Conflict in Libya and the Future Risk to the Demining Community

Adrian King
Allen-Vanguard

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal

Part of the Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
Conflict in Libya and the Future Risk to the Demining Community

The evolving face of modern warfare in Libya and elsewhere will leave behind an explosives legacy that the humanitarian-demining community must manage. This article examines the innovation of the anti-government forces in employing modified weaponry and assesses some of the challenges this might bring to humanitarian demining and explosive-ordnance-disposal teams in the future.

by Adrian King [ Allen-Vanguard Ltd. ]

Since the beginning of Libya’s armed conflict, the anti-government militia has desperately sought the means with which to counter the superior military capability of the better-trained and equipped pro-Gadhafi military forces. Arguably, much of the capability vacuum was filled to some extent by NATO’s military intervention, which although providing a potent and significant air component on the side of the rebels, left anti-government forces disadvantageous, especially during the initial ground-fighting encounters.

A rather apt description of the anti-government forces’ predicament is provided by a glut of available ammunition and a chronic lack of the parent weapon systems from which some ideas were inspired; “necessity has driven this industry, and although many designs are practical under the circumstances, some will inevitably prove unsafe and more of a hazard to the user than the intended target.” As anti-Gadhafi forces gained the ascendency, a requirement developed to employ weapons with some degree of stand-off. This has led to a unique array of sometimes improbable constructions that—although not particularly effective in the majority of cases—gave some degree of capacity to fight entrenched forces occupying the towns and villages of a very limited array of serviceable military vehicles and the personnel trained to operate them. This led to the wholesale modification of any suitable motor vehicle to withstand small-arms fire effects and allow the mounting of heavy weapons to provide the mobility of firepower and transport to the area of battle much needed at the time.

Improvisation is not entirely limited to vehicle-mounted weaponry; dismounted direct and indirect fire systems were also invented or modified. The apparent lack of mortar tubes and rocket-launch platforms, for example, encouraged a rampant garage industry in designing and building the required hardware. Necessity has driven this industry, and although many designs are practical under the circumstances, some will inevitably prove unsafe and more of a hazard to the user than the intended target.

This is a rather apt description of the anti-government forces’ predicament at the outset of the conflict and might also be taken to mean “desperate situations often breed innovative solutions;” and in this, the anti-Gadhafi rebels have on occasion excelled. Their ideas were inspired by a glut of available ammunition and a chronic lack of the parent weapon systems from which to fire and launch it. While certainly innovative, however, the rebels have not always reflected on either the viability or the effectiveness of their improvised weaponry and assesses some of the challenges this might bring to humanitarian demining and explosive-ordnance-disposal teams in the future.

Necessity Drives Innovation

"Necessity is the mother of invention," wrote Plato. This is

An anti-government militia prepares a homemade electric command-initiated firing pack constructed from domestic light switches in preparation to fire 122mm GRAD rockets from an improvised launch platform in Benghazi, Libya on 19 April 2011.

57mm air-to-ground aircraft rocket pod prepared in a ground-to-ground role mounted on a vehicle with improvised launch platform. All photos courtesy of the author.

Unfortunately enough to be caught up in the conflict. The inaccuracy and rather random use of these weapons has probably had negligible tactical effect; perhaps in the aftermath. Effective in the majority of cases—gave some degree of capacity to fight entrenched forces occupying the towns and villages of Misrata. The boat was fortunately destroyed and the explosives detonated by gunfire, but under different circumstances this water-borne IED could have damaged or even sunk a military or commercial vessel. Although the means of initiation were never discovered, radio-signal detonation from shore was the most probable trigger mechanism for this device.

Tactical Warfare Shifts

Libya’s situation is further evidence of the altering nature of modern conflicts and an indication of what the future holds. Conventional military might is confronting increasingly asymmetric tactics, where the ill-equipped and less-able force compensates for military weakness through the employment of improvised weapons and IEDs—tactically effective in the majority of cases—gave some degree of capacity to fight entrenched forces occupying the towns and villages of Misrata. The boat was fortunately destroyed and the explosives detonated by gunfire, but under different circumstances this water-borne IED could have damaged or even sunk a military or commercial vessel. Although the means of initiation were never discovered, radio-signal detonation from shore was the most probable trigger mechanism for this device.

Tactical Warfare Shifts

Libya’s situation is further evidence of the altering nature of modern conflicts and an indication of what the future holds. Conventional military might is confronting increasingly asymmetric tactics, where the ill-equipped and less-able force compensates for military weakness through the employment of improvised weapons and IEDs—tactically effective in the majority of cases—gave some degree of capacity to fight entrenched forces occupying the towns and villages of Misrata. The boat was fortunately destroyed and the explosives detonated by gunfire, but under different circumstances this water-borne IED could have damaged or even sunk a military or commercial vessel. Although the means of initiation were never discovered, radio-signal detonation from shore was the most probable trigger mechanism for this device.

Tactical Warfare Shifts

Libya’s situation is further evidence of the altering nature of modern conflicts and an indication of what the future holds. Conventional military might is confronting increasingly asymmetric tactics, where the ill-equipped and less-able force compensates for military weakness through the employment of improvised weapons and IEDs—tactically effective in the majority of cases—gave some degree of capacity to fight entrenched forces occupying the towns and villages of Misrata. The boat was fortunately destroyed and the explosives detonated by gunfire, but under different circumstances this water-borne IED could have damaged or even sunk a military or commercial vessel. Although the means of initiation were never discovered, radio-signal detonation from shore was the most probable trigger mechanism for this device.