

The French-Qatari Connection



Left: QA-85 is one of three Mirage 2000-5DDAs operated by the QEAF. The other nine aircraft are single-seat Mirage 2000-SEDAs.

Right: The Mirages maintained a tempo of two to three sorties a day for the duration of the operation. The three external fuel tanks can be clearly seen on QA-92.

Main Image: The Mirage 2000-SEDA can carry four radar-guided Mica missiles and two infrared guided Magic 2s. Here, QA-98 taxis out for another mission.

Below: The Qatari flightline at Souda.



'IN A TESTIMONY TO THE PREPAREDNESS OF THE QEAF, THE FIGHTERS ARRIVED AT SOUDA ON MARCH 22 AND 23 AND TOGETHER WITH THE FRENCH AIR FORCE, FLEW THEIR FIRST OPERATIONAL MISSION AS SOON AS THE 25TH'

Gert Kromhout examines the Qatar Emiri Air Force's involvement in the recent Libyan campaign

THE PARTICIPATION of the Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF) at Souda Air Base in Greece for Operation Unified Protector was remarkable for two reasons - it was the first time this air force had deployed outside its region and the first time it had operated in a NATO-led combat environment.

Qatar is a small but wealthy nation with 1.7 million residents, situated on one of the biggest natural gas fields in the world. It was one of the countries of the Arab League that supported UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which resulted in the intervention over Libya. Qatar plays an active political role in the Arab world and was also the first country to formally recognise those forces opposing Libya's Colonel Gaddafi.

Qatar did not wait long to send six Dassault Mirage 2000-5D/EDA fighters, two AgustaWestland AW139 search and rescue helicopters and its two Boeing C-17s (on humanitarian flights) to support the operation.



Later in the conflict it added two Westland S-61 Commando helicopters to augment the AW139s.

In a testimony to the preparedness of the QEAF, the fighters arrived at Souda on March 22 and 23 and, together with the French Air Force, flew their first operational mission as soon as the 25th. That day, Qatar also made its first of several C-17 flights

into Libya.

Qatar was the first of three Arab nations (the UAE and Jordan followed) to fly over Libya. Throughout the operation the Qataris primarily flew with French Mirages in two-aircraft combat air patrols, but also conducted missions on their own. ▶





Above: QA-92 uses full reheat on take-off from Souda.

French influence

France was instrumental in getting the Qataris into the fight; it was one of the leading countries to initiate the operation against Libya and has strong military and economic ties with Qatar. Having Arab countries in the coalition sent a much stronger diplomatic message and would show that it was not a Western nations-only operation.

Qatar lacked experience in combat operations and in operating in a NATO tactical environment, so it appreciated the French offer to operate jointly. The most obvious French Air Force type to deploy to Souda was the Mirage 2000-5F – Group de Chasse 1/2 'Cigognes' had deployed four examples to Souda at the same time as Qatar sent its own almost identical fighters.

Although it was anticipated the Qatari jets would be based at the French airfield at Solenzara, on the island of Corsica, they deployed to Souda instead for practical reasons: Qatari Mirage pilots are not trained for in-flight refuelling and their jets are not fitted with a refuelling probe. It was therefore essential they were based as close to the area of operations as possible and Solenzara is more than twice as far to Benghazi as Souda. At the time, a lot of fighting was occurring in eastern Libya, so Souda was the best location. Flying with two external fuel tanks, the combat air patrol (CAP) missions lasted no longer than three hours.

Other limitations facing the French/Qatari pilots were differences in operational procedures and the absence of NATO-only communications equipment. The Qatari pilots simply adopted tactical NATO/French procedures and tactical communications terminology. Because of the lack of such key equipment, 'blue-on-blue' targeting could only be avoided by thorough communication with command and control nodes, so that everybody in the coalition knew there were friendly aircraft in the area flying without the usual kit.

PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT

The size of the Qatari detachment was enormous compared to the size of its air force. The Mirage 2000-5EDA/DDA forms the backbone of its fighter fleet, but the QEAF only has 12 serving with the 7th (Air Superiority) Squadron. Ground attack is provided by six Dornier Alpha Jet Cs, light fighter-bombers which entered service in the early 1980s and operate with the 11th (Close Support) Squadron.

Four helicopter squadrons make up the rotary element of the QEAF – one SA341L Gazelle unit (6th [Close Support] Squadron) performs battlefield support missions; one Westland WS-61 Commando 3 unit (8th [Anti-Surface Vessel] Squadron) is tasked with maritime operations; another Commando squadron is multi-role tasked (9th [Multi-Role] Squadron); and the fourth flies search and rescue missions with the AgustaWestland AW139. All these units are based at Doha International Airport.

The QEAF is building a transport fleet, with two Boeing C-17As in service and two to come, while the first of four C-130J-30s is about to be delivered. Its next project is a replacement for the Mirage 2000-5; it's currently evaluating several options and a successor should be announced by the end of 2012. Between 24 and 36 jets are expected to be purchased, significantly more than the 12 flying today.



Above: Whilst on detachment to the Hellenic Air Force Base at Souda Bay, Qatar's Mirages operated alongside their more experienced French colleagues, both countries using virtually identical aircraft.



An AW-139 from the search and rescue squadron of the QEAF.



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Ulan-Ude Aviation Plant, JSC
1, Khorinskaya str., Ulan-Ude, 670009, Russia
Tel: +7 3012 253 386 • Fax: +7 3012 252 147
E-mail: uuaz@uuaz.ru • Web site: www.uuaz.ru

