



Libya's Last MiG-21s Terrorist H



Above: A C-130H brought in ground support equipment for the MiG-21 Fishbeds during the latter's deployment to Tripoli in June 2012. Among items delivered were UB-16 rocket pods, 23mm boxes of ammunition, MiG-21 tyres and pre-packed braking parachutes.

Main image: Three MiG-21s, '069', '208' and '800', deployed to Mitiga International Airport near Tripoli in June 2012 to protect Libya's capital. At the time the Free Libyan Air Force had two airworthy Mirage F1s at the airport, but no pilots qualified on the type. All images Libyan Air Force via author unless stated

SIXTY YEARS after its first flight, the MiG-21 *Fishbed* is still playing a vital role in North Africa, where the Libyan National Air Force (LNAF) employs 18 aircraft in the war against terrorism. Used against pro-Gaddafi forces in the 2011 civil war, the aircraft now patrol Libya's airspace together with its land and maritime borders. Since May 2014, General Khalifa Haftar has led them in action against Shura Council of Benghazi revolutionaries, Libyan Daesh and the Libyan Dawn Islamic regime, under Operation Dignity.

Fishbed tale

The MiG-21's history in Libya dates back to the early 1970s, when the country's ambitious dictator was attempting to lead the Arab World's anti-imperialist and anti-Israeli movements. In 1974, Libya ordered a mix of 40 MiG-21PF fighters and two-seat MiG-21U *Mongols* to train Palestinian pilots and form the Palestinian Air Force in exile.

During the short war between Libya and Egypt in July 1977, several of the MiG-21s were shot down or destroyed on the ground at Tobruk, as Egyptian Mirage 5s, escorted by MiG-21MFs, attacked Libyan airfields.

Libya placed a further order for 50 MiG-21s to reinforce its *Fishbed* force and make good losses. Mostly of the improved 'bis' version, all were delivered in 1978-79, replacing the older MiG-



hunters

The survivors of Libya's once large MiG-21 fleet are engaged in combat on multiple fronts against various enemies in the country's bitter and complex civil war, as **Babak Taghvaei** reports.

21s in service with 1021 and 1060 Squadrons.

In 1982, Libya's last operational MiG-21PFs were delivered to Syria, replacing similar aircraft that it had lost to Israel in the Lebanon War. Several PFs had also been scrapped. The number of operational Libyan Air Force MiG-21s gradually declined through the 1990s, before its commanders began considering the possibility of upgrading the survivors to MiG-21-93 standard, with beyond-visual range capability, in 1999. In 2006, 33 MiG-21s were operational with 1021 and 1060 Squadrons at Tobruk, slowly reducing to 25 in 2011, when the regime of Muammar Gaddafi fell.

Post-Gaddafi Fishbeds

On August 20, 2011, Tripoli fell to rebels, followed by Sirte in October 2011. Gaddafi was killed on the 20th and his regime ended. In March, before NATO operations against Gaddafi's forces had begun, rebel ex-Libyan Air Force pilots had flown their MiG-21s against pro-Gaddafi forces over Benghazi. A man-portable air-defence system (MANPADS) shot MiG-21bis '804' down after it took off from Benina on March 16.

After the 2011 civil war, only 11 Libyan fast jets remained operational, comprising three MiG-21bis, three MiG-21UMs, two MiG-23MLDs, a MiG-23UB and two Mirage F1EDs, plus five



Above: Shot down by a MANPAD on March 17, 2011 during Libya's civil war, the wreckage of MiG-21bis '804' lies on the outskirts of Benia AB. The pilot, Major Adel Boushah managed to eject safely from the jet.

L-39ZOs. These formed the primary fleet of the Free Libyan Air Force (FLAF) in Tripoli, Benghazi and Tobruk. Five further MiG-21bis and four MiG-21UMs were subsequently found in good enough condition to be overhauled and restored through 2012 and 2013.

