

Despite critical shortages of aircraft, spares and manpower, the cash-strapped Libya Dawn Air Force (LDAF), the 'new' Libyan air arm, held the line during initial efforts to rid the city of Sirte from insurgents of the so-called Islamic State (IS) this summer.

report: **Arnaud Delalande**

INSURGENTS OF THE so-called Islamic State (IS) have been a presence in the Libyan city of Sirte since February 2015. After the fall of the town of Nofaliya, 140km (87 miles) from Sirte, on February 8, IS militants took control of the Libyan Coastal Highway, and Sirte fell into their hands on February 16. On March 14 violent fighting took place between Libya Shield militia and IS militants after the Tripoli-based New General National Congress — one of two rival governments in Libya — called for the city's recapture. Ghardabiya air base, close to Sirte, was captured by IS fighters two weeks later.

On June 11, 2015 an IS propaganda video showed two examples of the L-39 Albatros and one An-26 belonging to the Libya Dawn Air Force (LDAF) blown up at Ghardabiya. The LDAF is part of the Libya

Dawn coalition, which supported the New General National Congress in Tripoli and proclaimed itself as the defender of the 2011 revolution. Around the same time, the first two foreign mercenaries — together with foreign mechanics — arrived at Misurata air base to fly the LDAF's two Mirage F1ED fighters.

Recruitment from abroad was necessary since former Libyan pilots refused to fly for the provisional government in Tripoli and 'bomb Libyan people'. One of the two mercenary pilots left Libya after refusing to bomb the Libya National Army (LNA), loyal to the government in Tobruk. The other mercenary pilot carried out several air strikes against IS and LNA targets, and was soon joined by additional foreign arrivals. The following months saw new clashes between IS militants and pro-Gaddafi loyalists who were expelled from the city by September 23.

LIBYA'S BATTLE FOR SIRTE



A new government

In December 2015 the Government of National Accord (GNA) was established as a new interim administration. The GNA consisted of 17 ministers led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and received unanimous approval from the UN Security Council. The new cabinet arrived in Tripoli in late March 2016, with the aim of uniting the various militias, especially the Misurata militia — one of many armed groups under the Libya Dawn umbrella — and the opposition forces of the LNA, which represented the two main military arms in Libya. These two forces launched a race to recapture the cities of Sirte and Benghazi from the hands of IS. The unacknowledged goal of each was to show the international community that it was the most reliable partner for the future Libya. Since the LDAF sided with the new, internationally recognized government in Tripoli it could now be considered as the 'official' Libyan Air Force.

Despite the 'reinforcements' provided in the form of mercenaries, a shortage of spares, maintenance personnel and pilots resulted in the LDAF being reduced to a single operational Mirage F1ED (the second lacked a working engine), two MiG-23MLDs, one J-21 Jastreb, five G-2 Galebs, five L-39s and two Mi-8Ts, by April

Below: **One of the two MiG-23MLDs operated by the Libya Dawn Air Force.**
All images via author

2016. In May, engineers began working on a 'new' MiG-23UB while five L-39s underwent refurbishment at Mitiga air base.

First air strikes

Operations aimed at liberating Sirte began three weeks before the ground offensive. On April 23, 2016, the LDAF launched its first air strikes near Nofaliya, targeting ammunition stored inside a Turkish company headquarters and resulting in a large explosion. On the 27th, attacks were conducted 50km (31 miles) west of Sirte by aircraft that had taken off from Misurata. The day after, aircraft targeted an IS gathering in the vicinity of Nofaliya.

Mirage F1ED serial 502, piloted by one of the foreign mercenaries, targeted the west gate of the city of Sirte on May 1 and hit a checkpoint. Two days afterwards, while LNA units based in Zallah reportedly came under attack from forces led by Zaid Bala'am (allied with the forces in Misurata), the LDAF MiG-23MLDs, deployed to al-Jufra air base a week earlier, took off and targeted the LNA forces. According to local reports, air strikes were also performed against IS positions at the Ouagadougou conference center near Sirte on the same day. On May 5, clashes took place near Abu Grein, 120km (75 miles) south of Misurata,

involving the Misurata militia and IS, the latter launching a double suicide attack that hit the Abu Grein and Sadada checkpoints and resulted in the capture of four villages. This push was part of a concerted effort by IS militias to attack Misurata forces in Jufra, which lies some 250km (155 miles) south of Sirte. Their objective was to cut the supply line between Misurata and Jufra. During the fighting, the Mirage F1ED was engaged in close air support sorties. A total of nine sorties were performed. On the 6th, numerous air raids on IS positions in Sirte were carried out by MiG-23s and the Mirage. The LDAF announced on the 10th that its jets had performed more than 40 air strikes in the vicinity of Abu Grein during the previous four days.

