

**Grail quest: MANPADS proliferation in the wake of Libya**

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**Thousands of MANPADS fell into the hands of militias during Libya's 2011 conflict, contributing to a level of proliferation that today represents an unprecedented threat to aviation. Jeremy Binnie reports**

Former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen was speaking in jest when he said that "MANPADS aren't hideouts we find to eat snacks and watch football", but the proliferation of man-portable air defence systems is no joke. Thousands have fallen into the hands of non-state actors in the last three years, the bulk of them taken from Libyan military stockpiles during the 2011 conflict there. These weapons are now turning up across Africa and the Levant. Syrian rebels have also seized MANPADS from military bases and have been supplied with more by their state sponsors. Meanwhile, separatists in eastern Ukraine have obtained MANPADS and are using them to down military helicopters.

This level of proliferation represents an unprecedented threat to aviation. Short-range, infrared-guided missiles are typically used to defend against low-flying ground attack aircraft and heliborne assaults. That makes them extremely useful for insurgents looking to mitigate their adversaries' air power. They are also potentially devastating weapons in the hands of terrorists, who could use them to target civilian airliners as they take off or land.

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**Strelas hit the fan**

General Carter Ham, then chief of US Africa Command (AFRICOM), was the first senior official to publicly identify the scale of MANPADS proliferation that was arising as the rebellion in Libya gained momentum after the NATO-led intervention began in March 2011. "I'm very concerned about the proliferation of weapons, notably shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles," he told a congressional committee on 7 April 2011. "We assess there were perhaps as many as 20,000 in Libya as the operation began. Many of those we know are now not accounted for and that's going to be a concern for some period of time."

A UN panel was subsequently tasked with tracking Libyan MANPADS proliferation. In its 19 February 2014 report it documented three confirmed cases of Libyan MANPADS turning up in other countries, including 13 9K32M Strela-2M (SA-7b 'Grail') missiles, one gripstock (launcher), and 11 batteries that were seized in northern Mali. France, which has military forces operating in the area, provided details of two of the missiles that it had traced back to Libya: an assertion corroborated by the panel's own findings. The Tunisian authorities told the panel they had found eight Strela-2M missiles, two gripstocks, and 11 batteries in a large cache in the southern town of Medenine. The panel inspected one missile with the same lot number as systems seen in Libya.

In its 2013 report the panel documented the arms found aboard the *Letfallah II* : a ship that was stopped by the Lebanese Navy in April 2012 before it could deliver a consignment of weapons that were loaded in the Libyan city of Misratah and presumed to be destined for Syrian insurgents. The arms included 10 Strela-2M missiles, one gripstock, and six batteries, as well as two Igla-S (SA-24 'Grinch') missiles.



*The weapons found by Lebanese authorities on the Letfallah II cargo ship in April 2012 included Strela-2M MANPADS and Igla-S missiles. (UNSCR 1973 Panel of Experts)*

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### **Sinai smuggling**

The Egyptian authorities were equally unco-operative, but there is nonetheless a substantial body of evidence indicating that Libyan MANPADS have been smuggled into Egypt. The Egyptian Ministry of the Interior (MoI) has posted photographs of recovered MANPADS components several times since June 2012, when one showed three missiles and at least nine batteries that were recovered from smugglers in the western port city of Marsa Matrouh. The military has also recovered MANPADS in Sinai. The 3rd Army's General Osama Askar told journalists in September 2013 that at least 10 SAM-

7s had been found in a mosque and homes of suspected militants in the North Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweid.

More Strela-2s have been turning up in the Gaza Strip after presumably being smuggled into the Palestinian territory from Sinai. Although these types of weapon have long been believed to be in the hands of the various militant groups that operate in the Gaza Strip, the armed wing of Hamas did not display its Strela-2s until November 2012 when it released a video showing one being launched.

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## **Attack record**

A few days after that parade a surface-to-air missile was fired at an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) helicopter flying over the Gaza Strip: the first time such an attack had been mounted. The IDF identified the system as a Strela-2, but did not say whether it missed its target due to countermeasures carried by the helicopter.

An Egyptian Mi-17 helicopter was less fortunate on 25 January. A video released by the Sunni radical group Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis showed the helicopter crashing after being hit by a MANPADS missile. Five army personnel were killed in the incident, which happened near the Sinai-Gaza border.