Operation Dignity

In December 2013, the Libyan General National Congress (GNC), later supported by Sudan, Qatar and Turkey, voted to enforce a variant of

Sharia law. The GNC and other Islamic parties in Libya rapidly gained in power, with the result that General Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), set up an opposition faction in February 2014. Haftar later established the Tobruk government, which is now internationally recognised as the sole formal government of Libya.

Libyan Islamists, supported by the Qatari-Turkish block, conducted several offensives aimed at taking Benghazi. The Libyan ►



A formation flight of two MiG-21UMs '073' and '076' fly with a MiG-21bis '500' over the sea port of Derna in 2010. The MiG-21bis was shot down in 2011 during the civil war.

National Army conducted Operation Dignity to repel them from the city in May 2014.

Two 1060 Sqn MiG-21s dropped OFAB-150 bombs on Islamists in Benghazi on May 16, 2014. Three days later, Tobruk's personnel officially announced that they had decided to become part of the Libyan National Army.

On May 28, two 1021 Sqn MiG-21s released bombs and rockets on February 17 Martyrs Brigade camp in Benghazi. The February 17 Brigade had close ties with the Qatari supported/al-Qaeda linked Ansar al-Sharia terrorist group, which had received a large batch of weapons via a Qatari Air Force C-17 several months earlier.

In June, the brigade had planned to launch an offensive to occupy the east of Libya as well as Tobruk, the FLAF conducted daily reconnaissance over eastern Libya and especially along the Mediterranean coast to detect and eliminate terrorist activities.

During one of these patrols, a MiG-21 pilot spotted two boats carrying weapons for the February 17 Brigade from Misrata towards the port of Derna. Fifteen minutes later, two MiG-21s, armed with S-5 rockets and OFAB-100 bombs, raided the port – one boat was destroyed and the other heavily damaged.

On July 13, the Islamic Dawn militia group in Tripoli and Misrata militias in Misrata launched 'Dawn Libya', with the intention of taking Libya's major cities by occupying their strategic locations. These included Mitiga air base and Tripoli International Airport.

The Islamists mortared the airport on the 16th, destroying most of the civilian airliners and Libyan Air Force transports parked there. Given the long distance between Tobruk and Tripoli, the MiG-21s took no part in the clashes in the capital, but were nevertheless engaged against Islamists, including Ansar al-Sharia, in Benghazi.

Combating Ansar al-Sharia

On July 19, Ansar al-Sharia terrorists shelled Misrata air base. Over the next few days they occupied the airfield, which became the headquarters of the Libyan Dawn Air Force (LDAF).

Meanwhile, an Il-76 loaded with free-fall bombs, rockets and other munitions arrived at Benina from the Ukraine on the 20th. As a

result of this Ukrainian delivery, two days later, four MiG-21s detached from Tobruk flew interdiction sorties against terrorist hideouts in Benghazi from Benina. The MiG pilots subsequently remained on alert to launch three MiG-21s armed with UB-16 rocket pods and FAB-100 bombs against three Qatari vessels carrying weapons for terrorists into Benghazi port on July 23.

Two *Fishbeds* bombed an Ansar al-Sharia convoy at Benghazi on July 24. On July 25 and 26, the forward-deployed MiG-21s at Benina assisted the Libyan National Army in repelling terrorist attacks on the city.

On August 7, Air Force Brigadier-General Saqr Adam Geroushi, commander of Operation Dignity, announced that FLAF air raids at Magzaha, south-east of Benghazi had killed 70 Ansar terrorists.

With Al-Watiya air base and Zintan airport threatened by Islamic Dawn, the LNAF was unable to deploy combat aircraft into western Libya. As a consequence, Algerian Air Force Su-24MK2s and Egyptian Air Force (EAF) F-16s bombed Mitiga air base and several Islamic Dawn installations in Tripoli on August 17. The United Arab Emirates Air Force and EAF followed up with raids against Libyan Dawn positions in Tripoli on the 24th.

