

المساعدات الخفيه للعرب في حرب اكتوبر-

المؤلف نوم كوير

Secret Helpers

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Secret Helpers

“Other” Arab Air Forces in 1973 War

By Tom Cooper & Brig.Gen. Ahmad Sadik

The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, best known as “Yom Kippur” or “Ramadan/October” War in the West, is usually described as one fought between Egyptians and Syrians on one side, and the Israelis on the other. When it comes to ground warfare, this is truth to a certain degree, then even if some Arab countries deployed Army contingents to Syria, and others to Egypt, most of these arrived too late, and the majority had no serious impact in the fighting. When it comes to air warfare, the situation was completely different: Algerian, Iraqi, Libyan, and even Moroccan air force contingents arrived in time and have had their share of fighting, while also a sizeable number of North Korean, Pakistani, and even some East German pilots and advisers participated in the war on the Arab side.

Interestingly enough, more specific – and confirmed - details are meanwhile known about activities of these air forces than about operations of either the Egyptian Air Force (EAF) or Syrian Arab Republic Air Force (SyAAF)!

“Libyan” Mirages

Until today, there is still much controversy surrounding the deployment of Libyan Arab Republic Air Force (LARAF) Dassault Mirage 5 fighter-bombers to Egypt during this war.

Immediately after establishing himself in power after a coup against the King Idriz, in September 1969, the new Libyan leader, Captain (later Colonel) Moammar el-Qaddafi, began reforming his armed forces. Within just two months, a contract was signed with France for delivery of no less but 110 Mirages, including:

- 32 Mirage 5DE radar-equipped interceptors (serials 101 thru 132)
- 15 Mirage 5DD two-seaters (serial 201 thru 215)
- 10 Mirage 5DR reconnaissance fighters (serials 301 thru 310), and
- 53 Mirage 5D fighter-bombers (serials 401 thru 453)

The Libyan order included also a ground simulator and an immense amount of spare parts, over 300 spare engines, various ground equipment, and weapons – in fact so many, that these were to last for more than 30 years.

The first Mirages reached Libya in 1971, when they entered service with the No.1001 Operational Conversion Unit (OCU). Their pilots, however, were exclusively Egyptians: the LARAF at the time counted barely 400 officers and

enlisted ranks, including a very small group that was about to complete training on Northrop F-5A Freedom Fighter. Clearly, this was insufficient to operate such a huge fleet of Mirages, but that was also not the purpose of the Libyan order: in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, namely, it was popular to buy the Mirage, the “winning” design of the 1967 War, a conflict that shocked the World and caused not few countries to completely reorganize their military strategy. Besides, Qaddafi, a staunch supporter of “pan-Arabic” ideas, was eager to support Egypt in its struggle against Israel. Correspondingly, a hand-picked group of highly-experienced EAF pilots was issued Libyan passports and sent to France for conversion course.

Contemporary US and Israeli intelligence reports cited that the first Mirages were transferred under EAF control already on 18 July 1971, but remained stationed at the former RAF el-Adem AB, now renamed “Gamal Abdel Nasser”. In fact, the first 25 Mirages were not delivered to Libya before the summer of 1972, and they were transferred to Egypt only months later. By the summer of 1973, a total of 42 “deltas” – including 20 Mirage 5Des, 20 Mirage 5Ds and two Mirage 5DDs were put under EAF control, together with a considerable amount of spare parts: 38 of these remained operational by September 1973, by when they officially entered service with the No.69 Independent Squadron “Mirage” of the Egyptian Air Force, based at Birma/el-Tanta AB. This was a purely EAF unit, without a single Libyan pilot, under command of Col. Ali Zien-Alabideen Abdul-Jawwad. It was also a relatively “top-heavy” unit, having no less but five Lieutenant-Colonels, six Majors, and 12 Captains on its roster.

North Koreans, Pakistanis, and Saudis

Aside from obtaining Mirages via Libya, Egyptians also attempted to agree with the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) to deploy some of its BAC Lightning interceptors – equipped with what was probably the best IR-homing air-to-air missile (AAM) of the world at time, Red Top - to Egypt. Despite lengthy negotiations, no agreement was reached, even if some EAF pilots were sent to Saudi Arabia for training on Lightnings.

Two other contingents arrived – from North Korea and Pakistan. The detachment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Air Force (DPRKAF) consisted of 20 pilots, eight GCI-controllers, five translators, three administrative people, one politic advisor, a medic and a cook. They were based at Bir Arida AB, and flew MiG-21s.

The Pakistani contingent in Egypt was much smaller. Led by Wing Commander S. Masood Hatif, it consisted of Squadron Leaders Abbas Mirza, Mohsin, Akhtar, Bukhari, and Khalid Iqbal, as well as GCI-controllers Rab Nawaz and Jahangir Akhtar (both with rank of Sqn.Ldr.). The Pakistanis were attached to the 102 Wing EAF, flying MIG-21F-13s from Inchas.

Although every DPRKAF pilot sent to Egypt had at least 2.000 hours on the type, and the Pakistani officers were also highly experienced, the Egyptians could not risk sending them over the enemy lines. Therefore, for most of the war, the pilots from these two countries were assigned missions inside a “well controlled environment”; means, well over the Egyptian territory. Nevertheless, this measure proved useful in so far that by flying combat air patrols (CAPs) over the Nile Delta, the North Koreans enabled EAF to deploy additional own units into combat on Sinai.

Operation Spark

The No.69 Squadron was the first of “foreign” contingents in Egypt to become involved, flying combat sorties right from the start of the war. At 1400hrs of 6 October, 16 Mirages flew highly successful strikes on Israeli command- and communication-, as well as artillery facilities in the Tassa Pass area.

Approaching at a very low level they reached their targets undisturbed and only one fighter was damaged by anti-aircraft artillery (AAA). Nevertheless, one Mirage was shot down over the Suez Canal, by an Egyptian Air Defence Force (EADF) SA-3 missile after separating from the rest of formation and returning late.

The unit lost another Mirage on the following day, during an escort mission for EAF Tupolev Tu-16K bombers, which were attacking the Israeli electronic warfare and ELINT-station at Ra’s Abü Ourun, a mountain in central Sinai, west of Bi’r Hasanah, with KS-1 Kometa air-to-surface missiles (ASCC-Code “AS-5 Kelt”). The second missile released from one of Tupolevs, namely, malfunctioned: it first dropped away, then climbed, pulling a hard right turn and impacting the wing of the nearest Mirage, causing it to crash. Nevertheless, according to US intelligence reports, this mission was a success, then several KS-1s have hit their target, and the intelligence gathering station at Ra’as Abü Ourun was not operational for almost two weeks.

During the following week, the No.69 Squadron was mainly tasked flying CAPs over the Nile Delta: little combat activity was recorded as the EAF High Command tended to keep its most important assets back while defending own bases in the Nile Delta from Israeli air raids.

Fiercest Battles

It was therefore not before the morning of 14 October that the No.69 Squadron flew its new combat sorties over the Sinai – this time in support of the ill-fated Egyptian ground offensive. On the same afternoon, the Israeli Defence Force/Air Force (IDF/AF) launched a major attempt to bomb Birma/el-Tanta AB, and neutralize the No.69 Squadron. It was during this battle that also the North Korean and Pakistani contingents became involved, then the EAF responded with scrambling over 50 MiG-21M/MFs.

An immense air battle - the exact flow of which remains largely unclear - developed as the three successive waves of Israeli fighters penetrated the Egyptian airspace over the Nile Delta. When MiG-21s of the 102 Wing EAF were scrambled in defence of el-Tanta and el-Mansourah, four Pakistanis became involved as well as four North Koreans. No Korean claims are known, but PAF Wg.Cdr. Hatif claimed one Israeli McDonnell Douglas F-4E Phantom II as shot down, the Israelis claiming three MiGs flown by North Koreans in exchange. In fact, no losses of IDF/AF F-4Es to Arab fighters on this day are known, even if some Arab sources claim as many as 18 for shot down, and Cairo subsequently declared 14 October for the “Air Force Day”. Nevertheless, most of Phantoms were forced to jettison their bombs prematurely and the two Egyptian airfields suffered hardly any damage.

