

Libya's Reconstruction Efforts: Understanding Public Perceptions through Social Media Monitoring

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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 X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook social media data related to the reconstruction plans in Libya. 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:

- Sentiments towards reconstruction plans are characterised by distrust towards local authorities and concerns over corruption.
- Sentiments towards the United Nations (UN) appear to be divided on social media.
- US and United Arab Emirates (UAE) involvement in the reconstruction plans are viewed critically.

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.

Following the floodings, the Government of National Unity in Tripoli directed an existing development fund, the Benghazi-Derna Reconstruction Fund which had been created following the Second Civil War, to finance the redevelopment of these areas. At the end of September the Libyan Public Prosecution in Tripoli filed a criminal [case](#) against 16 people it deemed responsible for the Derna flood in 2023. This includes two people formally involved in the reconstruction plan, including the head of the reconstruction fund and a member of the financial committee, who were both accused of corruption.

On 28 September the authorities in eastern Libya announced the creation of a rival [fund](#) for the reconstruction of the city of Derna, without explicitly indicating how this new fund would be financed. This was followed by an international [conference](#) held on the subject at the beginning of November, after having been postponed due to differences with the government in Tripoli on the subject of financing.

On 28 December, the prime minister of the government in eastern Libya, Osama Hammad, [appointed](#) Belqasim Haftar, the youngest son of Khalifa Haftar, as the executive director of the Derna reconstruction fund.

Findings

This section presents the main findings based on data collected on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook from 1 November to 30 December 2023 related to the reconstruction plans in Libya following the devastation caused by Storm Daniel in October 2023.

- **Main sentiments towards reconstruction plans characterised by distrust towards local authorities and concerns over corruption**

Online sentiment towards the reconstruction plans in eastern Libya are overwhelmingly negative, with most commentators expressing distrust towards the authorities and leading figures involved in the efforts to rebuild Derna and other affected areas.

Distrust expressed on social media platforms appears to be shaped by users' concerns over corruption among local authorities. Fears were widely expressed that the funds for the reconstruction of Derna would be syphoned off rather than used to rebuild homes and adequate infrastructure for the affected population.

For example, in December one social media user argued, “[for] this government ... the most important thing is to steal the budget, but not for reconstruction or anything else. There are corpses found at sea and in the city which haven’t been exhumed yet”. Another, also in December, wrote, “Not a single stone has been reconstructed in Derna, and the people are suffering, while the possibility of epidemics spreading widely due to the decomposition of corpses [is increasing]”. These comments reflect the general sentiment expressed in most comments and reactions found on social media.

The appointment of Belqasim Haftar to oversee the reconstruction fund appears to have deepened these concerns. In reaction to reports of the appointment, one social media user wrote that the fund has been passed “from one thief to another”, while another argued that Belqasim was “appointed to steal Derna’s reconstruction fund”.

Figure 1: Image uploaded by Drooj, a human rights and cultural platform, on X (Twitter) on 8 December 2023



Translation: Reconstruction of Derna
Showy statements without a clear implementation plan

Statements:

- We chose the companies.
- We are personally following up.
- The reconstruction is going great!
- Commitment to financial prudence.

Reality:

- The executive phase has not started.
- There is no unified real budget.
- There is no declared plan.
- There are no completion dates.

Source: X (Twitter)

In a testament to the anger expressed on social media, one user said, *“they [the authorities] killed the people [of Derna] and now they are dividing the cake, those bastards”*. Others questioned what they saw as the politically motivated appointment of Belqasim Haftar, such as in the following comment: *“What is the official reason given when they gave him the assignment, other than that he is the son of Khalifa [Haftar]?”*

On some pro-government pages, comments were more positive, with users praising the authorities' show of efforts to reconstruct Derna. However, these comments remained few and isolated within the wider sentiment identified through the monitoring process.

Civil society organisations also used social media to express criticism of the reconstruction process. Referring to the Derna reconstruction plans, human rights and cultural platform Drooj wrote on Twitter: *“The lack of clarity of the date and details of the implementation phase and the confusion of the requirements of the phase with procrastination and empty promises develop feelings of anxiety and despair among those affected by the floods in Derna”*.

- **Sentiment towards the United Nations divided on social media**

Opinions expressed towards the UN on social media in the context of the reconstruction plans appear to be deeply divided. For some, the UN appears to be a credible alternative to the corruption and perceived incompetence of local authorities. For example, one user commented, *“It is not useful to put the funds for the reconstruction of Derna in the hands of the Libyans who are in control of the government. Having it in the hands of the United Nations is better if you want to reconstruct Derna and its environs”*.

Moreover, social media discussions in reaction to UN talks with local authorities tend to express views almost exclusively about the local authorities and do not comment on the UN. This suggests that attitudes towards the UN are more neutral when compared to those towards local authorities.

Nevertheless, some commentators expressed negative views of the UN. For example, one user reacted to a meeting involving a UN representative by saying, *“We do not want your help, you are not welcome in Libya”*. As suggested in a [previous](#) Insecurity Insight social media monitoring brief, sentiment towards the UN may have deteriorated in recent months in Libya in the context of the conflict in Gaza. Indeed, a user commented: *“All countries should get out of this fake organisation controlled by America and Zionism”*.

- **US and UAE presence in discussions around the reconstruction plans criticised**

Reports of the US and UAE presence in discussions around plans to reconstruct Derna were criticised on social media. One user reacted to reports of a meeting between Libyan officials and a US representative on the subject of reconstruction: *“The numerous meetings of the American ambassador with Libyan officials in the East and West regarding administrative matters, not diplomatic ones, indicates that Libya is a colonised country”*. Another said, *“the US ambassador [is the] president of Libya”*.

In a similar fashion, the participation of UAE companies in meetings with Libyan officials, purportedly in order to assist in the reconstruction efforts, were also met with negative reactions by social media users, with some citing the UAE's long-standing interference in Libyan internal affairs.

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 current conflicts occurring elsewhere, as well as 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.
- Be aware that some Libyan civil society organisations want to address corrupt practices and may potentially perceive aid agencies' silence about such practices as signs of indirect complicity.

Work with trusted partners:

- Identify and work with and through positively perceived partners. Such due diligence in terms of reputation is important in politically unstable and contested environments.
- Develop a clear and unambiguous communication strategy to communicate details of appropriate financial management in the aid sector.
- Be aware that social media monitoring is better at identifying negative than positive perceptions and that views are not representative, but reflect those of people who choose to share their views publicly.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data was first collected in Libya for the period 1 November to 30 December 2023 using key words in Arabic linked to or referring to the reconstruction of Derna and affected areas in eastern Libya. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on X (Twitter) and Facebook. The analysis is based on 215 X Tweets, retweets, and comments and Facebook posts and comments. Relevant data was collected and categorised for further qualitative analysis. The research has a number of limitations. Firstly, the available data does not allow for a controlled study that takes into account 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.

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