FLASH NOTE: SYRIA

OPPOSITION FORCES SEIZE SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILES

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Ansar Al Islam, a hardline Islamist organization, each captured an estimated 15 surface-to-air missiles this week in separate attacks on weapons depots held by the Syrian regime in Idlib and Damascus, according to social-media reports. The seizures raise concerns about how the Syrian regime's stock of advanced weapons may be used by resistance forces as the conflict escalates.

Over the past week, social-media sources showed the FSA and Ansar Al Islam, a member of the conservative Salafist movement, had captured portable surface-to-air missiles called Man-Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADs), in three separate instances.

Video footage from the first social-media report, on 7 November 2012, showed that the FSA had captured four Strela (SA-7) shoulder-mounted launchers in Dweila, an area near Idlib. The videos show the seizure of additional munitions and arms, but provide little additional information

A week later, photos on another social-media site showed Ansar Al Islam had captured Strela-3 weapons (SA-16), an updated version of the Strela, in East Ghouta, near Damascus. No additional information is given on the number of units seized.

The third report, posted on the same site on 15 November 2012, shows Ansar Al Islam had acquired the Igla-S (SA-24), a highly advanced version of the MANPAD, from an air defence base near East Ghouta. The sources estimate 12 SA-24s were captured. While the videos appear authentic, it is unclear whether these weapons are fully functional.

ANSAR AL ISLAM

Ansar Al Islam is an armed opposition group associated with the conservative Salafist movement. On 8 August 2012, it announced its founding on a YouTube video and launched a Facebook page. The group operates in the Damascus and Rural Damascus regions. Its stated mission is to overthrow the Syrian government and to establish an Islamic caliphate

based on Sharia law. Since its formation, it has carried out numerous attacks in and around Damascus. It is not affiliated with the FSA and denies any links to the Syrian National Council.

ANALYSIS

This is not the first time armed opposition groups have captured surface-to-air missiles, nor will it be the last, as the conflict continues.

While the FSA is a secular group, it has formed strategic partnerships with other opposition groups – including jihadists – fighting the regime. The fact that an armed Salafist group has acquired surface-to-air missiles raises troubling questions about how these and other arms will be used, and whether terrorist groups may also wind up in possession of such weapons.

Another sobering development is footage from YouTube showing Syrian military forces unloading military cargo from a civilian plane. The posting was accompanied by the comment, "Don't blame #FSA if they attack it." With some opposition forces now in possession of surface-to-air missiles, this remark raises concerns that they will use these weapons to target civilian aircraft.

METHODOLOGY

SecDev. Analytics' innovative approach to social-media analysis enables it to track events on the ground in Syria rapidly and accurately, pinpointing developments in time and space as they unfold. This live mapping of events, though the data-mining of social media as well as network analysis and other measures of online activity, is enriched by intelligence gathered from traditional avenues, such as media reports and sources in the field, to create timely and reliable insights into this rapidly evolving conflict.