



Airpower Critical Roles in the War on Terrorism

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When proactive means fail to deter terrorist organizations or discourage them from pursuing their bloody and destructive plans, the use of military force becomes imperative to maintain security and achieve stability. Air operations are one of the main tools in the fight against these organizations, due to their advanced capabilities that make them able to launch quick and accurate strikes on many targets, including terrorist groups, their strongholds, training centers and means of transportation. They also provide support to ground forces and enable them to achieve impactful results. It is no exaggeration to say that there can rarely be much success in contemporary counter-terrorism campaigns without relying on airpower.

Unique Capabilities

Airpower has unique combat capabilities, represented in fighter jets, helicopters, drones, and other advanced air systems that enable it to monitor threats, locate the activity of terrorist groups, strike effective harsh blows to terrorist infrastructure, as well as spare the ground forces from confronting terrorists and their preferred method of warfare, which is “guerrilla warfare”, which poses a threat to regular ground forces. It is also a pressurizing tool in the hands of diplomatic power to set the course of political solutions to terrorism. Perhaps these capabilities determine how they can be used in various operations in order to strike crushing blows to terrorist strongholds.

Airpower derives its capabilities from its inherent characteristics of speed, range, and altitude. Speed distinguishes it from the rest of the forces, enabling the reduction of time, controlling the pace of movement, and quickly and smoothly keeping pace with changes. As for range or accessibility, it stems from not being influenced by natural obstacles, such as terrain and water bodies. Airpower is able through altitude to provide self-protection against conventional weapons, provide control and protection cover for other forces, and extend beyond the range of the naked eye. Through altitude, the air

force can see behind enemy lines, subvert elements of surprise, and prepare for their schemes.

Together, these characteristics provide the commander and planner with some principles of war, such as: Economy of effort, where significant roles are played, equivalent to a battalion of tanks or artillery. The Principle of surprise refers to the attacks that can be carried out from all directions, confusing the enemy and weakening their defenses. Flexibility, where several roles can be performed in a single sortie, quickly switching between offensive and defensive missions without the need for reconfiguration and positioning.

Significant Roles

The Air Force plays several important roles in the fight against terrorism, such as:

Reconnaissance: Airpower provides advanced surveillance capabilities to collect intelligence on terrorist targets, activities, and movements, using advanced technologies, surveillance devices, and drones to provide accurate information. This information is particularly important in the strategic planning of military operations, making the right decisions in due course, and getting a head start on the preemptive deterrence of terrorist attacks.

Hitting targets: Perhaps the most prominent role of airpower in the fight against terrorism is to strike direct blows to the strongholds of terrorism. These strikes rely on missiles, bombs and advanced air weapons, which can destroy specific targets without risking the lives of military personnel. Aircraft can track terrorists and their leaders and pursue them using modern technologies, such as remote sensing and automated targeting systems to ensure accuracy and effectiveness. Air force has been used in many operations to target and eradicate the leaders of terrorist organizations, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, former al-Qaeda leader, where a drone fired two missiles at the balcony of his house, hitting him directly, and killing him instantly .

Air Support: The Air Force provides air cover and fire support to ground forces fighting on the ground, in addition to transporting soldiers to hard-to-reach locations, and dropping supplies.

Border Protection: Protecting borders and preventing terrorist infiltration is an important part of the war on terror. Airpower plays a critical role in providing air

fortification of borders, detecting potential threats, and preventing the entry of terrorists.

Deterrence: The presence of warplanes in the sky means tension and anxiety for terrorist groups and confirmation that there is no safe place for them to carry out their activities beyond the reach of air strikes.

Serious Challenges

There are several challenges regarding the use of airpower in the war on terror, which can be classified into three main levels:

Strategic Challenges: They include three sub-challenges. First: conflicting international interests in the location of operations, which causes confusion to the air operation and leads to the spread of terrorist threats in conflict zones. Second: challenging direct or indirect international or regional support for terrorist organizations, whether ideological, moral, economic or military. Third: political restrictions on the use of airpower in conflict zones, manifested in the imposition of arms embargoes or threatening to do so against states defending themselves from terrorist attacks, on the pretexts of human rights and other grounds.

Operational Challenges, which denote the difficulties facing airpower on the battlefield. They include planning air operations in unconventional warfare, especially when geographical boundaries disappear, as battlefields vary between cities, rural areas and rugged areas. This is in addition to the vagueness of the laws of armed conflict and the rules of engagement, which regular military forces adhere to, while terrorist organizations do not recognize them. The final challenge at the operational level is the difficulty of obtaining information that helps in planning air operations, due to the fact that these organizations are usually located within civilian societies and carry out their activities hidden online and in remote areas.

Tactical Challenges: For example, the hazy location of military operations, which varies between government buildings, caves, forests and private houses in residential neighborhoods, and the imbalance of targets and resources used to carry out air attacks. The third tactical challenge is the risk of collateral damage, civilian casualties as a result of air operations, and the use of civilians by terrorists as human shields, which complicates the implementation of offensive air and relief operations.

Impacts and Risks

The use of airpower, as with all forms of military force, has implications and risks that are not limited solely to the adversary; but also to the innocent, not least if it is not used wisely and with restraint, as in the potential increase in casualties and injuries among civilians in the event of disproportionate air strikes, or errors in the geographical identification of targets. It is known that terrorist groups are usually irregular groups, based in civilian areas, which makes them difficult to target and handle. These risks also include the potential reinforcement of terrorist ideologies in case of serious damage inflicted by aerial bombardment on civilian areas and innocent people. As terrorist groups expand beyond state borders, airpower may risk violating the sovereignty of a neighboring state, necessitating previous coordination with the state concerned, as well as conflicting political interests, and divergent positions on terrorist organizations. With prolonged wars and the need for advanced weapons, the problem of high costs arises, which can drain the financial resources of the state, and trigger further burdens because of the war.

Strategy Development

The above challenges and risks dictate the development of a strategic framework for the use of air forces that is able to meet the challenges and manage risks. Military theories and administrative principles can be used to develop this framework, which includes determining the purpose and objective of the use of airpower, analyzing the strategic environment (international, regional, local), and analyzing the threat, its goals and objectives, centers of gravity and critical capabilities of the threat. There is also the need for determining the appropriate strategy, the optimal method and elements of airpower which are meant to achieve the final goal and the required strategic objectives, provided that they are used cautiously, within the framework of the laws of war, and with the least possible civilian damage.

Conclusion

Airpower plays an important role in the war on terrorism. It is capable of gathering information and intelligence, carrying out airstrikes against extremist strongholds with high accuracy, providing cover for ground forces, and securing borders .

Thanks to the capabilities of airpower, it is one of the most important factors for success in the comprehensive campaign of the war on terrorism. However, it should be emphasized that airpower cannot act alone. It is found to work with other forces, within

combined and integrated plans and strategies, to achieve the best results in defeating terrorist groups and reducing the terrorist threat.