Probably the best-known mission of Egyptian-flown – but Libyan-owned – Mirage 5s during this war was the attempted strike against the Israeli-occupied el-Arish AB, in north-eastern Sinai, undertaken on the late afternoon of 18 October, with intention of hitting US and Israeli transport aircraft bringing crucial supplies.

All the accounts of this mission published so far are based on Israeli narratives. These mention only participation of four EAF Mirages in this raid, and that these were reported before reaching their target. Egyptian sources, and US intelligence documents, however, report that eight Mirages were involved, and that the outcome was completely different.

The first flight of four Mirage 5Des were detected too late to be intercepted and they delivered a flawless attack, dropping two French-made SAMP 400kg bombs each on the runway and taxiway, as planned. The exact extent of the damage they caused is unknown, like it is unknown if any US or Israeli transports at el-Arish were damaged: the Egyptians did not know and the US reports do not provide any details. Certain is only that these four Mirages came away almost undisturbed: only one was damaged by Israeli AAA-fire.

Only five minutes later, with the Israeli defences on alert, the second flight of four EAF Mirages, led by Capt. Mohammad Fathi Fat-hallah Rif'at, was intercepted by Israeli Dassault/IAI Neshers from No.113 Squadron.

Egyptians were approaching the Sabkhat al-Bordavil (Bordavil Laguna), only some 50km west of el-Arish, at a level of barely ten metres, when they sighted their opponents. All pilots immediately jettisoned their stores, attempting to turn back towards west and accelerate away, flying towards the setting sun. While executing this complex manoeuvre, the Number 4 of the Egyptian formation hit the sea and disappeared in a huge plume of water. Shortly after, the Numbers 2 and 3 were shot down by a Shafrir air-to-air missiles, while Capt. Rif'at managed to escape, flying at a maximum speed and minimal level towards the setting sun.

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Moroccan Reinforcements

On 19 October 1973, the No.69 Squadron at el-Tanta was joined by a squadron of Force Aérienne Royal du Maroc (FARM) Northrop F-5A Freedom Fighters. Originally, Morocco intended to deploy two units to Egypt before the war, but as of September 1973 only one was operational. The problem was that after the coup attempt in 1972, many pilots from the No.1 Tactical Fighter Squadron FARM were arrested.

The second problem was that of logistics: barely 50% of Moroccan F-5A/Bs – supplied by the USA and Iran in the late 1960s and early 1970s – were operational at any time. The 12 F-5As and 14 pilots for them arrived in Egypt after a lengthy trip via Algeria, Tunis and Libya, accompanied by two Lockheed C-130 Hercules transports that carried spare parts, weapons, equipment, and technical personnel. Although they began flying CAPs already on the following morning, they did not become involved in any air combats with Israelis: the EAF controllers never provided them with any vectors into the combat zone. In fact, it was not before January 1974 that two F-5As armed with a pair of AIM-9B Sidewinder AAMs each were scrambled to intercept a pair of IDF/AF Mirage IIIRJs on a reconnaissance mission over the Canal zone. The Israelis detected their presence and turned their fighters away, attempting to drag them into an ambush set up by four F-4Es. Correspondingly, the Egyptian ground-control ordered the two Moroccans to disengage.

Meanwhile, the No.69 Independent Squadron became involved in combat operations against the Israeli bridgehead in the Deverosoir area – the so-called “Deverosoir Gap”. Despite the heavy loss on 18 October, the Mirages were in

action again on 21st, when a four-ship attacked a part of the 162. Reserve Armoured Division (“Ugdah Adan”) due south of the Great Bitter Lake. Four others were on a CAP over the Fayid airfield, meanwhile captured by the Israelis (and re-named “Nachshon”), when engaged by four Neshers from No.144 Squadron IDF/AF. After a short but sharp clash, one EAF Mirage was hit by an AAM and then finished off by 30mm guns. The other three disengaged towards the west, their pilots realizing that they were heavily outgunned, having no AAMs at own disposal (France delivered only few Matra R.530 AAMs to Libya by the time, and had nothing comparable to either the US-made Sidewinder or Israeli-made Shafrir to offer, while the USA turned down a request for delivery of AIM-9s).

In the following days, the condition of Mirages flown by No.69 Squadron worsened as the unit began running low on spare parts after flying no less but 467 combat sorties within only two weeks. Nevertheless, the Mirages flew 28 additional missions by 24 October, eventually ending the war with a total of 495 sorties. According to Israeli sources at least five, but according to US sources no less but nine out of 38 Mirages available at the onset of hostilities were lost in combat, and five more to non-combat causes within this period of time. Egyptian sources acknowledge a loss of three pilots from No.69 Squadron, but do not detail losses in aircraft.

Inexperienced Algerians

The Algerian contingent that took part in this war was the second largest “foreign” contingent of all involved during the war. Algeria already had a history of deploying its combat aircraft to Egypt during wars with Israel, then in 1967, the al-Quwwat al-Jawwiya al-Jazariya (QJJ) deployed half its fleet of fighter aircraft to replace Egyptian losses.

As only very few of ex-Algerian fighter-bombers sent to Egypt survived the fighting with Israel, in 1967 and 1968, hardly any were returned. Consequently, in the following years the QJJ concentrated on re-building its strength. In the frame of this process, following deliveries of new MiG-17Fs and MiG-21PFMs, the old structure of four squadrons equipped with each main fighter-type was reinstated, while the older MiG-15s were relegated to a conversion unit. In 1971, a treaty of cooperation and mutual defence was signed with the USSR, resulting in deliveries of first 20 Sukhoi Su-7BMK fighter-bombers, which replaced Il-28s of the No.27 Squadron, based at Mecheria AB. Additional Sukhois were to replace all the MiG-17s, relegating the later to the role of combat trainer.

In the following year the No.19 Squadron – the traditional “first” fighter asset of the QJJ, then based at Bou-Sfer AB – was also re-equipped, with the first batch of 12 MiG-21MFs. The second unit to receive MiG-21MFs was the No.15 Squadron, based at Tindouf. Both units completed their training by the summer of 1973.

By the time, Algerians were involved in the planning of a new war against Israel, even if their high officers were not in knowledge of all the details – especially not the time-schedule. The then Algerian President, Hawarry Boumédiène, knew that an attack would be launched at least since in April 1973 the Egyptian President Sadat asked him for supply of oil and fuel needed for a new war. Requested amounts were provided at no cost – and as soon as possible. Several QJJ units were also sent to exercise with the EAF, in 1972 and 1973. Namely, between 1970 and 1973, there was a sizeable QJJ detachment (including

foremost a sizeable air defence detachment, equipped radar-guided 57mm cannons) under command by Brig.Gen. Mohammed Taher Bouzroub, working with the EAF. These Algerian units, however, were based in Libya. The Algerians thus knew that a new war was about to be launched, but not exactly when.

When the time of the Egyptian strike came, the QJJ was put on increased readiness rate. It therefore came as no surprise when it started moving – already on 5 October 1973. On that day a detachment of the No.27 Squadron, comprising ten Su-7BMKs from Mecheria AB, started a trip to Egypt. Simultaneously, a unit with 12 MiG-21PFs based in Libya was also put under EAF command, and deployed to an airfield inside Egypt. The short-ranged Sukhois needed three days to reach their designation, flying via Ouragla, then Ghadames, Ghurdabiya, Benghazi and al-Bumbah, in Libya, then to as-Sallum in Egypt, Marsa Matruh, el-Alamayn, and finally ending in Alexandria. From there, they were sent to Qahira AB, on 8 October. Definitely learning the value of in-flight refuelling capability the wrong way, the Sukhoi-pilots were completely exhausted from the long trip, and needed a day of rest and briefings by EAF officers.

