

Argument

# Libyan Floods Reflect a River of Corruption and Negligence

In a devastating storm's aftermath, a greedy leadership is to blame

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When a natural disaster hits, it's as if the planet itself has turned against you. Every element of human experience ceases to make sense. This is the situation in Libya, after Storm Daniel arrived on the evening of Sept. 10, resulting in flooding so extreme that tens of thousands are feared dead (at the time of writing, the Red Cross had confirmed 11,000 deaths, with the mayor of Derna saying the toll could be 20,000 in the city alone), with another 30,000 estimated to have been made homeless and destitute. For those who were there, the solid ground liquefied beneath their feet, with water cascading in such quantities that it swept away everything in its path. Even time has been distorted, with the minutes and hours of desperation and praying to be rescued unnaturally stretched, only to rush through the hours and days of searching for survivors.

Ironically, for an experience that exposes the insignificance of man before nature, the factors that mitigate natural disasters are the decisions, planning and actions of people. Buildings can be made to shake with the earth, structures can collect and guide floodwaters, possessions can be protected and people can be evacuated. People can prevent disasters — or at least lessen their effects. But it requires leadership of empathy, social consciousness and planning. And all this is lacking. The leadership in Libya has been greedy, divisive and small-minded for decades. The result is a historic catastrophe, a staggering loss of people and property, which now risks being exacerbated by a shameless leadership that has seemingly learned nothing.

Libya is a young country, having become independent on Dec. 24, 1951, and born into turbulent geopolitics and poverty, yet with the promise of oil wealth. After his military coup of 1969, Col. Moammar Gadhafi completed the last five-year plan of the dethroned King Idris (with an infrastructure drive that included the Wadi Derna dams), but what followed was four decades of stagnation, neglect and negligence, alongside stratagems of divide-and-rule and patronage to control the population. The tricks stopped working, and Libyans turned to revolution in 2011, but although he was killed, the cultures he created remained.

Today Libya is divided between the families of Gadhafi's former disciples. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, who controls the northwest of the country, is the cousin of Ali Dabaiba, the former head of the Organization for Development of Administrative Centers, responsible for infrastructure that rotted during Gadhafi's tenure as he accrued billions. The rest, including the shores where Storm Daniel hit, is under the military dictatorship of Gadhafi's one-time co-putschist Gen. Khalifa Haftar.

Libya's politics, with two governments, two parliaments and a military dictator, gets confusing quickly. But despite the diversity of political offices, the policies remain largely the same. Politicians in both parts of the country explore avenues for self-enrichment while repressing or financially co-opting any dissenters. After 42 years of Gadhafi and 12 years of civil war, the country is falling

apart. To be a Libyan today is to be self-reliant, to have your own generator for electricity, access to a private well for water, reserves of fuel for when the proprietor of Africa's largest oil reserves has shortages, and personal networks to get anything out of the state bureaucracy, turn your bank balance into cash, or get any assets out of the country.

So Storm Daniel was unleashed upon a land of individuals, not a functioning state. As the rains started, the streets flooded (not an unusual occurrence in Libya), and Libyans responded as they usually do to their state's failure: with good humor. For most it began as a joke, and videos of kids diving off half submerged pickup trucks into the flooded streets circulated on social media. But the waters ominously continued to rise.

As the relentless waters gushed down nearby mountains, they swelled behind Libya's tired, creaking and cracking dams, most forebodingly of all, the two Wadi Derna dams. In 2021, Libya's audit bureau reported that nearly 2.3 million euros had previously been appropriated by Libya's Ministry of Water Resources to maintain the dam. A company had been contracted to do the work, but the project was never executed. This was either because of corruption (the relevant minister had received their commission and so was no longer interested), or Haftar's government blocking a project it hadn't personally contracted (and thus could not receive a kickback from), or the simple negligence of ministers and ministries which have no real incentive or desire to do the difficult jobs of government. This is the heady cocktail of negligence and malfeasance that infuses the mundanity of Libya's state failure. Worse still, Libyan hydrologist Abdelwanees A.R Ashoor had warned in a research paper in November 2022 that "immediate measures must be taken for routine maintenance of the dams, because in the event of a big flood, the consequences will be disastrous for the residents of the valley and the city." And there could not have been a more vulnerable city, even in broken Libya, for this disaster to descend upon.

Derna is a city of many faces. For one generation of Libyans it is the font of Libyan art and culture. For another, it is a nucleus of Libyan resistance to Gadhafi and tyranny. But in the years before this disaster, Derna was nothing but bloody, battered and bruised.

The city was a major arena for the power games between rival armed and political groups following the 2011 revolution, before the Islamic State group capitalized on these divisions to seize control in 2014. Local Islamist groups allied with former army officers to drive out the Islamic State in 2015, but thanks to its resistance to Haftar's growing dictatorship, it was besieged and bombarded for over a year. By the end of this war, 20,000 of the city's once-80,000 residents were dead, imprisoned or displaced.

Haftar's rule over eastern Libya has been predatory and suffocating, with Derna particularly marginalized as part of an ongoing collective punishment. A \$335 million fund created in 2021 to pay for the city's reconstruction has vanished with little to show for it. Meanwhile, Haftar's Military Investment Authority has been dismantling Libyan infrastructure, including water infrastructure, to sell for scrap. Any form of self-determination has been blocked, as Haftar repeatedly refused the city municipal elections. The contempt and misrule were evident in the preparation for Storm Daniel: Instead of evacuating the population, a curfew was imposed, at a cost that is only beginning to be understood.

