

OCTOBER 2011

ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION

STALEMATE & SIEGE

PART 3



Photo Credit: February 2011—Rebel celebration in Al Bayda, Libya. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART 3- STALEMATE & SIEGE | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | OCTOBER 2011

This report is the third installment of a four-part series on the revolution in Libya. *Part Three: Stalemate and Siege* details the progress of fighting in eastern and western Libya and the international response. The paper begins by explaining the battle of Cyrenaica, documenting loyalist and rebel offensives before the situation settled into a stalemate. The second section details the siege of Misrata and explains the tactics and organization used by forces on both sides. The paper then documents the Misrata seelift, and the contribution of international actors to rebel efforts. Lastly, the paper examines the rebel breakout from Misrata, as well as efforts to end the conflict through a negotiated settlement.

THE BATTLE OF CYRENAICA

- The fighting between mid-March and early April in Cyrenaica was characterized by major territorial exchanges between the rebels and loyalists. These large fluctuations were due in part to the initial support — and later lack thereof — that NATO warplanes provided to the rebel forces.
- Following the rebel victory at Ajdabiya (detailed in Part One of this series), the rebels pushed west and retook the towns of Brega, Ras Lanuf, and Bin Jawad with little or no fighting before reaching Harawah, fifty miles outside of Sirte, on March 28.
- The rebel advance was soon reversed by the end of March, as loyalist artillery fire forced the rebels to retreat over one hundred and fifty miles east to Ajdabiya. This allowed loyalist forces to re-occupy Brega and developing a stalemate that lasted into July.
- As the fighting stalemated, the rebel military leadership attempted to reorganize their forces under the senior rebel military leaders Defense Minister Omar Hariri, General Abdel Fatah Younis, and Khalifa Heftar.
 - The dynamics among the three men were complex from the beginning. Younis emerged as the military chief of staff while Heftar's role remained unclear.
- Qatari weapons and military trainers may have played a role in strengthening the Cyrenaican frontlines after the second retreat to Ajdabiya in early April.
- The stalemate at Brega was finally broken when the rebels launched a major offensive on July 15 and Qaddafi's forces retreated west towards Ras Lanuf.
- The sudden and mysterious assassination of rebel military chief of staff Abdul Fattah Younis Younis on July 28 complicated rebel progress on the eastern front.
 - That morning, Younis left his command post near Ajdabiya after receiving an official summons from NTC officials to appear in Benghazi, but he was killed by unknown gunmen en route.
 - The most significant development to arise from Younis' assassination was the dissolution of the NTC cabinet on August 8, on grounds that some were implicated in the incident.

THE SIEGE OF MISRATA (FEBRUARY 18 TO MARCH 19, 2011)

- The stalemated combat in Cyrenaica coincided with an increasingly dire siege of port city of Misrata in western Libya, where the uprising threatened Qaddafi's hold over Tripolitania and thus the country.
- After Misrata fell to the rebels in late February, Qaddafi laid siege to Misrata to contain the rebellion to the city while his forces marched on the rebel strongholds in Cyrenaica.
- On March 6, loyalist tanks spearheaded an attack up Tripoli Street and Benghazi Street to the city center. The loyalist offensive in late March marked the start of the second phase of the Battle of Misrata of fierce street-to-street fighting that would last for nearly two months.

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REBEL AND LOYALIST ORGANIZATION AND TACTICS

- While the rebels' superior knowledge of the city granted them a tactical advantage, the shortages of weapons, ammunition, and heavy equipment blunted their fighting efficiency.
- The rebels established multi-layered defensive positions around the city, which contributed to the continuously fluctuating battle lines.
- In late February, the rebels hastily established the 17-member Misrata City Council to organize the city's defenses and oversee basic services.
 - Under its head, Khalifa Zuwawi, the council established more than a dozen committees and subcommittees to administer the city, including those for medical, communications, finance, relief, and judicial affairs.
 - The Misrata City Council selected two representatives to the NTC in Benghazi, Suleiman Fortia and Mahmoud al-Muntasir.
- The Misrata Military Council, led by General Ramadan Zarmuh, was formed in February to organize the city's defense, and appeared to operate in tandem with the City Council.
 - While the council had difficulty exercising orders over the ad hoc rebel forces, it provided the crucial degree of organization needed to stave off the regime's offensive.
- The Misratan rebels lacked the same financial resources as the NTC, so they struggled to finance their operation.
- To recapture Misrata, the regime committed approximately 11,350 troops organized into seventeen battalions, including many of its best paramilitary formations.
- Qaddafi's forces adapted to the urban combat environment by using disguises, cover, civilian structures to mitigate NATO's air supremacy while maintaining combat effectiveness.

THE MISRATA SEALIFT

- By late March, dwindling arms and ammunition raised the possibility that the rebels would eventually fall to loyalist attacks.
- The rebels bypassed the loyalist siege in late March by beginning a sealift of military and humanitarian supplies from Benghazi to the port of Misrata, which proved pivotal to turning the tide of the battle.
- In early March, loyalist vessels complicated rebel attempts to ship supplies to Benghazi. But, on March 28, the international coalition lifted the loyalist blockade on the port by attacking a Libyan Coast Guard vessel and two smaller boats that were harassing the rebel vessels.
- The sealift created an awkward predicament for NATO, which was charged with enforcing an arms embargo on Libya under UN mandate, but had to strengthen the rebels and prevent Misrata from falling. Successful entry into the Port of Misrata for the rebel ships seemed to depend on the nationality of the NATO vessel inspecting their cargo.
- After NATO opened the port, the sealift began in earnest and a command center in Benghazi manned by rebel logisticians and sea captains coordinated the purchase and movement of weapons with Misratan rebels by satellite phone. Weapons had been purchased on the black market, captured from regime stockpiles or delivered to Benghazi from Qatar.
- The sealift allowed the rebels to markedly expand their fighting numbers and combat power.

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THE REBEL BREAKOUT

- In late April, ongoing NATO airstrikes and rebel gains in the Misrata city center and on Tripoli Street forced the regime to rethink its strategy and focus on obstructing the sealift by capturing roads that linked the rebels in central Misrata to the port.
 - Airstrikes prevented the regime from massing the forces and heavy weaponry required for sustained and coordinated attacks and sapped the regime's military strength.
 - The effort and resources the regime spent to maintain its ground in the city center became increasingly futile in light of the marginal gains and the rebels' ongoing ability to resupply from the port.
- Libyan Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Kaim announced on April 22 that the government would suspend its operations in Misrata and hand off the fight to the tribes around Misrata. Qaddafi had fairly strong ties with the tribes around Misrata, which balanced his authority against the relatively detribalized Misratans and the city's influential families.
 - The Warfalla have historically had a rivalry with the Misratans, and tribal elders were supposedly angered over having lost access to the port for months.
 - The Tawargha tribe was also loyal to the regime and a grudge against the Misratans due to local land disputes and racial tensions.
- Most of the loyalist forces in the city center began withdrawing from their positions under the cover of darkness on April 21. Qaddafi's withdrawal marked a shift in the regime's effort away from the city center towards taking control of the port to cut the rebels' lifeline.
 - Early in the morning on April 26, loyalist troops mounted a surprise assault on the port area under the cover of an artillery barrage.
 - The regime's launched increasingly sophisticated maritime attacks on Misrata's port from late April to mid-May, prompting NATO's broad attack on the Libyan Navy on May 20.
- The fighting on the ground shifted to Misrata's western and southwestern suburbs as the rebels seized the Misrata airport on May 11 and pushed loyalist artillery out of range of the port and city center.
- The regime conducted a general withdrawal from the Misrata area that was completed around May 15, ending the three-month siege and opening the possibility of a rebel advance up the coast towards Tripoli.
- Rebel officials estimated that one thousand, five hundred rebels and civilians were killed and five thousand wounded during the Battle of Misrata.
- After the rebel breakout from Misrata in May and June, there appeared to be growing discord between the Misrata Military Council and the National Transitional Council.
- In late July, a delegation from the Misrata Military Council flew to Paris to meet with Sarkozy and senior French officials to discuss the military situation.
 - Senior generals and NTC officials from Benghazi were noticeably absent, suggesting the Misratans were conducting their affairs independently.
 - The rebel officers laid out an ambitious strategy for a gradual offensive from Misrata to the capital, coordinated with an assault from rebels in the Nafusa Mountains.
 - The delegation requested increased air cover, heavy weapons, and other military aid.

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NEGOTIATIONS

- The months of largely stagnant battle lines prompted actors on all sides to begin discussing the possibility of negotiating an end to the conflict. However, the negotiations with the regime never made progress because of NATO and the NTC positions. Qaddafi, Saif-al Islam, and intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi all faced arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on June 27, further complicating the matter.
- The first reported diplomatic efforts occurred in early April when regime officials proposed two different plans for a settlement: one where Qaddafi would step aside and Saif al-Islam would provide over a transitional government and another that proposed a partitioned Libya.
- In May, the African Union developed a so-called “roadmap” that the regime quickly embraced but NATO and the rebels rejected.
- At the end of May’s G-8 summit, Medvedev announced a shift in Russia’s position and explicitly called for Qaddafi to leave power, demonstrating Qaddafi’s growing isolation.
 - He dispatched Russia’s special envoy for the Middle East, Mikhail Margelov, to Libya in order to convince Qaddafi to leave power.
- The possibility for a diplomatic solution emerged again in early July, when Qaddafi regime officials reached out to Russian and European officials to open up negotiations.
- U.S. and European defense officials made statements later that month suggesting that the regime was exploring ways Qaddafi could leave power but remain in Libya. The urgency to bring about a decisive end to the conflict—either through military victory or diplomatic settlement—was driven in part by the impending September deadline that marked the end of NATO’s planned involvement in Libya.
- The negotiation efforts were ultimately curtailed when nearly a month before the September deadline, rebels based out of the Nafusa Mountains marched into Tripoli on August 20 after seizing Zawiyah days earlier.

Abdel Fattah Younis: A former member of the Qaddafi regime, Abdel Fattah Younis served as Qaddafi's interior minister before his defection on February 22, 2011. Younis served as the chief rebel military commander until his assassination by an unknown rebel brigade on July 28, 2011.

Ajdabiya: The town of Ajdabiya is located 95 miles southwest of Benghazi. Ajdabiya is a vital crossroads for Cyrenaica. Highways extend north to Benghazi, east to the port city of Tobruk, and southeast through oil-producing regions to the Kufra Oases. Ajdabiya was contested by rebels and loyalist fighters in mid-March, until NATO air support allowed rebels to retake the town on March 26, 2011.

Benghazi: Benghazi, the largest city in the Cyrenaica region, served as the center of power for the Sanusi Monarch prior to Qaddafi's 1969 coup. Demonstrations against the Qaddafi regime began in Benghazi on February 15. Security forces began to use lethal force against the protests on February 17, 2011, and rebels successfully seized the city on February 20, 2011. The National Transitional Council officially convened for the first time in Benghazi on March 5, 2011 and the city served as the NTC's capital throughout the rebellion.

Brega: Located 115 miles southwest of Benghazi, the town of Brega contains an oil, natural gas, and petrochemical refinery. Brega is Libya's fifth largest refinery and provides natural gas to Benghazi and Tripoli. Qaddafi forces retook Brega from rebel fighters on March 15, 2011, and rebel forces were unable to dislodge the loyalist defenders from the town until the loyalists withdrew on August 17, 2011.

Cyrenaica: Cyrenaica is one of the three distinct regions in Libya. Comprising the eastern half of the country, Cyrenaica and its capital city of Benghazi served as the seat of power for King Idris I under the Sanusi Monarchy. Due to the historical rivalry with the western region of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica was long a cradle of anti-Qaddafi sentiment and was the first area to rise up against Qaddafi.

Fezzan: Fezzan is the southwest region of Libya. Owing to its remoteness and sparse population, Fezzan has not featured prominently into the rivalry between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Its largest city, Sabha, serves as the region's administrative center. Fezzan is dominated by the Maqarha tribe, one of Libya's largest tribes which staunchly supported Qaddafi.

Khamis Qaddafi and the Khamis Brigade: Khamis Qaddafi is one of the younger sons of Muammar Qaddafi and the commander of the elite 32nd Brigade (also known as the Khamis Brigade). The brigade was the primary paramilitary force deployed against the rebels in western Libya. Rebels have reported Khamis's death on several occasions, mostly recently stating he was killed in battle on August 29, 2011.

Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG): The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group is an extremist Islamic terrorist group formed in opposition to Qaddafi's regime in 1995. The LIFG was violently suppressed by the Qaddafi regime. The U.S. government designated the group as a terrorist organization in 2004 for its links with al-Qaeda. The LIFG became defunct by the end of the 1990s, though former LIFG fighters declared their support for the National Transitional Council. Abdul Hakim Belhaj, the leader of the Tripoli military council, was the overall commander of the LIFG.

Mahmood Jibril: Mahmood Jibril served as a senior economic advisor in the Qaddafi regime until his resignation in 2010. Jibril became the Chairman of the National Transitional Council's Executive Board on March 23, 2011 and was appointed the Prime Minister of the NTC. He has been the Council's main envoy to the international community.

Misrata: The port city of Misrata is located 125 miles southeast of Tripoli along the Mediterranean coast. It is Libya's third-largest city with 200,000 residents. Misrata joined the uprising on February 17, 2011. Loyalist forces besieged Misrata from early March to mid-May. The battle was marked by heavy urban combat and thousands of casualties. After the siege was lifted, Misratan rebels began advancing towards Tripoli in early August.

Muammar Qaddafi: Colonel Muammar Qaddafi seized control of Libya in a military coup on September 1, 1969. Qaddafi crafted the "Third Universal Theory," which combined elements of socialism, democracy, pan-Arabism, and Islam into an ideology outlined in his 1975 *Green Book*. Qaddafi dispatched paramilitary forces to quell the protests in February 2011; many soldiers and a number of government officials defected soon after, as the conflict escalated.

Mustafa Abdul Jalil: Mustafa Abdel Jalil served as Qaddafi's Minister of Justice from 2007 until his resignation on February 21, 2011. Jalil was a founding member of the National Transitional Council and was named chairman of the Council on February 26, 2011. Known for his reformist efforts while serving in the regime, Jalil secured significant domestic and international support as the leader of the NTC.

Mutassim Qaddafi: Mutassim is the fourth son of Muammar Qaddafi and served as his father's National Security Advisor since 2009. He and his older brother Saif al-Islam have long been considered the two most likely sons to replace their father, resulting in a heated rivalry between them. During the rebellion, Mutassim reportedly commanded the 9th Brigade, a paramilitary unit from Sirte that was heavily engaged against the rebels on the eastern front at Brega.

Nafusa Mountains: The Nafusa Mountains is a highlands area that stretches from the town of Gharyan to the Tunisian border. The Nafusa Mountains are an intricate patchwork of small Arab and Berber tribes. The Berber population has traditionally been at odds with the Qaddafi regime. Many towns in the Nafusa joined the uprising in February and fought off loyalist attacks during the subsequent months. The Nafusa Mountain rebels coordinated an offensive against Tripoli with NATO in August and seized the capital.

National Transitional Council (NTC): The National Transitional Council is the official political body that represents the Libyan rebel movement. The NTC was established in Benghazi on February 27, 2011 and the NTC Executive Board was created on March 23, 2011. Based out of Benghazi, the NTC began gradually relocating to Tripoli after the fall of the capital city. Many of the Council's leaders are former Qaddafi regime officials, Libyan exiles, and eastern Libya politicians.

Operation Odyssey Dawn: Operation Odyssey Dawn was the name of the U.S. military operation conducted in Libya from March 19 to March 31, 2011 to enforce UNSCR 1973. It was a joint air and sea operation to enforce a no-fly zone, maritime arms embargo and protect civilians on the ground by bombing regime forces. After March 31, the United States stepped down from its leadership role and contributed military assets to the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector.

Operation Unified Protector: Operation Unified Protector is the name of the NATO-led mission to enforce UNSCR 1973 began on March 23, 2011 when the alliance took responsibility for enforcing an arms embargo on Libya of the arms embargo. On March 31, 2011, NATO took full responsibility for the air campaign over Libya.

Ras Lanuf: The coastal town or Ras Lanuf is situated 126 miles southeast of Sirte and contains Libya's largest oil refinery. Rebel forces seized Ras Lanuf in early March, though a loyalist counterattack drove the rebels from the town on March 11, 2011. Following the rebel assault on Brega, rebel fighters attacked and captured Ras Lanuf on August 23, 2011.

Saif al-Islam Qaddafi: The second son of Muammar Qaddafi, Saif al-Islam was the heir apparent to his father. Prior to the rebellion, Saif spearheaded political and economic initiatives and was regarded as a reformer. Throughout the conflict, Saif was the most visible member of the Qaddafi family. While he initially tried to appease protesters with promises of reform, he publicly defended the regime's brutal crackdown on demonstrators as the conflict escalated. He evaded capture by rebel forces following the fall of Tripoli.

Sirte: The city of Sirte is located in central Libya and straddles the boundary between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Sirte is the hometown of Muammar Qaddafi and a stronghold of the Qadadfa tribe. During Qaddafi's rule, he developed Sirte into a major administrative center and military garrison. The city's heavily defended garrison has remained loyal to Qaddafi throughout the war. As of September 2011, loyalists troops continued to holdout in Sirte.

Tripoli: The capital of Libya, Tripoli is located on the western coastline and is the country's largest city with 1.8 million residents. Initial protests in the capital were suppressed by mid-March. The seat of power for the Qaddafi regime, NATO aircraft bombed Tripoli more frequently than anywhere else during the war. The Nafusa Mountain rebels began advancing towards Tripoli in early August in coordination with others inside the city. Qaddafi's compound was captured by the rebels on August 24, 2011, and rebel commanders reported the city was secure on August 28, 2011.

Tripolitania: Tripolitania is the northwest region of Libya. It is the most populated region of Libya, with the capital city of Tripoli and major cities such as Misrata and Zawiyah. that includes the capital city of Tripoli. The region has an historic rivalry with Cyrenaica in the east.

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1970: The UN Security Council passed UNSCR 1970 on February 26, 2011. It established an arms embargo, imposed a travel ban on regime officials, and compelled member states to freeze the financial assets of six regime figures and members of the Qaddafi family. It also granted the International Criminal Court jurisdiction over all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Libya after February 15, 2011.

UNSCR 1973: The UN Security Council authorized UNSCR 1973 on March 17, 2011. It granted member states the authority to use "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians threatened by Libyan military forces and enforce a no-fly zone and arms embargo on Libya.

Zawiyah: The city of Zawiyah is located 30 miles west of Tripoli and contains Libya's second largest oil refinery. Anti-Qaddafi forces drove loyalist troops from the city on February 20, 2011, though regime forces retook Zawiyah on March 11, 2011. Many of Zawiyah fighters subsequently fled and joined the rebellion in the Nafusa Mountains to the south. The rebels attacked Zawiyah in an offensive coordinated with NATO on August 13, 2011, finally recapturing the city on August 20, 2011 and securing a route to Tripoli.

Zintan: Located 85 miles southwest of Tripoli, the town of Zintan is the largest city in the Nafusa Mountains. Zintan joined the uprising in mid-February, and rebel forces repulsed loyalist attacks from February through May. NATO airstrikes enabled the Zintan rebels to break through loyalist lines on June 2, and rebel fighters seized numerous towns in the Nafusa Mountains in the following weeks.



THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION

STALEMATE & SIEGE

PART 3

By Anthony Bell & David Witter

This four-part series provides a detailed narrative of the war in Libya and seeks to explain the underlying dynamics behind the conflict for policymakers contemplating policies regarding Libya's future. Part One: Roots of Rebellion details Libya's political history, human terrain, economy, and the Qaddafi regime's unique political and military structures. It also addresses the early stages of the conflict in February 2011, beginning with the protests in Benghazi that triggered the rebellion, and the formation of the National Transitional Council. The paper also details the spread of unrest to western Libya and the regime's crackdowns in Tripoli and Zawiyah. Part Two: Escalation and Intervention discusses the international reaction to the war and the process that led to the U.S. and allied military intervention in March. This section explains the U.S.-led Operation Odyssey Dawn and the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector. Part Three: Stalemate and Siege documents the ebb of fighting in eastern Libya, the pinnacle battle of Misrata, and the turmoil within the rebel ranks. This section concludes with the extensive efforts to break the siege of Misrata. Part Four: The Tide Turns documents the fighting in the Nafusa Mountains of western Libya that culminated in the rebel seizure of Tripoli in August. This final installment in the series concludes with discussion of the most pressing issues facing Libya in the aftermath of the regime's collapse.

I. INTRODUCTION

This report is the third installation of a four-part series on the revolution in Libya. Part Three: Stalemate and Siege details the progress of fighting in eastern and western Libya and the international response. The paper begins by explaining the battle of Cyrenaica, documenting loyalist and rebel offensives before the situation settled into a stalemate. The second section details the siege of Misrata and explains the tactics and organization used by forces on both sides. The paper then documents the Misrata sealift, and the contribution of international actors to rebel efforts. Lastly, the paper examines the rebel breakout from Misrata, as well as efforts to end the conflict through a negotiated settlement.

II. THE BATTLE OF CYRENAICA

The fighting between mid-March and early April in Cyrenaica was characterized by major territorial exchanges between the rebels and loyalists. Both sides experienced their largest territorial gains and losses of the conflict as the frontline shifted between Benghazi and Harawa, a town fifty miles east of the regime stronghold at Sirte. These large fluctuations were due in part to the initial support — and later lack thereof — that NATO warplanes provided to the rebel forces in the form of targeted strikes on the regime's heavy weapons.

The loyalist retreat from Benghazi to Ajdabiya on March 20 precipitated a six-day battle for the strategic coastal town. Heavy tank and artillery fire from Qaddafi's forces within the town kept the rebels from moving inside the outskirts until March 23, after which the rebels launched ground attacks into eastern Ajdabiya over several days.¹ Loyalist forces retreated on March 26 after a series of debilitating NATO airstrikes destroyed at least four T-72 tanks and an artillery piece, in addition to severing crucial supply lines from the regime stronghold in Sirte.² Facing daily ground attacks and cut off from resupply, loyalist forces tried to negotiate a withdrawal with the rebels through a local imam on March 24.³ The talks fell through the next day, and by the afternoon of March 26, Qaddafi's soldiers had retreated towards Sirte.⁴

Following the victory at Ajdabiya, the rebels pushed west and retook the towns of Brega, Ras Lanuf, and Bin Jawad. Though each town saw major combat during the previous offensive, opposition fighters took them with little or no resistance by March 27.⁵ The introduction of two types of U.S. warplanes that were uniquely equipped to provide close air support, the A-10 Thunderbolt and the AC-130 gunships, aided the rebels' rapid advance. These two aircraft were first deployed to Libya between March 25 and 27, coinciding with this rebel advance.⁶ Although the locations of the A-10 and AC-130 sorties

were not publicized, the timing of the rebel advance and the large number of destroyed tanks and armored personnel carriers would indicate that these aircraft likely flew over Cyrenaica at this time.⁷

The rebel advance reached its high point on March 28 in the small town of Harawah, fifty miles outside of Sirte. Heavy fire quickly drove the rebels back to Bin Jawad. Qaddafi's forces had executed a tactical retreat from Ajdabiya to Sirte to resupply, mine the roads, and ambush the rebels as they approached.⁸ By March 30, intense loyalist artillery fire forced the rebels to retreat over one hundred and fifty miles east to Ajdabiya, allowing loyalist forces to re-occupy Brega.⁹ Significantly, there was just one NATO airstrike reported during the rebel retreat.¹⁰ Throughout the following week, Qaddafi's forces repelled numerous counterattacks on Brega's eastern outskirts as the rebels sharply contested control of the city.¹¹ Despite renewed NATO airstrikes, the rebels were unable to retake Brega and returned to Ajdabiya. With loyalists occupying Brega and the rebels positioned in Ajdabiya, the eastern front developed into a stalemate that lasted into July.