The Egyptians were happy to have the Algerians with them, even if pretty much disappointed to hear that the Su-7-pilots were lacking combat experience, and also had very little operational training. This was no surprise: after all, this type was in service with the QJJ since only two and a half years. Nevertheless, the Algerians assured the EAF that their pilots were ready to take on the IDF/AF; in the end a solution for the problem was found, in that more experienced pilots were permitted to continue with the aircraft into the combat zone, as Lt.Col. K confirmed:

- At the time very few of our pilots had combat experience and the Egyptians would only let few of them to fly combat sorties. So, most of the times our Su-7s were flown by Egyptian pilots. Only a few of Algerians were picked to fly combat sorties...mainly close-air-support (CAS), but also some escort missions for Su—7s. The Algerians also assured the Egyptians that additional QJJ units would be on the way to Egypt. This, however, was not entirely truth. The government in Algiers in fact planned to send another squadron of ten Su-7BMKs from Mecheria AB, and two units of MiG-21s (one with 12 MiG-21F-13s and another with 12 MiG-21PFs) from Ouragla AB, to Egypt, but did so only partially: after the first few MiG-21s reached Egypt, on 7 October, none were to follow. Lt.Col. K explained about their arrival.

- There is not much to say: in essence, our MiGs arrived and started flying on 8 October. On arrival they were still in their original colour, “grey metal” as we call it in the QJJ. Our pilots were welcomed by the EAF personnel, who invited them to the officer’s mess, while the Egyptian technicians took over the aircraft. As our pilots wanted to see their aircraft again, they came out, but there were no Algerian MiGs on the tarmac any more, so they asked, “but, where are they?” The commander of the Egyptian airfield explained, “here, in front of you”.

The Algerians did not recognize their own aircraft because within the shortest possible period of time the EAF personnel removed their old markings and repainted the aircraft in a new camouflage pattern of sand and green.

There is some controversy over the exact number of QJJ units deployed to Egypt during October 1973. The Algerian sources insist that there were two squadrons of Su-7s and two of MiG-21s. Israeli and US sources deny this, stressing that on 9 October 1973, the Israeli government passed a message to Algiers – via the Swiss

embassy in Jerusalem – that, “no target in Algeria was beyond the reach of the IDF/AF”. Reportedly, after the receipt of this message the QJJ immediately stopped preparing additional MiG-21s and Su-7s for shipment to Egypt. Former QJJ-pilots living in the USA indicate that there was also some kind of hard feelings over unrelated issues between Egypt and Algeria by the time, and that this was the other reason. Whatever happened, it appears that after the two initial batches of Su-7s and MiG-21s, no additional QJJ fighters reached Egypt during the war any more.

Meanwhile, on 9 October 1973 the Egyptians moved Algerian Su-7BMKs into the combat zone, together with some – but by far not all - Algerian pilots. As it seems the Israelis were closely tracking this deployment and during the transfer of the first ten Su-7BMKs to Birma/el-Tanta AB, in the Nile Delta, they set up an ambush for this formation, their Mirages claiming one Sukhoi as shot down. Algerians deny to have suffered any losses during this transfer.

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Minimal Losses

On the following day, 10 October, the chosen Algerians and several Egyptians were to fly their first combat sortie. Six Su-7BMKs, escorted by four EAF MiG-21s were to strike a target in Sinai. However, as soon as they crossed the Suez Canal the formation was intercepted by two Israeli Neshers of the 113 Squadron IDF/AF, and two Sukhois as well as a single MiG-21 were shot down. The Algerians confirm that two of their fighters were hit, specifying one of these should have been flown by Lt. Mohammed Dribche and another by Lt. Sadek Ben-M'Barek, but stress that they were hit by ground fire, and that Ben-M'Barek managed to return his damaged aircraft back to el-Tanta AB. Furthermore, Algerian sources insist that all but one of their Su-7BMKs were returned by Egypt after the war and brought back to service with No.27 Squadron, based at Ain Oussera AB. The Israeli sources, on the contrary, claim the IDF/AF to have destroyed another of Algerian Sukhois during the mentioned strike against el-Tanta AB, on 14 October – a mission specific Israeli sources for some time even denied was ever undertaken!

Finally, so the Israeli and US reports, only six Su-7BMKs were returned to Algeria. Surely enough, a Su-7BMK in colours as applied on QJJ Sukhois in Egypt, was seen during a parade in Cairo, as late as of October 1976.

An Important Experience

Despite Israeli threats and explanations about Algerian reactions, the fact is that the Algerians continued their support for Egypt. For example a group of 20 experienced Algerian MiG-17- and MiG-21-pilots arrived in Egypt in mid-October, to reinforce the EAF: they were assigned to different MiG-17-units and allowed to fly combat missions. At least one is known to have been shot down in air combat with IDF/AF Mirages (or Neshers) while flying an EAF MiG-17F, on 17 October 1973.

Eventually, all available sources agree that all Algerian pilots that participated in the October War survived, even if sources differ in assessment of the quality of Algerian participation in this war. The Western sources describe it as “minimal at best”. The IDF/AF reports stress that the Algerians were a “non-factor” in this war, and the Israeli pilots made their best in showing that Algerians earned none of their respect, a former IDF/AF Mirage-pilot stating:

- They made great targets and excelled in level and straight flying. By far the best we encountered at the time were Egyptian and Iraqi MiG-21-pilots.

This might mean much, and then nothing at all: the number of encounters between the IDF/AF and Algerians during this war was simply too low for anybody to draw generalizing conclusions. Besides, the available evidence points at the fact that the Syrians have scored more air-to-air kills against the Israelis than either the Egyptians or the Iraqis, and still, from what is published, it appears that the Israeli and opinion of other observers about them was never very good. Much more than this, for Egyptians it was important to have the Algerians with them, as a clear message of support: after all, the Algerians were not fighting for their soil, yet their pilots and – as we are about to see as next – their country and air force went well beyond what many other, especially richer, Arab countries have done for either Egypt or Syria.

Besides supplying fuel needed for Egypt to fight the war, the Algerian President Boumédiène was also influential in the Soviets starting an air-bridge to replenish decreasing war stocks in Egypt and Syria. Asked by Soviet leadership why was he demanding weapons for the two Arab countries when, “all these were doing was to give them to the Israelis”, Boumédiène answered:

- So you think that we (Arabs) can just lead a camel in the desert? OK, it is true and you are right, then you have the technology and we do not. But, what I would like to know is if you are with us in the way the USA are with Israel - or not?

Following his trip to Moscow, 32 brand-new Sukhoi Su-20s were supplied to Algeria. They, however, were not intended to be used by the QJJ: in a matter of few weeks all were flown to Egypt and Syria. Nevertheless, not knowing anything about this deal ever since all the Western observers credit Algerian Air Force with possession of Su-20s!

Certainly, the QJJ had no illusions about its participation in the October War: Algerian officers studied it very soberly and have – in a manner that might appear “surprisingly professional” for many Western observers - drawn important lessons about the employment and impacts of air power. They would use these lessons during subsequent confrontations with Morocco, but that is a different story.

Table 1: Foreign Air Units known or suspected to have deployed to Egypt and Syria, in 1973

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Unit/Origin	Equipment	Base & Remarks
Algeria		
No.15 Squadron	MiG-21MF	Tindouf (Algeria): deployed to Birma/el-Tanta AB
No.19 Squadron	MiG-21MF	Bou-Sfer (Algeria): deployed to Egypt, base unknown
No.?? Squadron	MiG-21PFM	Only aircraft sent to Egypt to attrition replacements
No.?? Squadron	MiG-21F-13	Not deployed
No.27 Squadron	Su-7BMK	Mecheria (Algeria): deployed to Birma/el-Tanta AB
No.28 Squadron	Su-7BMK	Mecheria (Algeria; later Ain Oussera): deployed to Egypt, base unknown
No.?? Squadron	Su-7BMK	In establishment; elements possibly deployed

