

A Stratfor Special Report

The Libyan city of Misrata is the last remaining major rebel outpost in western Libya. Misrata's access to the sea has enabled regular shipments of food, weapons, medicine and ammunition to sustain the resistance in the face of daily attacks by forces loyal to Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Gadhafi's forces are intent on retaking the port at Misrata, while the Libyan rebels based in Benghazi hope the looming humanitarian crisis in Misrata will persuade the European coalition leading the mission in Libya to deploy ground troops to assist the rebels.

Analysis

The city of Misrata is the last major rebel outpost in western Libya, with the opposition there able to hold out against the Libyan army for nearly two months of fighting due to its control of the port on the Gulf of Sidra. Rebel control of the port means access to the outside world, which has allowed a steady stream of ships to supply the city with medicine, food, weapons, and the current most-needed item, ammunition. The ships come from aid agencies (whether international organizations such as the United Nations, Red Cross or the International Organization for Migration, or national groups mainly from countries like France, Turkey and Qatar), and also from the Misuratan rebels' allies in Benghazi.

Recent calls by rebel leaders in both Misrata and Benghazi for foreign troops to come to the city's aid highlights the decision the European coalition leading the mission to unseat Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi must now make: Whether or not it is prepared to put forces on the ground in Libya. The Benghazi-based eastern Libyan rebel leadership knows that Misrata is its last chance to convince the international community that the opposition needs more help than just NATO airstrikes, and is doing all it can to use the looming humanitarian crisis in the city to induce the Europeans to commit troops.

Gadhafi's forces aim to retake the port in order to end the resistance in Misrata for two main reasons:

- * Misrata's symbolic value: The city is developing an image in the rest of the world as a Libyan version of Sarajevo, the Bosnian city which held out for four years while surrounded by Serbian and Bosnian Serb forces during the Yugoslav civil war. Misrata is now seen as Benghazi was in mid-March: the city whose collapse would usher in a humanitarian crisis. (It was only when Benghazi appeared on the verge of falling that the U.N. resolution which cleared the way for the implementation of the NATO no-fly zone [NFZ] was rushed through). Furthermore, the ongoing rebellion in Misrata shows that resistance against Gadhafi is not confined to eastern Libya and therefore that the rebellion is not a secessionist struggle. Indeed, other pockets of resistance beyond eastern Libya can still be found in the Western Mountains region near Nalut and Zintan. But the fighting in Misrata is much more significant because it is a city of around 500,000 people, the third-largest in the country, and located just across the Mediterranean from Europe. The longer Misrata can stand, the more hope it gives other rebel forces, and the more it keeps Libya in the Western public's mind.
- * The city's potential strategic value: Misrata's location along the Gulf of Sidra in the west makes it a potential staging ground for an attack on Gadhafi's core territory. This would represent a much more tangible threat to Gadhafi than any symbolic value the city might provide if a capable force intent on overthrowing the Libyan leader ever tried to use Misrata as a beachhead. However, as the Misuratans' eastern allies are far from coalescing into a fighting force capable of challenging Gadhafi, this remains a hypothetical threat at the moment. Talk by some European nations of establishing a maritime corridor connecting the city to Benghazi for the shipment of supplies into the port would mean much more if there were a credible force that could be shipped in. If there were ever a real push to send foreign troops into Libya, however, this would truly threaten Gadhafi. This gives him the impetus to recapture the city in full as soon as possible.

Rebels claim that nearly 200 Grad artillery rockets launched on the port

April 14 led to its brief closure, but since then, ships have continued to come and go amid daily reports of intense fighting. There have also been accusations that Gadhafi's forces are using cluster munitions in Misurata, and reports have come daily since March that artillery, snipers and tanks have been deployed in the city. The Libyan government counters that the West is trying to sensationalize the situation there in order to give the United Nations pretext for calling for the deployment of ground forces.

While foreign aid has helped the rebels continue to fight, it has not allowed them to actually defeat the Libyan army, nor does the situation show much sign of shifting anytime soon. Not only are the eastern Libyan rebels not much help to their allies in Misurata, but even NATO has been unable to truly turn the tide, as the NFZ is increasingly ineffective in the current situation. Densely-packed cities make it nearly impossible for NATO jets under strict orders to avoid civilian casualties to identify targets. Indeed, the chairman of NATO's military committee, Adm. Giampaolo Di Paola, said April 19 that the current operation makes it "very difficult" to halt the Gadhafi regime's assault on the city, pointing especially to NATO jets' inability to neutralize the Libyan army's mortars and rockets without killing too many civilians.

