

Pre-crisis humanitarian situation in Derna

KEY MESSAGES

- Chronic political instability and conflict in Derna district (mantika) between 2014–2019 significantly affected the population, driving displacement and humanitarian needs.
- In 2022, explosive remnants of war were a significant concern in the district as a result of the prior conflict, although more recent information is unavailable.
- Before Storm Daniel, Derna district hosted approximately 21,500 migrants, and Derna city hosted 45,100 returnees, and 1,600 IDPs.
- Pre-crisis humanitarian needs within the district included protection, health, WASH, food security, livelihoods, education, and electricity, although comprehensive information is lacking.

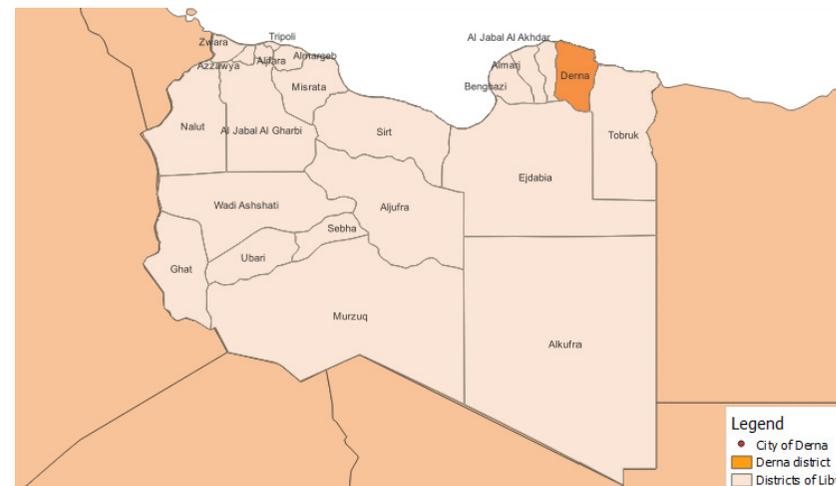
About this report

Aim: this report provides baseline, background, and context information on Derna district, referring to the situation before Storm Daniel made landfall in Libya on 10 September 2023 and the subsequent collapse of two dams in Derna, to help inform the humanitarian response.

Methodology: this report is based on a review of secondary data, including reports from international organisations, scientific publications, and news articles.

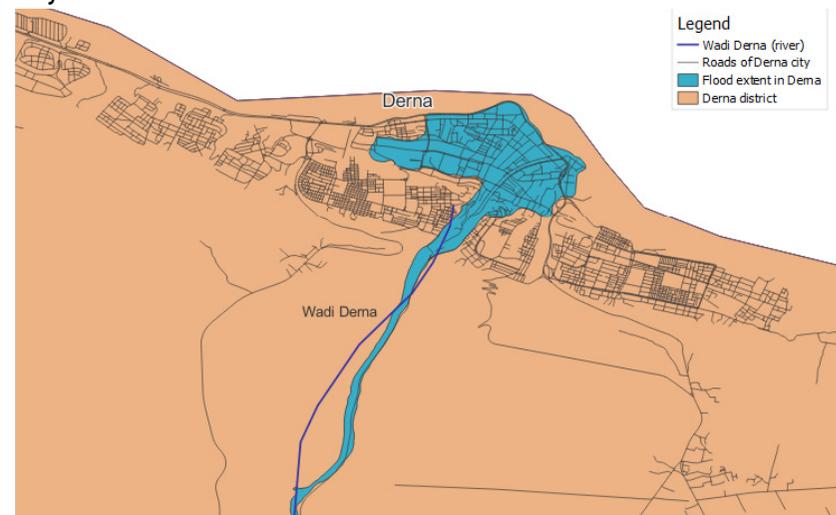
Limitations: because of years of conflict and political instability, there is limited information available on the pre-crisis situation in Libya, especially in Derna.

