
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

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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

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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.