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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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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 seafight, 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 Hefatar.
  - The dynamics among the three men were complex from the beginning. Younis emerged as the military chief of staff while Hefatar'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 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.