Losses and replacements

On July 29, 2014, MiG-21bis '764' had crashed in the Kuwefiyeh area after a technical failure during a functional check flight, the pilot ejecting safely. On another check flight, on August 19, MiG-21UM '069' crashed near Tobruk. It was destroyed and its pilot, Colonel Ibrahim Abdrabbuh El-Menfi, killed. A third *Fishbed*, MiG-21UM '114', went down on September 2 at Benghazi, killing pilot Lt Col Rafe' El-Farawi.

The air force now had only two airworthy MiG-21s, with three under maintenance, but during October the Egyptian Government donated three surplus MiG-21MFs, along with a batch of Mi-8T helicopters. They were soon in action against Islamic Dawn in Tripoli, via forward deployments to Zintan airport.

Later the Libyan National Army occupied Al-Watiya air base, which housed a temporary deployment of 1021 Sqn MiG-21s. On November 25, air force MiG-21s bombed Mitiga air base, which was under Libyan Dawn control, and then, on December 2, they attacked Islamic radical militias in the coastal city of Zuwara, between Tripoli and Ras Jedir. Seven people were killed on the ground.

Libyan National Air Force MiG-21 status in January 2016

Type	Serial	c/n	Sqn	Status	Fate
MiG-21UM	073	516999073	1021	Active	
MiG-21UM	076	516999076	1021	Active	
MiG-21UM	112	516999112	1021	In maintenance	
MiG-21UM	113	516999113	1021	Stored	Long-term storage at Tobruk
MiG-21UM	218	516999218	1021	Stored	Long-term storage at Tobruk
MiG-21bis	208	?	1021	In maintenance	
MiG-21bis	404	75066404	1060	Active	
MiG-21bis	614	?	1021	Active	
MiG-21bis	698	75050698	1060	Active	
MiG-21bis	704	75050704	1060	Active	
MiG-21bis	800	75050800	1021	In maintenance	
MiG-21MF	16	962312	1021	Active	Formerly '8116' with 104 Fighter Sqn, EAF
MiG-21MF	18	?	1021	Active	Formerly '8618' in EAF service
MiG-21MF	22	5207	1021	In maintenance	Formerly '8522' in EAF service
MiG-21MF	26	?	1021	In maintenance	Formerly '8226' in EAF service
MiG-21MF	27	?	1021	In maintenance	Formerly '8427' in EAF service
MiG-21MF	38	963513	1021	In maintenance	Formerly '6138' with 104 Fighter Sqn, EAF
MiG-21MF	55	962607	1021	Active	Formerly '8655' with 104 Fighter Sqn, EAF



Above: The vertical tails of three well-worn Libyan National Air Force Fishbeds show a variety of camouflage schemes. Despite a lack of sophisticated maintenance support facilities, the MiG-21s fly every day in order to attack Daesh targets. LNAF via M Roofa

Below: Free Libyan Air Force MiG-21 and MiG-23 pilots gather in front of the 1060 Squadron building at Benina AB for a group photograph in 2012. The variety of uniforms and personal equipment is an indication of how the force was struggling at this time.

On December 4 the MiGs bombed Dawn militias in Tripoli, and on the 5th, two MiG-21MFs armed with FAB-100s struck a Libya Shield Force border post on the Libya-Tunisia border, killing a terrorist.

On January 4, 2015, Tobruk's MiG-21s bombed the bow of a Greek-operated oil tanker anchored at Derna, killing two of its crew. The ship was loaded with oil sold to Turkey by Libyan Dawn.

That same day, two more MiG-21s attacked the country's largest steel plant, at Misrata. Mohamed Abdelmalik al-Faqih, Chairman of the Libyan Iron and Steel Company, said warplanes hit the facility's perimeter and a wall adjacent to a company training centre, at around 11.00hrs local time. After successfully striking the factory, one of the pilots attempted to attack the Misrata air base, which remained under Libyan Dawn control.