No.?? Squadron	Su-7BMK	In establishment; elements possibly deployed
Iraq		
No.6 Squadron	Hunter	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum (Iraq): deployed to Qwaysina (Egypt)
No.29 Squadron	Hunter	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum (Iraq): deployed to Qwaysina (Egypt)
No.1 Squadron	Su-7BMK	Al-Hurrya (Iraq); deployed to Blei, Syria
No.5 Squadron	Su-7BMK	Al-Hurrya (Iraq); deployed to Damascus IAP, Syria
No.8 Squadron	MiG-17F	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum (Iraq); deployed to al-Mezzeh, Syria
No.9 Squadron	MiG-21MF	Al-Wallid/H-3 (Iraq); deployed to Dmeyr and Tsaykal, Syria
No.17 Squadron	MiG-21PFM	Rashid (Iraq); deployed to Dmeyr and Tsaykal
Libya		
No unit	Mirage 5	Deployed with No.69 Sqn EAF at Birma/el-Tanta AB
Morocco		
No.1 TFS	F-5A	Kenitra (Morocco): deployed to Birma/el-Tanta AB

The Hunter-Wing

As of early 1973, the Iraqi Air Force (IrAF) was going through a period of transition: while MiG-21s and Su-7s were still its main fighter jets, it already placed orders for variable geometry MiG-23MS interceptors and Su-20 fighter-bombers in the USSR, with deliveries expected in the late 1973. Additional MiG-21MF multi-role fighters were to replace obsolete MiG-17s, while the Iraqis were attempting to negotiate a purchase of Mirage 5s or even the then brand-new Mirage F.1s with France. A contract was also made for supersonic Tupolev Tu-22 bombers to replace the old Ilushin Il-28s, retired from IrAF service in 1972. Eventually, the IrAF planned to purchase enough Tu-22s to establish two or three squadrons.

The Iraqis agreed to deploy IrAF elements to Egypt during a meeting of the Arab League's military committee held in Cairo, in January 1973. The IrAF offered to transfer 24 out of 28 operational Hawker Hunter F.Mk.59s and all four T.Mk.66s from No.6 and No.29 Squadrons, plus 30 pilots.

As this newly-formed "Hunter Wing" – under command of Col. Natiq - was to deploy to Egypt via Saudi Arabia (with its reserve pilots, forward air controllers and all ground personnel following in several Antonov An-12s), a request for overflight permission was issued to Riyadh. The Saudis almost turned it down, demanding the Hunters to fly unarmed, even without ammunition for their 30mm guns. Wondering what could happen if the Israelis decided to intercept the formation while underway to Egypt, the IrAF High Command requested the RSAF to provide protection. Correspondingly, on the morning of 6 April 1973, a strange scene was to be seen over the northern Saudi deserts, when a formation of 28 IrAF Hunters was escorted by four RSAF Lightnings, armed with British-made Red Top air-to-air missiles. RSAF Lightnings accompanied Iraqis until they were over the Red Sea: then the EAF MiG-21s took over.

Once in Egypt, the two Iraqi Hunter squadrons were based at Qwaysina AB, in the Nile Delta, roughly half-way between Cairo and Alexandria, and some 110km west of the Suez Canal. Although there were no EAF aircraft based there, the airfield was connected directly to the EAF High Command, and the Iraqi units were put under direct Egyptian control, and the later were permitted to use them without any referring to the Government in Baghdad.

Namely, despite strong British traditions within the IrAF, the High Command decided not to adopt the British model, which calls for a separate command structure for such deployments: the basic principle for its involvement in the war was based on US Army General Pershing's practices from World War I, according to which he put himself and his troops deployed in France under the French control. This was the first case that the Iraqis tested this principle on their own units, which thus effectively became a part of the EAF.

Indeed, the two Iraqi Hunter-units were immediately incorporated in the plans for the coming battle, with one squadron being scheduled to support the 2nd Egyptian Army, and the other the 3rd.

Serious preparations for the war began immediately, but the tension increased in early September 1973, when an EAF officer briefed Iraqi pilots about their future targets with help of reconnaissance photographs taken by Soviet MiG-25Rs. Their targets were the radar station at el-Jeddi, a MIM-23A HAWK SAM-site at Tassa Pass, and a battery of 175mm self-propelled guns. IrAF Hunters were to fly three sorties on the afternoon of the first day of the war.

Table 2: IrAF Order of Battle, September 1973

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Unit	Equipment	Base & Remarks
No.1 Squadron	Su-7BMK	Al-Hurrya AB, near Kirkuk
No.2 Squadron	31 Mi-4	Firnas AB, near Mosul (converting to Mi-8)
No.3 Squadron	10 An-24, 2 Tu-104 4 DH Doves and Herons	Muthenna AB, near Baghdad
No.4 Squadron	10 Wessex, 5 SA.316B	Al-Hurrya AB
No.5 Squadron	Su-7BMK	Al-Hurrya AB
No.6 Squadron	Hunter F.Mk.59/59A/59B	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum AB
No.7 Squadron	MiG-17F	Al-Hurrya AB
No.8 Squadron	MiG-17F	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum AB
No.9 Squadron	MiG-21MF	Al-Walid/H-3 AB
No.10 Squadron	Tu-16 & Tu-16K	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum AB
No.11 Squadron	MiG-21F-13	Rashid AB
No.17 Squadron	MiG-21FL	Rashid AB (OCU)
No.23 Squadron	7 An-12, 8 Il-14, 4 An-2, 2 Freighter 150	Rashid AB
No.29 Squadron	Hunter F.Mk.59/59A/59B	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum AB
No.?? Squadron	Su-7BMK	Wahda/Shoibiyah AB
No.?? Squadron	MiG-19	Tammuz/al-Taqaddum AB (most inoperational)
No.?? SAR Group	2 Mi-1, 2 Mi-4	Wahda/Shoibiyah AB (converting to Mi-8)
No.?? SAR	2 Mi-1, 2 Mi-4	Al-Hurrya AB (converting to Mi-8)

The First...and the Last Wave

At exactly 14:00hrs on 6 October 1973, some 230 Egyptian and Iraqi fighter-bombers crossed the Suez Canal, signalling the commencement of the October War on the Sinai front. All 24 IrAF Hunters were involved in the first wave: they hit their targets without any particular problems, but the fighter flown by 1st Lt. Waleed al-Samaraee failed to return, and the pilot was subsequently declared “killed in action” (KIA). Back at Qwqaysina AB, the Iraqis were preparing themselves for the 2nd wave, when an Egyptian liaison officer arrived informing them that the EAF HQs had, “cancelled the second wave because it thinks that the first one has achieved its aims and there was no need for another strike.” With this the Iraqis had to wait for the morning of 7 October to fly their next mission. This time their targets were two HAWK SAM-sites. The radars of these were to be attacked with unguided rockets, while missile launchers were to be strafed with 30mm cannons in the second attack run. Approaching undetected at very low level, the Iraqis popped up to an altitude of 500m, rolled over and commenced a dive attack, unleashing their rockets. Recovering on the other side, they turned around and attacked six missile launchers with powerful Aden cannons, approaching within the minimal range before opening fire. By then, of course, the Israelis were alerted and this second attack run turned into a nightmare for Iraqi pilots: every Israeli machine-gun was pointed at them, firing in concert with radar-guided Bofors L/70 anti-aircraft guns calibre 40mm. Once again the Hunters came away without any losses.

Nevertheless, later on the same day, 1st Lt. Amer failed to return from a combat sortie over Sinai: the wreckage of his Hunter was later found, together with his body, and he was buried on a military cemetery near Ismailia.

The Day of Losses

8 October was to become a day of losses, especially for No.6 Squadron, as its Hunters became involved in repulsing the first organized Israeli counteroffensive on Sinai. Early in the morning, four fighters were tasked with attack on the Israeli Southern Command HQs at Refidim. Led by Col. Natiq, the Hunters reached their target, Natiq delivering his bombs directly on the local cantina, where a large number of Israeli troops was killed or injured. Another Hunter missed the runway, but two others did not reach the target before the formation was intercepted by four Mirages with result that three Iraqi fighters were shot down immediately. Their pilots, 1st Lt. Abdul Qadir Khider, 1st Lt. Imad and 1st Lt. Durayed, became prisoners of war (POW). The leader was hit as well, but Col. Natiq reached the Suez Canal before bailing out.

This was a very heavy blow for the small community of IrAF Hunter-pilots, but the situation only became more critical. Later on the same day, two sections from the same unit were scrambled to strike Israeli armour engaged in a battle with the Egyptian Army, but both formations received such a heavy anti-aircraft fire, that they had to abort their mission. Meanwhile, pilots of No.29 Squadron were sitting in their ready-rooms, waiting for action orders that never came: the 3rd Egyptian Army never requested their help.

