

SEPTEMBER 2011

ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION

ROOTS OF REBELLION

PART I



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PART 1

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART I - ROOTS OF REBELLION | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | SEPTEMBER 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	06
GLOSSARY	10
I. INTRODUCTION	13
II. BACKGROUND ON LIBYA.....	14
III. THE ARAB SPRING AND THE LIBYAN REBELLION.....	24
IV. UNREST SPREADS TO TRIPOLI.....	29
V. THE BATTLE OF ZAWIYAH	30
NOTES.....	35
MAPS	
MAP OF LIBYA	12
MAP OF 1ST BATTLE FOR CYRENAICA	26
MAP OF BATTLE OF ZAWIYAH	32

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART 1 - ROOTS OF REBELLION | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | SEPTEMBER 2011

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. This first installment concludes with the spread of unrest to western Libya and the regime's crackdowns in Tripoli and Zawiyah.

LIBYA'S PHYSICAL AND HUMAN TERRAIN

- Owing to the Sahara's uninhabitable terrain, more than 90 percent of Libya's six million people live along the Mediterranean coast, with the remaining population scattered among the several oases communities deep in the country's interior.
- Libya has traditionally been divided into three distinct regions: Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the northwest, and Fezzan in the southwest.
- Historical enmity between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, dominated by their respective capital cities of Benghazi and Tripoli, has grown since independence in 1951 as both regions struggled for control of national leadership. Cyrenaica served as the seat of power for the Sanusi monarch King Idris I, who ruled Libya from its independence in 1951 to 1969, when Qaddafi seized power in a military coup.
- Tribes and the tribal system play a significant role in Libyan politics and society. There are about 140 tribes in Libya, but only 30 tribes or so carry significant political influence.
- While tribes are no longer unitary political actors or capable of systematic organization, they are perhaps the most potent political force in the country besides the regime.
- Qaddafi has utilized the tribal system as a means of building political support, reinforcing loyalties, and awarding patronage.
- Members of certain western tribes that closely aligned with Qaddafi were awarded and empowered through high-ranking positions in the government and security forces. Most of the eastern tribes, especially those previously aligned with the Sanusi, and rival elements in the west such as the Berbers, were all but excluded from the regime.

THE QADDAFI REGIME

- In September 1969, Qaddafi, a 27-year-old captain in the Libyan Air Force, and his cohorts in the Free Officers Union staged a successful military coup against Idris.
- Qaddafi assumed leadership of the country at the head of the Revolutionary Command Council composed of his fellow military officers. He also shifted the country's political and economic power away from the Sanusi base in Cyrenaica and westwards to Tripolitania. There, Qaddafi built his base of support among the tribes and elite of Tripolitania and Fezzan that had been neglected under the Sanusi.
- For much of Qaddafi's reign, he relied on a highly-personalized network of advisors and associates to run the regime and ensure the loyalty of those around him. The network consisted of extended family members, Qadadfa tribesmen, members of other loyal tribes, a handful of trusted military officers and old friends from the Free Officers Union.
- Qaddafi took deliberate precautions to protect his rule from the military by keeping it relatively small, poorly trained, and ill-equipped so it could not stage a coup.
 - To counterbalance the threat of the military, Qaddafi divested strength from the military and built smaller, separate paramilitary forces were more manageable and loyal than the regular military. He also created overlapping chains of command and prevented the aggregation of military and paramilitary units into

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART 1 - ROOTS OF REBELLION | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | SEPTEMBER 2011

division and corps formations, limiting force levels to the brigade or battalion size.

- As of 2010, the Libyan Armed Forces had approximately 76,000 personnel: roughly 50,000 in the Army, 18,000 in the Air Force, and 8,000 in the Navy.

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE LIBYAN REBELLION

- The protests that precipitated the Libyan revolution largely took place during mid-February in Cyrenaica. The epicenter of the revolt was in Benghazi—the unofficial capital of Cyrenaica—though protests quickly spread to the surrounding area.
- Although the first indications of unrest appeared in early February, they escalated with large-scale protests, known as the Day of Rage, on February 17, 2011, a date historically associated with opposition to the regime. Initially, police and paramilitary forces employed brutal but non-lethal tactics to disrupt the protests; however, security forces began firing live ammunition on February 17, killing more than 150 people over the next three days. Protesters retaliated by attacking Benghazi's military barracks, known to local residents as the Katiba, on February 18. The assault proved to be the turning point of the early revolts, as protesters ultimately overran the compound and forced the pro-Qaddafi forces to withdraw.
- Amidst this turmoil, Abdel Fattah Younis, the Libyan Interior Minister and former Army officer who participated in Qaddafi's 1969 coup, defected from the Qaddafi regime to the opposition. This, along with several other high-profile defections, degraded the regime's military capabilities in Cyrenaica and gave the burgeoning rebel movement propaganda victories.
- Violent protests erupted in the towns of al-Bayda, Derna, and Tobruk concurrently with those in Benghazi, and security forces quickly resorted to firing live ammunition.
- Protests reached Tripoli on February 20, 2011, but the regime moved quickly to silence the dissent. Over the next several days, loyalist forces continued to crack down on scattered protests in the capital as demonstrators made several attempts to rally.
- Although Qaddafi secured the capital, he had lost control over almost all of Cyrenaica by February 22. In Tripolitania, unrest had spread to the major coastal cities of Misrata and Zawiyah, and revolts occurred in Berber towns across the Nafusa Mountains.

THE FIRST BATTLE FOR CYRENAICA

- The protesters in Cyrenaica quickly armed themselves to fight Qaddafi's forces in what would become one of the three theaters of battle throughout the conflict.
- Fighting in eastern Libya dominated the early part of the conflict due to the two dramatic rebel advances and retreats along the coast in February and March 2011.
- After seizing Benghazi, rebel forces advanced south and clashed with regime forces in Brega about 125 miles south of Benghazi along the coastal highway. Brega is strategically important because it contains the second largest oil and natural gas refinery in Libya.
- Brega fell to the opposition movement on February 20 when anti-Qaddafi forces assumed control of the refinery, despite an attempt by loyalist forces to retake the town in early March.
- The rebel victory at Brega paved the way for an advance seventy miles further west into the towns of Ras Lanuf and Bin Jawad in early March. By mid-March, this push was repelled by loyalist forces and the rebels retreated to Brega and ultimately to Ajdabiya.
- The retreat to Ajdabiya was a moment of great desperation for the rebels due to the town's strategic location along a highway that offered direct access to the rebel capital of Benghazi.
- Qaddafi forces launched an assault on Ajdabiya on March 15, 2011, and the city fell within days. By March 19, Qaddafi forces had reached the outskirts of Benghazi. Qaddafi's assault on Benghazi was short-lived. French

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART 1 - ROOTS OF REBELLION | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | SEPTEMBER 2011

warplanes began flying sorties over Benghazi the morning of March 19 as part of the international intervention authorized two days earlier by United Nations Security Resolution 1973, which called for a no-fly zone over Libya and the use of “all necessary means ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack.”

- Loyalist forces retreated to Ajdabiya the following day, in what began a week-long battle as the rebels regained momentum and launched a second push west.

FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL TRANSITIONAL COUNCIL

- The opposition movement in eastern Libya worked quickly to develop basic political leadership. Councils, often staffed by local educated professionals, formed in the aftermath of protests to provide basic services.
- By late February, an overarching governing council took shape, and on February 26, former Libyan Justice Minister Mustafa Abdel Jalil announced that a transitional government had been formed.
- This body, the National Transitional Council (NTC), was made up of former regime officials and educated Libyan expatriates, as well as representatives from city councils in Cyrenaica and rebel-held cities in the west.
- The first official meeting of the NTC was on March 5 in Benghazi, where several key leadership positions were announced. Jalil was named the chairman of the council and two former regime officials, Mahmood Jibril and Ali Al Issawi, were appointed to be foreign affairs representatives and tasked with securing international support for the burgeoning resistance movement.
- The unity the rebels fostered in Benghazi in the first month of the uprising would be tested in the coming months as the conflict escalated and prompted foreign intervention. Though a collective opposition to Qaddafi unified the rebels, the degree to which they were capable of overcoming their own internal divisions as well as reconciling with former regime supporters in western Libya to fashion a stable and democratic government was unclear.

THE BATTLE OF ZAWIYAH

- As rebel and loyalist forces battled in eastern Libya, protests in Zawiyah also escalated into a full-scale rebellion in late February and early March.
- Zawiyah was strategically important for the regime to keep under its control not only because of its proximity to Tripoli (only thirty miles west of the capital) but also because of its port facilities and oil refinery.
- While Qaddafi mobilized his security forces against the rebellion, the rebels formed the twelve-man Zawiyah Military Council of defected army officers, commanded by Colonel Hussein Darbouk, to oversee the city's defense.
- Yet, the officers in Zawiyah faced weapons shortages that were soon depleted, leading to the collapse of the city's defenses by early March. Loyalist forces, reinforced by the arrival of the Khamis Brigade on March 4, 2011, launched a complex assault on Zawiyah that left them in firm control of the city by March 11.
- During the two weeks of the Battle of Zawiyah, more than two hundred rebels and civilians were reportedly killed and hundreds more wounded. Loyalist troops suffered at least several dozen casualties.
- The battle was a harbinger of the fierce fighting to come in Misrata and other cities. Zawiyah remained under the regime's control until August 13, 2011, when rebels rapidly advanced out of the Nafusa Mountains and attacked the city and other key points on the Jafara Plain.

GLOSSARY

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART 1 - ROOTS OF REBELLION | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | SEPTEMBER 2011

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.

GLOSSARY

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION | PART 1 - ROOTS OF REBELLION | ANTHONY BELL & DAVID WITTER | SEPTEMBER 2011

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.



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I. INTRODUCTION

In February 2011, major demonstrations erupted in Libya against the regime of Muammar Qaddafi amid a wave of popular protests sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. Regime security forces led a brutal crackdown on protesters and sparked an armed resistance throughout the eastern half of the country and several cities in the west. This rebellion unfolded into a broader conflict when Qaddafi ordered a full-scale offensive against rebel-held areas. As the violence escalated, the United States and its principal European allies denounced Qaddafi, sanctioned his regime, and called for his removal from power. These steps did not prevent loyalist forces from recapturing lost territory and advancing towards the rebel capital of Benghazi. Western policymakers became concerned about the potential carnage Qaddafi would soon inflict on the Libyan people. Qaddafi's security forces were poised to crush the rebellion on March 19 when an international coalition led by the United States, Britain, and France, intervened to protect Libyans facing immediate danger.

The Libyan revolution was fought simultaneously along different fronts, but the key areas of combat changed several times during the course of the war. The conflict was initially centered in eastern Libya, the heart of the

rebellion, where loyalist and rebel forces fought running battles up and down the coastline throughout March. Increased NATO airstrikes on regime ground forces and inconclusive rebel ground assaults created a months-long standoff at the city of Brega. The fighting then shifted to western Libya where loyalist forces besieged the rebel-held city of Misrata, a strategically vital port. In perhaps most decisive battle of the war, rebels and allied warplanes forced Qaddafi's forces to abandon the siege in May after two months of fierce urban combat. Although the rebels held a foothold in western Libya, regime forces prevented the Misratan rebels from making further gains. The key terrain moved to the Nafusa Mountains near the Tunisian border. Rebels consolidated their control of the mountains in June after months of indecisive fighting for control of population centers and crucial supply routes. These rebels spearheaded a rapid advance towards Tripoli in August as the loyalist forces in front of them crumbled. Nearly six months after the first protests began, Qaddafi's government collapsed as the rebels swept into Tripoli.