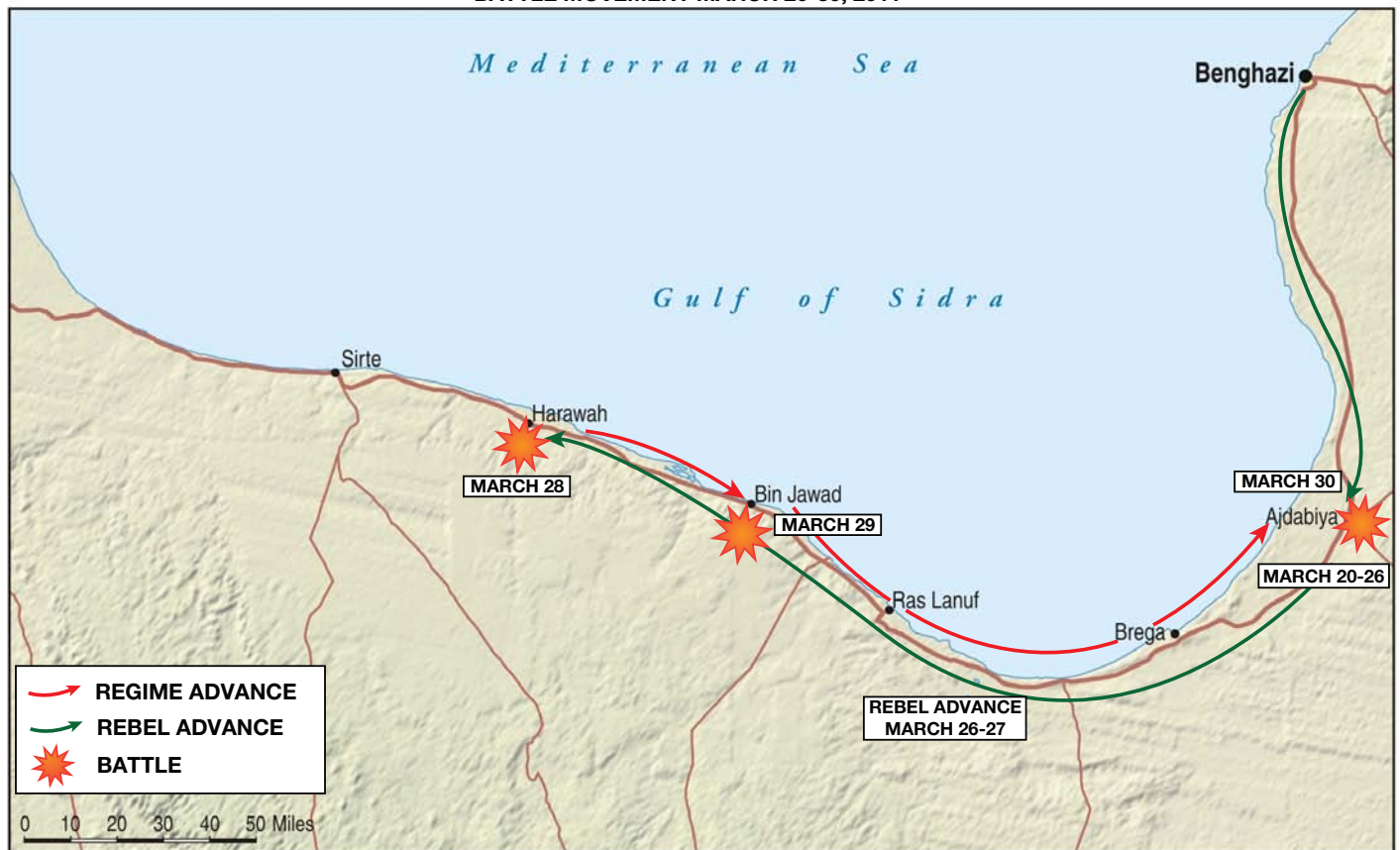
The rebel's precipitous retreat was due to more than inexperience and poor armaments. Most importantly, there appeared to be no air support from foreign warplanes during the retreat, something attributed to both bad weather and logistical difficulties associated with the switchover in command from the U.S.-led operation to NATO command.¹² The rebels' poor performance — a retreat of almost 200 miles — in the absence of NATO support was an indicator of their reliance on outside help during battle. Additionally, Qaddafi's forces began using civilian vehicles in battle similar to the ones that rebel forces used.¹³ The loyalists introduced these vehicles, generally pickup trucks with rockets or heavy machine guns mounted in the back, to confuse NATO pilots who were used to targeting conventional military vehicles. Loyalist forces' use of these vehicles during Qaddafi's counterattack at the end of March caused problems for NATO strike sorties, which did not strike loyalist forces but instead mistakenly bombed the rebels in two separate instances of friendly fire.¹⁴ A NATO spokesman later alluded to the tactical change, stating, "Libyan government forces have increasingly shifted to non-conventional tactics, blending in with road traffic and using civilian life as a shield for their advance."¹⁵

The rebel stand at Ajdabiya and subsequent counterattack on Brega can also be explained by the rebel military leadership's efforts to reorganize their forces. Senior

rebel military leaders—including Defense Minister Omar Hariri and the two senior rebel commanders, General Abdel Fatah Younis and Khalifa Hefatar—met sometime during the retreat from Harawah to reassess the military strategy. The dynamics among the three men have been complex from the beginning. News accounts have described Hariri—despite holding the top defense post—as a mostly ceremonial figure with little influence over the military campaign.¹⁶ Though Hariri was an original participant in Qaddafi's 1969 coup, he later led an unsuccessful coup attempt against Qaddafi in 1975 and served a fifteen-year prison sentence.¹⁷ Khalifa Hefatar spent the last twenty years in exile after his capture in 1987 while leading the Libyan army's invasion of Chad.¹⁸ Hefatar turned against Qaddafi after he refused to arrange for his release, and he later led an armed expatriate group with the intent of overthrowing Qaddafi.¹⁹ Hefatar was living in northern Virginia when protests began in Benghazi, and he returned to Libya in mid-March to lead the rebel forces, though the NTC did not grant him any significant control.²⁰ The uncertainty of his role in the rebel command led to a dispute with Younis over who commanded the rebel forces.²¹ Many of the rebels were suspicious of Younis, a former army officer who headed the regime's Interior Ministry until the February protests, because of his position in the regime as Interior Minister and commander of a special operations unit.²²

The meeting between the three men during the retreat from Harawah devolved into a heated argument between Younis and Hefatar over who commanded the rebel military.²³ Younis emerged from the meeting as the military chief of staff while Hefatar's role remained unclear.²⁴ Younis' visit to the front lines near Brega on April 1 solidified his position as overall commander.²⁵ Reports of an increasingly organized rebel force immediately following Younis' visit also suggest the rebel commander or other experienced leaders may have taken a more active role in organizing fighters along the frontline. Rebels set up defensive positions near Brega, shifted heavy weapons to the frontline, and set up checkpoints to prevent unarmed rebels and journalists from moving to the front.²⁶ Rebels also divided their forces according to experience. The young men with no military experience (known as the *Shabab*, or youth) manned checkpoints behind the frontlines, while the main body of the rebels received basic training in Benghazi before returning to the frontlines under the direction of "special forces," who were probably former soldiers and police officers.²⁷

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This reorganization did not result in any new battlefield victories but rather a new, stagnant phase of combat on the eastern front. For more than three months, there were no major changes in the front lines in Cyrenaica; the rebels held Ajdabiya while Qaddafi's forces were entrenched in Brega. Even though both sides occasionally attacked the other, neither gained significant ground.²⁸ NATO is partly responsible for the stalemate; the organization instituted "redlines," or boundaries that denoted areas in which alliance warplanes would immediately target regime forces. NATO encouraged the rebels not to cross these redlines for fear of friendly fire. For example, on May 9, NATO instructed the rebels to retreat to Ajdabiya despite success against loyalist forces at Brega.²⁹

Qatari weapons and military trainers may have played a role in strengthening the Cyrenaican frontlines after the second retreat to Ajdabiya in early April. The first reports of Qatari military equipment in rebel hands appeared in mid-April when journalists saw crates of supplies labeled "Qatar" in the port of Benghazi. These shipments, consisting of bulletproof vests, helmets, and ammunition, were bound for the rebels besieged in Misrata.³⁰ Though this shipment was unannounced,

Qatari Prime Minister al-Thani alluded to arming the rebels just days before the crates appeared. In the first meeting of the Libya Contact Group on April 13, Al-Thani stated that assistance to the rebels could include "all other needs, including defense equipment...It is time to help the Libyan people defend themselves and to defend the Libyan people."³¹ NATO and rebel officials, as well as Sheikh al-Thani himself, also claimed Qatar had shipped heavier weapons, including shoulder-fired Milan anti-tank weapons, to the rebels.³²

The Arab nation also sent military trainers to Libya to teach basic soldiering and infantry tactics to volunteers outside Benghazi.³³ Though the Qataris' presence was not reported until mid-May, NTC officials did state in mid-April that foreign advisors had been running training camps in Cyrenaica.³⁴ As fighting in the east ground to a halt, widespread reports of an increasingly professional and organized rebel force at Ajdabiya soon surfaced. Reports around this time that a Libyan trainer at one of the camps near Ajdabiya received 400 assault rifles supported the possibility that Qatari advisors were running camps in the area.³⁵ Though Qatar was never

explicitly connected to the assault rifles, it was the only country believed to be giving the Cyrenaican rebels weapons at that time.

The rebels finally broke the stalemate at Brega when they launched a major offensive on July 15. NATO warplanes had stepped up its airstrikes against loyalist forces at Brega shortly before the attack, targeting tanks, technicals, and armored personnel carriers from July 13 to 14.³⁶ Rebel expeditionary forces launched raids into the area from July 14 to 16, but were unable to enter the town after suffering serious casualties from landmines and rocket attacks.³⁷ Twenty rebels were killed and more than one hundred and eighty were wounded in the first three days after the raiding party discovered that the eastern approaches into Brega were littered with thousands of landmines.³⁸ With the attack stalled, Qaddafi's forces kept the main body of the rebel force at bay five miles outside the town with rocket attacks.³⁹ Opposition fighters finally broke into Brega on July 17, seizing the northern area of New Brega in an intense street battle, while government forces occupied the petrochemical facility in the southwestern neighborhood of Old Brega.⁴⁰ Fighting continued for the next three days as most of Qaddafi's forces retreated west towards the coastal city of Ras Lanuf, leaving a force of roughly one hundred and fifty soldiers behind to hold out in Old Brega.⁴¹ There are isolated reports that Mutassim Qaddafi, Qaddafi's son and national security advisor, commanded the loyalist force and oversaw the retreat.⁴² The rebel advance can be attributed to ongoing NATO bombing sorties, as well as a somewhat sophisticated multi-pronged attack that even featured attack boats.⁴³ Qaddafi's troops attempted to counter the NATO airstrikes by using vehicles bearing rebel flags and lighting an oil-filled trench on fire to obscure the ground movements to NATO pilots overflying the battlefield.⁴⁴ Skirmishes over the next week failed to substantively change the battle lines.

The sudden and mysterious death of rebel military chief of staff Abdul Fattah Younis Younis threatened rebel progress on the eastern front. On the morning of July 28, Younis left his command post near Ajdabiya after receiving an official summons from NTC officials to appear in Benghazi.⁴⁵ Later that evening, NTC Chairman Jalil announced that unnamed gunmen had killed Younis and that rebel forces had not yet recovered his body.⁴⁶ The next day they found Younis' body and those of his two close aides, Colonel Muhammad Khamis and Lieutenant Colonel Nasir al-Madhkur,

in Benghazi.⁴⁷ Their corpses were burned and bullet-riddled.⁴⁸

There is widespread uncertainty about the circumstances of Younis' death at the time of this publication. NTC officials, Younis' family, and alleged eyewitnesses have all presented contradictory accounts of what happened. The most strongly contested elements are why Younis faced an NTC inquiry, whether he had been arrested or merely summoned to appear before the NTC, and who was responsible for his death.⁴⁹

The NTC's initial response focused on shoring up support from Younis' Obeidi tribe, one of the most powerful tribes in Cyrenaica. Jalil appeared alongside two Obeidi tribal leaders when he announced Younis' death during a news conference in Benghazi.⁵⁰ The NTC selected Major General Suleiman Mahmoud, a fellow Obeidi tribesman, to assume Younis' command duties.⁵¹ Formerly the regime's garrison commander at Tobruk, Mahmoud defected on February 20 alongside thousands of his soldiers after refusing orders to fire on Cyrenaican protesters.⁵² The elevation of Mahmoud over other potential commanders may have been an attempt to placate Obeidi tribe.

Younis' death did not appear to destabilize the Cyrenaican military significantly, though there were a few bursts of gunfire outside Jalil's news conference. The fighters directly under Younis' command, former regime Special Forces soldiers, returned to their positions on the frontlines days later.⁵³ The rebels' disparate and disjointed national command structure worked in their favor, as Younis' death did not disrupt rebel military operations elsewhere in Libya.

