tripoli-based HSC government’s state apparatus. The unit’s powers were [extended](#) in January 2023 by Interior Minister-designate Emad al-Trabelsi to “investigate crimes and arrest outlaws” during part of a speech in which he launched a new security plan “to secure Greater Tripoli”. Al-Trabelsi appears to have indicated that the CID has therefore been given an increase in staff and finances to ensure that it had the personnel and finances to carry out the new security plan.

INGOs, including by a local NGO group, [Lawyers for Justice in Libya](#) (LFJL), have accused the CID of enforcing a Tripoli-based HSC government directive “to revoke the licences given to all non-governmental organisations (NGOs) established since 2011”. As the LFJL noted, “This renders all civil society organisations (CSOs) illegal, ultimately closing down Libya’s civic space entirely”. This circular ([no. 5803](#)) was issued on 13 March 2023, and followed the CID Tripoli’s raids on international organisations in Sabha on 23 February, during which staff were questioned. The unit therefore appears to be used to enforce government laws by raiding INGOs and CSOs who are accused of breaking the law, which is in turn linked to rival HSC and HoR claims over which has the authority to regulate and control INGOs and CSOs.

Humanitarian response to the September 2023 floods

On 10 September 2023 Storm Daniel devastated the eastern Libyan coastal region, resulting in significant damage to a number of towns and cities and causing the collapse of two dams in Derna a day later. The floods killed more than 11,000 people, with an additional 10,000 still thought to be missing. Moreover, the floods displaced an estimated 46,000 civilians, while many residents in affected areas lack access to regular water and food supplies, and are living in extremely unhygienic conditions.

The Tobruk authorities oversaw the response to the disaster. Initially, the eastern HoR government was reluctant to accept assistance from the Tripoli-based HSC administration and foreign donors. However, logistical and organisational cooperation did improve after the LNA stopped imposing onerous checks on supplies coming into the city. Aid and rescue

personnel arrived from across Libya and countries that backed the Tripoli-based HSC administration, including Turkey and Italy. Military and security personnel from the HSC administration were also allowed access to the city, although many of these teams have now left. There are signs that cooperation will be short term, with both administrations announcing plans to hold separate conferences to raise funds for reconstruction. It is also unclear whether funds allocated by the Tripoli-based HSC administration to relief efforts were distributed.

Sentiments expressed on social media suggest that many people in Libya reacted favourably to the aid that the Tripoli-based HSC sent to Derna and expressed hopes and expectations that the humanitarian response would transcend political divisions. However, they also expressed fears that local authorities might siphon off aid meant for people in need.

Meanwhile, the disaster has not significantly impacted the wider political or security environment in eastern Libya. A week after the floods, hundreds of people protested in Derna demanding the arrest of local officials, 12 of whom (including Derna's mayor) were detained and removed from office several days later. However, there have been no further demonstrations, nor has there been any dissent against the Tobruk-based government or the LNA, which provides security in the city and has been involved in relief efforts. Similarly, the Tripoli-based HSC government has come under only limited domestic criticism, despite being responsible for the maintenance of the dams that collapsed.

In the past, clashes between rival factions have also affected NGO work in Derna. For example, in May 2023 clashes disrupted NGO household visits, but staff members were able to leave unharmed after the situation calmed down.

Box 2: Derna: a complex recent history

Following Qaddafi's removal in 2011, Derna was initially administered by transitional authorities. It was then occupied by several Islamist militant groups between 2014 and 2018, before the LNA captured it following a two-year siege. The LNA's victory brought Derna under the control of the Tobruk-based government.

Islamic State (IS) in Libya and Derna

- Exploiting the prevailing political turmoil, militant Islamist factions such as IS have utilised Libya as a base for coordinating wider regional violence, further complicating the establishment of a unified government in the country. Following its territorial gains in Benghazi, Derna, and Ajdabiya, IS reached its peak influence in Libya in 2016 by capturing Sirte, previously the group's major stronghold outside Syria and Iraq. During IS rule its members committed numerous human rights violations, and are currently facing legal proceedings in Libya for their actions. In July 2018 Khalifa Haftar announced the LNA's recapture of Derna, marking the collapse of the last IS foothold in eastern Libya.
- Although IS has lost control over territory in Libya, the group retains the capacity to carry out assaults and disrupt oil operations, particularly in inland areas. In May 2023 a Libyan court handed down death sentences to 23 individuals for their involvement in IS attacks and beheadings in 2015.

Conclusions and recommendations

This section provides an assessment of possible events that aid agencies may anticipate and plan for, allowing them to respond with conflict-sensitive plans to ensure the safety of staff and aid access and the protection of the humanitarian space.

Violent clashes between rival factions may affect aid agencies that are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The risk of instability, clashes or security operations suddenly affecting aid agencies remains high:

- It is likely that in the future there will be further moves by factions opposing the HoR or the Haftar-aligned LNA/militia that may affect the safety of aid operations and access and the aid agency working environment.
- Further instability is likely to result from other militia leaders making further attempts to extend their power, especially around Benghazi, where many militia leaders/units reside.
- The direct impact on aid agencies from such clashes will most likely be limited to difficulties in communication and internet access and the need to restrict staff movement for periods of time.
- Individual staff members, offices or programme activities may find themselves unexpectedly in the vicinity of clashes that suddenly erupt, and at that point they may be at higher risk of injury or arrest.

Recommendations: Anticipate and prepared for potential clashes:

- Provide staff with guidance on how to protect themselves if they find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, taking into account potential communication outages during periods of clashes.
- Be aware of political, ethnic, and tribal sensitivities that may lead to further clashes and instability so that you can anticipate when the risk may be higher. Be aware that clashes may also erupt unexpectedly, despite aid agencies' best attempts to anticipate and plan for them.
- Carry out due diligence on local partners to ensure that they are not aligned with any particular faction in ways that could make them a target should tensions escalate.

Rivalry between the HSC and HoR could continue to directly and indirectly affect aid agencies.

It is likely that the conflict between the HSC and HoR over control of the non-governmental sector will continue and will require that aid agencies take care as to when and how to deal with authorities in order to comply with regulations:

- The risk remains that the HoR will use such tensions between rival factions to present themselves as protectors of those supporting them, while portraying both the Tripoli-based HSC and the countries that support it as an existential threat. This may play out on social media and, depending on circumstance and alliances, may possibly affect local partner organisations.

- The HSC may continue to use the CID to try to establish control over NGO activities beyond western Libya.

Recommendations: Seek legal and other relevant advice before proceeding with any formal registration of compliance processes.

Dissatisfaction with the aid response could create tensions.

Dissatisfaction with the aid response could raise political tensions if any stakeholder attempts to politicise aspects of it:

- An inadequate aid response could increase frustrations among the population, leading to demonstrations to display their dissatisfaction.
- Rumours or accusations of corruption – possibly presented as being the cause of an adequate aid response – could spread and contribute to negative sentiments.

Recommendations: Avoid perceptions of corruption or mismanagement.

- Be transparent in communications about your programmes to avoid perceptions of corruption.
- Discuss perceived and possible corruption with local partners and agree on common principles and strategies to cope with the issue.
- Support local partners to enable the secure running of programmes and aid operations in volatile contexts on the basis of mutually agreed support.

1 The Tripoli- and Tobruk- based governments are also referred to as the Government of National Unity (GNU) and Government of National Stability (GNS).

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