The international intervention's eventual outcome belies poorly conceived strategic objectives. Soon after the fighting started, U.S. and European leaders called

for Qaddafi to leave power but limited their involvement to a short term UN-mandated air campaign that sought to protect civilians and enforce a no-fly zone over Libya. The mission's ambiguous political and military objectives were complicated by the realization that the allies could only succeed by removing Qaddafi from power. The limited humanitarian intervention thus evolved into one of regime change, but this shift was not accompanied by a decisive use of force. With no vital national security interests at stake and constrained by domestic politics, the United States decided to limit its combat participation after leading the opening weeks of the intervention. Leadership of the operation was handed off to NATO allies, primarily Britain and France. The war dragged on from weeks into months; limited military capabilities hindered the NATO bombing campaign while the disorganized rebels struggled to make gains against Qaddafi's troops on the ground. Enthusiasm among supporting coalition members waned as the campaign dragged on and domestic pressures to conclude the conflict mounted. The war culminated when the international coalition stepped up its already considerable military and political support to the rebels for an offensive on the regime's capital of Tripoli.

At the time of publication, the situation on the ground following the fall of the regime is precarious and Libya's long-term future far from certain. The rebels continue to fight for control of several loyalist strongholds. Qaddafi, his sons, and much of the regime's senior leadership remain at large. Libya's new government, the rebel National Transitional Council, is far from a capable government-in-waiting. Despite receiving international recognition and support, the NTC is only a transitional body that has not yet articulated a clear roadmap for Libya's political future. The NTC itself is fraught with internal divisions and possesses an unclear decision-making structure. It has little institutional capacity to carry out policies and has not exercised control over the numerous armed rebel factions. Lastly, the NTC's leaders are self-selected and it is dominated by officials from eastern Libya, giving it tenuous political legitimacy over the western half of the country.

While Qaddafi has been removed from power, it is too early for the United States and its allies to declare the intervention in Libya a success. Serious challenges lay ahead in building a stable democracy. Security in Libya is disorganized and factional as the NTC struggles to incorporate disparate rebel militias and defected regime

security forces into a coherent chain of command. No civil society existed under Qaddafi, and there are no national political parties to facilitate the transition to democracy. The state-dominated and oil-driven economy is paralyzed and bordering on collapse in the absence of a government. Further, Libya is rife with regional and tribal animosities that will complicate the political process. The rebellion was strongest in eastern Libya, long a bastion of anti-Qaddafi sentiment, and was far weaker in western Libya where the regime had its base of support. Libya's internal cleavages have often been downplayed by rebel leaders and Western officials, fearful that signs of regionalism or tribalism would undermine their support and credibility. Yet these dimensions shaped the rebellion and will define the political landscape as groups vie to fill the power vacuum.

This report is the first installment of a four-part series on the war in Libya, which 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, the formation of the NTC, and the regime's crackdowns in Tripoli and Zawiyah.

II. BACKGROUND ON LIBYA

Libya is located in North Africa along the Mediterranean Coast. The country occupies a strategic location along Africa's northern rim, sharing extensive borders with Egypt and Sudan to the east, Tunisia and Algeria to the west, and Chad and Niger to the south. With an area of roughly 680,000 square miles, Libya is the fourth largest country in Africa and the seventeenth largest in the world. Apart from narrow strips of cultivable land along the Mediterranean coastline, the arid sands of the Sahara Desert cover more than 95 percent of the country. Owing to the Sahara's uninhabitable terrain, more than 90 percent of Libya's six million people live along the Mediterranean coast, with the remaining population scattered among the several oases communities deep in the country's interior.¹

Libya has traditionally been divided into three distinct regions: Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the northwest, and Fezzan in the southwest. While formal borders between the regions did not exist until the Italian colonial area, the vast stretches of desert between them inhibited integration for centuries. Thus the three regions, relatively autonomous from one another, developed separate political and economic identities. Historical enmity between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, dominated by their respective capital cities of Benghazi and Tripoli, has grown since independence in 1951 as both regions struggled for control of national leadership. Fezzan retained its distinct political identity but its remoteness and sparse population has limited its relevance in the rivalry. Despite increasing political and economic centralization between the territories that began under Ottoman rule and continued under Qaddafi, regionalism remains a defining feature of Libyan politics.

The Roots of Rebellion

The stark contrast between the strength of the rebellion in Cyrenaica and the relative degree of loyalty to the regime across much of Tripolitania and Fezzan reveal the underlying political dynamics that have shaped the conflict in Libya. Cyrenaica served as the seat of power for the Sanusi monarch King Idris I, who ruled Libya from its independence in 1951 to 1969, when Qaddafi seized power in a military coup. The Sanusi originated as an Islamic Sufi order established near Mecca in 1837 by the Algerian religious scholar Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi, known traditionally as the Grand Sanusi.² The Sanusi Order emphasized the basic tenets of Islamic practice and was considered exceptionally orthodox compared to other Sufi orders of the time, but less puritan than the Wahhabi movement that was developing simultaneously on the Arabian Peninsula.³ Due to regional political pressures, the Grand Sanusi and his followers left Arabia and settled in Cyrenaica in 1843—then a backwater province of the Ottoman Empire—and began proselytizing to the region's Bedouin tribes. The Order gradually embedded itself into the region's tribal system through an intricate network of religious lodges and successful missionary efforts. The Sanusi became the *de facto* political authority of the Cyrenaican interior, providing arbitration of inter-tribal disputes and managing the tribes' relations with the Ottoman administration in Benghazi and Tripoli.⁴

As Britain and France gradually expanded their empires into the region during the nineteenth century, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan came to be the last remaining provinces of the Ottoman Empire in North Africa. In 1911, Italy launched a military invasion of Libya in an effort to seize and colonize the Ottoman provinces. The Ottomans surrendered the three provinces to Italy in 1912, but tribal resistance to the Italian occupation remained strong across the regions. By 1914, the Italians subdued the tribal resistance in Tripolitania and Fezzan. The Sanusi, leading the Cyrenaican tribes, managed to hold out until the outbreak of World War I, after which the Italians were forced to pare down their military presence in Libya to a few garrison cities in Tripolitania and Fezzan, providing Cyrenaica a relative degree of autonomy.⁵ Eventually, the costs of the Great War had a corrosive effect on the Italian polity and military, wearing down interest in renewing the war effort for Cyrenaica.⁶

Britain, seeking to protect its influence in Egypt, brokered a short-lived détente between Italy and the Sanusi from 1917 to 1922. British support for the Sanusi led Italy to recognize and grant partial autonomy to the Emirate of Cyrenaica in 1920 under the leadership of Emir Idris Sanusi, the heir of the Grand Sanusi. As Cyrenaica moved closer to independence, the tribes and urban elite of Tripolitania coalesced to form the Tripolitania Republic in 1918, which Italy also granted a degree of autonomy. The Tripolitania Republic disintegrated into separate conflicts, one between the Warfalla tribe and the city of Misrata, and another among the tribes in the Nafusa Mountains.⁷

In 1923, Italy aimed to recapture Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan as part of Italy's "Fourth Shore." Italy abrogated its agreements with Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and launched a bloody war against the regions. Italian forces reoccupied Tripolitania in 1923 and forced tribal insurgents to flee into the desert interior in Fezzan, which resisted until 1930. The Sanusi disciple Umar al-Mukhtar led the Cyrenaican insurgency for eight years until his capture and execution in 1931, after which the remaining resistance collapsed.⁸ Al-Mukhtar was enshrined as a national hero, leaving a legacy that Libyans typically invoke as a unifying figure.⁹ After its victory, Italy unified the three regions into a single colony and called it "Libya," a Greek phrase for all of North Africa.¹⁰

Fighting during World War II devastated Libya. Upon Italy's defeat in North Africa in 1943, Britain established a separate military administration over Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, while France exercised control over Fezzan, due to the region's proximity to French possessions in Algeria and West Africa. After the war, Britain, France and Italy jockeyed for control of Libya. The Allies stripped Libya from Italy, but the fate of the provinces remained unresolved for several years and they were put under the trusteeship of the great powers. Britain had developed close political and military ties to the Sanusi during the war to guard its interests in Egypt and sought to install Idris Sanusi as the head-of-state of a unified and independent Libya. These proposals met with fierce objections from the tribes and elite of Tripolitania, where the Sanusi had little influence and two-thirds of Libya's population resided.¹¹

Britain unilaterally granted Cyrenaica self-rule under Idris, positioning him as the most viable leader of an independent Libya. The debate remained deadlocked until Cold War considerations to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining influence in North Africa prompted the United States to lend its pivotal support in the United Nations to the British plan for an independent Libya under Sanusi leadership.¹² In 1951, the United Nations granted independence to the United Kingdom of Libya—the same tricolor flag the rebels use as a symbol of the revolution.¹³ From Benghazi, the Sanusi monarch reigned over one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Despite its official unification, Libya remained deeply politically fractured with no sense of national identity or institutions.¹⁴

Due to the loose federal system adopted to quell regional differences, the monarchy was weak outside of Cyrenaica. King Idris opted to have two capital cities, Benghazi in Cyrenaica and Tripoli in Tripolitania to soothe the regional differences.¹⁵ The power Idris held was managed through personalized political networks and patronage doled out to the Sanusi-aligned tribes and notables. Idris maintained his position in power through British and American military protection and financial aid, and both countries established major military bases in Libya.¹⁶ In 1959, the discovery of oil in

Cyrenaica by American prospectors rapidly transformed the country's economy and politics.¹⁷ Within a decade, Libya emerged as a major world oil producer, but the newfound wealth intensified the regional divisions. Power and wealth remained concentrated in the hands of the Sanusi monarchy and its tribal allies in Cyrenaica. Rampant corruption and ineptitude crippled the central government.

Opposition leaders in Tripolitania sought to unify the province against the monarchy by appealing to Arab nationalism, inspired by Egyptian General Abdul Nasser—the idol of young Qaddafi—and denounced Idris for his alliances with the United States and Britain.¹⁸ In September 1969, Qaddafi, a 27-year-old captain in the Libyan Air Force, and his cohorts in the Free Officers Union staged a successful military coup against Idris. The Free Officers Union was an underground anti-regime

faction of young military officers formed in large part by Qaddafi, and many of its members would later form the nucleus of his regime. The coup was swift and bloodless; Idris had been out of the country and the Cyrenaican Defense Force, the monarchy's paramilitary guard, quickly surrendered rather than fight the mutinous elements of the army. Qaddafi assumed leadership of the country at the head of the Revolutionary Command Council composed of his fellow military

officers. He shifted the country's political and economic power away from the Sanusi base in Cyrenaica and westwards to Tripolitania. There, Qaddafi built his base of support among the tribes and elite of Tripolitania and Fezzan that had been neglected under the Sanusi.

Qaddafi's rise to power significantly weakened the Cyrenaican tribes and notables that had been privileged under the Sanusi. To thwart the opposition in Cyrenaica, Qaddafi purged the region's political, business, and military elites associated with the Sanusi establishment. Qaddafi moved against the Sanusi religious leaders and shuttered their lodges that had served the Cyrenaican tribes since the nineteenth-century. Eventually, Qaddafi attempted to supplant the Sanusi's religious legitimacy with the imposition of his own political and religious philosophy, enshrined in his infamous *Green Book*.¹⁹ The fall and subsequent repression of the Sanusi as a

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political force and religious organization, in addition to Cyrenaica's enmity towards Qaddafi's Tripolitanian-based regime, acted as catalysts for the emergence of militant Islamist opposition groups in the region after the 1970s. Cyrenaican cities such as Benghazi, Ajdabiya and especially Derna, became hotbeds of Islamist opposition to the government under groups such as the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and later the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in the 1990s.

