

# Libya's armed forces

## Prospects for arms procurements

The suspension of UN sanctions on Libya in 1999 has turned the country into a major potential arms importer. Before the sanctions were imposed seven years earlier, Moscow was the chief supplier. Russia now hopes to re-establish its domination of the Libyan arms market, but it faces stiff competition from former Soviet republics and could experience growing rivalry with Western arms exporters when the remaining sanctions enforced by Western countries are eventually lifted.

Before the embargo was imposed in 1992, the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, devoted considerable resources to creating an efficient and well-equipped military. Revenue from oil sales allowed him to purchase the most advanced military equipment of the time and to endow his armed forces with more weapon systems than they could service or field.

Between 1970 and 1991, Moscow sold \$19 billion-worth of military equipment to the Libyan armed forces, including more than 2,000 tanks, 2,000 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and armoured infantry fighting vehicles and about 350 self-propelled artillery guns. The Libyan Air Force and Navy used mostly Soviet-made aircraft and vessels. The USSR constructed military and military-industrial sites in Libya costing more than \$2bn. The very small proportion of non-Soviet armaments was supplied mainly by Brazil, Czechoslovakia, the UK, France, Italy, the United States, Yugoslavia and North Korea.

But the sanctions forced Qaddafi to suspend his procurement programme. The measures effectively blocked both the planned large-scale modernisation of Libya's air force and a deal for the delivery of MiG-29 fighters. Imposed on Libya in response to its alleged support for terrorism and its refusal to surrender suspects of the December 1988 bombing of a passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, the sanctions also covered supplies of spare parts, dual-use goods and services, an air embargo, the freezing of some Libyan financial assets abroad and a ban on sales of oil equipment. As a result, Russia lost

potential military-equipment deals worth approximately \$7.5bn.

### Qaddafi's requirements

The sanctions considerably weakened the now 76,000-strong Libyan armed forces. Clashes with the Islamic opposition in 1996-97 demonstrated that the army could no longer be confident of swiftly suppressing an armed internal challenge to Qaddafi's leadership. Most of the military's hardware is now obsolete, including its T-54/55 and T-62 main battle tanks (MBTs), BMP-1 APCs and the air force's MiG-21, MiG-23, Su-20/22 and Mirage-5s. Much of the equipment, particularly in armoured units and the navy, has been rendered inoperable by inadequate maintenance and the lack of spare parts. About half of Libya's 2,000 tanks do not work.

After sanctions were suspended in April 1999, the Libyan leadership regained badly needed revenue from oil sales. Qaddafi naturally is eager to use these funds to revive the armed forces. His priority is to repair and maintain defective armoured vehicles and naval vessels and to develop effective an air-defence system. For this, Libya needs spare parts as well as the services of foreign specialists to carry out the repairs. Before sanctions were imposed, technicians sent by Moscow were the main providers of such assistance.

Libya will seek to modernise key weapon systems, such as its Su-24 ground-attack aircraft, MiG-21 and MiG-25 fighters, T-72 MBTs and its air defences. Qaddafi will also purchase new armaments, whose nature will be determined by his military and political priorities, which include:

- *Protecting Libya from attack by Western countries, especially the United States and its NATO allies.* NATO's 1999 action in Yugoslavia raised Libyan concerns that NATO was growing more prepared to project its power beyond its members' territories. Tripoli will aim to build an air-defence system capable of repelling air and missile strikes and targeting

sea- and land-based enemy assets in the Mediterranean region. This system would include medium-range surface-to-surface missiles as well as attack and fighter aircraft.

- *Boosting Libya's role in regional affairs, both in the Middle East and Africa.* This will involve the deployment of ballistic missiles capable of striking a potential enemy such as Israel or US bases in Europe, as well as attack aircraft and mobile ground forces capable of being sent into a regional conflict.
- *Supporting the ruling élite and demonstrating the strength of Qaddafi's power.* To achieve this, Qaddafi will seek to modernise Libya's ground forces.

### Russia's contribution

It is clear that Qaddafi will turn to Russia and countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to provide military hardware and technical assistance, given that most of the Libyan army's equipment is Soviet-made. A joint commission on military and technical cooperation was created in 1999 after a visit to Libya by Russian Vice-Premier Iliya Klebanov. Klebanov is responsible for the military-industrial complex and for military cooperation with foreign countries.

Russian participation in the modernisation of Libya's armed forces was also discussed by the Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation in Moscow in October 1999 and at a meeting in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Libyan Foreign Minister Abdel Rahman Mohammed Shalgam in July 2000. The Russian Trade Ministry, rather than the arms exporters themselves, has been put in charge of handling Libyan requests.

Russia is at an advantage because its plants can repair and upgrade almost all Soviet-made weapons. Promeksport, the Russian arms-exporting company, has begun to fulfill a contract to deliver spare parts and ammunition to Libya worth \$100 million and Russia has reached an agreement in principle with Libya to

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## Libyan military assets

### Total Armed Forces

ACTIVE 76,000

### Army 45,000

11 Border Defence and 4 Security Zones • 5 elite brigade (regime security force) • 10 tank battalion • 22 artillery battalion • 21 infantry battalion • 8 Air Defence artillery battalion • 8 mechanised infantry battalion • 15 paratroop/commando battalion • 5 surface-to-surface missile brigade

