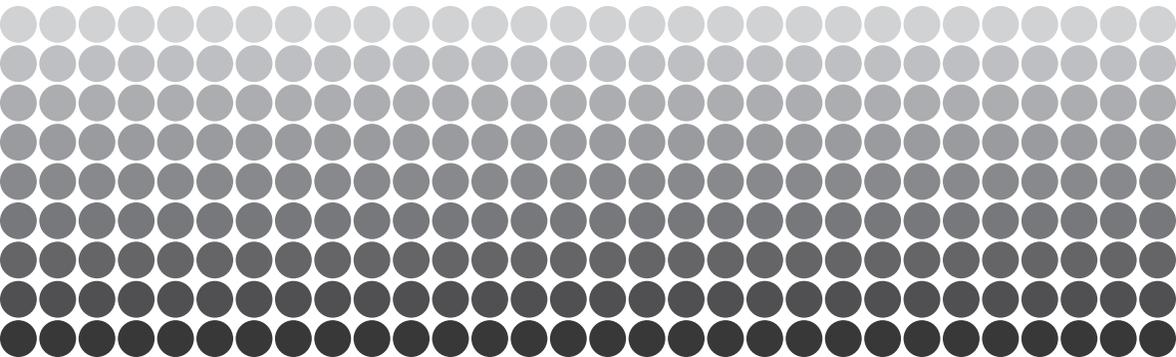


# **SIPRI YEARBOOK 2013**

Armaments, Disarmament and International Security

## Arms transfers to Syria

PIETER D. WEZEMAN



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## Contents

Arms supplies to Syrian Government forces	269
Arms supplies to Syrian rebel groups	271

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### III. Arms transfers to Syria

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As the conflict in Syria intensified in 2012, the international community remained at an impasse on how to respond.<sup>1</sup> It could not agree on how to deal with the conflict in general or with supplying arms to the parties in the conflict in particular. Whereas the European Union (EU), Turkey, the League of Arab States and the United States maintained arms embargoes against the Syrian Government, Iran and Russia continued to supply it with arms. Rebel forces called for foreign military aid and neighbouring countries seemed to supply arms or provide funds for arms acquisitions.

#### **Arms supplies to Syrian Government forces**

Before the start of the conflict in 2011, Syria's imports of major conventional weapons had increased by 330 per cent between 2001–2005 and 2006–10. After many years of economic difficulties, Syria had failed to keep its armed forces abreast of modern military technology, and the increase indicates a subsequent effort to upgrade the armed forces. During 2006–10, Russia provided 48 per cent of Syria's imports, with air defence systems and anti-ship missiles making up the bulk of the deliveries. Other suppliers of major conventional weapons were Iran (21 per cent), Belarus (20 per cent), North Korea (9 per cent) and China (2 per cent). More countries are likely to have been involved in the supply of other military equipment, including items used widely during the conflict. For example Russian and Italian companies were involved in upgrading Syrian T-72 tanks.<sup>2</sup>

Since the start of the conflict in 2011 there has been a sharp division between states that oppose the imposition of United Nations sanctions on Syria and that continue to supply arms to the Syrian Government, and states that have imposed arms embargoes on Syria and called for a UN embargo.<sup>3</sup> Russian officials have been most vocal with regard to the former position and made clear statements that arms supplies were continuing in 2011–12. However, there have been some indications of a growing Russian reluctance to supply weapons to the Syrian Government. Vyacheslav

<sup>1</sup> On the conflict in Syria see Allansson, M. et al., 'The first year of the Arab Spring', *SIPRI Yearbook 2012*; and chapter I, section I, in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Beretta, G., 'Siria: ministro Frattini, quei carro armati sparano italiano sui civili di Hama' [Syria: Minister Frattini, those tanks fire 'made in Italy' on civilians in Hama], Unimondo.org, 1 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.unimondo.org/Notizie/Siria-ministro-Frattini-quei-carro-armati-sparano-italiano-sui-civili-di-Hama-131207>>; and Barabanov, M., 'Russian interests in Syria: myths and reality', Moscow Defence Brief no. 4, 2012, <<http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/4-2012/>>.