The Human Terrain

Libya has approximately six and a half million people that are largely of Arab or mixed Arab-Berber descent. The vast majority of Libyans practice Sunni Islam, although there are small communities of Coptic Christians and Catholics in the major cities. Tribes and the tribal system play a significant role in Libyan politics and society. There are about 140 tribes in Libya, but only 30 tribes or so carry significant political influence—as many small tribes either vest their interests with more powerful tribes or are otherwise insignificant.²⁰ Rapid urbanization and internal migration over the past several decades has diluted the influence of the tribes as a means of direct sociopolitical organization.²¹ Tribal cleavages have remained pronounced in small cities, towns and rural areas, and even many urbanized Libyans still identify themselves by their tribal affiliations.²² Further, according to Professor George Joffe, an expert on Libya at Cambridge University, “The tribal ethos is still important; you still use the tribe from which you come as a means of identity. When the control of the state breaks down, then the tribal ethos becomes an alternative mechanism by which you seek security.”²³ The authority of the tribes has become nuanced; they are no longer unitary political actors or capable of systematic organization. Nevertheless, it would be a serious mistake to dismiss the tribal dimension of Libyan politics.²⁴ Besides the regime, the tribes are perhaps the most potent political force in the country, which has long led many Libya experts to conclude that if Qaddafi fell, internecine warfare would break out amongst the tribes.²⁵

In his early years in power, Qaddafi spurned the tribes as an antiquated means of political organization, instead relying on the power of military and the state. Over time, however, Qaddafi began to utilize the tribal system as a means of building political support, reinforcing loyalties, and awarding patronage. Qaddafi used tribal backgrounds

as a way to divide society between loyalists and potential opponents. Despite urbanization and increasing power of the state, under Qaddafi's authoritarian system in which no civil society or political organizations were permitted other than the regime, the tribes became an essential way for people to aggregate political and economic interests with the state. In many respects, Libya underwent a period of re-tribalization, in which the importance of tribal identity was strengthened in regard to each tribe's standing with the regime. Members of certain western tribes that closely aligned with Qaddafi were awarded and empowered through high-ranking positions in the government and security forces. Most of the eastern tribes, especially those previously aligned with the Sanusi, and rival elements in the west such as the Berbers, were all but excluded from the regime. Because the Cyrenaican tribes had been aligned with the monarchy, few officials in Qaddafi's inner-circle or the paramilitary forces hailed from the restive region or held their positions on merit. Qaddafi did eventually co-opt some eastern leaders and place them in somewhat figurehead positions within the government to soothe the regime's relations with Cyrenaica. For the most part, however, the real authority lay in the regime stacked with members of the loyal western tribes. Qaddafi used the loyal tribes of Tripolitania and Fezzan as recruiting grounds for his paramilitary forces that guarded the regime from internal threats, most of which emanated from Cyrenaica and within the military.²⁶

Many of Libya's tribes are descended from the Bani Sulaim and the Bani Hilal, two tribes from the Arabian Peninsula that invaded and settled the Libyan coastline in the eleventh-century. The Bani Sulaim settled in Cyrenaica, while the Bani Hilal settled in Tripolitania.²⁷ The tribes of Cyrenaica are distinguished by their status as either Saadi tribes or Marabtin tribes. The nine tribes of the Saadi confederation are the descendants of the Bani Sulaim. They are historically the most powerful tribes in Cyrenaica that occupied the towns, and fertile lands along the Mediterranean coastline between Egypt and Tripolitania. They were noble or “free” tribes whom controlled land and water resources and became strong allies of the Sanusi Order.²⁸ Due in part to this historical class-structure and the influence of the Sanusi, the tribal system in Cyrenaica is generally considered stronger than in Tripolitania and Fezzan, where the tribes are more divided. Important Saadi tribes include the Bara'sa, the Obeidi, and the Magharba. The Bara'sa tribe traditionally resided in the Green Mountain area

near the city of al-Bayda. The Bara'sa was considered the most politically distinguished tribe in the Saadi confederation. Closely allied with the Sanusi Order, tribe members held numerous high-ranking posts in the government under King Idris. Qaddafi sought to some extent to co-op the Bara'sa and gain legitimacy from the influential tribe by affording some members mid-level positions in the bureaucracy.²⁹ Qaddafi's second wife Safiya is a member of the Bara'sa. The Obeidi are the largest tribe territorially and numerically in Cyrenaica, residing in Tobruk and its surrounding areas.³⁰ Several Obeidi members served in fairly high-ranking military posts under Qaddafi and later became senior rebel military leaders, including Abdel Fattah Yunis, Qaddafi's former interior minister and later the top rebel general.³¹ The Magharba are a large tribe residing in the coastal communities, south of Benghazi to the fringes of Sirte along the Gulf of Sidra (but it is not the only major tribe in this area). The Magharba wield influence in strategically important cities including the crossroads city of Ajdabiya, and the major oil terminals of Brega and Ras Lanuf.³²

The Marabtin tribes are indigenous Berber or older Arab lineages and were historically the client tribes of the conquering Saadi tribes, whom they paid taxes for protection and use of Saadi lands. There are at least fifteen Marabtin tribes, ranging in size and power, and several Marabtin tribes were powerful enough to fend off Saadi domination and become quite influential.³³ Among the most important Marabtin tribes are the Zuwaya. The Zuwaya reside over a large area that stretches northwest from the Kufra Oases deep in the Cyrenaican interior to Jalu (their principal city) and Ajdabiya near the Gulf of Sidra. By virtue of the major oil fields on their lands, the Zuwaya became one of the most important eastern tribes.³⁴ Fiercely independent from the Saadi tribes, the Zuwaya have a long-running dispute with the Tebou, a dark-skinned semi-nomadic tribal group (considered neither Saadi nor Marabtin). The Tebou reside around the Kufra area to the Tibesti Mountains along the remote Chadian border. They were allies of Qaddafi, and he often used Tebou fighters as proxies for exerting his influence in Chad.³⁵ The Zuwaya and the Tebou have had violent clashes over land and political influence in Kufra, to the frustration of the Qaddafi regime, which sought the support of both tribes and was forced to frequently dispatch troops to quell the unrest in recent years.³⁶

Many of the tribes in Tripolitania and Fezzan are descendants of the Bani Hilal. As Qaddafi often repressed or co-opted the eastern tribes, his most important base of tribal support resided in Tripolitania and Fezzan. Qaddafi drew his strongest supporters from his own tribe, the Qadadfa, and many of its traditional tribal allies which once composed the Saff Awlad Sulayman confederation. These tribes include the Qadadfa, the Warfalla, and the several tribes of the Hunn-Waddan oasis located south of Sirte.³⁷ Qaddafi also has counted on the support of the tribes in Fezzan, especially the Maqarha, the region's dominant tribe, but also smaller tribes such as the Huttman, the Hasawna, and the Jama'at around the Wadi al-Shatii area.

Due to Qaddafi, the Qadadfa were elevated into one of the most powerful tribes in Libya during his rule. The Qadadfa live around the city of Sirte which straddles the boundary between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Qaddafi developed Sirte over the years into a large military garrison and administrative center.³⁸ The Qadadfa have approximately 100,000 members divided into six sub-tribes.³⁹ Prior to Qaddafi's rise to power in 1969, the Qadadfa were a relatively minor semi-nomadic tribe. Often at odds with the Sanusi-allied tribes of Cyrenaica, the Qadadfa were driven from Cyrenaica to Sirte by the Saadi tribes in the nineteenth-century. Qadadfa tribesmen were later prevented from joining the elite Cyrenaican Defense Force which was reserved for the Saadi tribes with special loyalties to the monarch. Qaddafi used tribal loyalties in a similar way to protect his regime, and Qadadfa members held a significant number of senior posts in the regime, especially in the security forces.⁴⁰

The Warfalla are the largest tribe in Libya, estimated to have more than a million members, and are situated across northeastern Tripolitania with Bani Walid serving as the tribe's principal city. The Warfalla are traditionally divided into at least three major sub-tribes and dozens of clans and smaller divisions.⁴¹ The Warfalla often aligned with the Qadadfa, and thus Qaddafi, due to blood ties, but the relationship is more than kinship. The Warfalla and the Qadadfa are long-established military allies, having fought together against rival tribes, the Ottomans, and the Italians.⁴² Due to their geographic proximity, they pursued similar political objectives vis-à-vis the tribes and political elite of Cyrenaica and western Tripolitania. As friends of the Qadadfa, Warfalla members were afforded high-ranking positions in the military and paramilitary

forces. Due to the tribe's size and influence, the Warfalla were an indispensable ally to Qaddafi.

Qaddafi's relations with the Warfalla became complicated after a failed coup attempt in October 1993. Military officers from the Warfalla, the Qadadfa, and other loyal tribes attempted to assassinate Qaddafi as he visited Bani Walid, but the plot was foiled at the last moment.⁴³ In response, Qaddafi purged the officer corps and arrested two thousand people, including fifty-five ringleaders from the Warfalla. Qaddafi asked the Warfalla execute its own members so as to spare the regime from shedding Warfalla blood, but tribal leaders refused and forced Qaddafi to order the executions himself in 1997.⁴⁴ The loyalty of the Warfalla tribe was called into question throughout the rebellion as a bellwether of tribal support for Qaddafi. Small factions of the Warfalla in Cyrenaica supported the rebellion.⁴⁵ Mahmoud Jalil, the Chairman of the NTC, is a Cyrenaican Warfalla, but he likely has little influence in the tribe at large. Mansour Khalaf, the paramount leader of the Warfalla, initially kept the tribe aligned with the regime during the uprising. He later demonstrated the Warfalla's quasi-neutrality by vowing not to send members to fight on behalf of the regime after Qaddafi gathered tribal leaders to rally their support in May 2011.⁴⁶ Qaddafi showered cash on the Warfalla to retain their loyalty during the rebellion and undertook several coercive measures, such as stationing large numbers of troops in Bani Walid, which became one of the final loyalist redoubts after the fall of Tripoli.⁴⁷

The Maqarha are the dominant tribe in Fezzan located around Sabha and are one of the largest tribes in Libya. The Maqarha enjoyed a strong relationship with Qaddafi, and many members held high-ranking positions in the regime. The most prominent Maqarha in the regime since the 1990s was Abdullah al-Senussi, Qaddafi's brother-in-law and the chief of the Jamahiriya Security Organization (JSO), the regime's premier intelligence agency. Al-Senussi was a close confidant of Qaddafi and his son Saif al-Islam, and the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest was issued in June 2011.⁴⁸ Another important Maqarha is Abdel Basit al-Megrahi, the Libyan intelligence agent convicted of carrying out the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over

Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988 that killed 270 people. Qaddafi's remanding of al-Megrahi and an associate to Scottish authorities in 1999 in the effort to get international sanctions on Libya lifted was a setback for the regime's relations with the Maqarha.⁴⁹ The regime's successful effort to secure al-Megrahi's release from Scotland was done in part to appease outcry from the Maqarha, who did not want one of their own to die in a foreign prison.⁵⁰

The Touareg are an important semi-nomadic Berber group that live along Fezzan's eastern fringes around Ghat and Ghadamis, but also reside across a large portion of the southwestern Sahara in Algeria, Mali, and Niger. Although the Touareg are small in number, Qaddafi long solicited them as allies.⁵¹ He provided support to Touareg rebel movements in West Africa during the 1970s and 1980s and later incorporated a large number of Touareg fighters into his security forces. Due to their dark-skin, many Touareg soldiers fighting on behalf of the regime were often mistaken by rebels as sub-Saharan mercenaries during the conflict.

Tripolitania has deeper internal divisions and a more fragmented tribal structure than Cyrenaica. Few of the other western tribes were considered as close to the regime as the tribes of central and eastern Tripolitania (the Qadadfa and the Warfalla) and the tribes of Fezzan (the Maqarha). Many of the other western tribal allies formed virtual second-tier within the regime's tribal allegiances. Some of these tribes supported the regime out of mutual interest or forceful coercion, while others considered themselves neutral, and yet others joined the rebellion. To the west of Tripoli, the Zlitan, the Tarhuna (both from namesake cities), and the Warshafana from al-Aziziya, about 30 miles southwest of Tripoli, were considered allies of the regime.