Derna district



Source: ACAPS using data from UNOSAT (18/09/2023) and Humdata (accessed 15/09/2023)

City of Derna



Source: ACAPS using data from UNOSAT (18/09/2023) and Humdata (accessed 15/09/2023)

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Political instability

Conflict has beset Libya since the Arab Spring uprising toppled autocratic ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 (CFR 01/08/2023). Since 2014, power in the country had been divided between the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord and its allies in the west, on one side, and the eastern Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) on the other. The HoR had the support of the forces of General Khalifa Haftar and his self-titled Libyan National Army (LNA), which engaged the west in a civil war from 2014–2020 (Geneva Academy 06/2017; CFR 01/08/2023).

Following an October 2020 ceasefire, Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah led the Government of National Unity that theoretically united the Government of National Accord and the HoR. Eventually, east-west tensions reignited over the legal foundation for presidential and parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for December 2021. The elections were postponed, and the HoR established a rival government in the east currently under the helm of Ossama Hamad, although General Haftar is still considered to be the real power broker in the eastern administration. This group currently controls Derna (ICG accessed 15/09/2023; CFR 01/08/2023; BBC 14/09/2023).

The stalemate between rival administrations has hampered government functions in Libya, including the maintenance of key infrastructure, such as dams. The two dams that recently collapsed near Derna had not been maintained since 2002 and were flagged in 2022 as requiring maintenance to avoid flood risk (Al Jazeera 14/09/2023; AP 13/09/2023; Ashoor 27/11/2022).

In April 2023, residents of Derna rioted after the HoR called for the postponement of municipal elections, which were scheduled for 16 September (The Libya Observer 04/09/2023). A new date for the elections has not been set.

Armed conflicts

Chronic political instability in Libya has enabled the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including militias associated with various political entities, the Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist groups, and foreign mercenaries (Geneva Academy 06/2017; CFR 08/01/2023; Atlantic Council 21/05/2021).

The IS started using Derna city as its first base in Libya in late 2014, declaring Derna an official IS district in November. In December, a coalition of Islamic extremist groups established the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council to combat IS presence in the city (Wilson Center 08/08/2017; USIP 16/03/2017; The Washington Times 18/11/2014). In mid-2015, the council cooperated with General Haftar to expel the IS in Iraq and the Levant, a successor of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, from the city (MEI 10/2017; EUAA accessed 15/09/2023; Geneva Academy 2017).

Between August 2016 and 2019, Derna was under the siege of the LNA. Between May–June 2018, the LNA and the Derna Security Force (a Libyan armed group formed by Ateyah Al-Shaari on May 2018) fought to control the city. The LNA closed all access points to the city, displacing 1,000–2,000 families within Derna or to other cities and districts in Libya. The clashes and aerial bombardment hindered people's access to supply markets, banks, and health facilities, leading to a deteriorating humanitarian situation (Protection Cluster 15/01/2019; Crisis24 29/06/2018). The city was subject to aerial bombing, which damaged unspecified civilian targets (The Libya Observer 26/06/2023). In mid-February 2019, the siege ended (REACH 28/03/2019). In 2020, a ceasefire was brokered, leading to a reduced level of large-scale conflict across the country (Brookings 11/2022).

Economic situation

In 2022, the annual growth rate of Libya's GDP shrank by over 12% compared with 2021, which increased by 28.3%. This was primarily because of decreased oil production in the first quarter and escalating conflict. Just like there are two governments, the Libyan financial institutions are also fragmented; the Central Bank and its eastern branch are separated, which has repercussions for the country's banking system (TE accessed 18/09/2023; AFDB accessed 15/09/2023). In 2022, inflation rose by 4% compared to 2021. The cost of the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) across Libya decreased overall (-2.8%) between May–June 2023 but remained 42.7% higher than pre-COVID-19 levels. Countrywide, one in ten households had a total income lower than the MEB cost, but the situation was comparatively worse in Derna, with one in three households living under the MEB poverty line (IFRC 13/09/2023; WB 06/06/2023). In 2022, UNDP signed a USD 5 million agreement with the Benghazi and Derna Reconstruction Fund (UNSMIL 26/06/2023). Derna is one of four free zones in Libya, which means that it is a special economic zone offering advantageous taxes, duties, and regulations to businesses (ELTC 28/10/2022).