The group deliberately blurred the front end of the MANPADS in the video to make it difficult to identify the system used in the attack. Nevertheless, a single frame from the video taken as the operator ducks to avoid the dust caused by the ignition of the main motor shows the weapon did not have the horizontally aligned, cylindrical battery used with the Strela-2, but had an angled BCU like the ones used on more advanced MANPADS.

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## **Separatist systems**

More recently pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine have engaged military helicopters with MANPADS. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (MoD) said that two Mi-24 attack helicopters were shot down with MANPADS on 2 May and a Mi-8 was downed on 29 May.

The MoD has implied that the separatists who were responsible are being trained and equipped by Russia. "[The] fact of the [MANPADS] use against the Ukrainian armed forces testifies that there are well-trained and -armed groups currently acting in Donetsk Oblast," it said in a statement. Separatists have been photographed with Igla and Strela-2 MANPADS. However, the use of MANPADS in the Ukrainian conflict does not necessarily mean that Russia is supplying the systems to the separatists. In early March local media reported that Igla systems had gone missing from two Ukrainian military units near Lvov.

The situation became more mysterious on 18 May, when the Ukrainian MoD announced that Polish-made PZR Grom missiles had been recovered from separatist rebels and released a photograph of a Grom-E2 missile attached to what appeared to be a 9P516 Igla gripstock.

### Syria's 'Stingers'

It would be extremely embarrassing for Moscow if hard evidence emerges that it has been supplying MANPADS to Ukrainian separatists, given its allegations that foreign states are arming Syrian insurgents with similar weapons. In May 2012 Russian officials began to complain that Syria was receiving General Dynamic FIM-92 Stinger MANPADS. While a Russian Foreign Ministry official subsequently admitted that the United States was not supplying MANPADS to Syrian militants, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on 6 November 2012 that Russia had "confirmed evidence" that Syrian militants had acquired 50 Stingers. "You know what Stingers are made for, especially as the top officers of the Free Syrian Army have more than once said that civilian aircraft will also be targeted," the Interfax News Agency quoted him as saying.



*Members of the Daraa Revolution Commission, an insurgent group operating in southern Syria, demonstrate how to operate a Chinese FN-6 MANPADS in a video released on 3 October 2013. (Daraa Revolution Commission)*

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There is, in fact, no evidence in the public domain that any Stingers have been delivered to Syrian rebels. One possible explanation is that Lavrov was using the well-known Stinger name as a generic term for all MANPADS. If that was the case, he may have been referring to the Chinese FN-6 systems that began appearing in insurgent videos a few months later in February 2013.

One insurgent commander told *The New York Times* that the FN-6s had been sent from Sudan to Turkey, from where they were distributed to insurgents by a Qatari intelligence officer. While a

video released in August 2013 showed an FN-6 successfully bringing down a Syrian Mi-8/17 helicopter, the insurgent commander said most of the missiles had failed to work, with two even exploding when fired, killing two insurgents and wounding four others.

This corroborated an earlier *New York Times* report that cited four US and Middle Eastern officials as saying that Qatar had delivered two batches of MANPADS - one of them consisting of FN-6s - to Syrian insurgents. The sources added that there were only "a few dozen missiles" in each batch and that the FN-6s had been plagued by technical problems.

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## **Grail fail**

While Syria has the potential to be a significant source of illicit MANPADS if foreign states supply more systems to the insurgents and more military stockpiles are overrun, for the time being Washington's reluctance to deliver such weapons to the insurgents is helping to limit their proliferation.

At the same time the discovery of MANPADS on the *Letfallah II* might indicate that the Syrian conflict is soaking up at least some of Libya's missiles. This could be one reason why there have been no confirmed shootdowns with a Libyan system anywhere since the 2011 conflict.

International efforts to secure Libya's MANPADS are another contributing factor. Andrew Shapiro, the US State Department's assistant secretary for political-military affairs, told a conference in February 2012 that British and US teams had already helped to identify, recover, and secure approximately 5,000 MANPADS and components in Libya.

Shapiro also noted that Libya's militias had accumulated large stockpiles of MANPADS, ensuring they had not been moved out of the country. "While the [militia] integration process has been slow and challenging, at the very least, we believe this means that the large stockpiles of weapons under militia control have remained inside Libya," he said.

Two years later, the UN panel of experts suggested this situation has changed little, saying its sources "stated that thousands of MANPADS were still available in arsenals controlled by a wide array of non-state actors with tenuous or non-existent links to Libyan national authorities".

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