The Berbers are the indigenous inhabitants of Libya who pre-date the Arab invasion in the eleventh-century. While most Libyans are of mixed Arab-Berber descent and there are Berbers in Cyrenaica (several of the Marabtin tribes), there is a distinctive Berber ethno-linguistic group in Tripolitania. The Berbers represent the country's most significant minority, comprising approximately five percent of the population.⁵²

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The Berbers, also known as the Amazigh, reside mostly the Nafusa Mountains, an area of highlands that stretch from Gharyan, fifty miles inland from Tripoli, to the Tunisian border.⁵³ The Berbers and the regime were traditionally at odds, stemming from Qaddafi's refusal to recognize the Berbers as a distinct ethnic group and their long-standing rivalries with the regime's Arab tribal allies.⁵⁴

The Nafusa Mountains are an intricate patchwork of small Arab and Berber tribes. One of the largest is the Zintan, centered on the town of Zintan, which two distinctive Arab and Berber sub-tribes and was among the most prominent tribes in the Nafusa Mountains rebellion.⁵⁵ Many of the other Berber tribes, such as the Yafran, the Jadu, the Fassatu, the Kabaw, and the Haraba, joined the rebellion in mid-February.⁵⁶ The larger Arab tribes in the Nafusa include the Mashashiya, the Awlad Busaif, the Nawail, the Rujban, and the Riyyana—at least several of which were counted as allies of Qaddafi who privileged them over their rival Berber tribes.⁵⁷ The Awlad Abu Sayf are a prominent tribe in southern Tripolitania located around the cities of Mizda and Gharyan. The Awlad Abu Sayf are renowned for their fierce independence developed from its recurring land disputes with neighboring tribes that were closely tied to the regime such as the Warfalla and the Mashashiya.⁵⁸

The Qaddafi Regime

Following the 1969 coup, Qaddafi became the chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), comprised of his thirteen coconspirators in the military, and it established itself as the new government of Libya.* Qaddafi did not trust the foreign powers that had backed the Sanusi and did not extend Libya's basing arrangements with the United States and Britain, causing the withdrawal of their forces by 1970. Struggling to craft a political agenda in the aftermath of the coup, Qaddafi and the RCC formed the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) in August 1972 as a single-party system.⁵⁹ Yet Qaddafi was

quickly disappointed in the ASU's independent streak and its failure to garner him broad popular support. In a landmark speech at Zuwarah in April 1973, Qaddafi beckoned the beginning of a "Popular Revolution" as a means of consolidating power under him through social upheaval and the formation of "popular committees" to mobilize supporters outside of the military.

The Arab defeat in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, after which Egypt slowly began the peace process with Israel and turning towards the United States, left Qaddafi at odds with his most important regional ally and internally vulnerable. Qaddafi and the RCC had predicated their rule on Arab nationalism and the support of the Egyptian military, but relations between the two rapidly deteriorated by the late 1970s. Growing political divisions within the RCC fragmented the allegiance of the army and increasingly threatened Qaddafi's hold on power.⁶⁰ Following civil unrest and several failed coup attempts by factions within the RCC and the armed forces in 1975, Qaddafi began transitioning himself from military ruler to revolutionary leader.⁶¹ Qaddafi dismantled the ASU and sidelined the RCC. In March 1977, he declared Libya to be the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, or the "state of the masses." The Jamahiriya was a bizarre authoritarian system outlined by Qaddafi in his 1975 *Green Book*, which espoused a third path between capitalist democracies and single-party socialist states through an indecipherable political ideology blended from elements of pan-Arabism, socialism, and Islam. Under the guise of Jamahiriya, Qaddafi sought a degree of legitimacy for his autocratic regime that would be acceptable in the country torn apart by regionalism and surrounded by adversaries.⁶² After the founding of the Jamahiriya, Qaddafi careened towards an increasingly belligerent foreign policy that led to confrontations with the United States, Britain, France, Egypt, Chad and other states in a pattern of pariah behavior that continued into the early 1990s.

One of the central pillars of the Qaddafi regime was the revolutionary committees, which were established in 1977 to serve as Qaddafi's political apparatus within the Jamahiriya as he turned away from the military.⁶³ Filled with staunch loyalists, the revolutionary committees evolved into Qaddafi's *de facto* political party and were granted wide-ranging powers over society.⁶⁴ Committee headquarters, or *mathabas*, were established in every town to serve as a direct extension

*The original members of the RCC announced in January 1970 were Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, Major Abdul Salam Jalloud, Major Bashir Hawadi, Captain Mukhtar Abdallah Cerwy, Captain Abd al-Munim Tahir al-Huni, Captain Mustafa al-Kharubi, Captain Khweldi Hamedi, Captain Muhammad Nejjim, Captain Ali Awad Hamza, Captain Abu-Bakr Yunis Jabar, and Captain Omar Abdallah al-Muhayshi. Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence: Oil and State Building*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998): 63.

of Qaddafi's authority.⁶⁵ The revolutionary committees acted in concert with every institution in the country—government, military, business or otherwise—in search of dissent. The committees exercised control over media, oversaw political and military appointments, and had jurisprudence over legal matters. Eventually, the revolutionary committees grew into a paramilitary police force charged with internal security and the repression and elimination of opposition.⁶⁶ Although the influence of the revolutionary committees waned in recent decades, they continued to occupy a central role in the regime leading up to the rebellion in February 2011.

The revolutionary committees marked the division in the Jamahiriya between “popular” authority and the “revolutionary” authority. The popular authority included the somewhat inclusive but toothless basic people's congresses and other popular committees that were established in every locality. The basic people's congresses held elections, managed local affairs and sent members to the General People's Congress, the national quasi-parliament. The popular authorities became one way the regime interacted with tribal leaders, who often used the bodies to pursue their regional and tribal interests with the state.⁶⁷ In reality, however, the popular authorities held no real power and were closely controlled and monitored for dissent by the revolutionary authorities, the true Qaddafi loyalists.⁶⁸

The revolutionary committees were a civilian organization; they generally had some armed capability within their locality owing to their role to maintain internal security. The revolutionary committees had an elite paramilitary wing called the Revolutionary Guard Corps (RGC). The RGC served as a praetorian guard for Qaddafi and was one of the final layers in the regime's security apparatus. The RGC was responsible for highly sensitive duties, including guarding Qaddafi's fortified Bab al-Aziziya compound in Tripoli, as well as vital military installations around the capital.⁶⁹ Hasan al-Kabir Qaddafi, Qaddafi's trusted cousin, commanded the RGC, which had approximately 3,000 men handpicked from the Qadadfa and other loyal tribes.⁷⁰ Due to the RGC's proximity to Qaddafi, it was

among the most well-trained and better armed units in the security forces.⁷¹

For much of Qaddafi's reign, he relied on a highly-personalized network of advisors and associates to run the regime and ensure the loyalty of those around him. The network consisted of extended family members, Qadadfa tribesmen, members of other loyal tribes, a handful of trusted military officers and old friends from the Free Officers Union. But as Qaddafi's eight children, seven sons and one daughter, began to come of age in the 1990s, several of them began to take on increasingly powerful roles in the government, the military, and their father's inner-circle.

Over the past decade, Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, the second oldest son, emerged most prominently as his father's heir-apparent and was among the most powerful figures in the regime. Although he held often no official government position, he was a prominent negotiator during Libya's re-engagement with the United States and Europe in 2003 and 2004.⁷² Saif became the pro-Western face of the Qaddafi government as it worked to shed its pariah-state status and open the Libyan economy, particularly the oil sector, to foreign investment after the removal of international sanctions.⁷³ In October 2009, Saif

al-Islam was designated the General Coordinator of the Popular Leaderships, charged with coordinating Libyan tribal, political and business leaders, which essentially made him the second most powerful figure in the country after his father.⁷⁴

Security Forces

Qaddafi has continuously faced a dilemma of needing a strong military to maintain power while the military—through coups attempts and rebellions—posed the greatest threat to his rule.⁷⁵ The military provided Qaddafi with the keys to power, a monopoly of force and the ability to quell internal threats. However, by possessing all the means of coercion, the military and the officers of the RCC became the strongest source of opposition, the most likely and able body to directly challenge Qaddafi for power.

For much of Qaddafi's reign, he relied on a highly-personalized network of advisors and associates to run the regime and ensure the loyalty of those around him.

As the power of the military and fellow officers in the RCC became a threat to his rule, Qaddafi went to remarkable ends to fragment and weaken the institution.⁷⁶ Qaddafi relieved the army of its responsibility for internal security after several coup attempts in the 1975, and further sidelined the army following its humiliating defeat against Chad in 1987.⁷⁷ The ranks and influence of the RCC gradually dwindled as Qaddafi consolidated power and sidelined his rivals within the military. The RCC became a largely symbolic body until its official dissolution in 1996, when only four members besides Qaddafi remained: General Abu-Bakr Yunis Jabar, General Khweldi Hamedi, General Mustafa al-Kharubi, and General Abdul Salam Jalloud. The remaining RCC officers remained in top military posts or government positions until the end of the regime. Although Jabar remained the head of the military, he was generally regarded as ceremonial figure that Qaddafi kept in place as a political asset. Jalloud, an influential member of the Maqarha tribe, was sidelined by Qaddafi in the 1990s in favor of Abdullah al-Senussi. Hamedi and al-Kharubi were considered staunch allies and remained active in the regime.⁷⁸

Qaddafi took deliberate precautions to protect his rule from the military by keeping it relatively small, poorly trained and ill-equipped so it could not stage a coup.⁷⁹ The regular military is not central to the regime due to the potency of separate paramilitary forces. As of 2010, the Libyan Armed Forces had approximately 76,000 personnel: roughly 50,000 in the Army, 18,000 in the Air Force, 8,000 in the Navy.⁸⁰ Qaddafi prevented the aggregation of military and paramilitary units into division and corps formations, limiting force levels to the brigade or battalion size.⁸¹ This underdeveloped structure served as a safeguard to contain dissent from spreading across units while also preventing the emergence of a unified officer corps.⁸² Another layer of protection is the perplexing chain-of-command within the military. Qaddafi frequently shuffled the positions of senior officials according to their political loyalties and tribal allegiances.⁸³ The ranks and titles of key officers are often unrelated to their actual power and responsibilities.⁸⁴ Qaddafi politicized the military by created overlapping chains of command using loyalists from revolutionary committees as enforcers within the military, closely monitoring officers.⁸⁵ Qaddafi distrusted the army to such a degree that he often did not permit it to conduct live-fire training exercises, believing it would use the ammunition to attack the regime.⁸⁶ U.S. officials

have recognized the significance of Qaddafi's peculiar configuration of his security forces as the significant source of his "staying power" vis-à-vis the rebels.⁸⁷ To counterbalance the threat of the military, Qaddafi divested strength from the military and built smaller, separate paramilitary forces were more manageable and loyal than the regular military.⁸⁸ Although Qaddafi relied on several different types of organizations for internal security, including multiple intelligence agencies, militias and armed tribes, the primary strength rested with the armed-wings of the revolutionary committees and elite paramilitary battalions, otherwise known as deterrent battalions or security battalions.⁸⁹ The officers and rank-and-file in these units were drawn almost exclusively from tribes considered the utmost loyal to the regime, such as the Qadadfa, the Warfalla and the Maqarha.⁹⁰ The paramilitary battalions—often named after their commander—served to check the strength of the regular military and were counted on to maintain internal security.⁹¹ The units typically had independent chains of command, with no horizontal hierarchy existing between commanders, but only to Qaddafi or a trusted official.⁹²

The regime's most prominent paramilitary formation was the 32nd Reinforced Brigade, which was commanded by Captain Khamis Qaddafi, Qaddafi's fifth son. The 32nd Brigade, generally known as the Khamis Brigade, is among the regime's most elite paramilitary units, and described in by U.S. officials as among "the most important military and security elements of the regime."⁹³⁹⁴ The Khamis Brigade is not a conventional unit within the Libyan Army, but an independent, parallel military that is unit composed of heavily-armed infantry, armored vehicles, tanks, artillery, and possibly some limited sea and air capabilities.⁹⁵ To ensure its loyalty, the brigade's rank and file men are drawn largely from the loyal tribes.⁹⁶

The Libyan Economy

Decades of rapid oil-fueled growth transformed Libya from one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world into one of the wealthier countries in Africa and the Arab world. Libya is the fourth largest oil producer in Africa, estimated at 1.8 million barrels per day. Libya has the continent's largest proven oil reserves at 43.7 billion barrels, while it a natural gas reserve of 1.54 trillion cubic meters.⁹⁷ The Libyan economy is almost entirely based on oil; it accounts for roughly 72

percent of GDP (\$90 billion in 2010) and 95 percent of export earnings (\$44 billion in 2010). Libya is a rentier state, with oil revenues amounting to 90 percent of the government's budget (\$42 billion in 2010), which fluctuates year to year depending on global oil prices.⁹⁸ Yet even these numbers do not show the full extent of the Libya's reliance on oil because revenues are recycled through the economy by means of state subsidies, loans, and investments that underwrite most other significant economic activity such as manufacturing and construction.⁹⁹