<sup>3</sup> On the debate on multilateral arms embargoes on Syria see chapter 10, section II, in this volume. For background on Russian motives for supplying arms to Syria see Barabanov (note 2).

Dzirkaln, deputy head of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, announced in July 2012 that although existing contracts would be fulfilled, ‘Until the situation stabilizes we will not deliver any new weapons [to Syria]’ and that the Russian Government had not given permission for a planned sale of 36 Yak-130 trainer/combat aircraft to Syria.<sup>4</sup> In early 2013 Anatoly Isaikin, the general director of the Russian state arms trading corporation, Rosoboronexport, stated that Russia continued to supply air defence systems and ‘maintenance and servicing equipment’ but not combat aircraft.<sup>5</sup> However, although it is unclear if Russia was still prepared to supply 12 MiG-29M2 combat aircraft that Syria had ordered around 2007, several reports of actual deliveries in 2012 indicate that the weapons supplied by Russia included more than air defence systems. In January 2012 a Russian ship reportedly delivered 60 tonnes of ammunition and explosives to Syria.<sup>6</sup> A Russian company reported it would continue the supply of KAB-500 guided aircraft bombs to Syria in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Russia has continued to return Syrian Mi-24 combat helicopters that had been overhauled in Russia.<sup>8</sup>

Iran and Ukraine are also known to have continued to supply arms to the Syrian Government in 2011–12. Two shipments from Iran to Syria including small arms, mortar ammunition and rocket propellant were intercepted in 2011 in Turkey as part of the enforcement of the UN embargo on Iranian arms exports.<sup>9</sup> It was also reported that ‘Western intelligence’ concluded that Iran continued to supply large quantities of weapons to Syria via air in 2012.<sup>10</sup> The Ukrainian Government reported the export of 4000 rifles to Syria in 2011.<sup>11</sup>

The EU, Turkey and the USA imposed arms embargoes on Syria and tried to prevent the delivery of weapons by other states when legally possible. In October 2012 Turkey ordered a Syrian aircraft passing through Turkish airspace on a flight from Russia to Syria to land in Turkey, where it was searched before being allowed to fly on. While both Russia and Syria pro-

<sup>4</sup> ‘Russia suspends new arms shipments to Syria’, CNN, 9 July 2012, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/09/world/meast/syria-unrest>>.

<sup>5</sup> “‘No warplanes’ for Syria says Russian arms sales boss”, RIA Novosti, 13 Feb. 2013, <<http://en.rian.ru/world/20130213/179443688.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Arms-laden ship docks in Syrian port: official’, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 12 Jan. 2012.

<sup>7</sup> [Portfolio of export orders KTRV], 15 July 2012, <[bmpd.livejournal.com/290141.html](http://bmpd.livejournal.com/290141.html)> (in Russian).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Russia will deliver first Mi-25 gunships to Syria on time—arms official’, RIA Novosti, 28 June 2012, <[http://en.rian.ru/military\\_news/20120628/174282882.html](http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20120628/174282882.html)>.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, Security Council, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1929 (2010), S/2012/395, 12 June 2012, pp. 28, 64–65.

<sup>10</sup> Charbonneau, L., ‘Exclusive: Western report—Iran ships arms, personnel to Syria via Iraq’, Reuters, 19 Sep. 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ukrainian State Export Control Service, [Information on the international transfer of certain categories of weapon made by Ukraine in 2011], Aug. 2012 <[http://www.dsecu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art\\_id=46460&cat\\_id=46454](http://www.dsecu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=46460&cat_id=46454)> (in Ukrainian).

tested against the action, the Turkish Government claimed to have found ‘illegal cargo’ on board, reportedly spare parts for radar systems, and argued that it had acted in accordance with the 1944 Convention on International Civil Aviation (Chicago Convention).<sup>12</sup> In June 2012 a British company withdrew its insurance for a ship transporting several overhauled Mi-24 combat helicopters from Russia to Syria, forcing the ship to return to Russia, from where an alternative delivery route for the helicopters had to be found.<sup>13</sup> The USA pressured Iraq to prevent Iran from flying weapons to Syria through Iraqi air space, even though its formal concern was that such deliveries were in violation of the UN embargo on arms exports from Iran.<sup>14</sup>

### Arms supplies to Syrian rebel groups

The main source of weapons for Syrian rebel groups appears to have been the capture of arms from government troops and arsenals. Small arms and light weapons were also bought on the black market in Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, rebel forces repeatedly called in 2012 for governments supporting their cause to supply them with weapons and other military equipment.<sup>16</sup> As of January 2013 the actual volume of foreign military aid to the rebels is hard to measure.

