

REPORT FROM THE LIBYAN-TUNISIAN BORDER, PART II

The following is the second and final installment of a field report written by a STRATFOR source who recently visited the Libyan-Tunisian border. While Libyan rebels in the coastal town of Misurata have made significant gains in recent weeks against the Libyan army, the other remaining outpost of rebellion in western Libya -- mainly ethnic Berbers holding out in the Nafusa Mountains -- has seen no significant change in the tactical situation since rebels seized the Wazin-Dehiba border crossing April 21.

Forces loyal to Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi launch Grad rockets and other forms of artillery at the string of rebel-held towns along the mountain range on a daily basis, but they have been unable to retake the elevated positions, which give the rebels access to a strategic redoubt in neighboring Tunisia. Control of the border crossing -- one of only two official outposts between the two countries, and the only one in the vicinity of the Nafusa Mountains (also known as the Western Mountains) -- affords the rebels the luxury of an unimpeded supply line from Tunisia. Were the rebels to lose control of the border post, they would be forced to smuggle materiel through the mountains. Though local tribes know the terrain well and are used to smuggling subsidized gasoline from Libya into Tunisia during the days before the Libyan conflict broke out, this is still a less-secure proposition than simply driving across the border on the main road and would make it more difficult for the rebels to sustain their guerrilla fight against Gadhafi.

The fighting between the Libyan army and the rebels in the Nafusa Mountains has caused strains recently between the governments of Tunisia and Libya. Reports of stray Libyan artillery rockets landing on Tunisian soil are frequent, and though the damage has been minimal -- a few injuries, but no deaths -- there have also been instances in which Libyan soldiers fled into Tunisia during firefights with rebel forces, which Tunisia sees as a violation of its sovereignty. At the time STRATFOR's source was leaving Dehiba, dozens of artillery rockets allegedly fell in the vicinity of the town once again, prompting the Tunisian government to issue a communique in which it threatened to report Libya to the U.N. Security Council for "committing acts of an enemy."

STRATFOR Editor's Note: What follows is a field report from a STRATFOR source in the region.

"I crossed onto the Libyan side again May 16 and talked to a bunch of traders from Zentan who sell sheep in Tunisia and bring gasoline back to Zentan the next day. They told me Zentan is being hit by an average of 20 artillery rockets -- considered by everyone to be 122 mm Grads -- each day, sometimes as many as 100. Only four struck on May 15, and there were none during the two or three previous days. I tend to consider the numbers rhetorical exaggerations on their part, but then again I heard heavy machine gun fire and at least 15 artillery rockets target the mountains during the two nights I was in Dehiba. As far as the military situation in and around Zentan is concerned, there seems to basically have been no significant change over the last three months, of course with the exception of the border post having been taken and its effect on the rebel supply lines. Before, everything had to go through the smuggling routes in the mountains -- actually more like big hills, but pretty steep.

Both on the Tunisian and Libyan side, everyone was smuggling even before the war. Dehiba is a sort of bay surrounded on two sides by the mountains behind which lies Libya. Before the unrest, people were bringing gasoline from Libya into Tunisia because it was so much cheaper. Now the direction of the traffic has changed but the intensity only has picked up. There are rundown pickup trucks all over the place that have no license plates and are only used to cross the mountains. The soldiers and border control guards know this, of course; they can actually see it because the main point of commerce to trade sheep brought in from Libya is just behind the border post. This makes the whole situation kind of odd as cars going through the post are

subject to a close scrutiny. But at the same time, everyone knows you can just go around. I guess the idea is that only locals can avoid the posts because they know the routes you have to take, while foreigners from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb -- who are the ones people are worried about, especially since the arrests in recent weeks -- have to go through the controls.

In Zentan, the rebels hold the city center and families and old men are in the outskirts or accompanying villages. These men claimed that only 25 percent of residents had left, and after seeing the relatively low amount of refugees on the Tunisian side of the border I would believe that. Gadhafi's troops shell downtown Zentan from down the mountain, though there does not seem to be much of a discernable pattern to their targeting. The rebels there claim to have killed 200 soldiers and imprisoned 250. At the same time, they claim there are only 500 soldiers encircling Zentan. Among the prisoners, according to the two supply runners I spoke to, there are mercenaries from Mali, Chad, Algeria and Sudan. Also, the families of local officers on Gadhafi's side supposedly are being held hostage in Tripoli in order to ensure the officers' obeisance.

I believe most of what those two told me, except some of the figures. They were guests of the man with whom I was staying. We ate, had tea and smoked together. This kind of stuff means everything down there. I had previously tried to talk to people from Zentan in a refugee camp while with an American working for an international nongovernmental organization and no one wanted to talk to us. The local who introduced me changed everything in that sense.

On the Libyan side of the border, I ventured into the first rebel-held town, Wazin. I was unable to go farther, as I had no one to translate for me and was worried about not getting back to Tunisia before nightfall (when the shelling usually starts). I talked to a group of young men from Jadu there. There were maybe seven or eight of them hanging out at a bombed-out gas station where they also sleep. The rebels have formed troops by locality of about 20 men each. They take shifts up on the mountains in three units -- two days up there defending their front, one day in the valley to relax. Underequipped, they are forced to hand off their arms to the ones coming up when they switch. They claim they have taken all their weapons from Gadhafi's soldiers.

All the rebels I met were former students or university graduates with low-paying jobs, one truck driver with a geology degree, for example, who had never fought before. I doubt very much their claim that the rebels are composed of about 40-50 percent former professional soldiers. I didn't see nor talk to a single rebel who fit this description.

One of my new friends, a youngster living in Dehiba, called me when I was on my way back to Tunis and told me Gadhafi's forces had started shelling more intensely, including during the day, which didn't happen when I was there. It seems they also targeted Wazin, which also hadn't been happening. The rebels on the mountain road they are holding seem to have moved back their positions some. Maybe that rumor that Gadhafi's troops had received reinforcements a few days ago was true after all.

The new rumor (as of May 17) is that Gadhafi has given his troops 48 hours to take the border post again, but then again, we've seen self-imposed deadlines like this from Gadhafi before in other theaters of the war, and they typically don't mean much."

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