Combating Daesh

Majority Muslim countries suffering longstanding civil war have proven ripe for Daesh infiltration as the group exploits their financial resources, particularly oil. Since 2014, Daesh has attempted to access Libya's oilfields and oil export terminals, which are under the control of the Tobruk government to the east and Libyan Dawn rebels to the west. Both these groups, plus the Islamic Shura Council of Benghazi, have fought between themselves for overall control of the country's oil industry.

Since July 2015, Tobruk has maintained a minimum of two MiG-21s forward deployed at Benina to fly alongside the base's sole operational MiG-23MLD ('6132'). The aircraft are tasked with the defence of Benghazi against attacks from Islamic Shura Council of Benghazi revolutionaries, including Ansar al-Sharia, which has fought beside Libyan Dawn against the secular forces of General Haftar. Starting from August 2015, two more MiG-21s were occasionally deployed to Al-Watiya, to defend against Libyan Dawn rebels.

Awaiting the optimum time to attack and occupy the oilfield and terminals at Ras-Lanuf and Sidra, Daesh planned firstly to occupy the city of Ajdabiya. It would be used as a base to threaten Sidra and Benghazi during November, but the plan drew French attention and Armée de l'Air Rafales struck Daesh positions.

The French failed to stop the campaign, ►



Above: Maintenance of the MiG-21 fleet under sparse conditions at Tobruk AB. This MiG-21bis '704' had been grounded for many years, but in 2014 technicians began work on restoring the aircraft to flight. This was accomplished on March 17 of last year when the Fishbed re-entered service with the Libyan National Air Force. LNAF via M Roofa

LIBYAN MiG-21s

however, and while the group was occupying parts of Ajdabiya and planning to re-occupy the west of Benghazi, on December 1 the Libyan National Army war operations room ordered the LNAF to increase the number of combat sorties it was flying against three enemies: Shura, Daesh and Libyan Dawn, in Benghazi, Ajdabiya and Sidra, respectively.

On December 2, General Haftar, followed two days later by Col Ali Elarfi, commander of the Libyan National Army war operations room, together with other Army commanders, visited Benina to meet pilots and technicians. They supervised preparations of the MiG-21 squadron, which was named 'Shahin (Falcon)', and the MiG-23 squadron, ready for a new round of attacks.

Martyr Abdol-Majid Kaseh

December 7 and 8 brought a surge in assassinations of Libyan Army personnel in their residences in Ajdabiya, while Daesh terrorists appeared on the streets, recruiting from the city's religious youths and establishing Sharia street justice (including crucifixion, beheading and stoning). In response, MiG-21bis '404' and MiG-23MLD '6472' bombed Daesh positions in the city under a new sub-operation entitled 'Martyr Abdol-Majid Kaseh' aimed at clearing out the terrorists.

The MiG-21bis, which had been repaired at Benina after a nose gear collapse on November 12, struck Daesh targets in support of the LNA's 21st Battalion as it advanced into the city on the 8th. Two days later and with the permission of the city elders, who are part of the Ajdabiya tribes, LNA T-54 and T-55 tanks entered the city to continue the clearing operation.

Between December 9 and 31, MiG-21bis '404' and MiG-21MF '18' flew against Ansar Al-Sharia on the outskirts of Benghazi and Daesh in Ajdabiya, using OFAB-100M and OFAB-100-120 bombs, and S-5 and S-24 rockets.

On January 4, 2016, MiG-23MLD '6472' bombed an Islamic Shura Council position on the outskirts of Benghazi. Seconds after releasing his weapons the pilot, Naser Gherith Al-Shahaafi, detected a hydraulic failure before losing control. He ejected safely, but the aircraft hit a farm and was destroyed. Ansar Al-Sharia claimed it had shot down the MiG; however, it has no anti-aircraft weapons. The pilot was uninjured, but taken to hospital for medical checks.

The air force commander-in-chief, Brigadier-General Sagar Adam Al-Jarrushi, immediately flew from Tobruk, in the back-seat of MiG-21UM '076', armed with a pair of UB-16 rocket pods containing S-5 rockets, to Benina to visit the MiG-23 pilot

An ex-Egyptian Air Force MiG-21MF is armed with a pair of S-24 unguided rockets prior to a strike against the Islamic Shura Council group near Benghazi on September 30, 2015.