The rebels’ requests for arms prompted mixed reactions. During 2012 the Friends of the Syrian People—a group of over 70 countries that supported the Syrian opposition—could not agree a common policy of supplying arms.<sup>17</sup> Instead, individual countries pursued their own policies. Several states supplied Syrian opposition groups with non-lethal equipment. Within the US Government several high-level decision makers were in favour of providing arms to rebel groups. However, others—including US President Barack Obama—were against the idea because of fears that this might draw the USA into a proxy war and that supplied weapons might end

<sup>12</sup> Omanovic, E., ‘Effective embargo enforcement: overflight denial and control’, Non-proliferation Papers no. 26, EU Non-proliferation Consortium, Feb. 2013, <<http://www.nonproliferation.eu/activities/activities.php>>, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Saul, J. and Grove, T., ‘Syria faces ire over fresh Russia arms shipments’, Reuters, 19 June 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Omanovic (note 12), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Constantine, Z., ‘Guns from Beirut: Syria uprising good for business for Lebanese arms dealers’, *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 29 Feb. 2012; Stephan, L., ‘Un trafic d’armes au profit des insurgés syriens se développe dans le nord du Liban’ [Weapons trafficking from Northern Lebanon helps Syrian insurgents], *Le Monde*, 10 Mar. 2012; and Nichols, M., ‘Weapons being smuggled between Lebanon, Syria: U.N.’, Reuters, 8 May 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Myers, S. L., ‘U.S. joins effort to equip and pay rebels in Syria’, *New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2012; Weaver, M., ‘Friends of Syria grant Assad’s opponents recognition but not weapons’, *The Guardian*, 12 Dec. 2012; and Karouny, M., ‘Syria rebels hope arms will flow to new fighter command’, Reuters, 10 Dec. 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Barnard, A., ‘U.S. and Turkey to step up “nonlethal” aid to rebels in Syria’, *New York Times*, 25 Mar. 2012.

up in the wrong hands, within or outside Syria.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the USA sent equipment, including communication equipment, which according to the US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, would 'help activists organize, evade attacks by the regime, and connect to the outside world'.<sup>19</sup> In late 2012 the United Kingdom provided non-lethal aid, including communication equipment and body armour.<sup>20</sup> Both France and the UK argued in favour of amendments to the EU arms embargo on Syria to allow the supply of additional types of non-lethal military equipment to opposition groups.<sup>21</sup>

Government representatives of Libya, Qatar and Saudi Arabia proposed in early 2012 providing weapons to the rebels.<sup>22</sup> In mid-April the Prime Minister of Qatar, Hamad bin Jasim bin Jabir Al Thani, stated that his country was not arming the Syrian rebels.<sup>23</sup> Despite the fact that no government openly admitted to supplying arms to the Syrian rebels, there were reports that several states supplied arms directly or provided the funds to acquire arms on the black market.<sup>24</sup> The chairman of the Syrian National Council claimed in March 2012 that the council had received funding from 'Arab and foreign countries' to procure weapons.<sup>25</sup>

In June 2012 it was rumoured that Syrian rebels received arms paid for by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.<sup>26</sup> In July 2012 it was claimed that Qatar and Saudi Arabia were advocating the supply of man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) to the Syrian rebels.<sup>27</sup> However, reportedly they had been holding back on supplying advanced weapons, such as MANPADS, because of US objections.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in early 2013 it was reported that MANPADS had been supplied via Turkey and that this was a relaxation of

<sup>18</sup> Landler, M. and Gordon, M. R., 'Obama could revisit arming Syria Rebels as Assad holds firm', *New York Times*, 18 Feb. 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Gaouette, N., 'Clinton says Assad is ignoring UN's plan to end Syria violence', Bloomberg, 1 Apr. 2012; and Barnard (note 17).