PRE-CRISIS HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN DERNA

The civil war that broke out in 2011 weakened Libyan institutions and caused a significant loss of economic potential. Urban insecurity, medicine shortages, and electricity disruptions worsened the humanitarian situation and diminished response capacities and resources (CFR 01/08/2023; ESCWA 13/09/2021). The pre-crisis population of the city of Derna ranged from 86,000–125,000, while the wider Derna district had an estimated population of 201,600 (City Population accessed 15/09/2023; Reuters 13/09/2023).

People in need

Libya's 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview, published prior to Storm Daniel, estimated that around 60,000 people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Derna city and several thousand more along the coast of Derna district, there were people in need reported in the rest of the district. Among the people in need in Derna city, 47% were women, and 53% were men. 36% were children, 57% were adults, and 7% were the elderly. 15% lived with disabilities (OCHA 26/01/2023).

In the 2023 HNO, the severity of needs in Derna was rated a 2 (Stress) on a severity scale of 1–5 (Minimal to Catastrophic), putting it among the districts with the least severe need levels in Libya. This is an improvement from 2022, with the HNO rating the needs of 21% of the district's population a 4 (Severe), making it the district with the highest percentage of people close to one extreme end of the scale, mostly because of mine contamination (OCHA 06/12/2021). The reason behind this improvement is unclear, and it is unknown if significant mine clearance has occurred in the area. As at 4 April 2023, 15 million square metres of land were still contaminated with explosive remnants of war (UNSMIL 04/04/2023).

People on the move: Libya is both a destination and transit country to Europe for asylum seekers and migrants. A February 2023 IOM assessment identified almost 706,100 migrants living across the country, 21,500 of whom were in different locations of Derna district. Their priority needs were shelter, food security, and NFIs. This represented an increase from December 2022, with migrants coming to Derna for job opportunities. Only 3% of migrants interviewed in February 2023 were unemployed, compared to the migrant unemployment rate of 25% across the country. Migrants from Egypt comprised the largest share of respondents in Derna (64%), followed by Sudanese migrants (27%) (IOM 23/05/2023). At the end of August 2023, security forces raided a boat factory used for illegal immigration in Ras Al-Tin, coastal area east of Derna district (Alwasat 30/08/2023).

As at August 2023, the city of Derna was hosting 46,600 IDPs and returnees, the majority of whom were returnees (almost 45,100) primarily displaced following the conflict in the area (IOM 24/08/2023; REACH 29/11/2022).

Response capacity

As at February 2022, there were 12 humanitarian projects implemented in Derna, five of which were related to education. There were nine humanitarian stakeholders, including six UN agencies, one government institution, one INGO, and one private organisation (OCHA accessed 15/09/2023).

Needs and services

Health: before the storm, Derna city had ten fully or partially functional health facilities: one hospital, eight polyclinics (four of which were private), and one health centre. Regardless, healthcare was not affordable for all people; as at 2022, 85% of households in the city could not afford healthcare (IFRC 13/09/2023; REACH 29/11/2022). As at August 2021, WHO was providing support to Al-Wahda hospital in Derna city (Health Cluster 13/09/2021). One source described the single hospital in Derna city as a makeshift facility in a five-bedroom villa, but it is unclear if this was referring to Al-Wahda hospital (BBC 14/09/2023).

WASH: before the recent floods, access to water was already a pressing need in the city. In 2022, the majority of Libyan households (69%) interviewed in Derna had unmet WASH-related needs, and 44% of people relied on bottled water as their primary source of water (REACH 13/09/2023). A 2021 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment found that 51% of respondents in Derna had rare or no access to water from the public network as at July 2021. Contamination and poor maintenance also affected water quality from this network (REACH 29/11/2022). Most health facilities of Derna district were located in Derna city, the location and exact number of hospitals in other parts of the district is not available.

Food security: recent information on food security in Derna is lacking. A 2019 survey of over 1,000 residents across eastern Libya found that Derna had the lowest average dietary energy consumption (a key food security indicator) of the six cities studied (Nouh et al. 09/08/2021).

In September 2022, large numbers of 14 fish species died in Derna port because of high pollution levels from sewage and toxic ammonia, raising food security and fishery productivity concerns (The Libya Observer 10/09/2022). The information on food security in the whole Derna district is not available.