The most significant development to arise from Younis' assassination was the dissolution of the NTC cabinet on August 8. An NTC spokesman indicated that the cabinet was "dismissed because some are directly responsible for how General Younis was arrested."⁵⁴ The spokesman did not specify which cabinet members were responsible, but a separate Benghazi-based opposition group publicly called for the resignations of several NTC officials for their roles in Younis' summons, including NTC Vice-Chairman Ali Essawi, Judge Jomaa al-Jazwi, and Defense Minister Jalal al-Digheily.⁵⁵

Younis' death shook up the Cyrenaican rebels, whose individual tribes and militias had largely put aside their differences to focus on their resistance to the regime.

Younis' Obeidi tribe continued to support the NTC after his death, though some tribesmen publicly criticized rebel leaders for their slow progress in launching an investigation.⁵⁶ Members of his immediate family asserted that the NTC will face consequences if they do not make an earnest effort to find Younis' killers.

Additionally, the timing of the NTC cabinet's dissolution was embarrassing in light of the July 15 decision by the U.S. and the Libya Contact Group to recognize the NTC as Libya's legitimate government.⁵⁷ The U.S. government had resisted awarding the NTC such recognition for the first four months due in part to concerns regarding its efficacy as a governing institution. The NTC's admitted mishandling of the assassination and subsequent internal shakeup seemed to validate these doubts.

III. THE SIEGE OF MISRATA (FEBRUARY 18 TO MARCH 19, 2011)

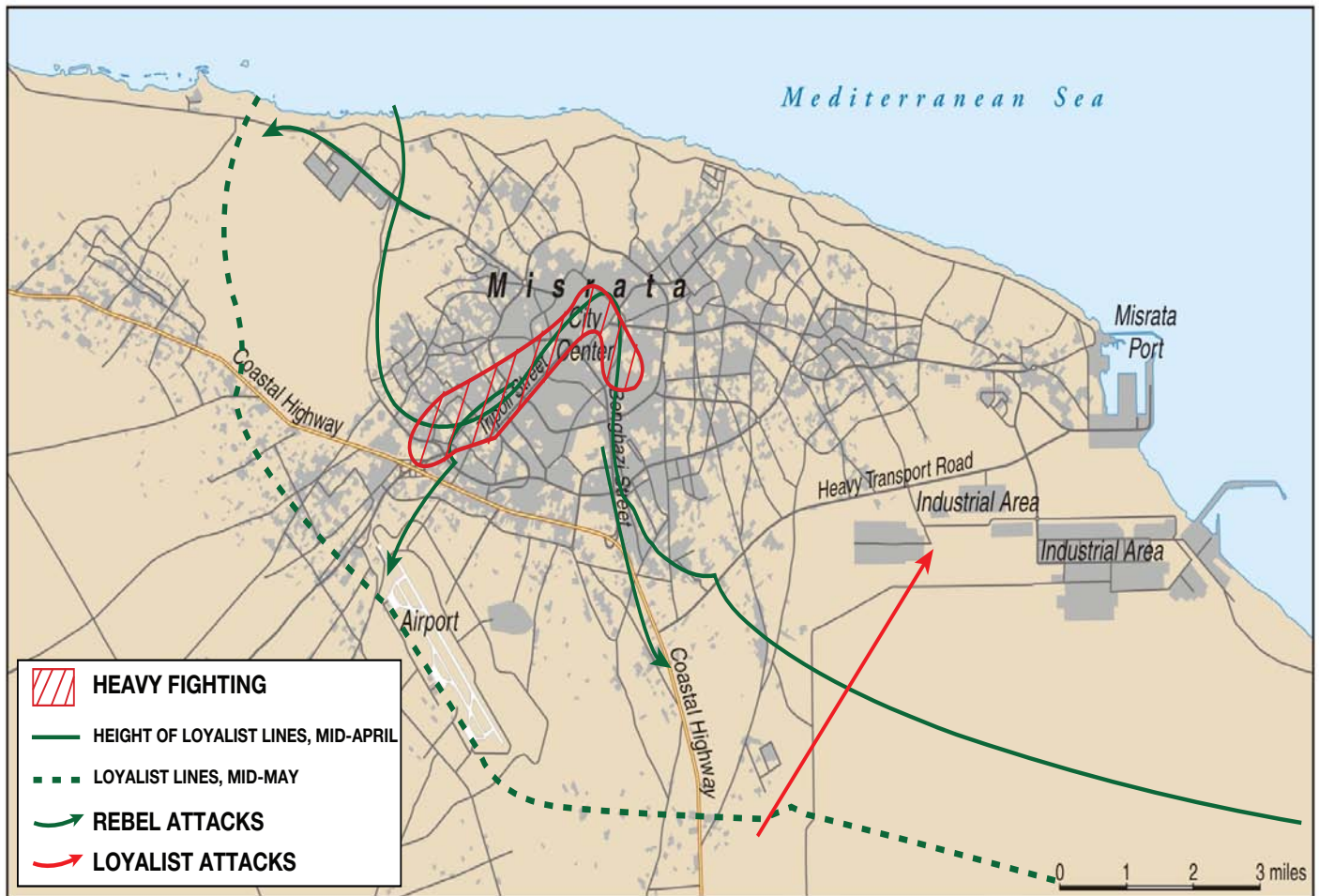
The stalemated combat in Cyrenaica coincided with an increasingly dire siege of a rebel enclave in western Libya at the port city of Misrata. Misrata emerged as the scene of the heaviest fighting in the conflict as loyalist forces and rebels battled for control of the strategically vital city. NATO's intervention in mid-March prevented loyalist forces from retaking the center of the rebellion in Cyrenaica, but the uprising in Misrata threatened Qaddafi's hold over Tripolitania and thus the country. Qaddafi launched a determined effort to recapture Misrata and contain the rebellion in Cyrenaica. If Misrata fell to the regime, Qaddafi would be able to concentrate the bulk of his forces on defending the eastern front, where he could draw out the conflict into a stalemate and reach a *de facto* partition of the country between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica along the static frontline around Brega. For the rebels, control of Misrata provided a key beachhead into Tripolitania and an avenue on which to march on Tripoli, sparing them from pushing Qaddafi's forces across the over three hundred miles of coastal areas between Brega and Misrata that included some of the strongest pro-Qaddafi tribal areas and cities in the country.⁵⁸ So long as the rebels held Misrata, Qaddafi could not easily partition Libya.⁵⁹ The Battle of Misrata was therefore a crucial moment in the war. The rebels had the opportunity to threaten Qaddafi's hold over the remainder of the country, and Qaddafi had his best chance at remaining in power by partitioning the country.⁶⁰

NATO played a pivotal role in preventing Misrata's fall to the regime, but its actions in Misrata became emblematic of its involvement in the war. The alliance faced numerous challenges in accomplishing its narrow military objective to protect civilians and the lofty political objectives set out by Western leaders to oust Qaddafi. As the Battle of Misrata dragged on and the eastern front stalemated, the resolve of NATO participants to remain in the conflict longer than they initially expected was tested. The battle also demonstrated the limits of using airpower to protect civilians and support a third party locked in combat in a dense urban environment. Misrata remained under constant attack until May, despite daily airstrikes against the loyalist forces besieging the city and a wider effort to cripple the regime's command and control and supply lines. Ultimately, NATO airpower and a sealoft of military supplies from Cyrenaica allowed the Misratan rebels to hold the city. Even after the loyalists withdrew, the regime continued to harass the city with artillery and prevent a rebel advance up the coast towards Tripoli.

Misrata is a coastal city located in eastern Tripolitania along the Mediterranean Sea, one hundred and twenty miles east of Tripoli. Misrata is Libya's third largest city with a population of approximately 300,000 people. Situated on the edge of the Gulf of Sidra, Misrata marks the end of the densely populated coastline of Tripolitania that stretches east from the Tunisian border. Scattered farms and marshlands lay to the south of Misrata before the land gives way to the Sirte Desert, which forms the natural barrier between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Small oil towns and villages dot the three hundred miles of the Sirte Desert between Misrata and Ajdabiya. That includes Qaddafi's small hometown, Sirte, which he expanded into an administrative center and major military garrison. Misrata has a distinct political and economic character compared to the smaller cities and towns of Tripolitania. Historically, Misrata flourished as a trade city that linked Saharan caravan routes with the Mediterranean. Contemporary Misrata developed into Libya's major non-oil commercial hub, home to the country's largest industrial base and busiest port. Owing to its unique economic character, Misrata has a history of influential merchant families and clans that distinguishes the city from the tribal-based politics found elsewhere.⁶¹

The regime took precautionary steps to curtail protests in Misrata in February by arresting opposition figures

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and warning the population about the consequences of unrest. Before the Day of Rage, security forces in Misrata arrested known dissidents and activists.⁶² Despite these measures, anti-regime protests began in Misrata on February 17 alongside nationwide demonstrations.⁶³ The early protests were small, apparently organized in part by the exiled opposition group the National Front for the Salvation of Libya.⁶⁴ Demonstrations gradually grew as residents turned out to support the protesters in Benghazi, who were experiencing the brunt of the crackdown, and to denounce the brutal methods employed by the regime. Security forces opened fire on a demonstration on February 19, killing Khalid Abushahma, the first Misratan to die in the protests.⁶⁵ The following day at Abushahma's funeral, crowds swelled into the thousands along Tripoli Street—the city's main thoroughfare—to mourn and protest. Major clashes erupted at dusk in the city center and along Tripoli Street between demonstrators and the security forces as well as pro-Qaddafi thugs known as *Baltajiyah*.⁶⁶ Over the next two days, protesters attacked and burned

police stations and revolutionary committee offices across the city, arming themselves with looted weapons.⁶⁷ Military officers from the city pledged their support to the protesters and provided access to weapons stores. By February 23, after several days of sporadic street fighting, Misrata fell to the rebels as the security forces fled.⁶⁸ Rebel sources reported as many as thirty people killed and two hundred wounded during the first few days of the uprising in Misrata.⁶⁹

The rebels expanded their control over most of Misrata while the regime mobilized its forces across Tripolitania.⁷⁰ Approximately five hundred troops from the loyalist Hamza Battalion took up defensive positions at the sprawling Misrata Airport, a dual use civilian airport and major airbase for the Libyan Air Force, six miles south of the city center. The rebels quickly attacked and captured most of the airport in an effort to seize the base's armory and barracks, but they met heavy resistance from the loyalists entrenched on the far end of the complex.⁷¹ Intense fighting raged over the next several

days as the loyalists used tanks and artillery to drive off the disorganized and poorly armed rebels.⁷²

As rebels and loyalists battled for control of the airport, both sides scrambled to organize their forces. Military officers at the nearby air force academy mutinied and joined the rebels, sabotaging warplanes at the airport to deny their use to the loyalists.⁷³ In the hectic fighting, the rebels claimed to have captured Brigadier General Abu Bakr Ali Mohamed Qaddafi, a loyalist commander from the Qadadfa tribe.⁷⁴ On February 27, rebel leaders reported that a large armored column departed from Sirte and headed up the coastal highway towards Misrata to reinforce the Hamza Battalion.⁷⁵ Qaddafi sought to lay siege to Misrata to contain the rebellion to the city and strangle it while his forces marched on the rebel strongholds in Cyrenaica. Mimicking the strategy loyalists were employing at Zawiyah, the regime planned to attrite the rebels' ability to fight.⁷⁶ Major General Yusuf Bashir, commander of Misrata's Border Defense and Zlitan Security, issued an order on March 4 to loyalist forces around Misrata to impose a complete blockade of the city, which marked the beginning of the siege. Rebels later discovered Bashir's order on captured soldiers. It declared, "No cars are allowed, for any reasons, to enter carrying food, fuel, or any other supplies to Misrata, through any of the checkpoints and gates."⁷⁷ In addition to closing the land routes into Misrata, the regime blockaded the city's port with naval vessels to prevent the rebels in Benghazi from sending supplies by sea. The siege resulted in a dire situation for the poorly armed Misratan rebels and residents trapped in the city as the fighting dragged on.