As the waters swelled behind the dam and anxieties swelled alongside, the Haftar-controlled Ministry of Water released a post on its Facebook page claiming the dam was fine and that fears were unfounded. By the time they called for an evacuation it was too late. The Derna dams collapsed. One hundred and fifteen million cubic meters of water surged through the valley, producing over 100 terajoules of energy, hitting the city with a force greater than the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Satellite images would later show that the entire central third of the city,

entire blocks, were simply washed away as if they never existed.

Libyan families often live together, with generations stacked above each other in the same apartment block. On the night of Sept. 10, the city heard a thunderous crack as the dam broke in what many assumed to have been an explosion. As the waters started to rise, families kept climbing higher and higher. The lucky ones found themselves on their roofs, watching, in the flashes of lightning that crackled across the sky, neighbors, friends, sometimes generations of families swept toward oblivion. As morning came, fissures appeared in the Earth as the waters drained seemingly as quickly as they rose. Families wandered out to see their street and their neighborhood gone. The vibrant city had stood in the path of the deluge and was now replaced with an expanse of red mud and a river flowing through the center of town, slicing it in two.

What hit eastern Libya was a natural disaster in all of its terrifying and humbling glory. While Derna is the focal point of the catastrophe because of the collapsing dams, many other areas suffered, too. Some villages, such as al-Wardiya in the Green Mountain region, were completely washed away, while other larger towns and cities, like Susa and Bayda, were flooded and isolated by the waters. This disaster has been experienced as collective trauma by all Libyans watching the videos coming out of the region, following accounts on social media or talking with friends and family who survived or are now trying to help with the relief effort.

As the storm subsided over the morning of Sept. 11, survivors staggered outside to find they were alone with their tragedy. The same leaderships that failed them were not there to help them. Shellshocked citizens, animated by nothing more than grief, desperation to find survivors and a sense of duty to give the dead their dignity, came onto the streets. They didn't know whether what they were doing was the correct or even the safe thing to do, as none of them were trained. They just knew that they had to do something.

The scale of the loss was overwhelming, the reality that entire families and neighborhoods were washed into oblivion was gut-wrenching. But only those observing from afar actually had the luxury to have their guts wrenched by that reality. The survivors were in morgues desperately cataloging bodies or on the coast desperately dragging bodies from a sea turned crimson, so that they could be buried with dignity, and their names, faces and stories would not be washed away with their lives. They worked until their desperation was no longer sufficient to fuel them and they collapsed.

But their stories spread. Videos of Derna's travesty flooded every screen of Libyan social media, uniting a people often derisively described as divided in grief and rage. A population increasingly impoverished by wars and corruption donated their food, their possessions, their clothes, their time and themselves to travel from all corners of Libya's great expanse to try and help. Convoys filled the highways, carrying "enough to provide for all of the east, not just the affected," according to one eyewitness on social media.

As Libya recovers from the initial shock of this catastrophe, the political situation is slowly sliding back to normal. A narrative war is beginning between various sides, and the politicization of and profiteering from relief have begun.

Haftar's military are doing what they're trained to do: give the appearance that they are in control while shirking any responsibility. In the evening following Derna's catastrophe, you could see the guilt and continuing incompetence shake the ranks. Haftar's spokesperson frantically warned that Benghazi (eastern Libya's capital) could be at risk from another dam collapse, panicking residents before retracting his statement after engineers lined up to contradict him. As the clumsy "official" relief effort stumbled forward, checkpoints were manned, and Haftar's army very visibly accompanied foreign search and rescue teams that quickly traveled from Turkey, Egypt and the

United Arab Emirates — geopolitical rivals that had warred against each other over Libya now working together to save Libyan lives. A primary part of this operation appears to be managing the optics. Journalists have reported being denied access or having their equipment seized at the airport, while many of those leading aid convoys report being stopped at Sirte and told to surrender their cars and aid because it's Haftar's army that must be seen to be distributing the aid and leading the relief. As time passes, more reports come out of Haftar's army stealing aid and relief equipment, like generators, while survivors put out calls for help over social media, saying aid hasn't reached them and they're starving.

Libya's politicians are also doing what they've been trained to do, looking for profit while shirking any responsibility for what occurs. Rival governments are frantically briefing journalists that the criminal negligence that transformed this disaster into a catastrophe is their counterpart's fault. Meanwhile, four days after the travesty, Libya's Parliament finally convened (although they're supposed to be in continuous session during times of crisis). But instead of planning or leading any relief effort to assist the thousands of their citizens who are stranded, starving or trying to bury their dead, the Parliament's speaker instead harangued those blaming the authorities. Then, in place of any immediate response, the Parliament prioritized appropriating 10 billion Libyan dinars (\$2 billion) into a new trust fund for Derna's reconstruction to be managed by their speaker — who many hold responsible for squandering Derna's last reconstruction fund.

While there's little that can be done to stop the planet unleashing its power when and how it decides, political dysfunction and negligence can elevate these disasters into catastrophes. Human failure elevated the disaster of Storm Daniel into a historic catastrophe for Libya, and this conclusion is resonating with all Libyans. As the grief ebbs, rage flows toward Libya's entire leadership class. In return, internal security is reportedly surging, as narrative wars divisively try to refocus Libyans away from the relief effort and back toward factionalism. But it is questionable whether the tried and tested cynical powers of Libya's elite can contend with the raw emotion swelling from this catastrophe. What happened in Derna, and elsewhere in eastern Libya, is a human-made catastrophe of historic proportions, for a population whose aspirations have long been made to seem impossible. Perhaps the reality-bending power of a natural disaster is what is required to finally deliver change.

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