

## MOROCCO AND LIBYA, A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

**Francis Ghilès**, Senior Associate Researcher, CIDOB

*At least 2,900 people are known to have died and 5,500 injured in the deadliest earthquake to hit Morocco, in the High Atlas Mountains on 8th September. A few days later, more than 11,000 people lost their life and more than 10,000 remain unaccounted for after a torrent of mud and water devastated the eastern Libyan city of Derna. The catastrophic flooding was caused by the collapsed of two dams outside the Libyan port town following torrential rain in a storm the like of which has never been recorded in this southern rim Mediterranean country.*



# 775

SEPTEMBER  
2023

CIDOB **50**  
years  
BARCELONA  
CENTRE FOR  
INTERNATIONAL  
AFFAIRS

**T**he ability of the two countries, Morocco and Libya, to respond to tragedy stands in sharp contrast. Morocco is a functioning modern state and within days, after the devastating earthquake, the *Nationale 10* road which crosses the mountains through the Tizin' Test pass was reopened, and thousands of ordinary Moroccans mobilised to bring aid to survivors whose houses and means of livelihood had been utterly destroyed in often remote and very beautiful villages, usually built several stories high of mud bricks which can last centuries. The state and the population reacted promptly, even if the King Mohamed VI **took a couple of days** to visit hospitals in the city of Marrakesh, where many houses were damaged by the quake within days of the catastrophe, illustrated however the sharp social divide in a country where the elite is very rich and millions live in poverty.

In Libya, a semi-failed state is split into two competing governments, one in the east run by General Khalifa Haftar and backed by the United Arab Emirates and Russia, and another in the west backed by Turkey and recognised by the United Nations. This did not prevent the Libyan meteorological service from issuing a warning to the inhabitants of Derna to evacuate before the storm hit their town, though no general alarm was raised. While a 100 members of the Libyan National Army led by Haftar died trying to save people, the response of prime minister Abdel Hamid Dheiba in Tripoli was very slow. Another aggravating factor was that the two collapsed dams upstream from Derna were built in 1979 and they had not been maintained let alone checked since 2010. Foreign help is essential but not easy to organise in the prevailing lack of state structures and rule of law.

Morocco has accepted technical aid from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Spain, the UK and Israel but not from France, with whom relations are

very strained, or from Algeria with which has been in a state of cold war for two decades. In the context of these choices lays the king's hard-nosed policy on the question of the West Sahara that was encouraged by president Donald Trump's proclamation that the US recognises the sovereignty of the kingdom over the disputed territory. Spain shifted its long-standing position of strict neutrality last year, but France has refused to follow suit, hence the king's lack of response to French offers of aid. Morocco's apparent stonewalling on offers of French aid provoked criticism from certain French media but president Emmanuel Macron was quick to point out in a twitter message that it was "up to his majesty the king and the Moroccan government, in a manner entirely befitting their sovereignty, to organise international aid".

There is little doubt that Algeria had the means to help its neighbour but, as with France, the king plays his game. Two years ago, bad blood between Rabat and Algiers led to the suspension of Algerian gas flows to Spain and Portugal through Morocco via the Pere Duran Farrell pipeline. This time, that Algerian technical help could have helped the beleaguered Atlas Mountains' population did not weigh very much in the decisions taken in Rabat. The Algerians were left to make ironic comments about Morocco's warm embrace of Israeli help at a time when their Palestinian "brothers" in the West Bank face an unprecedented wave of Israeli repression.

*This tale of the contrasted ability of two countries' very different approach to catastrophe is also one of declining western influence in the broader North African region. Yet climate change, which explains the unprecedented tropical storm that destroyed Derna, growing immigration pressure and bad economic governance in most southern rim Mediterranean countries continue to challenge the security of Europe.*

Western countries seem to think they have a god-given mission to offer aid and intervene after major catastrophes in less developed countries but such gestures, including food and medical aid, have often been instrumentalised politically and used as a tool of western foreign policy. It is Morocco's right to accept aid from Israel, with whom it has better relations today and from whom it buys weapons than from the former colonial power even if that upsets certain people in Paris who think that France enjoys some pre-eminent role in North Africa. Had the king wanted to improve relations with Algeria, accepting the help offered by his neighbour country's leaders in Morocco's hour of need would have sent a strong signal of détente.

In Libya, however, the aid certain countries offered after the flooding raises another interesting point which was explained by Ethan Chorin in an [article published in the New York Times](#) on September 13. A noted expert of Libya whose book *Benghazi, A New History of the Fiasco That Pushed America and its World to the Brink* (Hachette 2023), the author argues that “at a time of profound need, the Derna catastrophe affords the United States a rare opportunity to once again take a side – not with one or the other of Libya’s political factions but with the Libyan people”. “To those Americans who ask why should we care – states the author, the answer is as follows. In 2011, the United States spearheaded an international effort to save the city of Benghazi from attack by Libya’s long standing dictator Muammar Gaddafi, a well-intentioned move that fell into mission creep.” Together with France and the UK, both deeply involved in the intervention, it promoted democracy over state building, a decision that “ironically helped pull down Libya’s earlier democratic gains”. There is little sign that either of the three countries has the stomach, let alone the vision to make such an offer.

This tale of the contrasted ability of two countries’ very different approach to catastrophe is also one of declining western influence in the broader North African region. Yet climate change, which explains the unprecedented tropical storm that destroyed Derna, growing immigration pressure and bad economic governance in most southern rim Mediterranean countries continue to challenge the security of Europe. Neither the EU nor the US seem able to think strategically.