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Top Gun in Iran? Don't be scared of the Islamic Republic's F-14s

Maverick And Goose Won't Be Coming To The Rescue



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Eric Tegler

You remember *Top Gun*, the movie about Tom Cruise and Val Kilmer playing volleyball. There was that sexy airplane too, the Grumman F-14 Tomcat: A twin engine, swing wing, carrier-borne fighter built to chase off the Russkies. What you may not remember is that we sold Tomcats to Iran. As you can see from the video above, they're still flying today. Sort of.

Last November the video, apparently leaked by the Russian Defense Ministry, was released showing Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) F-14s escorting Russian Tu-95 strike aircraft across Iranian airspace to Syria. A little over a minute into the video, you'll see two F-14s that serve as a vivid reminder that Iran still operates this American icon, the only country other than the United States to do so.

Iran's purchase may have saved the F-14 program.

In 1979, the Shah of Iran, a pilot in his own right, struck a deal with the United States for Iran to purchase 79 F-14A Tomcats and 633 Hughes AIM-54 Phoenix missiles for \$2 billion. Iran's purchase may have saved the F-14 program, according to Tom Cooper, co-author of a book on Iranian Tomcats in combat. Congress had cut funding, and Iran's cash possibly saved Grumman itself from bankruptcy.

The Iranians wanted the F-14 to deter Russia from flying its ultra-fast MiG-25R Foxbat over Iran on reconnaissance missions. It worked. Russia halted its flights. Then came the Islamic Revolution. The 129 Iranian F-14 pilots and radar intercept officers trained in America along with Iranian maintenance technicians found themselves out-of-favor with

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the Ayatollahs. Over two dozen pilots and more technicians fled Iran. Many of those who remained were arrested, some murdered. But when Iran went to war with Iraq in 1980 the F-14 crews were back in business.



Trouble was, there were few spares for the F-14As and the US cut off the supply of new parts. About 77 Tomcats remained when the war broke out but they were either non-operational or not fully operational. Their aircrews were not current and lacked experience. Still, the Iranians managed to get about a dozen back in service and they were soon intercepting Iraqi MiG-21s, [Mirage F1s](#), MiG-23s and MiG-25s.

The Tomcat's world-class performance, combined with its powerful AWG-9 radar and a store of highly prized, 100 mile-capable AIM-54 Phoenix missiles, proved partly effective in keeping the Iraqi air force at bay. Though there were approximately 1,000 air-to-air engagements during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, there weren't any decisive victories. With unreliable supply sources, both countries held their best aircraft in reserve. Iran, for its part, used its prized F-14s to defend strategically important installations like its main oil-exporting terminal at Khark Island.

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In the early 1980s the IRIAF attempted to keep 60 Tomcats operational, but demanding combat patrols and too few qualified maintenance personnel forced it to cut the number of operational F-14s to 40 by 1984, and to 25 by 1986, according to Cooper. A lack of support also meant Iran ceased flying Tomcats with the Phoenix missile, though not before using them to shoot down three or four Iraqi MiG-25s, according to ex-IRIAF pilots.

Iran used its prized F-14s to defend strategically important installations like its main oil-exporting terminal at Khark Island.

The number of operational IRIAF F-14s dwindled further in 1990s. But while the US Navy upgraded its fleet to the more capable F-14D Super Tomcat and eventually to the F/A-18 Super Hornet, Iran kept its F-14As flying infrequently as a matter of prestige as much as a deterrent. The country also operated other American fighters like the F-4E [Phantom](#) and F-5E/F, legacies of pre-Revolutionary Iran, sparingly flown.

But what about those Tomcats in the recent video? How many are left, and what kind of juice do they have? Mark Bobbi, principal [military](#) aircraft analyst at research outfit IHS Aerospace, asserts that the IRIAF is a "shell" air force.

"They're good at making it look like they have more airworthy combat aircraft than they actually do," says Bobbi.

Recent estimates put the total number of Iranian jet fighters at around 200, a hodgepodge fleet comprised mostly of the Tomcats, McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantoms, MiG-29s, Dassault Mirage F1s, and Northrop F-5E/f Tiger IIs. Of those, only about half are operational. The fact that Iran has kept a relative handful of F-14s in the air, through a combination of cannibalizing remaining airframes and fabricating parts, is impressive enough. Apparently, the country found limited success in obtaining smuggled Tomcat parts. In 2007, for example, a Long Island man was charged with exporting F-14 and F-5



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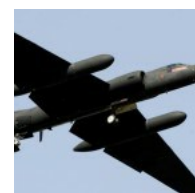


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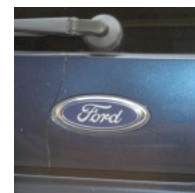
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parts to Malaysia that were destined for Iran.

