

Striving to keep relevant

# The Lebanese Air Force today



The bolt-on armour plating is clearly visible on this grey coloured Super Tucanos of the Lebanese Air Force. Photo: Arjen Weterings

With the arrival of six A-29B Super Tucanos, the Lebanese Air Force (*Al Quwwat al-Jawwiya al-Lubnaniyya*) has added a new type in its inventory. Combined with the AC-208 Combat Caravan the fixed wing component of this small air force has now added 'teeth'.

The A-29B Super Tucanos at Hamat Air Base mark completion of delivery to the Lebanese Air Force. Operating from Hamat, 7 Squadron's aircraft can reach the furthest point in Lebanon. With low operating cost, the Super Tucano has bolt-on armour plating and flare dispensers for self-defence, the aircraft carrying a payload of 1500 kg including M3M .50-inch machine guns, 70mm rocket pods, Mk81 and Mk82 unguided bombs and GBU-12 and GBU-58 laser guided bombs. This aircraft gives Lebanon counterinsurgency (COIN) capabilities.

The A-29s have joined the three AC-208 Combat Caravans, operating from Beirut with 4 Squadron. The Cessnas are used for a

variety of roles, besides cargo and passenger transport, also for attack and ISR missions. For the latter roles the crew consists of two pilots and a Mission System's Operator (MSO). For attack mission the aircraft carries the AGM-114 Hellfire II missile.

The Lebanese Air Force withdrew its last Hawker Hunters in 2014, and the A-29 and AC-208 can in fact be considered as fixed wing replacement aircraft, while there are three Scottish Aviation Bulldogs for training with 1 Squadron at Beirut.



Hamat is a small airbase some 60 kilometres north of Beirut. For the six A-29 Super Tucanos, new hangars were constructed. Photo: Frank Grealish

## Helicopters

The rotary wing element consists of several types. At Beirut, 12 Squadron operates UH-1H-IIIs, 16 Squadron flies S-61As (as fire fighters, funded by the Akhdar Dayem Association) and the single AW-139. Former UAE AF IAR330SM Pumas are operated by 9 Squadron at Hamat. The Puma is used for medevac, SAR and CSAR. Both Rayak and Kleyate are helicopter-only bases. Rayak is home to 8 Squadron (SA342L Gazelles in the attack role) while 15 Squadron is the training unit (operating the R44 Raven II and UH-1H), while 14 Squadron at Kleyate operates the UH-1H.

The versatile Huey/Huey II are used for numerous tasks (troop transport, VIP transport, crop spraying, firefighting, etc.). Six MD530G helicopters, supplied by the US (as were the UH-1s) will be added from 2020.



Three Bulldog basic frames came back into service around 2008. Photo: Frank Grealish



The Super Tucanos arrived in the country after the operations to remove ISIL from Lebanese territory had ended. 7 Squadron is currently training to keep it that way. Photo: Anton Rutten

## Puma gunship: Isolation and Ingenuity

Being cash-strapped, isolated and challenged, the Puma gunship was developed with local modifications including two Aden 30mm cannon and two Matra SNEB 68mm rocket pods. The Aden cannons were taken from the Hunters, while the SNEB was used by Mirage IIIs Lebanon once owned. The Puma can carry two bombs (one 1000lb and one 500lb bomb) on each side being involved in the 2017 operations.



4 Squadron at Beirut was majorly involved in the Qalamoun offensive, their three AC-208 Combat Caravans proving a valuable asset. The AC-208 can carry two Hellfire missiles and is equipped with high-tech equipment for its ISR missions. Photo: Stefan Goossens

## Recent operations

Since the end of the civil war in Lebanon 1990, its Air Force has been “seriously involved” in two major operations. In 2007, fighting broke out between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Islamist militant group Fatah al-Islam. The Lebanese Air Force deployed Gazelles with HOT missiles and gunpods against the hostiles. The UH-1H helicopters were modified to carry unguided bombs and rocket pods.

In 2011, the on-going Syrian civil war spilled over to Lebanon. Between 2011 and 2014, there were several clashes and bombings within Lebanon and Syrian military operating inside Lebanese territory. The Lebanese Armed Forces managed, more or less, to stay out of this conflict, but this changed in August 2014 during the Battle of Arsal, where fighters from the al-Nusra Front and ISIL had taken control of the Lebanese town, also capturing nine Lebanese soldiers. Then LAF got involved in taking back control of Lebanese occupied areas which culminated in the Qalamoun offensive in July/August 2017 when the Lebanese Armed Forces, Hezbollah and the Syrian Armed Forces all launched (non-coordinated) attacks on al-Qaida and ISIL on the Lebanon/Syria border, leading to a ceasefire between the LAF and ISIL on 27 August 2017.

This small Air Force played a major role in the offensive. Attack helicopters were used (Gazelles and modified Pumas) and the three Combat Caravans were heavily involved, firing AGM-114 Hellfires at targets and designating targets for M712 Copperhead laser-guided artillery shells.

*Stefan Goossens / 4Aviation  
and Jim Walg*



*9 Squadron operates a number of IAR330SMs from Hamat. Photo: Anton Rutten*



*Gazelle helicopters are based at Rayak Air Base and operate with 8 Squadron. Photo: Sonya Cooley*



*Lebanese Air Force SA330 Puma gunship. Armed with machine guns and rocket pods this was used against the ISIL in 2017. Photo: Sonya Cooley*



*The UH-1H Huey is workhorse of the Lebanese Air Force, its tasks including firefighting, crop spraying and VIP transport. Photo: Anton Rutten*



*The Lebanese Air Force operates both the UH-1H and the UH-1H II. Photo: Arjen Weterings*