

First Aid Efforts in Libya in the aftermath of Storm Daniel

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 1,000 Facebook comments posted as part of public online discussions regarding the provision of aid in Libya in the immediate aftermath of Storm Daniel. Although the brief does not specifically focus on aid organisations or their activities in Libya, the aim is to understand online sentiments that could help aid agencies in their programming and security risk management.

Main findings:

- Social media users in western Libya, which is controlled by the Tripoli-based High State Council, reacted favourably to aid sent by the Council to the flood-affected Derna area, which is controlled by the rival Tobruk-based government known as the House of Representatives.
- Many social media users expressed hopes and expectations that the humanitarian response would transcend political divisions.
- Social media users expressed frustration at what they perceived is a lack of international efforts to respond to the humanitarian disaster in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.
- Libyan social media users consistently link humanitarian aid to the geopolitical situation in post-2011 Libya.
- Some social media users have expressed fears that local authorities might siphon off aid meant for people in need.

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, where two dams collapsed. The resulting floods killed more than 11,000 people, with an additional 10,000 people still thought to be missing. Moreover, an estimated 46,000 civilians were [displaced](#), including 16,000 children, while many residents in affected areas still live in unhygienic conditions and [lack access](#) to regular water and food supplies.

[Mailing List](#)

The humanitarian disaster unfolded in a context of continued political and military division in Libya. Currently, Libya is deeply divided between the House of Representatives in opposition-held Tobruk and the UN-recognised High State Council in the Tripoli area.

In the past decades several regional and global actors have [interfered](#) in Libyan internal disputes to support either the House of Representatives or the High State Council, 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. Nevertheless, limited access to the affected areas and the lack of data from the ground are [complicating](#) existing aid efforts.

Findings from social media

- **Users in western Libya, which is controlled by the UN-recognised High State Council, reacted favourably to aid sent by the Council to the affected Derna area, which is controlled by the rival Tobruk-based House of Representatives.**

In the days immediately following the humanitarian disaster, authorities in western Libya showcased the organisation of aid destined for the affected areas in the coastal region with much fanfare on television stations and social media.

Social media users residing in western Libya overwhelmingly approved of this fraternal gesture of solidarity, with many expressing their wish for unity. For example, a male user commented, *"We ask God for the safety and wellness for our brothers in the east of Libya, and may God help us reunite the Libyan people"*.

A number of users contrasted the rapid organisation of aid by authorities in western Libya for people in eastern Libya to what they perceive to be apathy and indifference by countries in the wider region to the humanitarian disaster in the affected Derna area. For example, one user commented:

"When you see that all the Arab countries are silent, and that there is no country that has said even a word about what is happening in the East, you know that no one loves us, and at the same time you are happy that we Libyans love each other and stand together in the time of distress. We ask the Almighty Allah to protect our brothers, our families and our loved ones in the East."

These observations suggest that people active on social media in Libya think that the humanitarian response should transcend political divisions in the country.

- **Social media users expressed frustration at what they perceive is a lack of international and in particular regional efforts to respond to the humanitarian disaster.**

The comments posted by one social media user on 11 September summarises a sentiment of abandonment felt by a large number of Libyan users participating in online discussions on Facebook in the days after the humanitarian disaster: *“These disasters confirmed that #Libya_is_only_for_Libyans. We are facing everything alone, no international solidarity, no expression of concern, no help except from the mercy of my Lord”*.

Others reproached foreign countries for having readily supplied weapons to conflict parties in the Libyan civil war, but now appearing to be absent at a time of humanitarian need. For example, a young male user commented, *“The world only supports us with weapons”*. Another male user, similarly alluding to the supplying of armaments by foreign actors to warring parties in Libya, commented:

“They are prepared to send armour, ammunition and cannons, but they are not prepared to send a medicine box.”