After loyalist counterattacks turned back the rebel attack on the airport, there was nearly a week-long lull of fighting in early March. The rebels in Misrata braced for an attack as the regime continued to assemble forces and quell the unrest in other cities in Tripolitania. Saif al-Islam claimed the regime had negotiated with the Misratan rebels to disarm and surrender, which failed.⁷⁸ The rebels did not confirm or deny that talks occurred, but the regime reportedly made similar ultimatums to other restive cities prior to launching attacks. Likely after the rebels refused to surrender and the regime had reinforcements in place, loyalist tanks spearheaded an attack up Tripoli Street and Benghazi Street to the city center on March 6.⁷⁹ Demonstrating the skill of the military officers in their ranks, the outgunned rebels engaged in urban guerilla tactics against the better-armed loyalist troops. The rebels fell back to draw the columns

of loyalist tanks, armored vehicles, and technicals into a series of ambushes inside the dense city center. Opposition fighters effectively used RPGs and recoilless rifles mounted on pickup trucks to halt the attack. At least one loyalist column suffered heavy casualties after rebels trapped it in the streets and ambushed it from multiple directions.⁸⁰ The regime made another unsuccessful attack on the city on March 10, after which it stopped making direct assaults and resorted to indiscriminately shelling the city.⁸¹

The number of loyalist forces around Misrata grew as reinforcements arrived from Sirte and Tripoli; they established a command post at the recaptured Misrata airport and continued probing the rebels' improvised defenses. Elements of the Khamis Brigade, fresh from their victory in Zawiyah, arrived around March 13 to reinforce the loyalist lines around western Misrata. Several dozen soldiers of the Hamza Battalion mutinied upon the arrival of the Khamis Brigade, which led to a day-long gun battle among the loyalists in Misrata's western suburbs.⁸²

On March 16, Qaddafi delivered a speech to his supporters, exhorting them to rally for the upcoming battle for Misrata. Qaddafi repeated the regime's allegations that the rebels were infidels and foreign terrorists that had infiltrated from Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Afghanistan with the assistance of traitors. Qaddafi insisted that "Misrata cannot be manipulated by anyone; it's the city of jihad and patriotism." Qaddafi appeared impervious to the rising possibility of international intervention and displayed a renewed sense of confidence he would prevail as his military rolled the rebels back in Cyrenaica. Qaddafi declared that his forces would launch the "decisive battle" for Misrata the following day.⁸³ Government spokesman Ibrahim Moussa told foreign journalists in Tripoli, "The Libyan forces are surrounding the city and will move in slowly to avoid casualties. They will be done by tomorrow if not today."⁸⁴

As the United States and its allies prepared to intervene in Libya after the Security Council passed UNSCR 1973, Misrata was poised to fall to the regime. Thousands of loyalist troops positioned themselves around the Misrata airport and along the western approaches to cut off ground approaches to the city, and the regime controlled access to the harbor with small naval vessels. The rebels held the city center and port facilities, but were desperately low on supplies. The regime declared

a nationwide ceasefire on March 18 in compliance with UNSCR 1973 and demands from United States and coalition partners.⁸⁵ According to rebel sources, loyalist forces violated their own ceasefire and launched perhaps the most determined assault yet against Misrata on March 18, pushing into the city with approximately forty tanks and armored vehicles under the cover of an artillery barrage.⁸⁶ The following day, Operation Odyssey Dawn commenced. U.S. cruise missiles slammed into the Misrata airport and the aviation academy as part of the effort to destroy Libya's integrated air defenses around the country and ground the Libyan Air Force.⁸⁷ While the coalition initially focused on establishing the no-fly zone and halting the loyalist forces nearing Benghazi, Qaddafi's forces seized the opportunity to recapture a large portion of central Misrata between Tripoli Street and Benghazi Street.⁸⁸

The regime's offensive in late March marked the start of the second phase of the Battle of Misrata that would last for nearly two months. Loyalist forces and rebels entrenched themselves throughout the city as combat devolved into fierce street-to-street and building-to-building fighting. The regime's artillery bombardment intensified and loyalist snipers, backed by tanks and armored vehicles, took up positions along rooftops.⁸⁹ The eight-story Tamim Insurance Building on Tripoli Street, the highest building in Misrata, provided the snipers with a commanding view of the city center.⁹⁰ For the next month, unremitting sniper fire from the Tamim Insurance Building and elsewhere along Tripoli Street terrorized rebels and civilians.⁹¹ On March 23, loyalist forces captured Misrata's main hospital, the Clinic of the Facilitator, located on Tripoli Street. Qaddafi's troops used the large building (which was empty and closed because of planned renovations before the rebellion) as a forward command center and staging ground, possibly anticipating the hospital would be safe from NATO airstrikes.⁹²

In the opening days of Odyssey Dawn, the coalition focused on suppressing Libyan air defenses and command control infrastructure and only targeted the loyalist ground forces in the column advancing towards Benghazi.⁹³ Misrata, however, quickly drew the coalition's attention as the rebels' position in the city deteriorated and civilian casualties mounted. On March 22, Admiral Locklear stated that intelligence confirmed Qaddafi's forces were attacking civilians in Misrata and that the coalition was "considering all options" to protect civilians in the city.⁹⁴ The following day, the

United States declared it had successfully established the no-fly zone and would begin targeting the regime's ground forces.⁹⁵ Soon after, coalition warplanes began striking loyalist tanks in Misrata's city center and outskirts, forcing them to pull back.⁹⁶ On March 24, a U.S. AWACS surveillance aircraft identified a Libyan military aircraft — a Yugoslavian-built Soko G-2A-E Galeb — flying in the vicinity of Misrata, the Libyan Air Force's first violation of the no-fly zone. A French Rafale fighter destroyed the aircraft with an air-to-surface missile shortly after it landed at the Misrata Airport.⁹⁷ To prevent further Libyan sorties, on March 26 French aircraft destroyed five additional Galeb warplanes and two MI-35 attack helicopters on the tarmac at the Misrata Airport that French officials said were preparing to carry out operations.⁹⁸

Rebel and Loyalist Organization and Tactics

At the start of the uprising in Misrata, rebels suffered from a shortage of weapons and ammunition because the local armories they looted had limited supplies. The rebels were incapable of arming all their volunteers and possessed virtually no heavy weapons beyond a handful of technicals mounted with anti-aircraft guns and recoilless rifles.⁹⁹ The few armed fighters wielded aging Kalashnikovs, and few had any military training.¹⁰⁰ The shortage of weapons forced the rebels to fight in shifts. They would take turns sharing a single weapon in groups of ten or more; each would quickly expose himself down alleys and streets to fire a few rounds at loyalist positions before handing off the weapon.¹⁰¹ The rebels also made extensive use of improvised weaponry, including custom-made technicals produced in workshops behind rebel lines.¹⁰² The rebels used their superior understanding of the city against loyalist soldiers, who would often get lost in the maze of side streets and alleys where the rebels preferred to operate.¹⁰³ The small groups of rebel fighters were highly mobile, wielding only rifles, homemade grenades, and RPGs, allowing them to shift quickly fighting positions through alleys and holes they cut between buildings. With tactical maneuverability, rebels would close in and surround loyalist troops holed up in a building before they could bring up reinforcements and heavy weapons. Lacking their own tanks and armored vehicles, the rebels employed RPGs, mounted recoilless rifles, and even homemade bombs against loyalist tanks and positions.¹⁰⁴ The rebels were resourceful, but their lack of military training, organization, and arms hindered them. Their shortage of heavy military equipment remained a significant disadvantage against

the loyalists' tanks, armored vehicles and artillery. Unlike their small arms, the rebels could not be easily operate heavy weapons and armor without training and logistical support, and resorted to burning the few loyalist tanks they seized to prevent their recapture.¹⁰⁵

The rebels established an *ad hoc* defense-in-depth around the city, which contributed to the continuously fluctuating battle lines. Rebels fought from multi-layered defensive positions, using side-streets and buildings for cover, before falling back to other positions.¹⁰⁶ The rebels used piles of earth and other debris to create roadblocks in the streets and alleys every few hundred feet to prevent loyalist armor from moving freely. The barriers also provided defensive positions throughout the battle and restricted the vision of rooftop snipers.¹⁰⁷ The rebels used large dump trucks filled with dirt to partially block Tripoli Street, which cut off loyalist troops from reinforcement. The defenders also positioned shipping containers and sandbags around the port and connecting roads to defend from sudden loyalist attacks.¹⁰⁸

In late February, the rebels hastily established a city council tasked with organizing the city's defenses and overseeing basic services.¹⁰⁹ The Misrata City Council had seventeen members, including leading businessmen, prominent judges, and a number of former military officers that were notable city figures before the rebellion began.¹¹⁰ Khalifa Zuwawi became the chairman of the Misrata City Council, likely due to his standing in the city as a prominent judge and retired captain in the Libyan military.¹¹¹ Both the regime and the rebels sought Zuwawi's political support. Saif al-Islam even attempted to appoint him to an inquiry committee of Libyan judges to investigate the attacks on protesters in Benghazi and other cities in the early days of the rebellion.¹¹² Under Zuwawi, the council established more than a dozen committees and subcommittees to administer the city, including those for medical, communications, finance, relief, and judicial affairs.¹¹³

The Misrata City Council selected two representatives to the NTC in Benghazi, Suleiman Fortia and Mahmoud al-Muntasir.¹¹⁴ Fortia was a professor of engineering and a long-time dissident who taught at King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia for eight years. He claimed that Qaddafi's security forces had arrested and murdered his family members.¹¹⁵ Fortia later coordinated the movement of supplies from Benghazi to Misrata and strongly advocated for France and other countries to provide support to the Misratan rebels.¹¹⁶ Fortia, along

with a delegation from the NTC, attended the April meeting of the Libyan Contact Group in Qatar, where he met with U.S., European, and Qatari officials to discuss the situation in Misrata. Shortly afterward, Fortia confirmed that Qatar would send weapons to Misrata.¹¹⁷ The second Misratan representative to the NTC, al-Muntasir, is a businessman and likely a member of the prominent Muntasir family.¹¹⁸ The Muntasirs are a well-established merchant family in Misrata that wielded tremendous economic and political influence in the city and Tripolitania during the Italian colonial-era and following monarchy.¹¹⁹ He is likely a relative of the late Mahmoud al-Muntasir, the former Prime Minister under King Idris in the 1950s who Qaddafi later imprisoned. The family's broad power declined under Qaddafi, but it remained an important political actor in Misrata. Qaddafi appointed several members of the Muntasir family to positions within the government.¹²⁰

The Misrata Military Council formed in February to organize the city's defense, and is perhaps the most important rebel organization in Tripolitania. The relationship between the Military Council and the City Council is unclear; they appear to operate in tandem rather than one being subordinate to the other. General Ramadan Zarmuh, a former military officer who defected at the start of the rebellion in February, heads the Misrata Military Council.¹²¹ The council is composed of a number of retired and defected military officers, at least several of whom have said they retired around 1993 or 1994, around the same time Qaddafi purged the officer corps after a failed military coup in the nearby town of Bani Walid. While the council claimed command and control over the rebel field commanders and fighters in Misrata, it had difficulty exercising orders over the *ad hoc* rebel forces. Rebels estimated in mid-April that they had between three thousand and five thousand men organized into semi-formal units that the rebels referred to interchangeably as regiments, battalions or brigades. Misratan commanders adopted *noms de guerre* such as the Lion of the Desert, and fighters organized into units such as the Grand Lion Battalion, the Faisal (Sword) Brigade and the Arise Brigade.¹²² Colonel Ibrahim Betal Mal, a member of the council and a former military officer, described the command problems between the council and the fighters. "They [the fighters] don't have proper training. They are not proper soldiers, so they sometimes advance without orders from the military council. They have no obligation to carry out our recommendations, they are not a real army and no one is anyone's leader."¹²³ Despite its shortfalls, the Misrata Military Council

provided the crucial degree of organization needed to stave off the regime's offensive. After they broke the siege of Misrata in early May, Zarmuh and the other officers of the Misrata Military Council commanded the rebel troops fighting up the coastal highway at Zlitan and took part in the capture of Tripoli in late August.¹²⁴

The Misratan rebels lacked the same financial resources the NTC had, so they struggled to finance their operation. Many of the prominent families and wealthy businessmen in Misrata stepped forward as patrons of the rebellion.¹²⁵ Characteristic of the support system for Misratan rebel units was the Al-Marsa Regiment, which in July consisted of two battalions each with several hundred men. Although a former truck driver named Salim Al-Zofri commanded it, it was funded by Mahmoud Mohammed Askutri, a businessman who owns a major construction firm in Misrata. As the regiment's benefactor, Askutri paid the fighters' wages and purchased their weapons and ammunition—mostly from the black-market in Cyrenaica—and shipped them to the city at his expense.¹²⁶