#### EQUIPMENT

**main battle tank** 560 T-55, 280 T-62, 145 T-72 (plus some 1,040 T-54/-55, 70 T-62, 115 T-72 in store†)  
**reconnaissance** 250 BRDM-2, 380 EE-9 *Cascavel*  
**armoured infantry fighting vehicle** 1,000 BMP-1  
**armoured personnel carrier** 750 BTR-50/-60, 100 OT-62/-64, 40 M-113, 100 EE-11 *Urutu*, some BMD  
**towed artillery** some 720: **105mm:** some 60 M-101; **122mm:** 270 D-30, 60 D-74; **130mm:** 330 M-46; **152mm:** M-1937  
**self-propelled artillery:** 450: **122mm:** 130 2S1; **152mm:** 60 2S3, 80 DANA; **155mm:** 160 *Palmaria*, 20 M-109

### Navy 8,000 (incl. Coast Guard)

#### SUBMARINES 2†

**SSK (diesel)** 2 *Al Badr* † (Sov *Foxtrot*) with 533mm and 406mm torpedo tube (plus 2 non-op)

#### FRIGATES 2

**frigate with guided missile** 2 *Al Hani* (Sov *Koni*) with 4 SS-N-2C *Styx* SSM, 4 ASTT, 2 ASW RL

### Air Force 23,000

(incl. Air Defence Command; est. 15,000 conscripts) 426 combat aircraft, 52 armed helicopters (many in store, number unknown)

**bomber** 1 squadron with 6 Tu-22

**fighter, ground attack** 13 squadrons  
12 with 40 MiG-23BN, 15 MiG-23U, 30 *Mirage* 5D/DE, 14 *Mirage* 5DD, 14 *Mirage* F-1AD, 12 Su-24 MK, 45 Su-20/-22  
1 with 30 J-1 *Jastreb*

**fighter** 9 squadrons with 50 MiG-21, 75 MiG-23, 60 MiG-25, 3 -25U, 15 *Mirage* F-1ED, 6 -BD

**reconnaissance** 2 squadrons with 4\* *Mirage* 5DR, 7\* MiG-25R

modernise its air-defence systems and armoured vehicles. This could involve using Russian plants to upgrade Libyan Su-24 ground-attack aircraft and MiG-25 fighters as well as to convert second generation MiG-21 fighters to the MiG-21-93 version.

During Klebanov's visit to Tripoli, the two sides discussed deliveries of modern fighters and air-defence rocket systems to Libya. Russia offered Libya new equipment based on the S-300PMU1 and S-300PMU2 air-defence missile systems. This will be supplemented by the upgrading of Libya's existing air-defence armaments. However, these negotiations are still far from complete.

Russia could satisfy practically any Libyan request, from *Kilo*-class submarines to multiple-rocket systems and advanced armoured vehicles. But Libya has not yet decided whether to press ahead with wide-ranging military and technical cooperation with Moscow. This could be because Tripoli considers Russian prices too high. It may prefer competing suppliers from Belarus or Ukraine that could offer similar but cheaper products and services.

### Russia's rivals

Russia will face stiff competition from Ukraine and Belarus in securing contracts for the repair and modernisation of Soviet-made equipment. Both countries possess appropriate facilities, specialists and technologies inherited from the Soviet military-industrial complex. Since the embargo was lifted, Ukraine and Belarus have stepped up contacts with Libya aiming to secure military orders. The Ukrainians have facilities for the modernisation of Libyan T-72 tanks and naval vessels. Belarusian plants could repair Libyan T-54/55, T-62 and T-72 tanks, BMP-1 APCs, Su-22 aircraft and air-defence and radar systems.

Although Libya hired Russian experts to assess modernisation requirements for its Sukhoi aircraft, it has been reluctant to give Russia preference in the awarding of modernisation contracts. There are numerous potential suppliers of spare parts for Soviet-made equipment, including several former Warsaw Pact countries, which have surplus equipment and spares in excellent condition. The monthly salary of Ukrainian military specialists working in Libya is around \$350-400, while Russian specialists charge more than \$1,000.

It is likely, therefore, that Ukraine and Belarus will receive the lion's share of modernisation contracts. Out of 40

proposed contracts, Russia so far has only secured the Promeksport deal. But when it comes to supplying advanced, new armaments, the CIS countries cannot compete. Libyan contacts with Russia's competitors could be aimed simply at putting pressure on the country to lower its prices.

### Problems for Russia

The development of Russia-Libya military cooperation will not be smooth. Although Russian officials have repeatedly declared that they view both Libya and Iraq as major potential markets for Russian arms exports, the end of the embargo on Libya has not yet produced major dividends, despite Moscow's optimism and Tripoli's eagerness to upgrade its military. The same may also prove to be the case when UN sanctions on Iraq are lifted.

Russia's arms exports to Libya (and to Syria) are hampered by unresolved disputes relating to Soviet-era contracts. Most of Libya's outstanding \$3bn debt to Russia relates to pre-sanctions military contracts. Further difficulties have arisen over Tripoli's insistence that Russia provide compensation for losses incurred by Libya when Russia joined the international sanctions regime and refused to implement previously signed contracts.

In August 2000, Klebanov announced that Russia's expectations had not been realised because Tripoli had not taken the 'political decision' to develop large-scale military cooperation with Russia. One problem could be Libya's perception that Russia's importance has diminished. Tripoli no longer has a strong strategic incentive to conduct its military business with Moscow and to downplay disagreements over unfulfilled contracts.

The West, meanwhile, still has reservations about arming Qaddafi. Both the EU and the United States maintain their ban on arms sales. The Libyan elite also remains anti-West. To begin with, at least, Libya's expected rearmament programme must therefore be carried out with the help of states that, in Libya's view, are also not pro-Western. Since the embargo was lifted, mutual suspicion has prevented specific negotiations between Libya and Western countries on weapon purchases, even though the Europeans and Americans have conducted other business deals with Libya. In the longer term, however, when the EU and Washington eventually lift remaining sanctions, the Libyan government could decide to use its significant financial resources to buy Western weapons.

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