Friendly Fire is Always the most Accurate

On the early morning of 9 October, two Hunters flown by veteran pilots, Maj. Izzat (CO No.6 Squadron) and Capt Dhia, were scrambled to strafe Israeli reinforcements moving along a road in the central Sinai. The Iraqis were extensively briefed by Egyptians: like “Libyan” Mirages, IrAF Hunters were not equipped with Soviet IFF-transponders and there was no way the Egyptian air defence units could recognize them as “friendly”. To solve this problem, the EAF HQ allocated a special “corridor” along which they could egress and ingress over the Suez Canal during a specific time slot. Besides, Maj Izzat and Capt Dhia were warned of possible Israeli radio operators giving them new instructions in Arabic: given they were always using English in their communication, the Iraqi pilots were not concerned about these.

Flying at an altitude of barely ten meters, the two Iraqis crossed the Suez: below them they could see thousands of Egyptian troops in the process of crossing the water obstacle – a scene that bolstered their morale by a magnitude. Using speed and distance measurement, they navigated carefully so to reach their target from the proper direction. Their target was easy to find, even from an aircraft underway at a very low level, but the Egyptians warned the Iraqis about the presence of Israeli Mirages in the target area: these have wrecked havoc amongst EAF Su-7 and MiG-17 formations in the last two days. Nevertheless, Maj Izzat decided to attempt two attack runs: first to drop bombs and then strafe with cannons.

Less than a minute after crossing the Suez, both pilots knew they were approaching their designated initial point. Captain Dhia saw their target as first: a road junction swarming with Israeli vehicles of all types. Climbing slightly, the Hunters dropped their bombs in the middle of the huge number enemy trucks, cars and tanks, and then turned for the strafing attack, firing whatever they could see in front of them. The four 30mm Aden cannons of each Hunter pumped shells into the Israeli bunch causing numerous explosions.

When the Israelis realized that they were under attack, most dove for cover, but others stood behind heavy machine guns on their half-tracks and returned fire. Exploiting excellent flying characteristics of their British-built fighters, the Iraqis pressed their attack home, continuing to strafe the long column of Israeli vehicles lined down the road as they went. Despite numerous hits and secondary explosions they caused, the Israeli fire grew in intensity from one moment to the other, and the plane of Maj Izzat was finally hit. Looking around his leader, Capt. Dhia could not notice any damage; no warning lights went on in Izzat’s cockpit either. For a moment, the Iraqi leader considered a possibility of being jumped by an Israeli interceptor: then he would need some 30mm ammunition and a healthy aircraft to survive. Correspondingly, Maj Izzat ordered his wingman to return back to base. Leaving the Israeli column in fire and smoke, they turned right and speeded up towards the Suez Canal.

Once back over Egypt and safe from Israeli interceptors, the Iraqis felt much relieved. Capt Dhia once again made a full circle around his commander’s Hunter, attempting to inspect the damage. Hardly that this task was completed all hell broke loose around the Iraqi formation. With numerous grey puffs from exploding anti-aircraft shells, Dhia immediately felt several hits on his aircraft: turning around, he noticed that his aircraft was afire – and he was meanwhile well over 50km away from the Canal! The Iraqi captain eventually pulled his stick to gain some height and then ejected. Descending under the parachute, he observed the scene around him: the doomed Hunter went “ballistic”, and then

hit the ground; Maj. Izzat was circling the area, and there was a small Egyptian village not far away, from where dozens of people were running towards him. The Iraqi immediately realized the anger of Egyptian peasants: once he touched the ground and got rid of the parachute, he stood up and identified himself as an Iraqi pilot, a “fellow Arab”. This explanation was not accepted... Two days later, Capt Dhia woke up in the Egyptian Armed Forces Hospital: he would need a month longer to recover from the beating he received from Egyptian farmers, who misidentified him as an Israeli because of his blond hair and blue eyes... The Egyptian Air Defence Force later admitted his Hunter was shot down by 57mm anti-aircraft guns, which misidentified him as an Israeli Skyhawk. Dhia returned to service and later rose to the rank of Colonel, becoming a high officer in the IrAF Safety Board, during the 1980s.

Unfriendly Visitors

To return the favour, the IDF/AF decided to bomb Qwaysina AB. Early in the morning of 10 October, four McDonnell Douglas A-4 Skyhawks, escorted by four F-4E Phantoms attacked. Given that the Egyptians defended this airfield with only a few ZPU-14.5-4 machine-guns, the Israelis hit the runway without special problems, but then turned away without attacking other parts of the airfield: their pilots still claimed destruction of six Hunters on the ground.

In fact, no IrAF fighters were hit, but the strike did cause some problems. After the strike, Egyptian engineers rushed to repair the runway, supported by local farmers and peasants. Due to the lack of specialized equipment, this work took them much longer to complete than usually. An additional problem was the handling of delay-fused bombs the Israelis dropped to delay repairs. The Egyptian repair squad had to use ordinary ropes and tractors to drag such weapons away. The Israelis launched another raid against Qwaysina AB, on 17 October, and again the runway was repaired after a tremendous effort.

During the period between the first Israeli raid and the ceasefire, on 22 October, the two IrAF Hunter squadrons were tasked with several attacks on Israeli positions east of Suez, mainly against troop concentrations and headquarters.

Generally, the number of assignments dropped significantly below the average of the first few days – which was a general trend within the whole EAF.

In summary, the IrAF Hunter Wing in Egypt proved its worth despite facing a number of difficulties, including the slow pace of runway repairs and a lack of IFF-transponders compatible with Egyptian air defence system. Used to cooperate with forward-deployed ground observers, participating Iraqi pilots expressed serious reservations about the way the EAF conducted the air war and managed the Hunter Wing. Requests for air support travelled too long: they would come from liaison officers working with Egyptian brigade- and division-commanders, and then go up to the Army-level, before being passed to the EAF, and only then forwarded to the Wing Command. The Iraqis did not object the central planning of the massive first wave, but a more straightforward chain of command could have saved plenty of time at later stages.

During a visit of the late Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat to Baghdad, in the mid-1970s, Maj. Izzat was presented with high Egyptian military medal on behalf of all the pilots of the wing that participated in the war.

Iraqis over the Golan

Learning about the outbreak of the war between Egypt, Syria and Israel, at 16:00hrs on 6 October 1973, the IrAF High Command decided to dispatch the No.9 Squadron, under command of Col Yasser Abdullah and based at al-Walid/H-3 AB, in western Iraq, to Syria. The transfer was completed within 24 hours, with one detachment each being stationed at Dmeyr and Tsayqal. By the evening of 7 October, four additional MiG-21MFs were sent to reinforce this first IrAF unit in Syria. The Iraqis took great care their units to be well-supported and manned: enough pilots were deployed with aircraft to maintain a ratio of 1.5:1, and many additional pilots were rotated. The average number of sorties performed early during the war by MiG-21-pilots was three per day: Iraqi commanders stuck to medical rules that prohibited from flying more often. After 11 October this rate decreased to between one-and-half and two sorties a day.

Like in Egypt, the No.9 Squadron was put under Syrian control and fought as a part of the Syrian Arab Republic Air Force (SyAAF). The communications in regards of this and other Iraqi units that were to follow, were going via the Iraqi Ambassador in Damascus and the Syrian Chage d'Affair. The Iraqi Ambassador met the Syrian President Hafez al-Assad on the evening of 7 October, the later asking him for more aircraft and tanks. On the same evening also the Iraqi Deputy Chief of Staff, General I. T. al-Nu'aymee met President al-Assad, and reached an agreement to create an Iraqi liaison office, headed by Gen. M. L. al-Rifi, from the Iraqi General Staff. This office was to facilitate the military communication between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the SyAAF High Command tasked the No.9 Squadron with air defence in conjunction with other Syrian MiG-21-units. Most of the time, the Iraqi pilots therefore flew CAPs and were vectored to intercept Israeli Mirages or F-4 Phantoms.

