



New Airliner Threat: Arming Syrian Jihadists with US Anti-Aircraft Missiles

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April 2016

Abstract

With the breakdown of the ceasefire in Syria, there are reports that U.S. and Turkey backed al Qaeda groups have received anti-aircraft missiles. By arming Islamic extremist groups with these advanced weapons, this introduces a new threat to civilian airliners that would result in devastating economic losses in tens of billions of dollars. Chinese and Russian airliners are especially at risk given the high number of Chechen and Uyghurs jihadists in these groups, and would likely compel Beijing and Moscow to adopt more robust military counter-measures to neutralise this new threat.

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Analysis

In a blunder reeking of the fallout caused by supplying Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to 1980s mujahideen in Afghanistan, civilian airline passengers are now under threat from Syrian jihadists armed with portable surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS).

Reports say some American-backed jihadi groups are being equipped with US-made MANPADS. Indications are they're obtaining these advanced weapons either directly or indirectly from the US or its Mideast allies in connection with a recent escalation in the fighting in Syria.

On April 2, fighting broke out between western-backed al-Qaeda affiliates and the Syrian army, ending the Syrian ceasefire. The groups that broke the ceasefire included al-Qaeda in Syria (al-Nusra), the Chinese Uyghur Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), The Levant Brigade, the Freeman of Syria (Ahrar al-Sham), Division 13 and other jihadi groups. According to AP, the US-trained and armed Division 13 is now fighting alongside al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham." The latter two are part of the Turkey/Saudi/Qatar-backed Army of Conquest.¹

In addition to the missile threat, the resumption of the fighting is exacerbating the Syrian refugee crisis plaguing the EU. It's also prolonging the suffering of civilians inside Syria and diverting Syrian military resources away from battling ISIS.



US soldier with MANPAD

Threat to Civil Aviation

The US and Turkish-backed Al Hamza brigade reportedly posted pictures showing off their new missile acquisition, while Ahrar al-Sham downed (video) a Syrian Su-22 ground-attack plane with a MANPAD in southern Aleppo.²

These reports seem plausible when placed in the context of a February interview between Saudi Foreign Minister Abdel al-Jubeir and Germany's Spiegel Magazine. In the interview, al-Jubeir announced Riyadh would send MANPADS to Syria to help its jihadi rebels because "We believe that introducing surface-to-air missiles in Syria is going to change the balance of power on the ground ... just like surface-to-air missiles in Afghanistan were able to change the balance of power there."³

¹ <http://www.juancole.com/2016/04/syrian-ceasefire-in-tatters-as-al-qaeda-allies-attack-in-south-aleppo.html>; "Syria Cease-Fire at Risk as Heavy Fighting Erupts", *The New York Times*, 2 April

2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/04/02/world/middleeast/ap-m1-syria.html>

² <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2016/04/syria-as-rebels-break-ceasefire-army-gathers-for-new-campaign.html>

³ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir-on-syrian-war-a-1078337.html>

Conflict News also posited that although there's no direct evidence showing the Su-22 being shot down by a MANPAD, "the footage of the jet crashing to the ground was consistent with a hit from this type of weapon. The altitude from which it fell also seems to exclude damage from less-advanced anti-aircraft artillery."⁴



Jihadi with MANPAD in northern Aleppo, Syria

Officially, the US has been adamant about drawing a red line against supplying anti-aircraft missiles to such combatants for fear they could be used against civilian airliners or US military aircraft.

