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FLASH NOTE: SYRIA

CHINESE MANPADS IN SYRIAN REBEL HANDS

About This Project

The Syria Digital Security Project seeks to improve the online safety and security of the Syrian people, and to enhance the free flow of information in Syria. To this end, it provides information, analysis, tools and resources dedicated to enhancing digital safety and openness in Syria. The project is administered by The SecDev Foundation, a Canadian not-for-profit organization, with funding from granting bodies in North America.

About The SecDev Foundation

The SecDev Foundation is a not-for-profit organization that seeks to broaden global public awareness and understanding in three core programme areas: cyber empowerment; the sources of security and resilience; and armed violence prevention and reduction. The SecDev Foundation supports local partners, research and advocacy in regions at risk from fragility, violence and underdevelopment in Asia, Africa, Eurasia, the Middle East and Latin America.

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Rare footage of rebels firing a portable surface-to-air missile suggests opposition forces may be receiving some of these weapons from abroad. The unedited video, released this week, shows opposition fighters using what appears to be a Chinese-made Man-Portable Air Defence System, or MANPADS, to down a Syrian regime helicopter near Aleppo. To date, only Russian-made models were thought to be available within the country.

Dozens of videos uploaded on social media show government aircraft being downed by rebel attacks. However, only one other video is known to show the full launch sequence. This raises the question of whether rebels are deliberately editing footage to exclude shots of the launchings, which could reveal the type and origin of MANPADS they are using.

On 5 March 2012, Turkey's Anadolu news agency published an unedited version of a video previously captured by its journalists while they were embedded with a division of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Alwafa Shield Brigade, in January.¹ The footage, from 25 January 2013, shows the rebels using what appears to be a Chinese-made FN-6 MANPADS against a regime helicopter² near Nairab airbase in Aleppo. Previously, edited footage of the helicopter going down had been uploaded to the Facebook page of the brigade's parent group, the Revolution Shields Commission, but it did not include the firing of the MANPADS.³

To date, SecDev is only aware of one other video circulating via social media that displays both the launch and hit of regime aircraft by shoulder-fired missiles:⁴ on 25 February, the FSA's newly created Air Defence Battalion

¹ Anadolu Agency. 5 March 2013. *AA Crew Recorded as Helicopter Downed*. See <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/s/139787-aa-crew-recorded-as-helicopter-downed>; the video has also been uploaded to YouTube by various other individuals.

² It is difficult to assess what type of helicopter was shot down due to the quality of the video and the distance of the helicopter from the camera man.

³ 25 January 2013. Revolution Shields Commission. 2013. Facebook site. See <https://www.facebook.com/RevolutionShieldsCommission/info>

⁴ In both cases, the attacks were carried out by the Free Syrian Army.

uploaded video of an FN-6 being launched against a regime Mi-8 Hip transport helicopter near Menagh helicopter air base in Aleppo governorate. The attack was part of rebel efforts to enforce a no-fly zone they have created in the area as they continue their siege of the air base.

The presence of Chinese shoulder-fired missiles in rebel hands is noteworthy because China, like Russia, has not supported the armed uprising. Until these two videos emerged, the evidence suggested that the rebels have only Russian-made weapons, obtained from regime depots they have captured, as well as from the regional black market.⁵ However, SecDev is not aware of any evidence that the Syrian regime has ever been in possession of Chinese MANPADS, and as Matthew Schroeder, director of the arms sales monitoring project of the Federation of American Scientists, recently noted in *Foreign Policy* magazine, "Open source information suggests that few if any [FN-6s] are on the black market."⁶ The fact that rebels are using them therefore suggests they may have acquired them from a foreign donor.

Referring to the Menagh helicopter attack, Schroeder called the appearance of Chinese-made MANPADS "a very significant development" that marks a "change in the [selection of] MANPADS available outside of government control."

The provenance of the weapons remains unknown: as Eliot Higgins points out in his *Brown Moses* blog, "the nearest known operators of FN-6s to Syria are the Sudanese and Pakistani militaries,"⁷ though neither country is known to be actively supporting the rebels.

External sourcing may be one reason for the exclusion of footage showing the missile launchers in the majority of uploaded videos: foreign backing of the uprising is a mainstay of the regime's propaganda efforts to discredit the rebels. Excluding shots of the launchers also allows rebels to conceal from the regime what types of shoulder-fired missiles opposition groups have, as well as the identity of those firing the weapons.

⁵ See for instance, C.J. Chivers's reporting on rebels purchasing SA-7 MANPADS from an Iraqi arms dealer. C.J. Chivers. 7 December 2012. "The Lions of Al-Tawhid, revisited," in *The Gun*. <http://cjchivers.com/post/37448078406/the-lions-of-al-tawhid-revisited-earlier-this>.

⁶ Cited by John Reed. 28 February 2013. "Chinese surface-to-air missiles are being used by Syrian rebels," in *Foreign Policy*. <http://killerapps.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/02/28/chinese-surface-to-air-missiles-are-being-used-by-syrian-rebels>

⁷ Eliot Higgins. March 3, 2013. "Chinese MANPADS in Syria: Does 2+2=FN6?" in *Brown Moses Blog*. <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/chinese-manpads-in-syria-does-2-2-fn6.html>.

Rebel groups have been in possession of MANPADS since at least last summer.⁸ On 16 August 2012, SecDev reported that a brigade of the FSA had uploaded a video on YouTube showing the Russian-made SA-7s it had captured from regime depots in Dumair. In November 2012, video uploaded to YouTube reportedly showed the first documented use of MANPADS in the conflict; however, the video only depicted a helicopter being hit, not the missile launch.

ANALYSIS

The appearance of Chinese-made missile launchers raises questions about the potential involvement of unknown foreign parties in the conflict, as well as raising concerns about the proliferation of these highly portable missile launchers in the region, as the conflict escalates. As rebels continue to gain territory across Syria, the regime is likely to resort to mounting more air attacks on rebel-held territory, particularly in the north of the country; the demand for MANPADS could therefore increase, leading to greater circulation of these weapons – traded, seized, or donated – both in Syria, and within this volatile region.

⁸ SecDev.Analytics. 2012. *Syria Digital Security Reports*. 16 August 2012 and 14 November 2012. (Unpublished). See also SecDev.Analytics. 2012. *Syria Flash Note*. 23 November 2012 and *Syria CyberWatch*. 25 November 2012 at See <http://www.secdev.com/featured-publications>