

The war in Libya: the turn of the helicopters

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With the start of the third month of the international coalition's campaign in Libya, and after carrying out more than 10,000 sorties, of which more than 4,000 have been offensive attacks by the air force since 19 March of last year, we can say that there has been success achieved on the ground in accordance with the alliance's mission. One of its key results is that the momentum of the regime's forces and their offensive against the strongholds of the rebels in the east and west of Libya has calmed down. These forces are now depending on manoeuvres, rather than launching huge attacks with ground forces, in an attempt to buy time, hoping to reach an honourable solution from the viewpoint of the regime. The regime wants to maintain its grip on power, even within a small part of the country, despite mounting political and diplomatic isolation on the regime both regionally and internationally. This has been achieved partly due to the undermining of the regime's military capability, thus allowing the rebels to tighten their grip on their strongholds in the east and some parts of the west, thanks to the alliance's sustained air strikes.

However, the reality of it means that the regime is still tightening its grip on much of the western part of the country and the capital, Tripoli. Moreover, it has managed to maintain some kind of military adaptation to the situation where the Coalition has the complete upper hand on air. The regime has been forced to resort to the use of light weapons and mobile platforms instead of major warfare machinery. It is also confined to areas with fortified defences and it only launches night offensives and remote shelling against the strongholds of the rebels in and around the city of Misurata, and towards the towns of Mount Nefoussa in the far west.

It can be said that the international coalition is facing some problems which can be viewed in three dimensions:

First: the time the Libyan regime is seeking to buy does not work in favour of the coalition, for several reasons, the least of which is the eminent elections next year in the United States and France, as well as the looming doubts among the public within the coalition countries over the length of the operations.

Second: the nature of the majority of the regimes in the Third World is such that these regimes do not conduct cost analysis to know the benefits /losses of the conflict and cannot act accordingly; they do not know whether to continue fighting or to submit to the conditions of the stronger party. In the case of Libya, should change take place it means that the regime's figureheads will be brought to justice in the International Criminal Court. The regime's understanding of this fact makes it fight to the end, without considering its daily loss of military capabilities and the human suffering throughout the country.

Third: in the humanitarian military interventions, as in the case of Libya, there is an emphasis by political leaders on the importance of reducing the risks facing the intervention forces on the one hand, as well as protecting the civilian population against threats of their enemies on the other, which imposes strict rules of engagement that limit the use of military force required for intervention. In the Libyan model, in particular, the West has rejected the possibility of sending ground troops.

The Coalition's predicament: capacities less than goals

A thorough reading of the Coalition's air sorties and strikes against targets in Libya for a period of 66 days indicates that there has been a shift from a concentration on specific military targets in the first month to maximising the damage against Gaddafi's forces which are positioned on the major combat fronts in Ajdabiya in the Middle and Misurata and mountain areas in Nefoussa in the West. Air strikes are directed to centres of command and control and the headquarters of the regime in the capital Tripoli, in parallel with continued

pressure on the same fronts, the former albeit at a lower rate, in an attempt to inflict a higher degree of political and psychological damage in the regime and its inner circle. However, the regime's adaptation to the coalition's air operations and its relative success in maintaining its continuation at alternative locations have prompted the military leaders and even politicians in the coalition to talk about the need to intensify air strikes, and even to expand the lists of targets to include infrastructure such as bridges, power stations and telecommunication systems, which the British Chief of Staff, Gen. David Richards, has likened to an attempt to replicate the success of this tactic during the NATO operations in Kosovo in 1999.

To summarize, this dilemma can be attributed to a number of factors involving the three levels of conflict:

1- Strategically

- allocation of limited military resources not was not on a par with the political objectives set for the campaign (for example, the number of combat aircraft assigned for offensive strikes does not exceed 72 aircraft compared to 336 combat aircraft allocated for these tasks during air operations over Kosovo in 1999, which were supported by strategic bomber flights emanating directly from the U.S.).
- exclusion of any talk about the possibility of landing ground troops in Libya.
- deliberate slowdown in supporting the Libyan rebels with military equipment to allow them the ability of manoeuvre and progressing outside their current strongholds.

2- Operationally

- delay in the targeting of command and control centres and the headquarters of the political and military leadership for more than a month after the start of the operations.
- the coalition's operation from concentration areas off the Libyan coast, especially from air bases in the south of Europe and some Mediterranean islands, increases the extent of the work of combat aircraft, thus reducing rates of daily sorties (for instance, the Sigonella Airbase is located on the Italian island of Sicily at a distance of about 550 km from Tripoli, while the Saljnara French base on the island of Corsica, is about 1100 km from the same city).
- the air embargo is not tight enough to stop supply lines flowing from the south and west across the Libyan border in favour of the regime in Tripoli.

3- Tactically

- the task of air operations is only conducted by fixed wing aircraft.
- use of costly and weapons and ammunition of high precision (for example, cost of laser-guided or GPS bombs is about \$40,000 each, and up to \$300,000 for all types of remote bombing as in the case of the French AASM anti-air rockets), and thus they are only used for high-value targets.
- the lack of capacity to deal with moving small, speedy targets that rely on surprise and operate with stealth. These are known as targets of critical time (used by the Libyan regime extensively with rocket launchers, medium and heavy machine guns

for manoeuvring in the outskirts of the rebel – controlled cities and towns, in a process of hit-and hide)

Helicopters in the theatre of operations

In the coalition's quest to resolve the said military dilemma, the most notable development happened last week when France announced on 23 May, the deployment of the amphibian warship *Tonnerre*, carrying 12 Tiger HAP and Gazelle assault helicopters, on the Libyan coast to be used in offensive operations against the forces of the Libyan regime. It was the same day the London-based Daily Telegraph reported the departure of the amphibious ship HMS *Ocean*, carrying 12 assault helicopter Apache WAH-64D Apaches for a similar task for the Libyan coast.

The introduction of assault helicopters is an important development towards the escalation of air operations against targets in the Libyan regime, in an attempt by the coalition's military and political leaders to reduce the time span required for ending the NATO mission in Libya, which includes, in addition to the protection of civilians, the removal of the Libyan regime from power in Tripoli. The importance of the operational use of this type of combat equipment is represented in the following elements:

- increase the capacity to deal with critical time targets as a result of helicopters available on amphibious ships near the coast, or the possibility of deploying them on prepared land areas near civilian communities to be protected, which reduces the response time significantly.
- ability to deal with different types of targets such as armoured vehicles, anti-missiles, artillery and mortars and individuals, both snipers or members of military units, thanks to the diversity of well-equipped weapons systems (30mm quick shots artillery, anti-tank missiles of the Trigat LR, French HOT-3, or the American Hellfire AGM - 114D type, as well as warehouses of free-rocket using French launchers of 68mm and American launchers of 70mm).
- cost-reduction both ammunition and aircraft operation allows the opportunity to expand the spectrum of combat targets.
- high accuracy of targeting, especially with the joint work of French and British special forces located on the ground in the areas of operations.
- increase in the daily sortie rates with the Coalition's new force, by at least 30% of the current daily levels.

In return, the capacity of these helicopters seems to be high in the face of the enemy's anti-defence systems, particularly individual rockets and anti-aircraft artillery, one of the problems to be faced when using these types of helicopters, and one which can be overcome by using operational manoeuvres and the electronic protection with which these aircraft are equipped.

Such a development, by introducing new types of combat equipment in the Libyan theatre of operations, marks a serious attempt by the coalition leaders to solve the existing military impasse. The situation thus depends not only on the effectiveness of these new combat systems in the battlefield but also on the margin of manoeuvre available to the adversary, which is diminishing day by day.