Initially during their stay in Syria, Iraqi pilots observed that the SyAAF GCI was of excellent quality and that the air defence system was well-set-up, clear and accurate, enabling them to operate competently and with confidence. The major complain from the Iraqi side was about trigger-happy Syrian gunners manning medium and heavy AAA-pieces and causing many incidents.

This was largely due to compatibility-problems related to IFF-systems used by aircraft of the two countries. Their IFF-transponders were actually the same, but the Syrians used to change their IFF-codes more often than expected by anybody. The basic rule within the SyAAF was to change codes at least twice a day, but often enough – especially later during the war - this was done three or four times. The IrAF was not used to such a practice and had some problems to adapt – especially since the Syrians frequently failed to forward the corresponding information. Several times it happened that the SyAAF changed the codes while Iraqi aircraft were airborne!

Furthermore, like Egyptians, the Syrians had a different chain of command and air-tasking methods, deploying their fighter-bombers only with their own SAM-umbrella, while the Iraqis were willing to fly also outside of this. This caused several cases of fratricide fire, even if no such losses as usually reported.

On the other side, the Syrians had a much better airfield repair teams than Egyptians: the Israelis bombed Tsayqal and al-Mezzeh several times, but Syrian engineers repaired all the damage within a very short period of time. On 13 October 1973, for example, the airfield was attacked at 08:00hrs, and declared fully operational already by 11:00hrs.

7 October: Cover for Advance

On 7 October at noon, four IrAF MiG-17s led by Lt.Col. Shehab al-Qaisy, took off from al-Walid/H-3 AB. This formation represented the lead element of a whole No.8 Squadron that was also ordered to Syria. Usually based at Tammuz/al-Taqaddum AB, Lt.Col. al-Qaisy was briefed by telephone to put his unit at maximum alert already on the afternoon of 6 October. Once in al-Walid, al-Qaisy was briefed by three officers that arrived from Baghdad on board an An-24 transport: the IrAF decided to deploy the No.8 to Syria with the task of providing CAP over Iraqi troops advancing along the highway from Baghdad to Damascus, and to intercept Israeli fighters and reconnaissance aircraft penetrating the Syrian airspace after crossing Jordan.

Arriving at al-Mezzeh AB, near Damascus, Iraqi MiG-17-pilots noted two IrAF An-12 transports on the tarmac. These aircraft were loaded with various equipment and personal belongings of No.9 Squadron. Only few hours after their arrival, new Iraqi MiGs were scrambled into their first combat mission of the war: low-level CAP along the Jordanian border, in order to intercept Israeli fighters flying along the passes over the al-Zarqa Valley and King Talal Dam, as well as along the canyons from Mafraq towards the Syrian border. Israeli formations made a detour to the Um al-Hammal area and then reached Syria border. It is interesting to note that Jordanian AAA crews opened fire towards the Israeli aircraft every time they spotted them, however no Jordanian fighter was ever present to intercept the Israelis: the Royal Jordanian Air Force (RJAF) was not the least interested in becoming involved, and overall the Jordanians would not cooperate with Syria.

Two other IrAF units - No.1 and No.5 Squadrons – arrived in Syria with 18 Su-7BMKs during 8 October, and were deployed to Blei and Damascus International airfields. Both squadrons were reinforced with additional pilots, having a ratio of fliers to aircraft of 1.5:1, and put under SyAAF control. They began flying combat sorties already on the same day, with the main task of providing close air support (CAS), but some armed reconnaissance sorties were flown as well – the SyAAF trusting Iraqis enough to give them the liberty to locate their targets and attack at own discretion. Exploiting this opportunity, the Iraqi Su-7-pilots flew a maximum number of sorties in the period between the 9th and 14th October, hitting a number of Israeli targets. Then, however, the targeting list began to decrease: so far, the IrAF Sukhois operated only inside the zone defended by Syrian SAMs, but due to the Israeli counterattack these had to be pulled back and thus the number of targets within the reach dwindled.

In regards of facilities at which they were stationed, the Iraqi pilots described those at Damascus IAP as of “high calibre”: this huge airfield was well-protected by SAMs and AAA, and had a large number of hardened aircraft shelters. Blei, however, was nothing but a forward strip, without full technical support. When the Iraqis arrived, there were two Syrian squadrons stationed there, one flying Su-7s and the other MiG-17s. These units were dispersed to other airfields subsequently and only few SyAAF pilots remained in Blei to help coordinate Iraqi operations. Blei was also poorly protected and Israeli strikers – sneaking through Jordanian airspace – bombed it four times, each time scoring hits on the runway (the Israelis used the same route to penetrate the Syrian airspace and hit other targets, further to the north). One of IrAF Su-7BMKs was also destroyed

inside its hardened aircraft shelter when the doors were left open, while the Syrian war-hero from 1967, Capt. Zohair el-Baowab, was killed in an air combat with Israeli Phantoms while attempting to defend this airfield, on 12 October. Otherwise, the Iraqis noticed that the Syrian engineers repaired runways within a very short period of time.

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Armed Reconnaissance

On the early morning of 9 October, a pair of IrAF Su-7BMKs – flown by an unknown Syrian pilot and Iraqi 1st Lt. Mohammad al-Sa'adoun – took off from Blei, simultaneously with another pair from Damascus, flown by Capt. Khaldoon K. Bakir and 1st Lt. Nobar Abdul Hameed. The task of the first pair was armed reconnaissance between the southern sections of Syrian frontlines and Lake Tiberias, to the Arik's Bridge on Jordan River, while the second pair was to conduct armed reconnaissance in the area of B'not Ya'acuv Bridge. All four aircraft were armed with four FAB-250s, and their pilots were ordered to evade engagements with Israeli fighters. For this purpose, they had to fly low, use maximum possible speed and manoeuvre.

The first pair found very little traffic in the southern Golan Heights: they reached Arik's Bridge without finding anything valuable to attack. Therefore, the Syrian leader ordered his Number 2 to attack the Israeli military camp at el-Al, where they detected a concentration of Israeli trucks moving towards the Golan. Approaching from the west towards the east, the Sukhois caught the Israelis by surprise and dropped their bombs undisturbed: at least one fuel truck was hit and went up in flame. Surprised by the absence of the Israeli anti-aircraft fire, the two pilots were even more shocked when they encountered fire of Syrian gunners on the other side: both aircraft were hit, but managed to land safely.

Meanwhile, the second formation reached their intended target area without any problems too, and found nothing to hit. Turning around, they finally spotted several trucks driving along the road to Kfar Nafekh: two trucks were attacked and set on fire.

Surprisingly, the IrAF Su-7-pilots in Syria never received an order to attack the Israeli bridges on the Jordan River. The Arik's Bridge and the one at B'not Yacuv were of strategic importance and have had profound effect on the Israeli capability to reinforce their troops on Golan. Had these bridges been dropped, the two depleted IDF brigades fighting against the Syrian onslaught would probably have run out of ammunition – or been overrun – by 10 October. All the air tasking was heavily centralized, with all orders coming from the SyAAF HQs: local commanders had no initiative in any respect. Syrian sources admit that striking bridges on Jordan was, “beyond the SyAAF mentality” at the time: constructed of stone, these would be very hard to knock down. The work of the HQs was not the best. The Iraqi pilots criticised the poor planning, lack of target photographs and outdated intelligence – aside from the fact that they were literally thrown into the battle at a very short notice.

Our Number 4 is Missing!

Later the same day, Capt. Khaldoon K. Bakir had led a formation of four Su-7BMKs in a raid on the Israeli HQs in Kfar Nafekh. Each aircraft in formation that took off from Damascus International Airport carried six FAB-250 bombs.

Flying at an altitude of less than 20 metres, all four pilots nervously observed the skies above them and their fuel gauges: Israeli Mirages could bounce them at any moment, and the thirsty L'ulka engines were drinking kerosene at an alarming level. Although the distance from their base to the frontline was only a couple of minutes flying time, for the Iraqi pilots the flight lasted for centuries. While all had previous combat experience from fighting Kurds in northern Iraq, this time the situation was different: the enemy had interceptors and SAMs. The Iraqi pilots knew the moment when they approached the frontline. There was a lot of light and smoke, explosions everywhere on the ground...