Time is therefore on Gadhafi's side in Misurata, as long as he can sustain combat operations. Assuming that Gadhafi's position in Tripoli is secure, the only thing that could prevent the eventual victory of the Libyan army there would be the insertion of foreign ground troops, something no nation has indicated it is willing to do. And until April 19, no Libyans had publicly advocated for this option, either.

The Rebels' reluctant request

Libyans are very sensitive to foreign (particularly Italian) encroachment, given the country's colonial past. This, combined with the recent memory of the war in Iraq, formed the basis of the rebels' objection to any foreign soldiers coming to their aid on the ground. On April 19, Nouri Abdallah Abdel Ati, a member of Misurata's 17-person leadership committee, became the first known Libyan rebel leader to publicly reverse this position. Ati called on foreign forces — specifically the United Nations or NATO — to enter Misurata to protect the city's civilians, and denied that this would be a display of Western occupation or colonialism. Ati said that if such forces did not come, the people of Misurata would die.

Ati's statement came just one day after a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said the European Union had unanimously approved a concept of operations plan for a future militarily-backed humanitarian mission to aid the people of Misurata, an idea that had been under development for more than a week. The force is only in the concept stage right now, and EU officials have not strayed from the pledge that only an explicit U.N. call for help would cause them to move beyond this stage. Whatever such an intervention would be called, it would by its nature be a combat operation with considerable risk of both escalation and entanglement far beyond what any participating country envisioned when it first committed to the NFZ.

There is no solid indication that the United Nations is on the verge of calling for an urgent intervention in Misurata — however, this was also the case in the days leading up to the passage of U.N. Resolution 1973, a resolution which took almost all by surprise and cleared the way for the implementation of the NFZ. While there is often little material impact of U.N. accusations of war crimes against particular governments, an April 20 statement by U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay alleging that the actions of the Libyan army in Misurata could be labeled as such is significant only in light of the EU plans for a militarily-backed humanitarian mission.

Europe's considerations

Though European involvement in Libya appears to be increasing — possibly to the point where the Europeans might send ground troops, despite public pledges to the contrary from all national leaders — it is not clear how far France, the United Kingdom and Italy are willing to go

along this path. All three countries have since April 19 pledged to send small numbers of military advisers to Benghazi, but that does not address the situation in Misurata. If the city were to fall, a political solution and cease-fire between Gadhafi and the eastern rebels would no longer be unthinkable, as Misurata is the last major rebel outpost standing in the way of a true de facto partition of Libya. This would of course represent an embarrassment for NATO forces (especially Paris, London and to a lesser extent, Washington and Rome) that have led the campaign thus far, as the implicit mission has been regime change all along. However, the United States is making it increasingly clear that it intends to allow the Europeans to handle the Libyan situation. It will be up to the French, British and Italians to pick from a handful of options: cutting their losses and pushing for a political settlement in the event of Misurata's fall, maintaining a stalemate for an indefinite period, or escalating matters through the insertion of ground forces designed to fully defeat Gadhafi, regardless of whether Misurata falls.

A push for a political settlement would represent a failure for the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council, which cannot be secure with Gadhafi still in power. The eastern rebel leadership knows that Misurata is its last true chance to convince the international community of the need for more drastic action against Gadhafi, since Benghazi has proven possible to secure from attack using air power while Misurata represents the last urgent risk of massive civilian casualties at the hands of Gadhafi's forces.

Those leading the mission to overthrow Gadhafi now find themselves having to make decisions that just a few weeks ago they had hoped they would not be forced to make. For the Libyan rebels, that means asking for foreign troops to help fight the Libyan army. A day after the Misurata opposition official made his appeal for foreign troops, the spokesman for the Benghazi-based rebel council also voiced his support for a reversal in the rebels' long-held opposition to the idea, saying that if protecting Libyan civilians "does not come except through ground forces ... then there is no harm in that at all." For the Europeans, it means having to decide if they are fully prepared to follow through in fomenting regime change. Misurata will be the testing ground for these decisions.