The Sky Hunters: Tigre, Mangusta, and Fenice Against the Drone Threat

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The evolution of modern conflicts has transformed battlefields into scenarios dominated by unmanned aerial vehicles. In this context, the attack helicopter is experiencing a "second youth." No longer just a tank destroyer, but a specialized predator of mid-level drones (UAVs). While the French **Tigre** paved the way in recent operations in the Gulf, Italy deploys its "heavyweights": the **A129 Mangusta** and the brand new **AW249 Fenice**.

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The Tigre: Operational Efficiency in the Gulf

The recent operations of April 2026 in the United Arab Emirates confirmed the **Tigre** as one of the most versatile anti-drone systems. General Fabien Mandon confirmed the downing of several one-way drones (Shahed type) primarily using the **GIAT 30mm cannon**.

The strength of the Tigre lies in its ability to operate in "passive" mode: thanks to the **Strix** optronic system, the helicopter detects drones through the heat of their engines without emitting radar signals, swooping down on the prey without it being able to detect the threat.

Italian Excellence: Mangusta and the New Fenice

Italy plays an equal role in this technological challenge. The **A129 Mangusta**, a veteran of numerous operational theaters, has proven to be an ideal platform for drone hunting thanks to its extreme agility.

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- **The Mangusta (A129D):** Equipped with a **M197 20mm rotary cannon**, the Mangusta can saturate a drone's flight area with surgical precision. Its ability to fly "nap-of-the-earth" (at very low altitude among obstacles) makes it invisible to Russian drone navigation systems.
- **The AW249 Fenice (New Generation):** This is where the future of European air defense lies. The Fenice was natively designed for the digital battlefield. Thanks to a suite of next-generation sensors and the ability to interface with "friendly" drones (MUM-T - Man-Unmanned Teaming), the Fenice can act as a flying command center, coordinating the destruction of enemy drone swarms before they even enter the range.

Why does the helicopter beat the jet against the Shahed?

For both the Tigre and the Mangusta/Fenice, the tactical advantage against drones like the Russian **Shahed-136** is threefold:

1. **Speed Compatibility:** Jet fighters fly too fast to easily intercept drones traveling at 150 km/h. Helicopters operate exactly in the same "flight envelope."
2. **Thermal Detection:** Russian drones have piston or rotary engines that generate a lot of heat; the infrared sensors of European attack helicopters are optimized to lock onto these traces.
3. **Economic Sustainability:** Using a million-euro missile to shoot down a twenty-thousand-euro drone is an economic defeat. The 20mm cannon of the Mangusta or the 30mm of the

Tigre solve the problem with a few hundred euros.

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Conclusion

The European synergy between the French Tigre and the family of Leonardo combat helicopters (Mangusta and Fenice) is rewriting the rules of air defense. These aircraft are today the most credible bulwark against the asymmetric threat of UAVs, demonstrating that, in low-altitude combat, the man on board and the flexibility of the rotary wing remain irreplaceable.