The formation leader ordered everybody to engage their afterburners and then the first light puffs of smoke indicated that both – the Syrian and the Israeli anti-aircraft artillery - were active. Clearing the battlefield without any problems, the Iraqis progressed towards their target, which was only a minute or so away – when the Number 3 screamed in the radio, that the Number 4 is missing!

Looking around, the leader decided to proceed as planned: the target was in sight only seconds later. The building of the Israeli HQ in Kfar Nafekh was easily distinguishable from the air and the three Sukhois dropped their bombs without experiencing any particular problem to hit the target.

The Iraqi Number 4, flown by 1st Lt. Mohammad Alwan, was never accounted for. After the war, the Israelis denied they had any idea about his whereabouts; they even claimed that they had no idea about an Iraqi Su-7 being shot down on that day. The most likely reason for this loss was that the fighter was shot down by an IDF MIM-23A HAWK SAM, a battery of which was known to have been active in the Kfar Nafekh area.

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Ambush for Mirages...

Also on 9 October, Capt. Ma'an Ala'wsi led a two-ship of MiG-21s over the Syrian town of Dar'aa, when the GCI instructed him to prepare for engagement. Both pilots jettisoned their drop tanks and lit afterburners, climbing to 4.000m. Within seconds, they observed four black dots, some ten kilometres ahead. Accepting the fact that he was about to face a tough battle, Capt. Ala'wsi concentrated on opening a 2 vs. 4 engagement, when the GCI ordered him to make a sharp 180 degrees turn and accelerate. While turning away, Ala'wsi noticed several smoke trails: SAMs were streaking upwards, towards the enemy formation.

With their engagement over, Ala'wsi and his wingman returned to Tsayqal and walked to the operations room for debrief. There they met the Base commander who congratulated the Iraqi section leader for “downing” an Israeli Mirage! The astonished Ala'wsi denied he had done anything: he did not spend even a single round of 23mm ammunition or any of his missiles. The Syrian brigadier laughed: the Iraqi formation was used to lure the Israeli aircraft into an ambush set up by a battery of Kvadrat SAMs (SA-6s)!

...and a Draw with Phantoms

On 10 October, the IrAF deployed another MiG-21MF-unit, the newly-converted No.17 Squadron, to Syria. This unit originally has had a task of protecting Iraqi armoured units that were advancing from Iraq towards Golan, and initially saw little action – contrary to pilots from No.8 and No.9 Squadrons, who had a particularly interesting day on 12 October.

Two MiG-21MFs from the later unit, flown by Capt. Ali Hussain and 1st Lt. Fayez Bagir, armed with two R-3S' missiles and carrying three drop tanks each, took off from Dmeyr AB for a CAP along the Syrian-Jordanian border. The Israelis continued using local canyons and narrow valleys to slip deep over Syria. Although under GCI-control, the Iraqis were mainly left to themselves for detecting the enemy visually: the Israelis flew too low to be detected by radar. Underway at a level of 1.000m, Lt. Baqir was all the time keeping a vigilant lookout, controlling his instruments then the position of his leader, and then the skies around them time and again. All of a sudden, he realized that his leader was missing. Looking straight ahead, he noticed Capt. Hussain's fighter well away, with afterburner lit and chasing an Israeli F-4E Phantom, underway towards the triangle of Israeli-Jordanian-Syrian borders. Just a second later Baqir watched in horror as another Israeli Phantom approached Capt. Hussain's MiG from the rear. While warning his leader about the new threat, Baqir jettisoned his drop tanks and accelerated as well. Approaching his target, he noticed that the Israelis did not see him yet, and that the Phantom was "clean": it did not carry any bombs or drop tanks, although two AIM-7 Sparrows were visible in rear bays.

While positioning his MiG-21s behind the target, the Iraqi glanced at his rear-view mirror and noticed another Phantom sitting at his deep six o'clock. A white puff appeared bellow the Israeli fighter behind him and the Iraqi pilot immediately recognized that the F-4 launched an air-to-air missile. Lieutenant Baqir immediately pulled the stick towards his belly and the MiG made a very sharp climb, strongly shuddering. Looking back, he saw the Israeli missile exploded bellow him, but tens of shrapnel pieces were dancing above his wings. Baqir immediately disengaged.

This encounter thus ended in a draw, without any fighters being shot down, even if the Israelis credited one of their F-4E-crews with a kill.

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Overburdened Transports

Captain Khalid was flying an IrAF Mi-4 helicopter; he took off with his payload from Tammuz AB and followed the road towards the Syrian border. His load was a strange one: he was carrying a group of ten mechanics specialized in tank repair, while lubricants and spare parts for tank engines were stockpiled in the rear. Strange scenes were happening inside the helicopter: every occupant was looking out the windows and as soon as they spotted a tank standing still, the helicopter would land. The group of technicians would disembark from the helicopter and inquire from the tank's command about the nature of problem. Such measures were required by the need for two armoured and one mechanized brigade of the Iraqi 3rd Armoured "Saladin" Division to deploy from Baghdad to Damascus and then to Golan. The Iraqi Army lacked tank transporters, and Syrians suffered immense losses in tanks during the first four days of the war. The Iraqi T-55s therefore had to drive all the way – and do that in a rush. Capt. Khalid's Mi-4 was not the only one performing the task: several others were operational along the same route, each allocated a certain section of the highway.

During the war, IrAF helicopters were employed also for liaison and transport of high-ranking officers, traffic control of Iraqi convoys inside Iraq and in Syria, search and rescue of downed pilots, CASEVAC and MEDEVAC, and transport

of Iraqi special forces to the Golan. Later on, the IrAF was criticised for not deploying its helicopters for delivering helicopter attacks behind the enemy lines, or to support the 5th Mountain Brigade during operations near Mt. Jabel Sheikh. Aside of combat aircraft and helicopters, the IrAF transport fleet became involved as well. Once the war began, all routine flight schedules were cancelled, transports began flying to Syria instead, foremost transporting Iraqi Army units in the process. The long distances and heavy loads they had to cover were unusual: some of the flights lasted for up to 17 hours. After the war, the IrAF concluded that there was a need for a fleet of larger transport aircraft. The theoretical cargo lift capability of all Iraqi transport aircraft available in 1973 was a maximum of 145 tons, or some 730 soldiers; if cargo aircraft were modified as troop transporters, they could lift up to 1,584 troops at once. This was insufficient to fly even a single Iraqi Army brigade to Syria. Besides, a plan was developed to include the civilian transport fleet operated by Iraqi Airways into any contingency plans.

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The Whereabouts of the Iraqi Bomber Fleet

In 1967, the Iraqis sent two Tupolev Tu-16 bombers to attack Israeli air bases, one of which failed to return. At the time, the Tupolevs flew over the whole Jordan to reach Israel. In 1973, this was impossible, then Jordanians were non-belligerents in this war. The route over Syria or Lebanon was too dangerous then no Arab fighters could escort them; eventually, the IrAF concluded that the use of these slow bombers was impossible. This was the major reason for the Tu-22-order. The Soviets began delivering Tu-22s to Iraq in early October 1973, and initially there was great enthusiasm among IrAF pilots and crews.

Correspondingly, the IrAF High Command began planning attacks against Israel with them; however, the necessary support equipment to fly the aircraft into combat and maintain them properly arrived too late. Eventually, no Iraqi bombers were to participate in the October War.

Final Success

By 15 October, there were three IrAF units deployed in Syria and flying combat missions: the No.8, 9. and 17 Squadron, with a total of 12 MIG-17s and 24 MiG-21MFs as well as MiG-21PFMs. The whole No.8 Squadron – based at al-Mezzeh AB – was meanwhile integrated into the SyAAF, with the task of flying ground-attack sorties.

