

# War in Libya: Disintegration of Gaddafi forces and the growing capacity of the rebels

*Aljazeera Center for Studies*



It has been nearly two months since NATO's aerial operations began in Libya, first under the name "Operation Odyssey Dawn," led by the United States, then under the name "Operation Unified Protector" under the command of NATO.

Despite the success of these operations in reining the progress of forces loyal to the regime on the eastern and western fronts and reducing its military capabilities to levels that prevent it from finalizing the waging conflict thus paving the way for its eventual defeat, NATO's strategy has been strongly criticised for the slow pace of its operations and the insufficiency of resources needed to curtail the life of the war as well as its failure to protect Libyan civilians from the regime's forces. This has prompted Secretary-General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, to defend NATO's efforts before the World Affairs Council in Atlanta on Tuesday, May 10th declaring, "We can accomplish great things via air raids but we cannot guarantee 100 percent that a rogue regime like Gaddafi's will not attack its own people. A military campaign alone will not resolve the conflict in Libya... We will increase military and political pressure and I am confident this combination will lead to the collapse of the regime".

Consequently, a stalemate facing NATO's operations in Libya is difficult to accept when comparing the operational status quo now to that of the start of the air campaign on the 19th of this past March, although it must be said that the international coalition has not done enough just yet to destroy the forces of the regime or disrupt its internal cohesion.

## **The Operational Situation on the Conflict Fronts**

### **The Western Front**

Confrontations on the western front are concentrated in the city of Misrata and its outskirts, and in the areas surrounding the Western Mountains of Nafusa. Rebel activity was also witnessed last week in the capital, Tripoli.

#### **Misrata**

The regime as well as the rebels and NATO are all well-aware of the importance of Misrata as the third largest city of Libya. It is a coastal city located in the middle between Tripoli, the source of supply for the western front, and Sirte, the source of supply for the eastern front, and has a current symbolic status in the opposition as the key to unity of Libya's east and west following the imminent collapse of the regime.

After the regime's attempt to force its way towards the centre of the city and seize it in mid-April, it now appears that the battalion has retreated to the outskirts of Misrata due to a combination of NATO air strikes, growing capabilities and expertise of rebel defenders of the city, and the arrival of relatively better weapons and fighters, from eastern Libya, through its lifeline, the seaport. It is because of this very seaport that the regime's forces persist in bombing and mining Misrata's waters.

Recently the rebels have made significant progress, advancing west of Misrata aiming to acquire control of Zliten, located 60 kilometres to its west. They also aim to seize the air base south of the city to push the regime's missile systems and artillery forces beyond the effective range of the city.

### **The Western Mountain Areas**

The regime is also fully aware of the importance of the Western Mountain areas as a source of threat to Tripoli and its western extensions as they form a potential barrier to communication with Libya's south. It employs about three brigades of its forces and utilizes

weapons of joint formations – each formation being composed of 70-80 tanks, armoured combat vehicles, a number of multiple rocket launchers and truck-mounted anti-aircraft guns –to attack the major towns of Alzentan, Ifrane, and Nalut.

Simultaneously, however, the rebels have come together to form one united force dubbed "the Unified Mountains Forces" which acts in a systematic manner in the face of regime attacks on the outskirts of Alzentan, Ifrane, and Nalut and the long distance shelling of their centres. The rebels' persistence in prolonging their dominance over the Wazin -Dhueiba border crossing with Tunisia (considered to be the main supply line of weapons, fighters, food, and water) is disconcerting to the regime which continues to shell it from the neighbouring town of Ghazaya.

## **Tripoli**

Since the last week of April, NATO strategy has shifted to focus on the upper command and control centres at the heart of the Libyan capital. These operations reached their peak on the 30th of the month. Housing compounds inhabited by Gaddafi's family were shelled thus causing the death of his son and some family members.

Also, government and intelligence compounds were bombed on Tuesday, May 10th, thus provoking the eruption of mass protests against the regime in many areas throughout the capital. Some of the protesters even reached the Mitiga air base, east of the capital.

## **The Eastern Front**

The halt of hostilities between Marsa el-Brega and Ajdabiya, the continuation of coalition aircraft bombing regime forces in their deployment locations within Brega and Ras Lanuf, and the destruction of ammunition depots and artillery at the base of the main supply for the eastern front in the city of Sirte, provided an opportunity for the rebels to re-organize and receive training as well as send reinforcements to the city of Misrata by sea. Attempts by regime forces to progress towards Ajdabiya in the south, through the oases of Kufra and Gallo, appear staggering and counter-productive due to the air strikes by the coalition in the sweeping desert environment. Furthermore, there is a possibility that the rebels will develop their operations west towards Brega, while rates of attrition of the regime forces and supply bases particularly in the regions of Sirte and the Kufra Oasis in increase.

## **History of the Conflict and the Status of Parties**

The conflict has taken the form of cumulative attrition of the capacity of the regime in Libya by coalition air strikes and rebel attacks. The coalition also targets major ground systems such as tanks, armoured combat vehicles and rocket-launchers, skilled military personnel, command and control centres and the bases of the main supply and logistic transport systems, hoping to bring about the collapse of the regime.

Vice Admiral Rinaldo Veri, Commander of Maritime Forces for Operation Unified Protector has stated, "There is no deadlock, but we are moving slowly and steadily. There is positive achievement everyday and we are gradually getting closer to the ultimate goal we seek." The positions of the three actors in the ongoing military conflict can be summarised as follows:

## **The Forces of the Regime**

- Regime forces may have adapted to an operational environment where the international coalition assumes full aerial command. They use infantry troops, backed by armoured vehicles, to try to penetrate urban areas, with the backing of remote

artillery and missile shelling from the margins, in an attempt to clear the areas of their populations and to terrorize the people to thus enable the capture of the areas.

- The insistence of the regime to control the whole of Libya disperses its efforts and exposes its military capabilities to continuous exhaustion on more than one front.
- With diminishing resources and a naval blockade, the regime is no longer able to mobilize enough troops to defeat the rebels and put an end to clashes on any of the warring fronts.

### **Rebel Forces**

- The rebels have developed tactics corresponding to the nature of the battles whether in cities, such as Misrata and its surroundings, using anti-tank armoured vehicles and establishing temporary barriers, or near mountains, forming unified leadership, adopting manoeuvring tactics at the edges and securing supply crossings.
- There is relative improvement, albeit less than anticipated, in the weapons systems, which include artillery rocket systems of 107 mm and 122 mm, mortars and guns, recoilless calibres of 106 mm, and anti-aircraft artillery loaded on trucks, as well as some Milan anti-tank missiles.
- Rebel forces have not lost any gained areas recently.

### **Coalition Forces (NATO)**

- NATO has developed new tactics to counter those utilized by the regime forces in disguised night movement, centralization in urban areas, and use of unmanned aircraft (UAV).
- NATO has modified its bombing strategy to focus on targeting high political and military leadership of the regime in order to maintain pressure and force it to surrender to the coalition's terms.
- NATO is still committed to using limited air force in a protracted struggle to achieve the ultimate goals of the campaign (the rate of flights does not exceed 160 sorties, including 60 offensive sorties). However, the coalition's strategy is still extremely costly in terms of both casualties and material losses aside from the high economic costs of rebuilding the nation after the end of the conflict and the dangers of internal political divisions with the prolongation of this military confrontation.