Regardless of smuggling, observers, including Bobbi, put the current number of operational Tomcats at about a dozen. Iran has apparently modernized these in limited fashion. Italian defense blog *The Aviationist* reported in 2015 that the IRIAF had updated an unspecified number of its Tomcats to F-14AM ("Modernized") standard, extending their operational life until 2030. The domestic upgrades include radar and radar warning receivers, along with weapons that include R-73E, AIM-54A, AIM-7E and AIM-9J air-to-air missiles.



According to *The Aviationist*, these F-14AMs have been adapted to the aircraft's fire control system. The blog also reports that the jets carry the AIM-54+ "Fakour-90" missile, a partly reverse engineered, upgraded version of the Phoenix.

The reports don't impress IHS' analyst, who says Iran has little defense industrial capacity to make new parts for F-14s (like engines and large structures). Bobbi concedes that Iran may have received limited Russian help in fabricating reverse-engineered fan blades, for instance, but asserts that such fabricated pieces would likely have very limited life.

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Iran has little defense industrial capacity to make new parts for F-14s.

As for radars and missiles, the Iranians may have added some new wrinkles, likely by working around the F-14A's AWG-9 system, for which the last code written was probably in the mid-1980s, Bobbi points out. Even if add-on radar and weapons control systems are working with the AWG-9, the airplanes carry a weight penalty lugging it all around.

The Tomcat is difficult to maintain and expensive to fly, reasons cited for its retirement from US Navy service. Given the paltry number of aircraft still operational, along with maintenance demands and expense, Bobbi posits that Iranian F-14 aircrews overwhelmingly fly desks. So they're not highly capable, adding to the likelihood that if they ever came up against American F/A-18 Super Hornets or F-22s, they'd be toast.

With the additional non-flying time on their hands however, Iranian AF pilots could be pretty proficient at beach volleyball.

News Source: Persian_boy via YouTube

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f-14 tomcat

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thedriveatfive

4 Days Ago

I like the cross over articles, people here are so cynical and critical about everything, it brings a little refreshment.

7



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rjstanford

3 Days Ago

@thedriveatfive

I guess that's good if you only have one website in your newsfeed...

0



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Zrm Sh

5 Days Ago

im from iran and im so happy for new joint venture between IKCO and peugeot. we dont have new car for more than 35 years but now we have it. thank you world for trust us again.40 years ago we produce many american car in iran like cadillac seville and chevy nova and buick skylark andwe love american car and we love americans .

12



Report

Reply



Pete

4 Days Ago

@Zrm Sh

Hey Zrm SH

are you getting alle the new peugeot's 107 , 208, 308,508, RCZ ?

i've had a 106 gti and 306 gti and 206 xr, the best one was the 106 gti(super fun and agile, 118 hp to 925 kilo, 7,7 sec. to 60 mph.)

and what about Renault, they have a great line up now, espicially the new megane looks really good.

2



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Andy from Beaverton

4 Days Ago

@Zrm Sh

We may trust the individuals, but we don't trust your terrorist government. America is plagued right now with the worst president since Jimmy Carter, the one who helped turn Iran into a terrorist state.

-10



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Mark Machado

4 Days Ago

USA! USA! USA!

2



Report

Reply



kenc29

3 Days Ago

A buddy of mine in grad school flew F14s off carriers back in the 80s when he was a naval aviator. He got lots of the usual Top Gun jokes.

2



Report

Reply



New Shimmer

4 Days Ago

Tom Cooper's book *Iranian F14 Tomcat Units in Combat* (from which the author of this article sources most of his information) is a must read for the aviation enthusiast. From the 1980s the official stance of the US military is that Iran doesn't have the capability to maintain F14s in an operational status, and yet 35 years after support was cut off Iran still has some Tomcats operation. Cutting off support to the Tomcats made Iran invest in a domestic infrastructure for avionics and other military hardware. What this article doesn't mention is that, for all the rhetoric between Iran and Israel, for duration of the conflict with Iraq, Iran had a clandestine supply channel open with Israel for parts for its aircraft. I agree with the post by neutra_site that Iran has capable engineers, people who are perfectly capable of matching or exceeding what was the state of the art 40 years ago.