One of the first missions that morning was flown by Lt.Col. al-Qaisy against Israeli positions near the Syrian village of Kfar Nasij. Each MiG dropped two 250kg bombs on a collection of Israeli vehicles near a local road junction, and then made a left turn, accelerating towards the north to reach the safe space over Syrian units. Al-Qaisy led his wingman away at a level of barely 30m, keeping a careful lookout for Israeli interceptors, when he noticed a trail of characteristic smoke from J-79 engines of an IDF/AF F-4E Phantom. The F-4 was at al-Qaisy's two o'clock high and five kilometres away when first spotted. The Iraqi pilot therefore gradually pulled the stick back, so to climb below and behind the enemy, eventually ending at his deep six o'clock.

Obtaining a perfect position to kill the Phantom using his cannons, al-Qaisy refused to do so instantly: feeling in a clearly better position he wanted to play a cat and nose game with the Israelis. These have now spotted him and were

looking back at the MiG when the Iraqi pilot first moved slightly to the right, and then to the left. The pair of white crash helmets inside the cockpit of the IDF/AF fighter followed the movement and then this game continued for over a minute, without the Israeli crew attempting to accelerate away or outmanoeuvre the MiG. Then al-Qaisy decided it was about the time to finish the episode. He opened fire, causing the Phantom to explode in a huge orange fireball.

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Conclusions

The No.8 Sqn Iraf ceased combat operations in Syria on 22 October, when the unit was returned to Iraq. This move came at the same time the Israelis launched their counterattack to recapture the observation post on Mt. Jabel Sheikh, and the No.17 Squadron launched no less but 29 sorties within 24 hours, claiming four kills in exchange for two losses. Such tempo of operations was possible because the Iraf continued rotating crews in and outside Syria, while there were also exchanges with Syrian units.

Remaining Iraf units continued combat operations until 24 October, by when the Iraf is known to have suffered a loss of 26 aircraft in total, including:

- 8 Hunters (all losses occurred over Sinai)
- 5 MiG-21MFs
- 12 Su-7BMKs
- 1 MiG-17F

Only one Iraf MiG-21-pilot is known to have been killed during 1973 War; his name was Hassan Ubayid, but rank remains unknown. The most successful Iraf MiG-21-pilot of that war was called Ibrahim: he should have claimed four kills against Israelis, but no details about these are known.

The last Iraf aircraft have left Syria soon after the war: after differences about the possibility of continuing the war against Israel, on 30 October 1973, Bagdad issued the order all Iraqi troops and equipment to be pulled out of the country. The Israelis returned all three Iraf Hunter-pilots captured on Sinai front after the war.

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The German Connection

Meanwhile, a number of aircraft began arriving in Syria from Eastern Europe. The SyAAF suffered considerable losses in the war, and was in need of urgent replacements. In the frame of the Operation "Herbstrose" ("Autumn Flower"), on 19 October 1973, the Hungary dispatched 12 MiG-21F-13s, together with 23 drop tanks, to Aleppo. These aircraft – included were "214", "320", "810", and "906" of the 6336 Fighter-Bomber Regiment, based in Tazsar, as well as "215", "314", "315" and "812" of the 5081 Fighter-Bomber Regiment from Papa – were flown to Syria on board Soviet Antonov transports. Hungarian technicians put them together and they were test-flown by a group of Hungarian pilots, led by Lieutenant-Colonels Krista Istvan (from Tazsar), Szentepeteri Zoltan (from Kecskemet), and Kratki Lajos (from Papa).

Poland followed by seven MiG-21F-13s, while Czechoslovakia supplied 12 Avia S-106 (Czechoslovak version of the MiG-21F-13).

Regrettably, there is still considerable controversy over the East German participation. It is certain that East German pilots were sent to Aleppo, to test-fly 12 MiG-21Ms delivered from the stocks of their air force. Officially – and like

Hungarians and Czechoslovak pilots - they did not take part in the fighting. Nevertheless, there are unconfirmed reports about an encounter between four East-German-flown MiG-21Ms and several Israeli F-4Es, that ended inconclusively. Indeed, one of the involved East Germans should have subsequently got the Blücher Medal – the highest decoration for courage in combat in the former East Germany, which (officially) was never issued to anybody.

According to US reports, seven other foreign pilots arrived in Syria together with the Iraqi contingent, including East Germans, Polish, Libyan and even one British pilot. The identity of the later is meanwhile known: Robert Conner was killed on 13 October 1973, when his Hunter FR.Mk.10 was shot down by a Syrian SA-3 near Jabel Sheikh. On the same day, the Syrian anti-aircraft guns shot down also one of Iraqi MiG-21PFMs, supposedly flown by the East German pilot named “H. Sluszkiewicz”. Sluszkiewicz should have previously been involved in an air combat with Israeli fighters, and his aircraft was already damaged when he was hit while attempting to land at al-Mezzeh AB.

However, former SyAAF officers – including those that were stationed at al-Mezzeh during the 1973 War – do not recall any foreigners arriving with the Iraqi contingent, except one Hungarian technician. In turn, there is no confirmation to be found in Hungary for any Hungarian to have worked directly with the IrAF or SyAAF at the time.

Besides, in interview for FANA, the former Chief-in-Command of the East German Air Force (LSK/LV), Lt.Gen. Wolfgang Reinhold, outright denied that there was ever any East German pilot with the name of Sluszkiewicz, or that any East Germans flew with the IrAF during the 1973 War.

Most of the Iraqis interviewed for this feature denied to have been accompanied by foreign pilots in 1973, regardless if in Syria or in Iraq. In fact, the Iraqis also do not know about deployment of any of their Hunters in Syria: even if there were at least four single-seat F.Mk.59s left back at al-Taqaddum, and these could be easily converted to the FR.Mk.10 version. Besides, flying a reconnaissance mission over the Israeli lines meant that the plane would not only operate outside the Syrian air defence zone, but also be directly exposed to enemy fire. Iraqis proved ready to fly such missions in 1973, and the Syrians proved ready to let them do so: Syrians that worked with them confirmed that Iraqi pilots and technicians were very good, and that the only problem in cooperation with them was the issue of IFF-codes. The Iraqis use this as an example of there being no need to send foreigners to accomplish jobs that would otherwise also be extremely difficult and dangerous for foreign pilots: problems with IFF-codes already showed that the tasking of such a mission would require extremely careful coordination with the Syrian air defences.

Besides, Iraq and Syria were ruled by rival fractions of the Ba’ath Party at the time, and the deployment of foreign mercenaries under such circumstances was definitely nothing the other side would see as being in the sense of pan-Arabic ideas.

Nevertheless, it is meanwhile well-known that a number of members of the “Mathematic-Physical Institute” – as the former East German Military Intelligence used to be officially designated – have left their traces in various Arab countries over the last 40 years. One of them was former LSK/LV Colonel Otto Abel, who is known to have been in Egypt from 1969 until 1973 at least, and to have flown at least a dozen of combat air patrol missions during the war.

Several former EAF pilots clearly recall Abel as a much respected pilot, instructor and student of Western aircraft, and a person of high integrity. Photos of Abel in Egypt are available, but when asked about him, Lt.Gen. Reinhold tersely replied, “no comment”.

Last, but not least to mention here is a number of expatriate IrAF pilots serving with the SyAAF in 1973. After a failed coup against the communist regime in Baghdad, in 1959, several young pilots from No.5 Squadron – then stationed at Mosul and equipped with Hawker Fury FB.Mk.11 fighter-bombers – fled to Syria. They joined the SyAAF, and one of them – Col. Samir - even commanded a SyAAF MiG-17-squadron during the 1973 War. Their’s is, however, a completely different story...

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Note by Authors:

This report came into existence through cooperation of both authors and as a result of a whole series of intensive interviews with former Algerian, Egyptian, Iraqi, Moroccan, and Syrian air force officers, most of whom participated in the 1973 War. The authors were also able to use a number of documents released by US authorities in accordance with the FOIA procedure.

Regrettably, the memories of interviewed officers did not become better over the time, and the circumstances under which we met them did not always permitted us an insight into their original documents, such as log books. Therefore, some “holes” in this story remained open, and the quality of photos is not the best.

At least as regrettable is the fact that – even 33 years after the end of this war - number of the then active high officers even well outside the Arabic militaries still refuse to talk openly about matters in their knowledge and responsibility.