Livelihoods: high unemployment is a pressing issue countrywide, with a persistent rate of 19.6%, and more than 85% of the workforce is involved in the public and informal sectors. According to a March 2023 assessment, the overall labour force participation rate in Derna was 78% (REACH 03/03/2023; AFDB accessed 15/09/2023).

Multiple oil spills have also affected Derna in recent years, attributed to attacks during the siege of Derna city or, more recently, to poor infrastructure. The spills inflicted significant damage on marine wildlife and potentially caused risks to residents of Derna city by contaminating fisheries and groundwater used for human consumption or agriculture (CEOBS 07/07/2021).

Electricity: even before Storm Daniel, one in two households in Derna was experiencing six to ten hours of power cuts per day (IFRC 13/09/2023).

Protection: Derna has faced intense armed conflicts that have caused protection concerns among civilian populations. During the three years that Derna city was under siege (2016–2019), the LNA-affiliated Libyan Arab Armed Forces arbitrarily detained, mistreated, and damaged the homes of residents. They incarcerated 2,000 people – among them civilians, including women and children – in Gernada Prison, which was notorious for being a torture site (HRW 08/03/2022; OCHA 21/02/2019).

In 2019, concerns were raised about the impact of landmines and explosives resulting from the war on residents of Derna returning to the city after being displaced by conflict (IMPACT 31/03/2019).

Education: the conflict has disrupted education in Derna for several years. Between 2017–2019, it affected at least 56 schools in Derna district, completely destroying two and partially damaging the others. Around 500 public school teachers have also not received their salaries since June 2018 because of administrative delays with the Ministry of Education in Tripoli. There are significant shortages of textbooks and crowding in schools (OCHA 21/02/2019; UK Gov't 14/09/2020).

PRE-CRISIS INFRASTRUCTURE

Dams

The Al-Bilad Dam was approximately 1km south of Derna, with a 1.5m³ capacity, while the larger Abu Mansour Dam was approximately 13km south of Derna, with a 22.5m³ capacity. The two dams were built in 1986, and within the same year a leak in one of the dams caused flooding and subsequent deaths and injuries (AA 12/09/2023). There had been concerns regarding the neglect of the two dams since 2002, including money set aside for their maintenance being unused and taken back by the Ministry of Water Resources in 2003 (Al Jazeera 12/09/2023; The Guardian 14/09/2023). In 2007, a Turkish firm was contracted to maintain the dams, but it left the country when Libya's civil war broke out in 2011 and did not return.

The abandonment of the dams led to the theft of any machinery left behind. After the civil war in 2011, new contractors were not hired to maintain the dams, leading to further neglect (The Guardian 14/09/2023).

The pumping systems of Wadi Jaza Dam located in Tocra, between Derna and Benghazi districts, have also not been functioning and are under the threat of bursting (BBC accessed 15/09/2023). The eastern regional water minister has stated that the dam's pumping equipment has been stolen and not replaced since 2018, indicative of the underfunding and lack of maintenance of infrastructure across Libya (The Messenger 13/09/2023).