Rapid population growth and urbanization in the past several decades, along with the dearth of natural resources besides oil, have made Libya entirely dependent on imports for food and other basic commodities. Such economic conditions have led to Libya's persistently high unemployment rate at around 25 to 30 percent, although these figures are slightly misleading because many Libyans work outside the formal employment structure and hold several jobs.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, Libya employs more than a million skilled and unskilled foreign laborers—mainly from Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa—a result of structural inefficiencies in the labor market from minute private sector opportunities and an ineffective education system that does not produce highly-skilled workers.¹⁰¹ Many Libyans therefore work in the oversized and burdensome public sector which employs nearly a million people, or 60 percent of Libya's entire workforce.¹⁰²

Oil revenues provided Qaddafi with a vast treasury with which to repeatedly remake the Libyan state in a manner that helped him sustain his rule. Oil enabled Qaddafi's erratic pursuit of socialist policies that began in the 1970s, after which the state came to dominate virtually all economic activity and funded his massive military buildup of Soviet arms. It allowed him to dabble in foreign adventures such as his disastrous war with Chad in the 1980s and become a patron of foreign terrorist groups and rebel movements. In 1992, the U.N. Security Council placed economic sanctions on Libya after Qaddafi's intelligence service was implicated in the December 1988 bombing Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and the September 1989 bombing of UTA flight 772 over Niger. The sanctions led to a period of economic hardship in Libya with declining oil revenues and a flair up in domestic opposition in Cyrenaica and turmoil from the military. U.N. sanctions were suspended in 1999 after Qaddafi remanded two of

the suspects in the Lockerbie bombing. In 2003 and 2004, the United States and European states, including Britain, France and Italy, reconciled with Qaddafi and dropped their sanctions after he abandoned his weapons of mass destruction program and agreed to compensate the victims of the airline bombings.

The wealth derived from oil in many ways defined the complex relationship between Qaddafi and the Libyan people. While Qaddafi squandered a great deal of Libya's wealth and economic potential, he succeeded to a degree where the monarchy had failed, and delivered Libyans a moderately high standard of living. In 2010, Libya's per capita income was about \$14,000, striking a balance between the lavishly wealthy Persian Gulf monarchies and the struggling economies elsewhere in the Middle East such as Egypt.¹⁰³ Qaddafi used oil revenues to provide social programs to stifle public discontent and build overlapping security forces for protection and coercion. Most importantly, Qaddafi built patronage networks among tribes and other social networks, either to ensure their loyalty, or to encapsulate potential opposition by leveraging their economic dependence on the state. Professor Dirk Vandewalle, a Libya expert at Dartmouth College, concluded in 1998, "Qaddafi's survival has become so closely intertwined with the perpetuation of the distribution of patronage that he cannot be expected to reform the economy. Whether or not he remains the country's leader, Libya's ability to move away from a volatile, oil-dominated economy has perhaps become impossible."¹⁰⁴ It is no surprise, then, that one of the first methods the regime used to attempt to placate protesters in February 2011 was to dispatch envoys to nearly every restive city with promises of cash payments if they dispersed.

The removal of UN sanctions and improved relations with the West after 2003 led to a new period of economic expansion and reform, as foreign investment returned to develop Libyan oil fields. Saif al-Islam, Qaddafi's second son and likely successor, headed the regime's attempts to liberalize Libya's economy. Saif al-Islam's efforts included plans to privatize state-owned corporations, attract foreign investment, encourage entrepreneurship, and reduce the size of the burdensome public-sector. In 2007, the government announced a plan to cut nearly 400,000 public sector jobs over the next three years in order to reduce its growing weight on the state budget and encourage growth in the private sector.¹⁰⁵ Saif al-Islam received praise for his reformist schemes to modernize

the economy (and the political system by proposing a constitution) from Western officials and experts. The regime, however, never sincerely attempted to overhaul the oil-based economy, and Saif al-Islam's efforts appear to have been to curry support from foreign audiences and domestic opponents.¹⁰⁶ The years following Libya's advent from pariah state status after 2003 until the revolution in 2011 will perhaps be remembered as the only period of relative peace and prosperity during Qaddafi's forty-two year reign.

III: THE ARAB SPRING AND THE LIBYAN REBELLION (FEBRUARY 2011 TO MARCH 19, 2011)

The Eastern Front

The protests that precipitated the Libyan revolution largely took place during mid-February in Cyrenaica. The epicenter of the revolt was in Benghazi—the unofficial capital of Cyrenaica—though protests quickly spread to the surrounding area. These demonstrations were undoubtedly influenced by the uprisings in the neighboring countries of Tunisia and Egypt, where popular demonstrations ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and President Hosni Mubarak in January and early February. Though there were no significant protests in Libya during January, Qaddafi's attempts to support these two autocratic rulers indicate that he was aware the wave of unrest could sweep into Libya. Qaddafi made a speech on January 16 supporting Ben Ali, telling the Tunisian people, "You have suffered a great loss. There is none better than Zine to govern Tunisia."¹⁰⁷ Two weeks later, after Ben Ali had resigned and protests were escalating in Egypt; Qaddafi reportedly called Mubarak on January 28 to express his support for the Egyptian president.¹⁰⁸

The first indications of unrest in Libya occurred on February 1, when a web-based political activist was arrested on apparently trumped-up charges shortly after making an online appeal for demonstrations.¹⁰⁹ The subsequent protest movement coalesced around a separate online call for protests by the National Conference of Libyan Opposition, an opposition group of exiled Libyan activists that had been created in 2005.¹¹⁰ The protests, known as the "Day of Rage," were scheduled for February 17, a date historically associated with opposition to the regime.¹¹¹ On that day in 1987, nine people were executed

on national television following charges of having plotted against the regime.¹¹² In 2006, approximately ten people were killed in Benghazi when police fired on a crowd that had been protesting a television broadcast in which an Italian cabinet minister wore a t-shirt that featured an offensive caricature of the prophet Mohammed.¹¹³

Qaddafi took several steps to head off large-scale protests before February 17. Shortly after the Day of Rage was announced, Qaddafi met privately with political activists and the local media, warning them not to further inflame the situation.¹¹⁴ The regime also released twelve political prisoners, who had only served fractions of their sentences, on February 8 in what was interpreted as a conciliatory gesture toward the nascent opposition movement.¹¹⁵ Finally, Qaddafi sent two key regime officials to Benghazi, his son Saadi, a special forces commander, and Abdullah al-Senussi.¹¹⁶ Neither official had any success in averting conflict and in fact further exacerbated tensions. Saadi delivered a speech that promised reform, but its disingenuous and condescending tone stirred more anger amongst Cyrenaicans.¹¹⁷

Al-Senussi inadvertently instigated large-scale protests in Benghazi after ordering the arrest of human rights advocate Fathi Tarbil on February 15, as part of a nationwide effort to detain anti-regime activists.¹¹⁸ Tarbil was a lawyer for the families of inmates involved in the 1996 Abu Salim prison uprising, a prison riot in Tripoli that resulted in the deaths of more than a thousand prisoners during a violent crackdown. He was held for two days as authorities hoped to head off the demonstrations planned for February 17.¹¹⁹ Tarbil's arrest had the opposite effect; several hundred protestors – including family members of the victims of the Abu Salim riots – gathered in Benghazi's central square and clashed with local security forces.¹²⁰

Initially, police and paramilitary forces employed brutal but non-lethal tactics, relying on rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse protestors on February 15 and 16.¹²¹ However, security forces began firing live ammunition on February 17, killing more than 150 people over the next three days.¹²² The conflict escalated when Libyan security forces responded to protestors with lethal force, targeting funeral processions for those killed in the protests. Protestors responded with the few weapons they had – including rudimentary hand grenades – but made little headway against the security forces.¹²³

Violence continued on February 18 as regime forces fired at a funeral procession from the rooftops of Benghazi's military barracks, known to local residents as the Katiba.¹²⁴ After the forces inside the Katiba fired on the procession, protesters retaliated by attacking the barracks on February 18, an assault that proved to be the turning point of the early revolts. The compound housed several military units—including the elite Khamis Brigade—and became the focal point of the violence in Benghazi.¹²⁵ Over the course of a three-day siege, protesters repeatedly tried to force their way onto the base only to be turned back by heavy gunfire.¹²⁶

Two events allowed the protesters to overwhelm the Katiba on February 20. First, a vehicle loaded with propane tanks rammed the gates of the compound, successfully breaching it and clearing the way for the protesters to continue the battle inside the base. Second, a recently defected security force arrived on scene later that day and granted the remaining loyalist forces in the Katiba safe passage out of the city, effectively ending the fighting.¹²⁷ Abdel Fattah Younis, the Libyan Interior Minister and former Army officer who participated in Qaddafi's 1969 coup, led the unit.¹²⁸ Younis' defection was noteworthy for both its dramatic timing and his visibility within Qaddafi's regime. The arrival of his forces turned the fight's momentum in favor of the protesters, ending the battle at the Katiba and the regime's already weak influence in Benghazi. The defection of Younis was also a propaganda victory for the opposition as he was the most visible regime figure to defect. However, his importance within the regime is debatable; the power of the police force Younis controlled and even much of the regular military paled in comparison to strength of the paramilitary forces and the revolutionary committees at the regime's disposal.

Several other defections further reduced Qaddafi's control of military assets stationed in the east. The commander of the army barracks in Tobruk publicly renounced Qaddafi on February 17, and two Libyan Air Force colonels flew to Malta to request political asylum after protesters seized their base in Benghazi.¹²⁹ These defections degraded the regime's military capabilities in Cyrenaica and gave the burgeoning rebel movement propaganda victories.

The effects of these protests were felt throughout Cyrenaica. Violent protests erupted in the towns of al-Bayda, Derna, and Tobruk concurrently with those

in Benghazi, and security forces quickly resorted to firing live ammunition.¹³⁰ Despite the deaths of several protesters in these cities, security forces were driven out and the cities fell into the protesters' hands less than a week after the Day of Rage.¹³¹

The First Battle for Cyrenaica

The protesters in Cyrenaica quickly armed themselves to fight Qaddafi's forces in what would become one of the three theaters of battle throughout the conflict. Fighting in eastern Libya dominated the early part of the conflict due to the two dramatic rebel advances and retreats along the coast in February and March 2011. Combat in the east dropped off considerably after the second retreat and static battle lines developed between the rebels and Qaddafi's forces between Ajdabiya and Brega, with only skirmishes occurring until a rebel offensive was launched against Brega in late July. This later offensive ground to a halt due to thousands of land mines loyalist forces that were laid in and around Brega. Despite the stalemate, Cyrenaica remained a strategically important theater of combat as it is where the majority of the Cyrenaican rebels' military forces were based.