On the offensive

The ground offensive to retake the city of Sirte was launched on May 12. This operation was named 'Al-Bunyan Al-Marsoos' ('Solid Structure'). Between May 11 and 13, the LDAF launched numerous air strikes in the vicinity of Abu Grein, including eight bombing missions on the 13th. That day, an Italian Air Force C-130J Hercules transport took off from Misurata Airport bound for Rome, carrying 17 fighters wounded in the battle with IS near Abu Grein.



LIBYA DAWN AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT SERIALS, 2016

Type	Serial	c/n	Notes
Squadron 1039			
L-39	1102		
L-39	1108		
L-39	1939	131939	
L-39	1941	131941	
L-39	3602		
L-39	3605		
L-39	9440	931440	
L-39	9441	931441	
L-39	9443	931443	
L-39	9445	931445	
L-39	9446	931446	
Unknown squadrons			
MiG-23MLD	117 (ex 6117?)	2960326117/18125?	
MiG-23MLD	474 (ex 6474?)	2960326474/18418?	
G-2	201	10201	
G-2	205	10205	
G-2	206	10206	
G-2	207	10207	
G-2	211	10211	
Mirage F1ED	502		Shot down June 2, 2016
Mirage F1ED	508		Not operational
SF260	310	310/29-004	
SF260	669		
Mi-8T	8334	33334	Crashed June 3, 2016
Mi-24P	918		Operational since June 5, 2016
Mi-24P	962		



Left: A view from inside Mirage F1 serial 502 earlier this year, before its shoot-down.

Below: With one Mirage F1 having been shot down (502, pictured), the other is now unserviceable and requires a new engine.

Gate 50 in western Sirte was targeted on May 16 while ground forces finally recaptured Abu Grein from IS militants. The day after, LDAF jet fighters carried out eight sorties, launching 16 air strikes. On the 18th, they performed four sorties during which they launched four air strikes; these targeted fleeing IS columns and mechanized infantry.

The LDAF carried out six offensive sorties on May 21: three consecutive air strikes from Misurata air base hit IS concentrations and ammunition storage facilities. On the 25th, several missions were conducted against IS concentrations, including three combat sorties against groups of IS armed vehicles. LDAF aircraft also performed night-time strikes in the vicinity of Sirte, near Gate 30 and the area around Gate 50 in the west of the city. The following day, the LDAF completed six offensive sorties against IS. On the 27th, 10 sorties were carried out in the vicinity of Sirte, one of which hit an IS convoy during its escape toward the desert.

More LDAF losses

During an attack on IS positions in Sirte on June 2, Mirage F1ED serial 502 was hit by

ground fire that damaged the fuel pump. The pilot, a Portuguese mercenary, was killed. This loss dramatically reduced the LDAF's capabilities, since a replacement engine was still required for the second Mirage F1ED. The LDAF lost another aircraft on June 4, when an air ambulance Mi-8T (serial 8334) crashed near Zuwara, west of Tripoli, without casualties.

GNA-affiliated forces continued their offensive in Sirte, capturing key points close to the city the following week. On June 4, Misurata militia took Ghardabiya air base after it had been in IS hands for a year. Shortly before this, the remainder of the LDAF fleet performed five successful air strikes on Ghardabiya, Abu Hadi and south of Sirte. Jets carried out five more attacks against concentrations of IS militants in the vicinity of Ghardabiya's runway 17. Another five strikes were made against militants fleeing from Ghardabiya, bringing the number of offensive sorties to 15. On June 5, Mi-24P serial 918 was returned to service and entered action in Sirte, while IS militants managed to recapture the airfield at Ghardabiya.

Nine air raids on June 8 targeted IS gatherings in Taqrvat Camp, Galt Camp

and Abu Hadi Island. That day, GNA forces entered Sirte for the first time after capturing a bridge in the western part of the city. On the 9th, L-39s carried out four missions in Sirte and Mi-24P serial 918 performed two combat sorties. Two more strikes targeted IS concentrations at a farm south-west of Sirte. Fighting was focused near the Ouagadougou conference hall. On the 10th, six air strikes were performed near Abu Hadi Island. GNA-affiliated forces captured the port east of Sirte on the 11th, slowly cutting off all IS supply lines in Sirte. The following day, they announced that they had recaptured Sirte's port and airport.