<sup>20</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Foreign Secretary remarks at Friends of the Syrian People meeting', 12 Dec. 2012, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-remarks-at-the-friends-of-syria-meeting>>; and Loveluck, L., 'What's non-lethal about aid to the Syrian opposition', *Foreign Policy*, 20 Sep. 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See chapter 10, section I, in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> 'Gulf states propose funding Syrian opposition army', France 24, 2 Apr. 2012, <<http://www.france24.com/en/20120401-friends-syria-talks-get-underway-istanbul-six-point-annan-peace-plan-assad>>; and Kennedy, E. A., 'With smuggling choked, Syria rebels feel arms curb', Associated Press, 25 May 2012.

<sup>23</sup> 'Qatar PM: no arms to Syrian rebels from Gulf state', Associated Press, 17 Apr. 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Worth, R. F., 'Citing U.S. fears, Arab allies limit Syrian rebel aid', *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Astih, P., 'The National Council reveals that it is obtaining financial resources to secure qualitative weapons for the dissidents', Al-Sharq al-Awsat Online, 10 Mar. 2012, Translation from Arabic, Open Source Center.

<sup>26</sup> Schmitt, E., 'C.I.A. said to aid in steering arms to Syrian opposition', *New York Times*, 21 June 2012.

<sup>27</sup> 'Syrian rebels acquire surface-to-air missiles: report', Reuters, 31 July 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Dettmer, J., 'Syrian rebels step up efforts to get anti-aircraft missiles', Voice of America, 16 Aug. 2012, <<http://www.voanews.com/content/syrian-rebels-step-up-efforts-to-get-anti-aircraft-missiles/1489899.html>>; Worth (note 24); and Hosenball, M., 'As militants join Syria revolt, fears grow over arms flow', Reuters, 22 June 2012.

the restrictions that Turkey and the USA had imposed on arms flows to the rebels.<sup>29</sup>

Reports of interceptions of arms shipments and the analysis of images of weapons used by Syrian rebels provide further indications that foreign governments were supplying arms to the rebel forces. While it is possible to ascertain the ultimate origins of these weapons, there is uncertainty regarding the immediate suppliers and the volume of arms flows to the rebels. For example, in April 2012 Lebanese authorities seized a consignment of rocket-propelled grenades and other ammunition on a ship from Libya that was believed to be destined for Syrian rebels.<sup>30</sup> However, it was not established with certainty who in Libya was behind the shipment. A Swiss Government investigation established that hand grenades photographed in the possession of Syrian rebels had originally been delivered from Switzerland to the United Arab Emirates in 2003–2004 and had then been given to Jordan in 2004.<sup>31</sup> However, it was not established how the hand grenades reached the Syrian rebels. The large number of videos and photographs of the Syrian conflict made available on the Internet have provided analysts opportunities to assess arming trends. For example, in late 2012, videos posted on the Internet showed rebels using weapons originating from the former Yugoslavia.<sup>32</sup> Investigations by journalists resulted in reports that the weapons had been supplied from Croatia, via Jordan, to rebels in Syria in a deal financed by Saudi Arabia.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Borger, J., 'Syria crisis: European countries expected to start arming rebels', *The Guardian*, 1 Mar. 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Nichols (note 15).

<sup>31</sup> Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, 'Swiss hand grenades in Syria: conclusion of investigation and measures', 21 Sep. 2012, <<http://www.seco.admin.ch/aktuell/00277/01164/01980/index.html?lang=en&msg-id=46075>>.

<sup>32</sup> Higgins, E., 'Weapons from the former Yugoslavia spread through Syria's war', *At War Blog, New York Times*, 25 Feb. 2013, <<http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/25/weapons-from-the-former-yugoslavia-spread-through-syrias-war/>>.

<sup>33</sup> Chivers, C. J. and Schmitt, E., 'Saudis step up help for rebels in Syria with Croatian arms', *New York Times*, 25 Feb. 2013.