After seizing Benghazi, rebel forces advanced south and clashed with regime forces in Brega about 125 miles south of Benghazi along the coastal highway. Brega is strategically important because it contains the second largest oil and natural gas refinery in Libya, which produced up to 90,000 barrels a day.¹³² The town has two primary neighborhoods. The southwestern region, known as Old Brega, consists of the refinery, a hospital, and a residential area, and the northern portion of the city, referred to as New Brega, is a modern housing development for oil workers.¹³³

The residents of Brega, like many in Cyrenaica, strongly opposed Qaddafi's rule. Brega fell to the opposition movement on February 20 when anti-Qaddafi forces assumed control of the refinery.¹³⁴ Local residents overpowered loyalist forces that had retreated south from Benghazi that same day.¹³⁵ After the initial revolt, Brega residents gathered arms from captured loyalist forces and a nearby military barracks, preparing to either push west or repel an attack.¹³⁶

On the morning of March 2, loyalist forces seized Old Brega's refinery and the town's university.¹³⁷ The ensuing battle typified many of the engagements along

**1ST BATTLE FOR CYRENAICA
BATTLE MOVEMENT MARCH 2-19, 2011**



the coastal highway, featuring artillery, ground combat, and a tendency by both sides to withdraw and then counterattack. Loyalist forces advanced into the town only after a heavy artillery barrage and several airstrikes in the early morning displaced rebel forces positioned on the outskirts of Old Brega.¹³⁸ Yet loyalist forces held Old Brega for only a short time, as rebels drove them out later that day when thousands of opposition fighters arrived from other parts of Cyrenaica.¹³⁹

The rebel victory at Brega paved the way for an advance seventy miles further west into the town of Ras Lanuf on March 4.¹⁴⁰ The fighting in Ras Lanuf—home to Libya’s largest oil refinery and an airstrip—was brief but intense as rebels seized the town that evening.¹⁴¹ On March 5, rebel forces arrived in Bin Jawad, a small town twenty-five miles northwest of Ras Lanuf, and quickly took control of the town. However, they did not occupy Bin Jawad in large numbers nor set up any defensive positions.¹⁴² Instead of holding the village, many returned to Ras Lanuf for the night, promising to return the next morning to push westwards towards Qaddafi’s hometown of Sirte.¹⁴³

The rebel offensive ended the morning of March 6 when regime forces that had taken up positions in Bin Jawad overnight ambushed the rebel fighters as they reentered the city.¹⁴⁴ The rebels came under withering fire shortly after entering the town and retreated to a point outside Bin Jawad after a day-long battle.¹⁴⁵ Loyalist troops unleashed an artillery and mortar barrage against the rebels, who were pushed farther away in the evening despite several attempts to retake the town.¹⁴⁶ Attack helicopters and warplanes were first used against rebel forces in Bin Jawad, though they were responsible for few casualties and had a very limited impact.¹⁴⁷

The rebels also faced a local population that, for the first time, provided either tacit or active support to Qaddafi’s forces; residents of Bin Jawad reportedly allowed loyalist troops to fire from their homes or even took up arms against the rebels themselves.¹⁴⁸ At this point, the rebels were not trained or organized to a degree that they would be able to overtake a town where Qaddafi’s forces were dug in and the local population was hostile. In light of this, it is unlikely that the rebels would have been able to take Sirte, a major regime stronghold with strong

personal and tribal ties to Qaddafi, had they had pushed beyond Bin Jawad.

Following the loss, rebel forces retreated to Ras Lanuf on the evening of March 6, where they endured an artillery and aerial bombardment over the next three days.¹⁴⁹ The airstrikes caused few casualties but did intimidate the rebel fighters.¹⁵⁰ In what would become the loyalist forces' primary tactic, the shelling displaced the rebels and defeated subsequent counterattacks. The rebels were forced to withdraw towards Brega on March 10 and 11.¹⁵¹

The fighting in Brega between March 13 and 14 mirrored that of Ras Lanuf, with a loyalist artillery barrage forcing the rebels to initially abandon the town before they returned later that evening to counterattack.¹⁵² There were reports that members of a deterrent battalion had either been captured or defected over to the rebels the evening of March 13.¹⁵³ By the evening of the 14th, the rebels had fled northeast to Ajdabiya, where airstrikes and rockets were already falling on the town's western approaches.¹⁵⁴

The retreat to Ajdabiya was a moment of great desperation for the rebels due to the town's strategic location. Ajdabiya is a vital crossroads for Cyrenaica. Highways extend north to the rebel capital in Benghazi, east to the port city of Tobruk, and southeast through oil-producing regions to the Kufra Oases. If the rebels ceded control of Ajdabiya, there would be little to prevent Qaddafi's forces from advancing upon Benghazi and using substantial armor, artillery, and airpower on the rebel headquarters. Rebel fighters, acknowledging Ajdabiya's importance, promised to make a final stand.¹⁵⁵

On March 15, the battle for Ajdabiya began much like those in Brega and Ras Lanuf the previous week. The rebels were driven from the city in the morning by an artillery, tank, and aerial bombardment but counterattacked later and held much of Ajdabiya.¹⁵⁶ Despite having withdrawn to the town's outskirts, loyalist forces held positions that encircled the city.¹⁵⁷ The rebels' hold on Ajdabiya slipped away as fighters in the city center suffered through intense shelling and multiple ground assaults over several days.¹⁵⁸ The city fell to loyalist forces on March 18.¹⁵⁹

The assault on Benghazi began before Ajdabiya fell, with a series of airstrikes near Benghazi's Beinana Airport on March 17.¹⁶⁰ Ground forces and tanks moved quickly up

the coastal highway to Benghazi's outskirts after a brief engagement with rebel troops on March 19 in the town of Zuwaytinah, located twenty miles north of Ajdabiya.¹⁶¹ Though there are reports of aging rebel tanks positioned along the highway to Benghazi, the speed with which loyalist troops advanced indicate that either the number or the efficacy of these tanks were overstated.¹⁶² The battle of Benghazi mirrored the previous week's engagements, as loyalist tank fire and airstrikes pounded Benghazi's southernmost neighborhoods the morning of March 19.¹⁶³ Qaddafi's armor and ground forces swept into the city's southern and central neighborhoods, fighting a pitched ground battle as rebels deployed the few tanks under their control.¹⁶⁴ The rebels' ability to defend themselves was further called into question when a rebel jet—one of the few seen in combat—crashed inside the city.¹⁶⁵

Qaddafi's assault on Benghazi was short-lived. French warplanes began flying sorties over Benghazi the morning of March 19 as part of the international intervention authorized two days earlier by United Nations Security Resolution 1973. The resolution called for a no-fly zone over Libya and the use of "all necessary means ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack."¹⁶⁶ The U.S. and French governments engineered this UN mandate after being sharply criticized at home for mishandling their involvement in the Tunisian and Egyptian protests. Now possessing the necessary authorization to begin military operations, French jets targeted Qaddafi's tanks and armored vehicles outside Benghazi, preventing further incursions into the city.¹⁶⁷ Loyalist forces retreated to Ajdabiya on March 20 and held off a rebel attack later that day.¹⁶⁸ This retreat marked the beginning of a week-long battle for Ajdabiya as the rebels regained momentum during the subsequent advance towards Sirte, the second such offensive since the start of protests in February 2011.

Governance Formation

The opposition movement in eastern Libya worked quickly to develop basic political leadership. Councils addressing local, regional, and military issues formed in the aftermath of protests, evolving somewhat independently of each other. This *ad hoc* development can be attributed to the absence of an existing opposition group or figurehead during the protests, as well as an awareness that a coordinating body needed to be created quickly to build off the protests' momentum.

Provisional councils, staffed by local educated professionals, were quickly organized in many of the eastern cities to provide basic services. On February 26, a fourteen-member management council was announced in Benghazi, with each person assigned to an area of responsibility for day-to-day management of the city.¹⁶⁹ This group, known as the Governing Council in Benghazi, was intended as a stop-gap measure with similar councils appearing in other restive cities.¹⁷⁰

The development of an overarching governing council occurred concurrently, as former regime officials and recently returned expatriates formed a nucleus of political leadership in late February.¹⁷¹ After meetings in Benghazi and al-Bayda, former Libyan Justice Minister Mustafa Abdel Jalil announced on February 26 that a transitional government had been formed.¹⁷² This body, the National Transitional Council (NTC), was made up of former regime officials and educated Libyan expatriates, as well as representatives from city councils in Cyrenaica and rebel-held cities in the west.

The first official meeting of the NTC was in Benghazi on March 5, where several key leadership positions were announced. Jalil was named the chairman of the council, having previously served in the regime as the president of the Court of Appeals from 2002 to 2007 until his appointment to head Ministry of Justice in 2007.¹⁷³ Jalil was considered a reformist figure within the regime. As a judge, he often ruled against the government and publicly clashed with Qaddafi over prisoner's rights.¹⁷⁴ Omar Hariri, a former military officer who had been imprisoned for his role in an attempted coup in 1975, was named defense minister.¹⁷⁵ Two former regime officials, Mahmood Jibril and Ali Al Issawi, were appointed to be foreign affairs representatives and tasked with securing international support for the burgeoning resistance movement.¹⁷⁶ As part of the regime Jibril had headed a state economic planning organization, the National Economic Development Council, while Issawi had served as the Libyan ambassador to India.¹⁷⁷ Jibril later became the NTC's prime minister. Most of the NTC members are representatives from cities across Libya. Initially, only eleven members of the council were named, although there are believed to be more than thirty. During the fighting, the rebels claimed many members were not being named for security reasons because they lived in loyalist-occupied areas.¹⁷⁸

In late March, the NTC published a document entitled "A Vision of a Democratic Libya" that pledged to establish a liberal democratic state.¹⁷⁹ Seemingly modeled on the principles of Western constitutional democracies, the document described a state that guarantees freedom of expression and universal suffrage, allows for the creation of political parties and civil society, and permits the existence of a private sector within the economy. The role of religion was less clearly detailed; the state would draw "...strength from our strong religious beliefs in peace, truth, justice and equality," while also respecting "the sanctity of religious doctrine" and the rights of minorities.¹⁸⁰

The opposition movement's need to secure the political and military support of Western countries likely influenced this growing political identity. The rapid creation of a central leadership, especially one that featured Libyan expatriates who had spent considerable time in the United States, gave the appearance of an organized opposition movement that was sympathetic to the U.S. and Europe. Additionally, the subsequent release of a plan for a secular, liberal democracy signaled to its potential Western patrons that the opposition movement had an acceptable political identity without actually committing to a political system that may not resonate with Libyans. Yet the unity the rebels fostered in Benghazi in the first month of the uprising would be tested in the coming months as the conflict escalated and prompted foreign intervention. Though a collective opposition to Qaddafi unified the rebels, the degree to which they would be capable of overcoming their own internal divisions and reconciling with former regime supporters in western Libya to form a stable and democratic government was unclear.

IV. UNREST SPREADS TO TRIPOLI

As protests spread across Cyrenaica after the Day of Rage on February 18, Qaddafi led a rally in Tripoli's Green Square and the regime mobilized supporters and security forces to crack down on the spreading protests.¹⁸¹ The regime used the state-owned cellular company to send threats via mass text message that demonstrations would not be tolerated. Regime intelligence services that monitored internet traffic in Tripoli rounded up dissidents calling for protests in the capital and elsewhere.¹⁸² On February 19, Libya's internet connection to the outside world was abruptly severed by the government in an attempt to disrupt the opposition's ability to organize and communicate.¹⁸³ The revolutionary committee newspaper *Al-Zahf al-Akhdar* presented the regime's unequivocal position that protests would be met with violence: "Any risk from these minuscule groups [protesters]—the people and the noble revolutionary power will violently and thunderously respond."¹⁸⁴ The state media and mass text messages warned against crossing four red lines: Libya's territorial integrity, Qaddafi himself, internal security, and Islam—which, if violated, would be "suicidal and playing with fire."¹⁸⁵ The General People's Congress was indefinitely suspended, and Qaddafi met with tribal leaders to shore up support amid speculation that influential tribes such as the Warfalla were splitting with the regime.¹⁸⁶

The way Cyrenaica quickly slipped from the regime's grasp and the growing unrest across Tripolitania clearly shocked the regime. As protests reached Tripoli on February 20 and the first clashes between demonstrators and security forces in the capital led some to speculate that the regime was rapidly collapsing and perhaps Qaddafi would resign, mimicking the resignation of Mubarak that had stunned the Arab world barely a week before. Qaddafi, however, had no plans to capitulate. The regime's response to the protests came in the middle of the night on February 20. In one of the most defining moments of the rebellion, Saif al-Islam delivered a dramatic and defiant speech on state television—rebroadcast around the world—to the tense nation. Speaking without prepared remarks that caused him to ramble at times and appear desperate, Saif al-Islam nevertheless presented an extraordinarily candid assessment of the situation. He dismissed the comparisons between the unrest in Libya and the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, warning that Libya was different and a civil war would ensue if the protests continued. While he called the protesters drunkards, thugs, and terrorists, he also criticized the actions of

the security forces in Benghazi, a rebuke of his brother Saadi, who had led the crackdown in Benghazi. Saif al-Islam claimed the security forces had erred because they were not trained to deal with the throngs of angry demonstrators and described the protesters' deaths as a "tragedy." He offered to implement an array of political reforms, including a long sought-after plan for a constitution that he claimed had finally won his father's approval. Saif al-Islam warned that if the country continued on its course, it would descend into a civil war along tribal and regional lines, alluding to a partition between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. He pointed out that a partition would cripple the oil-driven economy. Saif concluded that regime would not fold peacefully, declaring, "We will fight until the last man, until the last woman, until the last bullet."¹⁸⁷

Saif al-Islam's entreaty to the protesters was short-lived as Qaddafi mobilized the full-weight of his security forces to crush the rebellion. Shortly after Saif al-Islam finished his speech on February 20, anti-regime demonstrators and pro-Qaddafi supporters backed by riot police converged on Green Square in Tripoli. Clashes between the two sides raged throughout the night. Early in the morning on February 21, paramilitary forces arrived to relieve the riot police and opened fire on the protesters. In the fray, protesters looted and burned police stations, revolutionary committee offices, the Interior Ministry and the General People's Congress building. Qaddafi's forces careened through Tripoli, firing from technicals and pickup trucks. Some unconfirmed accounts claimed the regime deployed helicopter gunships and warplanes in the crackdown; the latter were likely used to bomb arms depots left unguarded around the capital to prevent the protesters from arming themselves, as had occurred in Benghazi.¹⁸⁸ By nightfall, the protests in Tripoli were largely stamped out, approximately sixty people had been killed and scores wounded.¹⁸⁹ Over the next several days, loyalist forces continued to crack down on scattered protests in the capital as demonstrators made several attempts to rally.¹⁹⁰ The neighborhoods of Tajura and Feshloom were the hub of discontent in the capital; residents were eager to fight but lacked weapons.¹⁹¹ Loyalist troops established a heavy military presence in the restive neighborhoods and forced dissidents underground.