- **Libyan social media users consistently link humanitarian aid to geopolitics.**

As seen in the comments given above, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster social media users reacted angrily to the seemingly lack of solidarity with Libya’s humanitarian plight shown by foreign actors who in other ways had been deeply involved in Libya’s internal conflict in recent years. This was particularly the case for Türkiye and Egypt, both of whom were militarily embroiled in Libya and for the past decade supported opposing parties. As one social media page put it on 11 September, *“Neither Türkiye nor Egypt provided aid, and if there was a war between you, you would receive them as the first supporters. #And the wise_man_understands”*. In other words, users appear to be particularly attentive to how countries with a history of intervention in Libya reacted to the country’s humanitarian need.

However, whenever Libyan social media users learned that countries involved in Libya’s internal struggles were sending aid, many questioned these countries’ intentions by referring to their aggravating role in the civil war. For example, when Qatar announced that it was sending aid, most users expressed negative sentiments, with some specifically condemning Qatar’s role in the war and its supplies of military equipment. For example, a male social media user from the Bani Walid area, which is controlled by the Qatar-supported Tripoli-based High State Council, said, *“I don’t want anything from you, your prince sent us weapons and destruction”*. Another male user commented:

“Qatar kills a man and then attends his funeral.”

Anger towards actors involved in Libya’s internal affairs making humanitarian gestures appears to cut across the areas of control of both the Tripoli- and Tobruk-based rival governments. For example, a number of users who gave their residential location as being in Tripoli and the western area were among those who criticised Qatar, even though it is a strong supporter of the Tripoli-based government.

These attitudes suggest that Libyan social media users associate humanitarian aid with the geopolitical situation, in some instances preferring to call for the rejection of aid from countries seen as aggravating Libya’s internal situation. Indeed, in contrast to the reception of news of Qatari or Turkish aid, social media users were unequivocally supportive of aid from Algeria, which is perceived to be a more neutral actor.

- **Some social media users have expressed anger at local authorities, seeing them as corrupt.**

In the days following the tragic disaster in Derna, hundreds of protestors [gathered](#) and burnt down the local mayor's home as reports began emerging of corrupt practices around the management of the local dams and that people had been told to [stay](#) in their home as Storm Daniel made its way towards the city.

Social media users' comments on Facebook indicate that the perception that local authorities are corrupt is not limited to the city of Derna, but is also held by users in other areas in Libya. Moreover, some social media users have expressed fears that local authorities would siphon off aid destined for people in need. For example, one user commented, *"God willing the aid will not end up in the hands of those with connections and their families, as often happens"*.

Recommendations for agencies

Understand perceptions:

- Be aware that the intentions behind aid are frequently perceived and interpreted in relation to the geopolitical interests and nature of past military or political involvement in the conflict in Libya of the actors associated with funding the provided aid.
- Be aware of the reputational risks to aid organisations associated with foreign partners, especially those who have some role in Libya's internal politics.
- Be aware that, at least among social media users in Libya, there is a perception that corruption is affecting aid delivery and that this entails risks for aid agencies if the Libyan population suspects local partners of corrupt practices.

Work with trusted partners:

- Identify and work through positively perceived partners. Such due diligence in terms of reputation is important in politically unstable and contested environments.
- Be aware that social media monitoring is better at identifying negative than positive perceptions.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data was first collected in Libya for the period 1-30 September 2023 using key words in Arabic linked to or referring to the aid efforts in the country. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent posts on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook.

The analysis presented above, however, relied exclusively on the identified Facebook data. This selection was made because humanitarian-aid-related Facebook posts had a much wider reach than the X platform 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 such as X.

To focus on the immediate public reactions to the disaster on social media, the above analysis is based on more than 1,000 comments shared via Facebook generated in the week following the floods, i.e. from 10 to 17 September 2023. From the available information about social media profiles, it appears that the comments cited in this brief came from people without formal links to authorities, or if they had such links, they did not disclose them.

The research has a number of limitations. Firstly, it relies on a relatively small data sample size, 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 social class or 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.

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