With the remnants of the IS militants holed up inside the city of Sirte, five offensive sorties were flown by the LDAF on June 25, targeting both IS concentrations and vehicles. On the 26th, 10 more missions were launched against the same targets, not least by Mi-24P serial 918. On the 27th, GNA-affiliated forces continued their progress on the southern axis supported by heavy artillery and by the LDAF, which carried out five sorties in central Sirte and a nocturnal raid against groups holed up within the city. Nine LDAF air raids took place on July 2, while Mi-24P serial 918 used guided missiles on the battlefield for the first time on the 10th. An ammunition store was destroyed in Sirte on the 15th by the same 'Hind' helicopter.

The Misurata operations room announced on July 22 that its jet fighters had carried out more than 27 sorties over the past 72 hours, during which they targeted militants and materiel inside Sirte. In excess of eight medical evacuation (medevac) flights were completed in that period. Confirmation came from Misurata on July 29 that the LDAF had flown nine air raids over the center of Sirte during the previous 24 hours.





A lack of money meant that all foreign mercenary pilots and engineers had left Libya by the end of July, leaving the LDAF with only a few operational pilots and aircraft. This is probably the main reason why the government in Tripoli requested US help in stepping up the air campaign.

Following the request from the GNA — and in co-ordination with its affiliated forces — US Africa Command (AFRICOM) conducted its first five air strikes against IS targets in Sirte on August 1 as part of Operation 'Odyssey Lightning', destroying a T-72, a T-55, two military support vehicles, an enemy fighting position and two pieces of heavy engineering equipment. The raids were undertaken by a combination of manned (flying from the USS *Wasp*) and unmanned aircraft. Full details of the opening phase of Operation 'Odyssey Lightning' were provided in *Combat Aircraft* October 2016.

Despite increasing US involvement, the LDAF continued its bombing. On August 3, six combat sorties targeted IS militants and vehicles in Sirte. The LDAF commander, Col Mukhtar Fakroun, and his co-pilot Col Omar Dogha died on the

10th when their L-39 crashed near the University of Sirte, probably as a result of being shot down. GNA-affiliated forces claimed on August 11 that 70 per cent of Sirte was under its control, but IS snipers were still active inside the Ouagadougou complex. The death of its commander and the withdrawal of foreign pilots left the LDAF in Misurata in a desperate state.

Despite these setbacks, the LDAF emergency operations room commissioned pilot Mohammed Umesh as its new spokesman. On August 20, as part of an integrated plan to secure and support stability in Libya, the LDAF proceeded to launch reconnaissance sorties in an area between central Libya and the far south of the country, to prevent new militants from crossing the Libyan border. On the 28th the air arm conducted nine armed reconnaissance flights in the vicinity of Sirte and performed medevac missions that transferred the wounded from the area of operation in Sirte to Misurata on board an An-32P.

The 'opening' of Misurata air base to journalists on September 4 revealed an LDAF fleet reduced to two MiG-23MLDs,

10 L-39s, five G-2s, one J-21, two Mi-24Ps and one Mi-8T, with the Mirage F1ED still stored. However, the number of available pilots was unclear.

The aerial intervention by the United States has now become essential to fully retake the jihadist stronghold. On September 18 the LNA announced the capture of al-Jufra air base, previously in the hands of militias affiliated with the GNA. Several aircraft had regularly been detached from Misurata to al-Jufra, including the two MiG-23MLDs that bombarded LNA forces in Zillah on May 3. Civilians were killed in an air strike near the base on September 20. According to the LNA, its troops had been the intended target of aircraft flying from Misurata, but Tripoli denied this and accused the aircraft in question of operating from Ras Lanuf, a base that had been seized by the LNA a week earlier.

With the LDAF now in a poor state of repair, and continuing to lack both pilots and spare parts, its opponent, the LNA Air Force, is now the main air arm in the country. As such, it is perhaps best-placed to rebuild the future Libyan Air Force. 🇱🇐

Above left to right: **The Mirages had been equipped to carry FAB 250 freefall bombs for close air support.**

An L-39 with gun packs taxis out for a mission.

Below: **G-2s on the flightline at Mitiga.**