Minor defections from the regime began to pile up the Libyan government began to fragment down regional and tribal divisions where either the rebellion or the

regime was strongest. Staunch regime supporters and those from areas of Tripolitania and Fezzan unaffected by the rebellion stayed, including officials from loyal tribes, the paramilitary forces, and the revolutionary authorities. Defectors largely hailed from Cyrenaica and other restive areas, including government officials, military officers, and a number of foreign diplomats. The most dramatic defections occurred on February 21 after the Libyan delegation to the United Nations, led by Deputy Ambassador Ibrahim Dabbashi, denounced Qaddafi as a war criminal and called for his immediate resignation. Dabbashi became the first official to call for the United Nations to implement a no-fly zone over Libya. Interestingly, Dabbashi's rationale for a no-fly zone was not intended to ground the Libyan Air Force, which had been barely used at that point, but to prevent Qaddafi from flying in foreign mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹² Other officials that resigned in protest and joined the rebels included Justice Minister Mustapha Abdul Jalil (who became Chairman of the NTC), Ambassador to the United States Ali Aujali, Ambassador to India Ali Issawi, and Arab League representative Abdel Monem al-Howni.¹⁹³

Although Qaddafi secured the capital, he had lost control over almost all of Cyrenaica by February 22, including Benghazi, Ajdabiya, Derna, al-Bayda, and Tobruk.¹⁹⁴ In Tripolitania, unrest had spread to the major coastal cities of Misrata and Zawiyah, and revolts occurred in Berber towns across the Nafusa Mountains. The regime had been rattled and placed on its heels since the Day of Rage. Qaddafi had been significantly weakened by the losses and his regime appeared on the verge of collapse in the early days. But the rebellion's momentum had finally been blunted in Tripoli, and Qaddafi was ready and capable of fighting for control of the country. The rebels were relatively geographically dispersed and restive pockets of Tripolitania were insulated from each other by loyalist strongholds. Further, the rebels had virtually no organized military forces or unified political leadership. Qaddafi delivered a speech on February 22 announcing the regime was taking the offensive, promising to "... cleanse Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, alley by alley, person by person, until the country is cleansed of dirt and scum. We cannot let Libya get lost without a vision...The hour of work is here, the hour of onslaught is here; the hour of victory is here."¹⁹⁵ The pillars that Qaddafi had relied on for most of his rule had not wavered. The defections had not afflicted his inner-circle, including several of his sons, and long-trusted

advisers, military officers, and loyal tribesmen. While the regular military had fragmented, the more-powerful paramilitary forces that Qaddafi built for the specific purpose of putting down internal rebellions remained loyal. Although small in number, they provided a strong and loyal base that could be supplemented by the revolutionary committees, militias, and what remained of the regular military. With much of the regime's assets frozen abroad and an arms embargo quickly imposed on the country by the United Nations, Qaddafi had extensive financial reserves to keep the regime afloat for some time and large stockpiles of military equipment for his forces. Perhaps most importantly, Qaddafi retained the support of the tribes he had woven into the upper-echelons of his regime for decades.

V. THE BATTLE OF ZAWIYAH (FEBRUARY 24 TO MARCH 10)

Zawiyah is a major city in western Tripolitania located on the fertile Jafara Plain, a flat and densely populated area that starts west of Tripoli and stretches along the Mediterranean coast to the Tunisian border. Zawiyah lies on the coast thirty miles west of the capital. A middle-class city surrounded by farming communities, Zawiyah has a population estimated at 200,000 and is the fourth largest city in Libya.¹⁹⁶ The city was strategically important for the regime to keep under its control because of its port facilities and oil refinery. Zawiyah's refinery and import terminal facilities are Libya's second largest. They connect to the oil fields of Fezzan via pipeline and serve as the primary source of fuel for Tripoli.¹⁹⁷ The regime needed a stable fuel supply for its forces fighting across the country's expansive terrain. The loss of Cyrenaica meant that the regime no longer had access to Libya's four other major refineries. The three refineries at Brega and Ras Lanuf along the Gulf of Sidra were in the middle of the fluctuating battles along the coastal highway and sustaining damage, while the fourth was deep inside rebel territory at Tobruk near the Egyptian border. Therefore, controlling Zawiyah was critical for the regime to maintain its offensives.

Demonstrations in Zawiyah began on February 18 as hundreds of residents congregated in Martyrs Square in the center of the city to protest the regime's brutal crackdown in Benghazi.¹⁹⁸ As demonstrations grew, the outnumbered security forces abandoned the city on February 20.¹⁹⁹ Several hundred demonstrators, some

wielding hunting rifles and pistols, began an anti-regime sit-in at the large Souq Mosque in Martyrs Square.

The rebellion in Zawiyah seriously threatened the regime due to the city's close proximity to Tripoli. The uprising on the outskirts of Tripoli, in tandem with the revolts in Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains, would essentially encircle the regime's center of power and cut it off from its strongholds elsewhere in Tripolitania and Fezzan. While the rebellion in Cyrenaica was explicable given the region's long-standing opposition to Qaddafi's rule, the uprising in Zawiyah and other parts of Tripolitania presented an immediate threat to the regime's position and legitimacy. The presence of a rebel-held city so close to Tripoli undermined Qaddafi's attempts to contain the scope of the revolts and depict the conflict as a civil war between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. A civil war, rather than a country-wide revolution, would appeal less to policymakers in the United States and Europe who were contemplating intervening on behalf of the rebels.

As Qaddafi mobilized his security forces against the rebellion, Zawiyah received a brief respite while the regime concentrated on retaking the town of Sabratha, fifteen miles to the west of Zawiyah. Demonstrators had taken Sabratha on February 20 after driving out police, burning regime buildings, and receiving support from army defectors.²⁰⁰ On February 23, loyalist forces, joined by militia called up from the revolutionary committees, began an assault on the disorganized rebels at Sabratha. After several days of street fighting, the regime regained control of the town on March 1.²⁰¹ The quick reaction from the regime to contain the unrest in Sabratha and other neighboring towns left the rebels in Zawiyah isolated.

While the regime quelled the revolt in Sabratha, Zawiyah remained in a state of uncertainty. Security forces had retreated from the city, but protesters and residents had not yet raised arms against the regime. On February 23, Qaddafi dispatched a high-level envoy to deliver an ultimatum to the protestors at the Souq Mosque. The envoy offered money to each family in Zawiyah if the protestors dispersed and threatened a massacre if they did not, but the city rejected the regime's bribe.²⁰² At dawn the next day, troops that had taken position outside of the city moved into Martyrs Square and opened fire on protesters in and around the mosque. According to residents, the soldiers killed and wounded dozens of unarmed people.²⁰³ The brutality of the attack spurred

the city into a full-scale revolt. The protesters' ranks swelled into the thousands as army officers and soldiers defected to defend their city and families. The military defectors began arming the protesters and organizing them as fighting erupted. The rebels drove the loyalists out of Zawiyah, forcing them to the western outskirts of the city and to a garrison located to the immediate north that protected the Zawiyah refinery (which remained operational throughout the battle).²⁰⁴

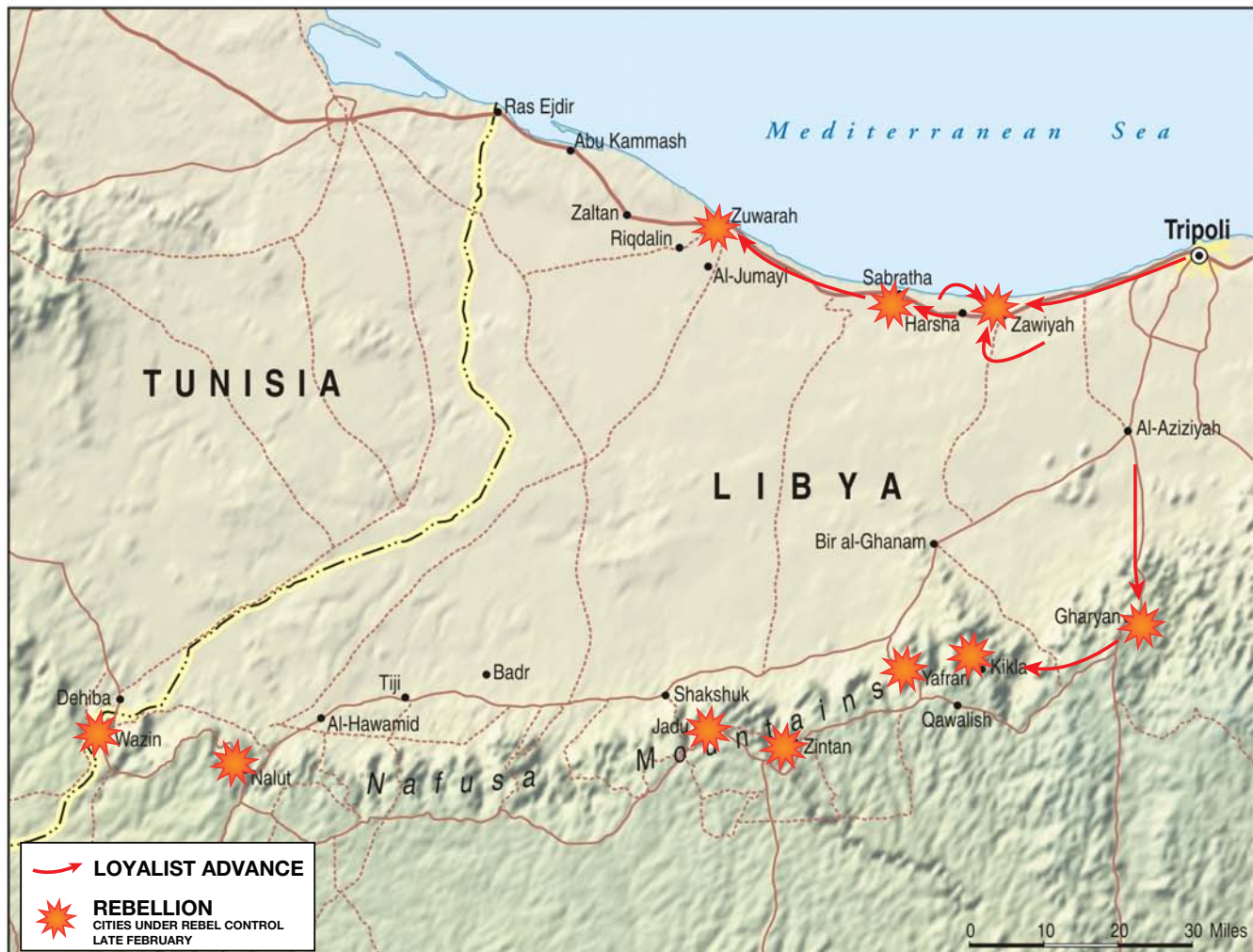
Qaddafi delivered a speech to Zawiyah on February 24 in which he accused its residents of mistakenly siding with al-Qaeda—which had become the regime's rhetoric for the Cyrenaican rebels—and called on the city's elders to disarm the fighters and end the revolt. Qaddafi demanded the city surrender and gave a veiled threat that he would crush the city if he needed to:

'I am waiting. I am sure that Zawiyah will not disappoint. I am sure that Zawiyah remains Zawiyah, the town of a thousand martyrs against the Italians. Do not disappoint me. Do not belittle yourselves before my eyes. The Libyan people, eventually, will demand a conclusion. Should the Libyan people's patience run out, it will say 'come on, those who are capable of exterminating this plague, let them do it and save the country.'²⁰⁵

Zawiyah continued to defy the seemingly weakening Qaddafi as his security forces clashed with protestors for control of Tripoli in late February. Some rebels began referring to their enclave as the "Zawiyah State" reflecting secessionist attitudes also seen in Cyrenaica.²⁰⁶ The rebellion in Zawiyah, however, faced serious danger after Qaddafi's forces secured Tripoli and began offensives in late February to recapture lost territory. Aside from pockets of unrest at Sabratha and Zuwarah, forty miles to the west, most of the Jafara Plain had not risen up en masse, as had Cyrenaica after Benghazi's fall, leaving Zawiyah secluded from the other rebel-held areas. Loyalist forces pressed their attack against Zawiyah in order to quickly secure Tripoli's western rear and secure its fuel supply for offensives elsewhere.