To recapture Misrata, the regime committed a large number of troops, including many of its best paramilitary formations. Rebel officials estimated in mid-April that there were as many as two hundred to three hundred loyalist soldiers fighting in the city center itself and as many as twenty thousand surrounding the city in late April.¹²⁷ The rebels captured dispatches from Khamis Qaddafi on a loyalist officer that detailed the regime's order of battle around Misrata as of May 26. The order of battle included a number of paramilitary units such as the 32nd Brigade under the command of Khamis Qaddafi, who appears to have led all loyalist forces in the area, and signed as "Commander of the Misrata Theater of Operations". The regime had approximately 11,350 troops organized into seventeen battalions engaged at Misrata. About four thousand of the troops were identified as well-trained soldiers that likely represented the paramilitary forces, and the rest were likely counted as militias, conscripts, volunteers and tribal fighters.¹²⁸ The battalions ranged in size from four hundred to eight hundred men and were arrayed around the city in six sectors, with two to four battalions per sector. The makeup of the loyalist units appears to bear out the salience of the regime's tribal and regional allegiances. The areas of origin were the regime-held areas of Tripolitania including Janzour, Sabratha, Tarhuna, Zawiyah, and Zlitan.¹²⁹ Four other battalions came from the Warfalla, the Tawargha, the Zlitan, and the Warshafana tribes (a

loyalist tribe from al-Aziziya, about 30 miles southwest of Tripoli). There appear to have been five paramilitary battalions that likely composed the 32nd Brigade, joined by a unit of revolutionary committee volunteers and another unit of "popular guards."¹³⁰

Qaddafi's forces adapted to the urban combat environment and NATO's air supremacy over the battlefield. Due to NATO rules of engagement and targeting priorities, airstrikes concentrated on the loyalists' heavy equipment, such as tanks and artillery pieces, supply lines and command and control centers. Therefore, tanks and other heavy vehicles were largely unable to operate freely around the city. Loyalists began staging tanks and heavy equipment underneath cover and driving tanks in the city center into stores and markets to avoid being spotted by NATO warplanes. Soldiers shed their uniforms for civilian clothes, making the troops fighting in the center of the city nearly indistinguishable from rebels and civilians.¹³¹ The loyalists began fighting from more mobile technicals and using convoys of pickup trucks, rather than military transports, to move men and supplies. The loyalists' truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers that were responsible for much of the artillery fire on the city began using "scoot-and-shoot" tactics to avoid being spotted. The launchers would roll out from the safety of buildings or other camouflage, unleash a barrage towards the city, and quickly return under cover to reload or shift to a new position. The change in tactics made the loyalists' heavy equipment difficult for NATO warplanes to find. Furthermore, loyalists began to position themselves intentionally near civilian targets that NATO would be hesitant to strike.

Brigadier General Mark van Uhm, Chief of Allied Operations, declared in early April that Misrata had become the alliance's highest priority in Libya.¹³² As NATO tried to break the regime's siege of Misrata, the changing loyalist tactics proved a source of intense frustration. The rebels struggled to grasp why the alliance could not stop the regime's artillery bombardment and constant ground attacks. The rebels, joined by France, harshly criticized the alliance for not doing enough to save Misrata.¹³³ On April 5, an aggravated General Younis argued, "If NATO wanted to free Misrata, they could have done that a few days ago."¹³⁴ NATO officials admitted their strict rules of engagement limited the hittable targets around Misrata. Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, explained the alliance was having difficulty stopping the regime's shelling of Misrata without causing heavy

damage to civilian targets.¹³⁵ The withdrawal of U.S. warplanes from the air campaign in early April caused further difficulties as NATO's air cover appeared to temporarily slip over Misrata and other parts of the country.¹³⁶ Van Uhm underscored the difficulties the alliance faced lifting the siege. "There is a limit to what can be achieved with air power to stop fighting in a city ... Within the current mandate ... using air power to protect Libyan civilians on the ground of course has limitations."¹³⁷ Even with the restrictions placed on airstrikes, NATO was still hitting targets around the city on a near-daily basis. At the height of the siege between March 19 and May 2, warplanes flying under Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector hit approximately forty-three tanks, eighteen artillery pieces and rocket launchers, sixteen technicals and other military vehicles, seventeen ammunition sites, nine armored vehicles, eight command and control facilities, and four bunkers in and around Misrata.¹³⁸ From April 12 to July 21, NATO struck nearly three hundred targets in the vicinity of Misrata, leaving Tripoli as the only area bombed more frequently.¹³⁹

IV. THE MISRATA SEALIFT

The rebels in Misrata were poorly armed, surrounded and outgunned from the outset. By late March, the arms and ammunition the rebels seized in the opening days of the uprising had dwindled to critically low levels. Without resupply, the rebels would eventually be unable to stave off the loyalist attacks and the city would fall.¹⁴⁰ The regime had cut off Misrata from the center of the rebellion in Cyrenaica by commanding the overland routes. The port of Misrata became the only feasible route to get supplies into the city. Beginning in late March, a sealift of military and humanitarian supplies began reaching Misrata from rebel ships that crossed the Gulf of Sidra from Benghazi. The sealift was pivotal in turning the tide of the battle as the stream of supplies allowed the Misratan rebels to expand their fighting numbers and steadily push back loyalist forces. While the heaviest combat was in the city center, control of the port became the key to the battle. Fortia, Misrata's representative to the NTC, explained its importance. "Keeping the port open is the only gate to the world and the only way to keep the city alive. ... If not, we'll have to surrender."¹⁴¹

The Port of Misrata is a large commercial seaport located on the western tip of the Gulf of Sidra.¹⁴² The port is approximately seven miles east of Misrata's center in

the neighborhood of Qasr Ahmad and is accessible by several roads, the most significant being the heavy transport road (also known as the Nak al-Theqeel Road) that runs to coastal highway. The port is roughly a mile north of Misrata's major industrial center. The state-owned Libyan Iron and Steel Company (LISCO) is headquartered there, along with a number of other factories and warehouses and a separate industrial port. The periphery of Misrata begins immediately south of the industrial area. Marshland and scattered farms reach twenty miles inland from the east of the coastal highway.

The NTC in Benghazi recognized the importance of preserving the rebellion's foothold in Misrata. General Ahmed al-Ghatrani, a senior rebel leader in Benghazi, described Misrata as "the key to western Libya." A fleet of merchant ships began to ferry weapons captured from regime arms depots in Cyrenaica to the besieged city in early March. The regime thwarted early attempts to establish a sealift by deploying several naval vessels to blockade the port. The loyalist ships retreated after coalition operations began, temporarily reopening the sea-lane.¹⁴³ They returned, however, on March 28 to prevent a convoy of rebel merchant vessels sailing from Benghazi from entering the harbor.¹⁴⁴ On March 28, the Coalition moved to reopen the Port of Misrata after it confirmed reports that the *Vittoria*, a small Libyan Coast Guard vessel, and two smaller boats were harassing the rebel vessels attempting to enter the port.¹⁴⁵ A U.S. P-3C Orion and an A-10 Thunderbolt, joined by the USS *Barry*, a guided-missile destroyer, responded to the attacks late in the evening. While the *Barry* directed the merchant vessels away from the area, the P-3C Orion opened fire on the *Vittoria* with two AGM-65F Maverick missiles, striking the vessel and forcing it to beach near the port.¹⁴⁶ The A-10 then engaged the two smaller boats, strafing them with its auto-cannon, destroying one and forcing the crew to abandon the other.¹⁴⁷ The attack lifted the blockade of the port and opened a lifeline to the rebels.¹⁴⁸

The sealift created an awkward predicament for NATO. The UN mandate charged the alliance with enforcing an arms embargo on Libya, and the intervention had been justified as a humanitarian mission to protect civilians against the regime.¹⁴⁹ Yet there was also a political and military necessity to strengthen the rebels and prevent Misrata from falling. These competing demands were characteristic of the larger debate among Western policymakers over whether to arm the rebels and the

appropriate level of support and coordination between the rebels and NATO. Initially, NATO was inconsistent on whether to enforce the arms embargo in full or to turn a blind eye to the sealift that provided military support the rebels, leading to considerable frustration among rebel leaders in Benghazi and Misrata.¹⁵⁰ Successful entry into the Port of Misrata for the rebel ships seemed to depend on the nationality of the NATO vessel inspecting their cargo. In one instance described by rebel captains, NATO warships stopped a convoy of five rebel ships carrying weapons, forcing two to turn back after being inspected but allowing the three others to pass without explanation.¹⁵¹ According to the rebels, France was more lenient than other countries, and French warships escorted rebel vessels into Misrata in late March. Turkey, however, was stricter in enforcing the embargo. On April 8, a Turkish warship inspected a rebel ship laden with weapons and, citing the arms embargo, told the captain to surrender the weapons or turn the ship back to Benghazi.¹⁵² Turkey's actions, which may have reflected Turkey's lagging support for the NTC, seemed inconsistent with other NATO members and stirred outrage among the rebels, causing General Younis to chastise Turkey and the alliance. "Whoever stops any support to Misrata is ... assisting the criminal regime that is carrying out genocide in Misrata. They should have been assisted to reach Misrata even if there were weapons."¹⁵³ With the Misratans undoubtedly in need of the weapons, French Defense Minister Gerard Longuet declared NATO would protect the rebel fleet from Qaddafi's naval forces.¹⁵⁴ Longuet proclaimed, "The boats of Benghazi will be able to ... free Misrata."¹⁵⁵ On April 13, Misrata's NTC representative, Fortia, met with Sarkozy and his advisors in Paris. According to Fortia, Sarkozy pledged more humanitarian supplies for Misrata and ongoing French support until Qaddafi's fall. After the meeting, Fortia advocated that France and Britain act outside the confines of NATO and arm the Misratan rebels. He also confirmed they were receiving arms from Qatar and "Europe."¹⁵⁶ By mid-April, the alliance was tacitly cooperating with the sealift and, according to *The New York Times*, the rebel fleet operated with NATO's "approval and support."¹⁵⁷ Rebel captains reported that allied warships and helicopters would only hail their vessels, allowing them to cross the Gulf of Sidra and make port without inspection.¹⁵⁸ NATO officials cryptically denied alliance warships were allowing the sealift to occur and insisted any arms shipments would be in violation of the arms embargo "irrespective" of whether they went to the loyalists or the rebels. NATO,

however, conditioned its enforcement of the arms embargo on whether it suspected the weapons "were likely to be used against innocent civilians."¹⁵⁹

After the Coalition opened the port, the sealift of military supplies to Misrata began in earnest.¹⁶⁰ The rebel fleet consisted of about two dozen fishing vessels, merchant ships, and tugboats that made the two hundred and fifty-nautical mile trip across the Gulf of Sidra from the Port of Benghazi. The arrival of small but steady shipments of assault rifles (an assortment of Kalashnikov variants and Belgian-made FN FALs), PKM and DShK machine guns, RPGs, and French-made MILAN anti-tank missiles, in addition to ammunition and artillery rounds significantly strengthened the Misratan rebels.¹⁶¹ Rebel logisticians and sea captains in a command center in Benghazi coordinated the purchase and movement of weapons with Misratan rebels by satellite phone. Some Misratans also privately chartered vessels to carry supplies purchased in Benghazi. According to *The New York Times*, the rebels acquired many of the weapons as part of a "buyback program."¹⁶² Through intermediaries, Misrata's wealthy residents financed the cost of the weapons purchased in Benghazi on the black market, which had emerged after the regime's armories across Cyrenaica were ransacked.¹⁶³ It became an expensive operation as wartime scarcity drove up demand. The cost of a single Kalashnikov rifle in Benghazi ran as high as \$2,500.¹⁶⁴

In addition to the black market, the NTC was the most important source of weapons and military equipment for Misrata. The Council sent weapons and military equipment to Misrata that had either been captured from regime stockpiles or delivered to Benghazi from Qatar.¹⁶⁵ Some of the rebel ships, as foreign journalists witnessed at the Port of Benghazi, carried military equipment marked as property of the Qatari Ministry of Defense.¹⁶⁶ Qatari-chartered ferries began to dock in Misrata on a near-daily basis, evacuating thousands of refugees and wounded fighters and delivered Qatari-flagged shipping containers of humanitarian aid and, quite likely, weapons.¹⁶⁷ Misratan commanders acknowledged in mid-April that at least four hundred Qatari-supplied assault rifles had already reached the city.¹⁶⁸ While earlier in the battle the rebels had to fight in shifts, share weapons, and fire sparingly, the sealift allowed the rebels to expand markedly their fighting numbers and combat power.¹⁶⁹