Four MiG-21s from 1021 Squadron at Tobruk AB (top to bottom): MiG-21bis '800', MiG-21UM '073', MiG-21bis '208' and MiG-21UM '069', the latter crashed in 2014 killing its pilot Colonel Ibrahim Abdrabbuh El-Menfi.

and the new commander of the Benina base, Col Mohammad Menfor. The MiG-21UM flew a combat sortie against Islamic Shura that evening, alongside MiG-21bis '698'.

On the day that the MiG-23 crashed, Daesh attacked the Sidra oil export terminal with mortar or long-range rocket fire. In the chaos that ensued, Libyan Dawn rebels moved in from Sirte to occupy the facility. The following day, Menfor used MiG-21bis '698', armed with a pair of French 120kg SAMP bombs, to provide close air support to LNA troops confronting Libyan Dawn and Daesh forces in the Sidra area.

He flew as part of another sub-operation, named 'Sunrise' and intended to clear Sidra and Ras-Lanuf from terrorists and Libyan Dawn rebels. After Daesh and Libyan Dawn had retreated from Sidra on the 6th, the MiG-21bis dropped four OFAB-100Ms on Daesh terrorists at Ras-Lanuf.

On January 7, Daesh member Abu-Muslim al-Tunisi drove a Toyota Land Cruiser-mounted bomb against the Zliten Police Training Center, killing 65 policemen and wounding more than 80 others. The attack gained the attention of both the Tripoli and Tobruk factions and worried the French and Italian governments, which prepared for counter-terrorism air operations against Daesh positions around Misrata and Sirte.

Separately, the LNAF conducted raids against Islamic Shura Council hideouts, and arms caches in the south of Ajdabiya, using MiG-21bis '698' and '404', MiG-21UM '076' and Mi-35 helicopters. The attacks, which killed 60 terrorists, were flown in support of the LNA's Thunder special forces unit, as it engaged in street fighting.

At 14.50hrs local time on January 12, MiG-21MF '18' fired rockets at a building in Benghazi's Al-Hoot market, where Daesh or Ansar Al-Sharia leaders were reportedly hiding. Over the following two days, MiG-21bis

'698' dropped OFAB-100-120 bombs on Islamic Shura Council terrorists in Benghazi.

In the early morning of January 15, the same jet, armed with four similar weapons, attacked an Ansar Al-Sharia mortar shell storage area in the Sadri region of Benghazi. After a successful strike, the aircraft was refuelled and rearmed with four more bombs and despatched that evening to attack a terrorist stronghold near a 17th February Military camp close to Benghazi university.

With the MiG-21 still in the air, terrorists mortared the Benina base and its pilot decided to land at Al-Abraq, 170km (106 miles) northeast of Benghazi. Next day, the jet was refuelled and prepared for a maritime patrol sortie along Libya's eastern coast.

Ansar Al-Sharia units in the Sadri region attracted the attentions of MiG-21s on January 19, and on the 20th, MiG-21bis '698' and the LNAF's only operational MiG-23 were in action. The latter bombed Daesh forces in the Lithy area of Ajdabiya, while the MiG-21bis attacked Daesh buildings in the Seyyidi Faraj region of the city, killing 20 terrorists. Both aircraft flew from Abraq, owing to the danger of mortar attacks against Benina.

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Fishbed future

In late January the LNAF had a fleet of six MiG-21bis, seven MiG-21MFs and five MiG-21UMs with 1021 Sqn at Tobruk, all but four of them were operational and flying counter-terrorism operations.

Under civil war conditions, none of the combatants can easily procure weapons or combat aircraft from abroad, but should a unified government be formed, the LNAF and LDAF will merge and the MiG-21s be retired. Their replacement has been identified as the MiG-29M2, the acquisition of which Egypt has been planning to fund since early 2014.