The rebels formed the twelve-man Zawiyah Military Council of defected army officers, commanded by Colonel Hussein Darbouk, to oversee the city's defense.²⁰⁷ While there were thousands of volunteers eager to defend

BATTLE OF ZAWIYAH
FEBRUARY-MARCH 2011



the city, shortages of weapons and ammunition limited the number of armed fighters to several hundred. The rebels possessed a mixture of small arms, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, and a handful of technicals, armored vehicles, and tanks.²⁰⁸ The armaments came primarily from the army and police defectors who provided access to armories, in addition to the weapons looted from government buildings and captured from loyalist soldiers. The opposition forces set up dozens of roadblocks on the main roads leading into the city center and established defensive positions in buildings and streets around Martyrs Square as gun battles erupted with loyalist troops on Zawiyah's outskirts.²⁰⁹

Similar to the elements of the army that had defected in Misrata and Cyrenaica, the officers in Zawiyah did not have sufficient stockpiles of weapons needed to fight the

regime's far better-equipped paramilitary forces. The army had access to little weaponry because of Qaddafi's deep suspicions of the institution. Instead, Qaddafi entrusted control of the stockpiles to the paramilitary forces and the revolutionary committees. Thus, while the rebels claimed to have 2,000 fighters, the figure appears to include masses of unarmed rebel volunteers that would congregate in the city square throughout the siege. The crippling shortages forced the rebels to fight in shifts of about 300 to 400 men at a time. Their numbers dwindled even further as the fighting stretched on and the rebels' ammunition was depleted, inevitably leading to the collapse of the city's defenses.²¹⁰

In the days following Qaddafi's speech to Zawiyah on February 24, the rebels continuously clashed with a deterrence battalion on the eastern edge of the city.²¹¹

The loyalists began launching daily assaults into Zawiyah with tanks, armored vehicles and technicals supported by artillery and sniper fire but made little headway.²¹² The loyalist forces at Zawiyah were reportedly commanded by Brigadier General Mahdi al-Arabi and Major General Khweldi Hamedi, both participants in Qaddafi's 1969 coup.²¹³ Al-Arabi, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and a resident of Zawiyah, led the initial attacks on the city as the head of a deterrent battalion.²¹⁴ Hamedi was a long-serving member of the RCC (and one of the few senior military officers from that era that Qaddafi never purged, perhaps because his daughter is married to Qaddafi's son Saadi) and a resident of Surman, ten miles west of Zawiyah. Hamedi reportedly led his deterrent battalion from Surman at Zawiyah.²¹⁵ By March 4, another battalion-sized force from the Khamis Brigade arrived from Tripoli with approximately 500 troops and a number of tanks, armored vehicles, technicals and heavy artillery to join the siege.²¹⁶ The unrest in Tripoli, which had persisted until the end of February, likely delayed the loyalist reinforcements to Zawiyah. The preference given to Tripoli indicates that Qaddafi was only comfortable dispatching his top paramilitary units to the front after crushing the threat in the capital. With the additional troops from the Khamis Brigade, the loyalists extended their lines to the south and northwest, encircling Zawiyah and beginning the siege.²¹⁷

As the tide across Libya turned in Qaddafi's favor in early March, the dwindling supply of ammunition and the growing number of loyalist forces around the city left the Zawiyah Military Council in a dire situation.²¹⁸ On March 4, Colonel Darbouk, along with sixty fighters, took an enormous risk and attempted a surprise raid against the loyalist military base at Harsha, twelve miles to the west of Zawiyah, to seize its arsenal.²¹⁹ The Khamis Brigade, arriving to reinforce the loyalist positions on the western edges of Zawiyah, surrounded and destroyed the raiding party in fierce fighting despite attempts from rebels inside the city to counterattack and free their trapped men. The loyalists, pressing their advantage, mounted a fierce two-front assault on the city.²²⁰ The attack nearly broke the rebels, causing the regime to preemptively claim it had recaptured Zawiyah, but loyalist troops withdrew as night fell. While the rebels managed to hold on, they had suffered a near-fatal blow during the day's combat. Darbouk and more than forty rebels were killed, fifty were wounded and dozens were reported missing during the raid and subsequent loyalist

counterattack.²²¹ After the failed raid on Harsha, and with no prospect for relief or resupply, the rebel defeat at Zawiyah became a matter of time.

With Zawiyah surrounded and the rebellion's momentum beginning to reverse nation-wide in early March, loyalists began attacking the city from multiple directions. The regime deployed snipers along the city's rooftops, and the indiscriminate long-range fire degraded the opposition's morale and inflicted heavy casualties on rebels and civilians. For the next two weeks in March, the fighting in Zawiyah became a near-daily routine of loyalist attacks and withdrawals. Artillery would pummel the city early in the morning, providing cover for loyalist troops as they moved towards the rebels' defenses. Loyalist tanks and infantry would then stage simultaneous but poorly coordinated assaults from the east and west, forcing the rebels to divide their forces. Heavy street-to-street fighting raged during the day as the rebels steadily retreated deeper into the city until the loyalists would fall back in the late afternoon.²²² The ebb and flow of the battle gave the impression that the rebels were driving back Qaddafi's forces nearly every day, but there was little decisive action by either side. Rather than being beaten, the loyalists were unable to dislodge the defenders and withdrew before nightfall, minimizing their exposure in the hostile environment but allowing the rebels to reorganize their defenses and regain lost ground. While both sides sustained losses in men and equipment in the chaotic street fighting, the regime's resource advantage provided it the upper hand over time. The persistent pressure on the city from multiple directions whittled away at the rebels' fighting capability as the defenders reached the end of their ammunition.²²³

On March 10, the regime offered to negotiate with the Zawiyah Military Council for the city's surrender. Rebel spokesmen claimed to have rejected negotiations, but the situation had become untenable.²²⁴ Surrounded and almost completely out of ammunition, the rebels started to melt back into the city's population. Some three hundred to four hundred fighters fled into the surrounding farmland or slipped through the loyalist lines and joined the growing rebellion in the Nafusa Mountains to the south, where they formed the Zawiyah Brigade.²²⁵ Loyalist troops were in firm control of central Zawiyah on March 11.²²⁶ During the two weeks of the Battle of Zawiyah, more than two hundred rebels and civilians were reportedly killed and hundreds more

wounded. Loyalist troops suffered at least several dozen casualties. The rebels reportedly killed several loyalist officers and the regime reported a general defected.²²⁷ By the time pro-Qaddafi militia occupied the city, much of central Zawiyah was badly damaged. In a demonstration of the regime's victory, loyalist tanks disinterred the makeshift cemetery of rebel dead in Martyrs Square, and draped the regime's green flag across the city center for foreign journalists brought to the city from Tripoli.²²⁸ The Souq Mosque, which had become a symbol of the city's resistance, was later razed to the ground.²²⁹

With Zawiyah seemingly pacified, Qaddafi shifted many of his forces, including the Khamis Brigade, eastward to join in the siege of Misrata.²³⁰ The regime had secured the refinery and import terminal to provide a temporary supply of fuel for loyalist troops and Tripoli. However, rebels in the Nafusa Mountains would eventually cut the critical pipeline from Fezzan to Zawiyah, and international sanctions would complicate the regime's efforts to import fuel.²³¹ Other loyalist units that had recaptured Sabratha and fought at Zawiyah, likely Hamedi's battalion, moved northwest towards Zuwarah, the last rebel-held town on the Jafara Plain.²³²

Zuwarah is a coastal town forty miles west of Zawiyah with a population of around 40,000 people, the majority of them ethnic Berbers.²³³ Dominated by the Ait Willoul tribe, Zuwarah is the largest Berber settlement on the Jafara Plain, although the majority of Berbers reside in the Nafusa Mountains about seventy miles to the south. Along with Berber towns in the Nafusa, Zuwarah rebelled around February 23 after local army units sided with anti-regime demonstrators and forced loyalist police forces out of the town.²³⁴ The army officers and town leaders established a council to administer the town.²³⁵ Qaddafi dispatched a messenger to negotiate with the Zuwarah Council, offering amnesty and money if the town surrendered; otherwise it would be taken by force.²³⁶ Rejecting the offer, the rebels in Zuwarah escaped attack for twenty days as the regime concentrated on retaking Zawiyah.²³⁷ In the interim, thousands of the town's residents fled toward Tunisia in anticipation of the regime's assault.²³⁸ After Zawiyah fell on March 11, the loyalist troops at Sabratha quickly moved towards Zuwarah in technicals and tanks and encircled the city.²³⁹ Faced with certain defeat and demoralized by the regime's victory at Zawiyah, the rebellion in Zuwarah collapsed.²⁴⁰ On March 14, after days of intermittent skirmishing

and shelling, the regime recaptured Zuwarah with little resistance.²⁴¹

While the Zawiyah rebellion had dissipated in early March and the regime secured the city, an underground rebel movement in the city began conducting irregular small arms attacks against the occupying troops.²⁴² Since the resistance in Zawiyah collapsed due to insufficient supplies, the rebels in the Nafusa Mountains attempted to support the guerilla movement and rekindle an uprising by smuggling weapons into the area. To prevent arms from reaching the city, government militias established an array of checkpoints around the city and surrounding roads to search vehicles for weapons.²⁴³ On June 11, up to a hundred rebel fighters from the Nafusa Mountains infiltrated through loyalist lines on the Jafara Plain and attacked the troops holding Zawiyah, attempting to prompt another uprising.²⁴⁴ Loyalist forces destroyed the rebel raiding party after two days of fighting on the western outskirts of Zawiyah around Al-Mutrad and Harsha, killing thirty fighters and wounding another twenty.²⁴⁵

In many respects, the Battle of Zawiyah reflected Qaddafi's simple but effective strategy to recapture Misrata, Benghazi, and other rebel-held cities. While the regime crushed the uprising at Zawiyah, it had consumed weeks of time and bottled up some of Qaddafi's best forces which could have bolstered his offensives to the east at Misrata and in Cyrenaica. Nonetheless, the battle was a harbinger of the fierce fighting to come in Misrata and other cities. Zawiyah remained under the regime's control until August 13, 2011, when rebels rapidly advanced out of the Nafusa Mountains and attacked the city and other key points on the Jafara Plain.

This series continues with Part Two: Escalation and Intervention, which documents the international reaction to the war and the military intervention in Libya under U.S.-led Operation Odyssey Dawn and the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector.

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