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V. THE REBEL BREAKOUT

In March and early April, the regime's main effort was to recapture the city center, but the sealift continued to undermine the loyalist strategy of starving the rebels of supplies.¹⁷⁰ The regime began making offensives to obstruct the sealift and the port by capturing roads that linked central Misrata, which would cut off the rebels in the city from the port.¹⁷¹ In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Saif al-Islam acknowledged the regime knew the rebels were using the port to bring in arms and that the sealift was challenging the regime's prospects of recapturing Misrata. He hinted that the regime should have been more aggressive during the first month of the siege in Misrata, which he said allowed the rebels to reinforce their positions and bring in supplies. In an attempt to justify the regime's latest offensives against the port and the artillery bombardment, he stated, "You want the Libyan government to sit and wait every day for the terrorists to get stronger? ... The army was in dialogue and in negotiation with those people for one month, trying to convince them to lay down arms and go back home. One month, we failed. And then, they used

the time to fortify their site. So you want us to repeat the same mistake again? Of course not."¹⁷² Regime spokesman Mussa Ibrahim declared, "We will not allow weapons and supplies to come through the sea port to the rebels. We have proven the rebels in Misrata have been gaining weapons from Benghazi, from Qatar, and [from] other locations ... in the last few weeks. We will not allow this."¹⁷³

In late April, ongoing NATO airstrikes and rebel gains in the city center and on Tripoli Street forced the regime to rethink its strategy.¹⁷⁴ After days of fierce fighting, the rebels finally reclaimed the eight-story Tamim Insurance Building, which had been the major redoubt for loyalist snipers, on April 21.¹⁷⁵ Capturing the city was becoming more unlikely and costly by the day for the regime. As the battle dragged on, Qaddafi's forces still enjoyed some freedom of movement behind the frontline and command and control, but airstrikes prevented the regime from massing the forces and heavy weaponry required for sustained and coordinated attacks, like those seen in Zawiyah and earlier in the conflict. The daily losses were slowly sapping the regime's

military strength and weakening the siege.¹⁷⁶ Further, the Misratans were being continuously resupplied and gaining strength through the sealift, unlike the rebels in Zawiyah and elsewhere who had slowly run out ammunition and resources until they could no longer resist. The regime's strategic imperative to recapture Misrata and secure Tripolitania remained, but the effort and resources the regime spent to maintain its ground in the city center became increasingly futile in light of the marginal gains and the rebels' ongoing ability to resupply from the port.

Libyan Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Kaim announced on April 22 that the government would suspend its operations in Misrata. Kaim acknowledged that the NATO airstrikes and the sealift had stymied efforts to recapture the city. "The tactic of the Libyan army is to have a surgical solution, but it doesn't work, with the air strikes it doesn't work," he said. Instead of using its own forces, Kaim declared that the regime would hand off the fight to the tribes that surround Misrata, including the Warfalla, the Tarhuna, the Zlitan, and the Tawargha.¹⁷⁷ Kaim claimed the tribes had pressured the regime to pull back from the battle and allow them to resolve it. The tribes would have two days to negotiate with the Misratan rebels, after which the regime would hold them responsible for retaking the city with their armed militias.¹⁷⁸

Qaddafi sought to use the acute tribal and political divisions that existed in Misrata to his advantage. After a major military revolt that occurred in the area in 1993, he held the tribes responsible for the behavior of their members and left local security up to them. While the NTC leaders in Benghazi typically dismissed the impact of tribalism on the rebellion, NTC Vice Chairman Abdel Hafiz Ghoga acknowledged that Qaddafi was trying to use the tribal rivalries around Misrata to his advantage. Yet he insisted the tribes would not fall for his tactics.¹⁷⁹

In many ways, the fighting at Misrata did play out along tribal and regional divisions. Qaddafi had fairly strong ties with the tribes around Misrata, which balanced his authority against the relatively detribalized Misratans and the city's influential families, who he never counted among his supporters. The Warfalla, whose principal city of Bani Walid is located just sixty miles southwest of Misrata, have historically had a rivalry with the Misratans, and tribal elders were supposedly angered over having lost access to the port for months.¹⁸⁰ Two units from Zlitan fought with the regime at Misrata, and rebel

commanders suggested there were "tribal sensitivities" with the Zlitan tribe when they later approached the city.¹⁸¹ The Tawargha tribe, a black Libyan tribe centered on the town of Tawargha twenty-five miles south of Misrata, were also loyal to the regime. There are long-standing animosities between the Misratans and the Tawarghans due to local land disputes and the racial tensions in Libya, which rumors of sub-Saharan mercenaries fighting on behalf of the regime had amplified.¹⁸² The rebels were also aware that Tawargha militias were fighting alongside loyalist troops in Misrata.¹⁸³ Ibrahim al-Halbous, a rebel field commander in southern Misrata, declared that if his men captured the city of Tawargha, they would expel the Tawarghans as a reprisal for their support for the regime, and Tawarghans living in the Misratan neighborhood of Ghoushi reportedly fled the area in fear of rebel retaliations.¹⁸⁴ Though these tribal elements were a factor in the region's security dynamics, the feasibility of the regime's plan to deploy tribal militias was questionable. Many of the nearby tribes, such as the Warfalla, were well represented in the regime's paramilitary forces. It was dubious to believe the tribal militias, if they existed, were willing or able to accomplish what the regime's forces could not.

Most of the loyalist forces in the city center began withdrawing from their positions under the cover of darkness on April 21.¹⁸⁵ Troops continued moving out of the city center and neighborhoods for several days, regrouping near the airport on the southern side of the coastal highway and the western suburbs.¹⁸⁶ As the loyalists pulled back, the rebels advanced into the city center and down Tripoli Street, clashing with loyalist troops serving as a rearguard under a hail of artillery fire.¹⁸⁷ A number of loyalist troops later captured in the city claimed their officers abandoned them and they had no received orders to retreat. Rebel roadblocks and advances cut off other pockets of soldiers.¹⁸⁸ The rebels had to clear out the remaining loyalist positions thoroughly, building by building.¹⁸⁹

Qaddafi's withdrawal from the city center was not a decisive end to the battle. The regime remained intent on recapturing Misrata, but it shifted its effort away from the city center and towards taking control of the port in order to cut off the rebels' lifeline.¹⁹⁰ Early in the morning on April 26, loyalist troops mounted a surprise assault on the port area under the cover of an artillery barrage. Approximately three hundred loyalist soldiers in armored vehicles and technicals advanced towards the port from the coastal plain and marshes

on Mistata's southern and southwestern approaches.¹⁹¹ Rebel commanders rushed reinforcements from across the city into positions near the transport roads and the LISCO terminal and industrial area, a mile south of the port complex. As the loyalists and rebels fought across the industrial area and southwest Misrata, rebel commanders on the ground alerted NATO to the attack.¹⁹² NATO responded late in the day with several warplanes that broke up the loyalist attack with airstrikes.¹⁹³ The alliance claimed the subsequent airstrikes destroyed a dozen loyalist military vehicles and technicals, while the rebels put the loyalist losses at thirty-seven vehicles.¹⁹⁴ Due likely to confusion over the battle lines caused by the loyalist attack, the next day the first errant NATO airstrike in Misrata occurred when two bombs were dropped on a rebel position in a factory in the industrial area, killing twelve fighters and wounding five.¹⁹⁵

The regime's first attempt to close the port by sea since the Coalition had lifted the blockade in late March came three days after the failed loyalist ground assault. On April 29, loyalist troops in four rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs) laid sea-mines along the approaches to Misrata's harbor to disrupt the flow of weapons into the city. A French maritime patrol aircraft off the Libyan coast sighted the boats and relayed the intelligence to the French frigate *Courbet*, which was in the immediate vicinity but not operating under NATO. The *Courbet* moved in and fired on the RHIBs, sinking one and causing the others to flee.¹⁹⁶ The loyalists managed to lay three sea-mines haphazardly, prompting rebel officials to close the port as NATO mine-hunters HMS *Brocklesby*, HNLMS *Haarlem*, and BNS *Narcis* arrived to clear the area.¹⁹⁷ The warships found and destroyed two mines moored to the seabed, but they were unable to locate the third, which had drifted free.¹⁹⁸ Following the mining operation, Kaim declared the port of Misrata closed and vowed that the regime's forces would sink any foreign ship that attempted to enter, and loyalist military officers publicly vowed to do whatever necessary to block access to Misrata by sea.¹⁹⁹ NATO officials claimed the port was safe in spite of the loose mine, but rebels indicated that the threat kept the port closed.²⁰⁰ The loose third mine disrupted port activities for several days until the *Brocklesby* found and destroyed it on May 5.²⁰¹ More menacing than the sea-mines, loyalists stepped up the artillery bombardment of the port complex to deter ships from entering the harbor. The accuracy of the regime's rockets and mortars was poor and proved ineffective at shuttering the port. However, the continuous bombardment took a horrific toll on civilians and rebels inside the city, killing and

wounding dozens on a near daily basis.²⁰² The regime also fired rockets that scattered anti-tank mines around the port, in addition to the cluster munitions fired on the city since mid-April.²⁰³ Continuing its attempts by sea, the regime launched a second maritime attack against the port on May 12 with a number of RHIBs filled with loyalist troops. The HMCS *Charlottetown*, the HMS *Liverpool*, and the *Courbet*, which were operating close to the harbor of Misrata, intercepted the boats. Covering the RHIBs' retreat, loyalist troops on the shore opened fire on the warships with anti-aircraft cannons and artillery. The coalition warships returned fire with their main guns, silencing the loyalist positions and destroying at least one rocket launcher.²⁰⁴

The regime's most sophisticated and disturbing maritime action occurred on May 17. A NATO warship and helicopter intercepted two RHIBs headed towards Misrata from the Zlitan area. After being spotted, one of the boats fled, but the other was suspiciously left abandoned. Upon inspection, NATO discovered the RHIB had two human mannequins posed as the crew and was packed with approximately 2,200 pounds of SEMTEX-H plastic explosives.²⁰⁵ It was a sophisticated plan and demonstrated that the regime, while degraded, still had surprising capabilities under its sleeve. Loyalists likely planned to abandon the boat in the waters off Misrata, which would inevitably lure in a NATO warship and then remotely detonate the explosives.²⁰⁶ Presumably, the attack would have caused other alliance vessels around Misrata's harbor to take more precautions and pull farther away from the coastline, giving loyalists freer rein to contest the port. According to a NATO official, the incident, along with the previous sea attacks, represented "a serious change of tactics by the pro-Qaddafi forces and clearly demonstrates their intent to use their naval assets and their naval knowledge. It also demonstrates that pro-Qaddafi forces have the will and desire to strike NATO vessels."²⁰⁷ The escalating maritime threat posed by loyalist forces prompted a "direct response" from NATO.²⁰⁸ Three days after the discovery of the explosive-laden RHIB, the alliance retaliated with a broad attack on the Libyan Navy, destroying eight naval vessels docked in Al-Khums, Tripoli, and Sirte, in addition to an RHIB maintenance facility in Al-Khums directly linked to the loyalist sea operations at Misrata.²⁰⁹

The regime's assaults on the port by ground and sea proved to be its final attempt to turn the tide of the battle. Loyalist forces incurred heavy losses from rebel

counterattacks and NATO airstrikes after pulling out of the city center and failing to cut the rebel supply line. The fighting on the ground shifted to Misrata's western and southwestern suburbs as the rebels began to break out of the siege in early May.²¹⁰ NATO stepped up its airstrikes around Misrata, destroying thirty targets around the city in just over a week, including tanks, artillery pieces, armored vehicles and technicals.²¹¹ The rebels advanced to the southern side of the coastal highway for the first time since early March. After several days of fighting, the rebels seized the Misrata airport on May 11, overrunning the loyalist's principal command center.²¹² To the west, rebels also drove loyalist troops several miles to the fringes of Dafaniya, a small farming town along the coastal highway. The rebels slowly pushed loyalist artillery out of range of the port and city center, liberating Misrata from constant shelling.²¹³ The regime conducted a general withdrawal from the Misrata area that it completed around May 15, ending the three-month siege.

Rebel officials estimated that one thousand, five hundred rebels and civilians were killed and five thousand wounded during the Battle of Misrata.²¹⁴ Precise loyalist casualties are unknown; the rebels provided a reasonable estimate of two thousand loyalist casualties. By June, gravediggers in Misrata had buried five hundred and forty-five loyalist soldiers killed in the battle and rebels had taken two hundred and thirty loyalists prisoner.²¹⁵ The regime likely lost between one hundred and two hundred pieces of heavy military equipment during the battle, including approximately fifty main battle tanks.²¹⁶ At the height of the battle in March and April, an estimated 100,000 Misratans fled their homes—mainly from the southern and western neighborhoods—to safer locations in the northern part of the city, while others became trapped behind loyalist lines.²¹⁷ The battle heavily damaged Misrata, especially in the city center and Tripoli Street.