When you read the Cooper book, you'll wonder "why isn't this information available from other sources?" The book describes extensive air-to-air combat involving the Tomcat, with Tomcat kills exceeding all American jet kills in the Vietnam. In addition, the Iranians used the Tomcat as an improvised AWACS platform. Because the contentions of the book are impossible to confirm, you don't know how much is true and how much is false, but if even 1/4 of it is true, you will gain a greater appreciation of both Iranian ingenuity and the F14 Tomcat.

4



Report

Reply



haloguy628

3 Days Ago

@New Shimmer

Just imagine what the Iranians will be able to do with new shiny Eurofighters or Grippens bought for the 150 Billion that the Dear Leader just gave the Ayatollahs.

-2



Report

Reply



Rob

2 Days Ago

@New Shimmer

Actually, all of this is a testament to how well American aircraft are built, and nothing more.

0 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Bravo Johnny

4 Days Ago

" Because I was inverted."

3 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



RedTaxi

5 Days Ago

What specifically does this article have to do with the automotive industry?

2 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Gerald Michael

5 Days Ago

@RedTaxi

Much like cars, F-14s have wheels.

10 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Daniel D

4 Days Ago

@RedTaxi

Most Iranian F14's cant fly anymore, but they can taxi around the runways like cars.

7 ↑ ↓

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Mike M

5 Days Ago

@RedTaxi

Its a cross over episode,like that one time family guy was on the simpsons.

0 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



neutral_site

4 Days Ago

Iran has some capable engineers and scientists. As with Russia, it is a mistake to underestimate them or disparage them in this area.

Had the West not brutalized Iran over the last 100 years, they'd likely be a friend rather than a foe.

We can hope for a future that has less religion in both countries and more dialogue.

2 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Gary Jackson

4 Days Ago

@neutral_site

Iran is the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world. We should have nuked the country out of existence long ago. A bunch of savage refugees from the 7th Century, and nothing more.

-5 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Muttons

3 Days Ago

These may seem outdated until they convert into their battloid mode and start firing off huge salvos of cluster missiles. The Iranians were always way ahead in the fight against the Zentraedi.

1 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



razorpit

3 Days Ago

@Muttons

lol

0 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Sammy

4 Days Ago

The Tomcat was purpose built as a fleet-defense aircraft - almost completely built around the single purpose of being a launch platform for the (then) new Phoenix missile.

If engaging an adversary in a close-in gun fight, somebody screwed up . . . although it has the ability, it's weight places it at a distinct disadvantage against most adversaries in this regime.

Without the presence of the Phoenix missile or some other BVR weapons system, the Tomcat is a too-big, gas guzzler with one too many seats.

Anything we have on deck today would splash one of these things before he even knew we were in the air.

1 ↑ ↓

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MaderFaaker

4 Days Ago

This story smacks of bias. It's not a professional assessment and is as much an exaggeration of Iran's Air Force weaknesses as Iran likes to photoshop pictures and bluff about its strengths. Very unprofessional and childish. Plus with the sanctions relief Iran's got plenty of money to go fighter jet shopping from Russia and China.

-1 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Revis Goodworth

4 Days Ago

You can't fault the f-14 for the lack of current performance. Having five hanging Iranian men trailing you on each flight does create a large drag. Add a woman and the burka acts like a parachute.

-1 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Ziv

4 Days Ago

@Revis Goodworth

Iran's leadership has different ideas of what women should dress like than Iran's women. I think Iran is heading back out of the dark ages of the Ayatollahs. In 10 to 20 years, I think they will be a better frenemy to the US than the Saudi's ever were. Or so I hope. Having the Saudis as our "allies" in the middle east makes no sense whatsoever.

4 ↑ ↓

Report Reply



Lantern42

4 Days Ago

@Revis Goodworth

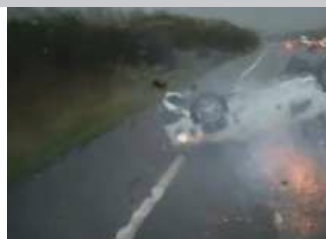
The Burkha is a Saudi thing, not Iranian.

2 ↑ ↓

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