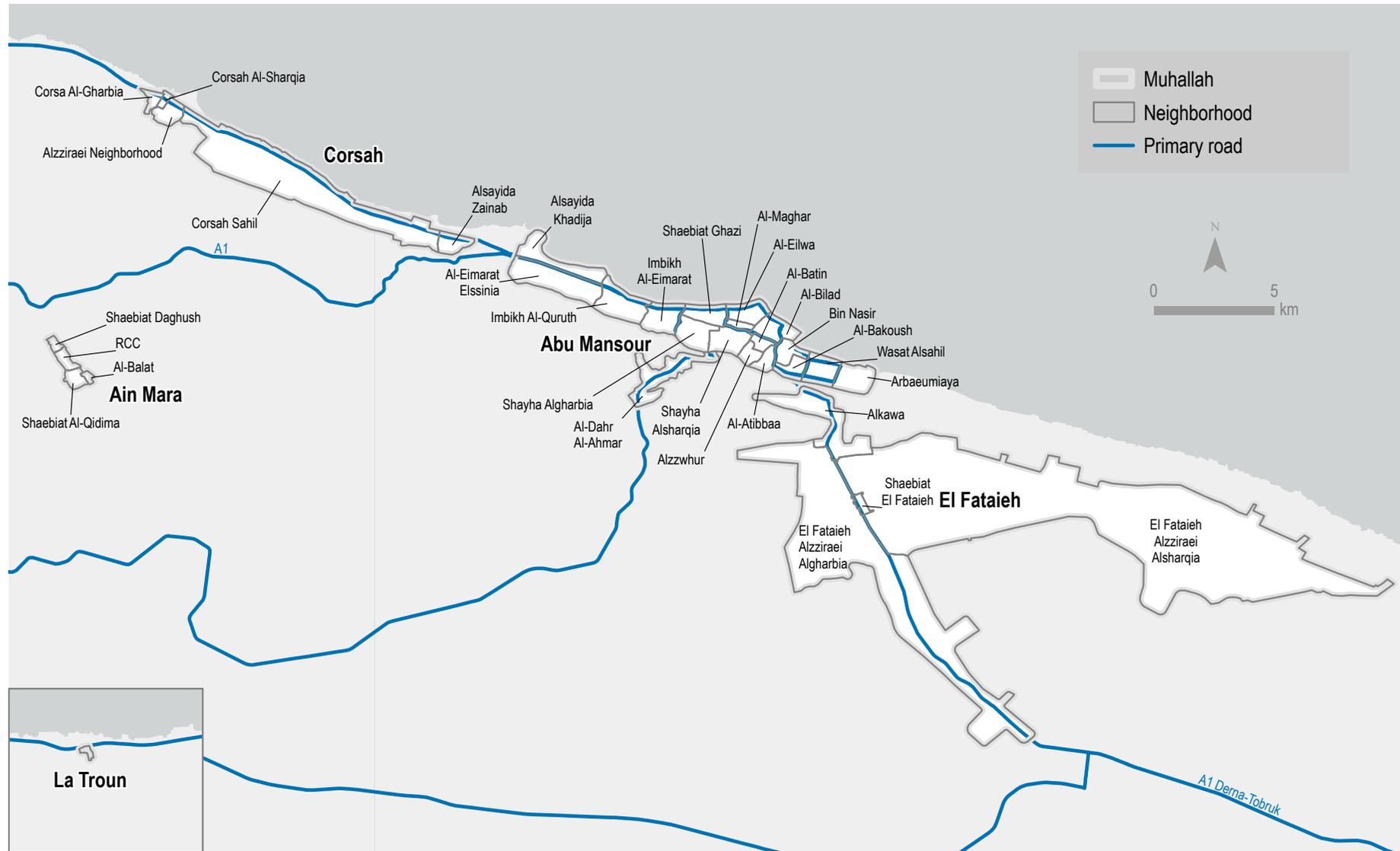
Derna Steam Station Power Plant

The Derna Steam Station Power Plant of the state-owned General Electricity Company of Libya has not been operational, but its storage tanks have been rented to an independent desalination plant. Despite being non-operational, multiple oil spills from the power plant were reported on 8 June, 22 June, and 1 July 2021. The Conflict and Environment Observatory attributed the spills to the poor maintenance of the facility, partly because of conflict but also because of improper waste management and possible corruption, leading to a failure of essential parts of the power plant (CEOBS 07/07/2023). A trend in incidents of oil releases from the plant into the sea of the coast of Derna has been recorded following heavy rainfall, highlighting the limited capacity of wastewater treatment in Derna district and across Libya (CEOBS 07/07/2021; Libya Observer 26/06/2021).

Road infrastructure: investment in roads and other public infrastructure in Derna has been minimal in recent years, partly because Islamist militant groups controlled the city until 2019 (The Guardian 13/09/2023). Even prior to the 2011 revolution against Muammar Gaddafi, Derna had been suffering from decades of neglect from the Libyan Government, as Gaddafi perceived it to be an anti-Gaddafi city. This left Derna with chronically insufficient public infrastructure and a lack of schools and hospitals (BBC 14/09/2023). Engineers had previously issued warnings about the dams in Derna bursting (The Guardian 12/09/2023).

The use of Derna port was suspended in 2014. In March 2021, Derna city began work to restore the port, which received its first post-suspension cargo ship in June 2023 (The Libya Observer 26/06/2023).

DERNA ROADS PRIOR TO THE FLOODS



REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

Source: REACH (03/03/2023)