The rebel breakout opened the possibility of an advance up the coast towards Tripoli. The loyalist forces pulled back to positions to the west and southwest of the city to block any rebel advances out of Misrata. Qaddafi's troops withdrew into territory that was friendly to the regime, assuming defensive positions east of Zlitan between the villages of Namiah and Dafniyah, where farmland divided the terrain into easily defensible hedgerows and villages that provided areas to hide heavy equipment from the NATO warplanes pounding the loyalist lines. It appears that the bulk of the paramilitary units engaged at Misrata, including the Khamis Brigade, were heavily

engaged on the Zlitan front to protect Tripoli, while militia and other units defended Tawargha and Bani Walid.²¹⁸ The subsequent rebel offensive stalled around Dafniya and took heavy casualties from June until August from loyalist artillery and counterattacks.²¹⁹ According to hospital records in Misrata, more than one hundred and sixty-five rebels were killed and seven hundred wounded in June alone, mostly along the Zlitan front.²²⁰

After the rebel breakout from Misrata in May and June, there appeared to be growing discord between the Misrata Military Council and the National Transitional Council.²²¹ The NTC and its military leaders ostensibly headed all rebel political and military matters, but the Misrata Military Council operated with a degree of independence, even claiming to be in direct negotiations with France for weapons in early July.²²² The Misratan rebels seemed to operate only in conjunction with the National Liberation Army, the military under the NTC based in Cyrenaica, rather than under any formal chain of command.

In late July, the leaders of the Misrata Military Council flew to Paris to meet with Sarkozy and senior French officials at Élysée Palace in Paris to discuss the military situation as a stalemate appeared to have settled across the country. The rebel delegation included General Zarmouh, Colonel Betal Mal and Colonel Ahmed Hashem, and Suleiman Fortia. Senior generals and NTC officials from Benghazi were noticeably absent, suggesting the Misratans were conducting their affairs independently.²²³ They met with Sarkozy, Lieutenant-General Benoît Puga, head of the Directorate of Military Intelligence and a senior military advisor to Sarkozy, and Bernard-Henri Lévy. Sarkozy and the French were frustrated with the overall campaign's lack of progress and concerned that the conflict would drag on. The rebel officers laid out an ambitious strategy for a gradual offensive up the coastal highway from Misrata to the capital, pushing back the loyalist forces dug in at Zlitan, through Al-Khums and other regime-friendly towns along the one hundred and fifteen-mile route.²²⁴ According to Lévy, the Misratans explained to Sarkozy that the "keys to Tripoli are in Misrata."²²⁵ They intended to coordinate the offensive from Misrata with the rebels in the Nafusa Mountains who would attack down onto the Jafara Plain on Tripoli's western flank towards Zawiyah and Gharyan. The offensives would encircle Tripoli and isolate the regime from areas of support in Fezzan and Sirte. Fortia and the officers were confident that once their forces arrived on the outskirts

of Tripoli, rebels within the city would rise up and the regime would collapse, sparing the rebels a lengthy and bloody siege of the capital. The rebels touted their forces' battle experience and hard-earned victory over Qaddafi's forces at Misrata, in contrast with the rebels in Cyrenaica, who had been locked in a stalemate with loyalist troops at Brega for months.²²⁶

In addition to increased air cover from NATO warplanes, the Misratan delegation asked the French for heavy weapons and other military aid. It was a signal that the seahift of Qatari and captured loyalist weapons from the NTC had become insufficient, possibly because the rebels in Benghazi were hoarding weapons.²²⁷ The French were reluctant to be seen directly passing weapons to the rebels. Fortia hinted that the French agreed to assist them in procuring weapons from "Arab countries," almost certainly Qatar, which continued to act as an arms intermediary for the West.²²⁸ Eager to progress towards ending the war, Sarkozy and French officials received the Misrata offensive positively.²²⁹ In the weeks ahead, NATO and the Misrata Military Council increased their offensive against Qaddafi's forces at Zlitan, and Qatari planes began flights into the Misrata Airport delivering weapons and ammunition directly to the Misratans.²³⁰

Negotiations

The months of largely stagnant battle lines prompted actors on all sides to begin discussing the possibility of negotiating an end to the conflict. However, the negotiations with the regime never made progress, as NATO and the NTC both had inflexible positions. NATO and the NTC demanded that much of the regime's senior leadership leave the government but refused to provide any kind of reassurance that they would not be prosecuted. The rallying cry of "Qaddafi must go" appeared to include the dictator's sons – most notably Saif-al Islam, Khamis, and Mutassim – who held key political and military leadership positions. This stance appeared to be a precondition to negotiations with the regime and significantly limited the extent of discourse. Furthermore, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Qaddafi, Saif al-Islam, and intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi on June 27, potentially limiting their movement outside Libya.

The regime was also unlikely to accept these demands as long they managed to cling to power in Tripolitania. However, the international intervention on March 19 prevented Qaddafi's forces from retaking Benghazi

and thwarted the recapture Misrata over the next two months sealed Qaddafi's fate. Qaddafi's best prospect for remaining in power was to continue fighting and stalemate the situation on the ground in the hope NATO would lose the political will to remain actively involved. Until the rebels seized Tripoli on August 20, the regime appeared capable of disrupting serious rebel advances nationwide and did not face a looming threat to Tripoli.

The first reported diplomatic efforts occurred in early April when regime officials proposed two different plans for a settlement. The first consisted of Qaddafi stepping aside and having Saif al-Islam preside over a transitional government. Some reports indicate that this proposal split Qaddafi's sons; Saif al-Islam and Saadi supported it while Mutassim and Khamis opposed it.²³¹ The second, introduced by regime Prime Minister Abdul Ati Obeidi, proposed a partition of Libya that allowed Qaddafi to remain in power in Tripolitania and Fezzan while the rebels ruled Cyrenaica.²³² Neither of these efforts gained traction with the NATO allies or the rebels.

In May, South African President Jacob Zuma made the second initiative on behalf of the African Union, which developed a so-called "roadmap" that the regime quickly embraced. The plan featured four parts: a ceasefire, cooperation from the regime to guarantee safe passage for humanitarian aid, protection of foreign migrant works, and a dialogue between the two sides during a transition to a more democratic form of governance.²³³ Though Qaddafi quickly accepted the proposal, Zuma's plan was unacceptable for the rebels and the international coalition because it called for NATO airstrikes to cease prior to negotiations and allowed elements of the regime to remain in power.²³⁴ Zuma traveled to Libya on May 30 and met with Qaddafi for several hours but made no headway in convincing the Libyan leader to step down. The lack of progress in this meeting was a significant setback for negotiations in light of the prominent role Qaddafi had within the AU.

As the conflict dragged on, Qaddafi's government became further diplomatically isolated as countries that had initially resisted the intervention switched sides and echoed calls for him to step down. Russia has long-standing political, military and economic ties to the Qaddafi regime that stretch back to the Cold War, when Qaddafi aligned Libya with the Soviet Union shortly after coming to power. Libya became less dependent on Russia after it shed its pariah-state status in 2003 and

opened up military and economic relations with Europe and the United States. Russia remained an important, however, and had recently signed four billion dollar arms contract with the regime and had several agreements on developing and exploring Libya's oil fields. Despite these ties, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had agreed to U.S. and European pressure to not veto the UN Security Council resolution authorizing military action against Libya in March. Although Russian officials quickly condemned the coalition military campaign after it began and continued to publicly criticize it, Medvedev remained tacitly cooperative with the United States and allies. As the conflict settled into a stalemate after the first two months, the United States sought Russia's cooperation and to leverage its relationship with Qaddafi to persuade him to leave power. In late May, Obama and Medvedev met on the sidelines of the G-8 summit in France. The two leaders discussed Russia's policy towards Libya amongst a host of U.S.-Russia issues, with Obama seemingly leveraging continued cooperation on top priorities for Medvedev such as Russian entry into the World Trade Organization and U.S. missile defenses in Eastern Europe.²³⁵ At the end of the summit, Medvedev announced a shift Russia's position and explicitly called for Qaddafi to leave power. He dispatched Russia's special envoy for the Middle East, Mikhail Margelov, to Libya in order to convince Qaddafi to leave power.²³⁶ In early June, Margelov met with NTC representatives in Benghazi and regime officials in Tripoli, but talks stalled over Russian demands that Qaddafi leave power.²³⁷ The Russians also pursued a second, more curious negotiating channel. The president of the World Chess Federation Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, also a Russian national, served as an informal Russian envoy. Ilyumzhinov met with Qaddafi in Tripoli twice, on June 12 and July 4, seemingly to convey the Russian position that Qaddafi step-down. Neither meeting was productive as Qaddafi reiterated his intent to remain in Libya.²³⁸

The possibility for a diplomatic course emerged again in early July, when regime officials reached out to Russian and European officials to open up negotiations.²³⁹ Although little was reported about the content of these discussions, U.S. and European defense officials made statements later that month suggesting that the regime was exploring ways Qaddafi could leave power but remain in Libya. U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, British Foreign Minister Hague, and French Foreign Minister Juppé all said that they supported letting the Libyan people decide Qaddafi's future. It was a small change, if any, in their policies that Qaddafi must leave Libya if he abdicated

power.²⁴⁰ The NTC appeared tentatively to accept this possibility when Jalil made a statement on July 24 that "Qaddafi can stay in Libya but it will have conditions. We will decide where he stays and who watches him."²⁴¹ Though these comments were vague enough to encompass a broad array of outcomes for the Libyan dictator's future – ranging from a comfortable life among his tribesman to incarceration in a rebel prison – it was a marked shift from the previous insistence that "Qaddafi must go."

The impending September deadline that marked the end of NATO's planned involvement in Libya drove, in part, the urgency to bring about a decisive end to the conflict—through either military victory or diplomatic settlement. At the beginning of June, NATO agreed to extend its military commitment until September 27; however, no new countries agreed to support the conflict and many existing participants were beginning to draw down their forces due to military and fiscal strain.²⁴² Incoming U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta estimated on July 11 that some NATO countries would see its forces "exhausted" within 90 days.²⁴³ Norway withdrew its six F-16s from the mission on August 1, after flying nearly 600 missions and dropping 569 bombs.²⁴⁴ Italy withdrew its aircraft carrier and another one of its ships to reduce costs due to recent austerity cuts in late July.²⁴⁵ While NATO countries passed the previous extension with relative ease, the mounting financial costs and military strains of the deployments, felt especially on the smaller contributors such as Norway, only added to the growing impatience of each country's leaders and legislatures for the conflict to conclude.

The negotiation efforts ultimately stalled when nearly a month before the September deadline, rebels based out of the Nafusa Mountains marched into Tripoli on August 20 after seizing Zawiyah days earlier. These Nafusa rebels, aided by fighters from Misrata, took control of much of the capital and brought about the regime's collapse. For NATO, even the fall of Tripoli did not immediately reduce the need for its active military involvement, and airstrikes continued against the remaining loyalist strongholds across the country.

This series concludes with Part Four: The Tide Turns, which details the fighting in western Libya that culminated in the rebel seizure of Tripoli in August. This final installment in the series concludes with discussion of the most pressing issues facing Libya in the aftermath of the regime's collapse.

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primarily comprised of former religious prisoners of Qaddafi's Abu Salim prison. Tarhouni specified the Brigade murdered Younis to avenge his suppression of religious groups while he was Qaddafi's interior minister. The Obaida Ibn Jarrah Brigade is reportedly responsible for rebel internal security but is not a member of the Union of Revolutionary Forces, an organization established on July 13 to provide a unified command structure for volunteer rebel brigades. Graeme Smith, "General's family drives wedge of suspicion into Libya's rebellion; Relatives reveal to Graeme Smith why they don't think Younis was killed in an ambush," *The Globe and Mail*, August 3, 2011. Dan Rivers, "Libyan Rebel Commander Killed; Hitting the Debt Ceiling; Political Ramifications of Debt Crisis; Doctors Treat Somalia's Malnourished," CNN International, July 29, 2011. Rami Al-Shaheibi and Hadeel Al-Shalchi, "Witnesses: Commander killed by fellow Libya rebels," Associated Press, July 29, 2011. "News Analysis: Libyan opposition's internal strife embarrasses West," Xinhua News, August 4, 2011. Rania El Gamal, "Libyan rebel commander killed by allied militia," Reuters, July 30, 2011. "Gadhafi regime says it is in contact with Libya rebels," Agence France Presse, July 31, 2011. Adrian Blomfield, "Rebels face enemy within; The admission that a leading commander was assassinated by Islamist allies threatens to undermine the Libyan opposition's credibility," *The Telegraph*, July 31, 2011.

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