Indeed, in 2007, the Taliban shot down a US Chinook helicopter with Stinger missiles over Helmand, Afghanistan, and war logs detail at least 10 near-misses in four years against coalition aircrafts, by missile types supplied by the CIA to Afghan rebels in the 1980s.⁵

Moreover, military records reveal that in 2012, Taliban fighters in Kunar province shot down a US Army Ch-47 helicopter with new generation Stinger missiles. Ken Timmerman in the *New York Post* revealed that the serial number for the missiles used were traced back to a lot recently signed out by the CIA to the Qataris for anti-Qaddafi forces, with between 50 to 60 Stingers believed to have been diverted to the Taliban in early 2012.⁶

These incidents underscore how difficult it is to control lethal weapons for regime change operations, and how easily Turkey and Arab Gulf states can proliferate arms to extremist groups once the CIA signs them out. Despite this risk, Time magazine reported in 2014 the Obama White House was considering sending MANPADS to the anti-Assad opposition.⁷

Now, if it turns out that al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria are indeed armed with MANPADS, it would amount to what former CIA director David Petraeus called "our worst nightmare." The missile would do far more than improve terrorist groups' military capabilities to conduct future attacks.

⁴ <http://www.conflict-news.com/articles/jet-shot-down-in-syria-in-search-of-a-smoking-gun>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/25/afghanistan-taliban-missile-strike-chinook>

⁶ Kenneth R. Timmerman, "How The Taliban got their hands on modern US missiles", *New York Post*, 8 June 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/06/08/how-the-taliban-got-their-hands-on-modern-us-missiles/>

⁷ Michael Crowley, "White House Debates 'Game Changer' Weapon for Syria", *Time*, 21 April 2014, <http://time.com/68336/syria-obama-anti-aircraft-missiles/>. An April 6, 2016 Middle East Newsline article also mentioned an affiliate of the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army was said to have received Stingers and other weapons from Turkey in March 2016, and they were allegedly cooperating with ISIS to attack Kurdish units in northern Syria. A Syrian jetfighter shot down by ISIS in Aleppo on April 5 appears to lend credence to this allegation. "A Syrian jet plane has reportedly been shot down by ISIS", *Reuters*, April 5, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/syrian-plane-reportedly-shot-down-by-isis-2016-4?IR=T>.

A 2005 RAND study also concluded that jihadis shooting down a civilian airliner would put a temporary freeze on worldwide air travel, causing a \$15 billion loss to the world economy.⁸ More than a decade after this study, the present-day economic loss would be substantially higher than \$15 billion.

Countermeasures – Lessons from Israel?

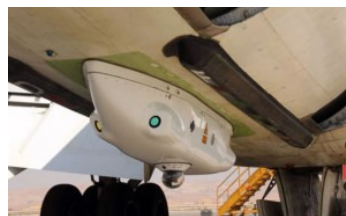
In the face of this potential new threat, how can the civil aviation industry respond? One possibility is arming civilian airlines with missile defense systems. Israel's national airline El Al has equipped all its planes with an anti-missile system called "Flight-Guard." The counter-measure was developed after an Israeli airliner carrying 250 passengers was targeted by two shoulder-fired missiles in Kenya in 2002.⁹



El Al planes on runway

The system responds by firing flares designed to confuse a heat-seeking missile and divert it away from the original target. However, at a price tag of \$1 million per plane, with thousands of planes to be equipped worldwide, the cost may be prohibitively high for many airlines. This would be especially true in the case of large carriers such as United Airlines with a fleet of 1,264 aircraft, or American Airlines with 1,494 aircraft.

In recent years, El Al has upgraded its counter-measure system include Sky Shield or C-MUSIC (Multi Spectral Infrared Counter) measures. The system uses a laser to jam in-coming heat-seeking missiles, and actually passed a NATO test carried out in Germany in October 2015.¹⁰



C-MUSIC system mounted underneath plane

[Watch video: Israel's Elbit Systems C Music anti-missile protection suite](#)¹¹

⁸ http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP106.html

⁹ John Vause, "Missile defense for El Al fleet", *CNN*, 24 May 2004, <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/05/24/air.defense/>

¹⁰ <http://www.israelandstuff.com/video-israels-anti-missile-defense-system-for-passenger-jets-passes-nato-tests>

¹¹ Israel's Elbit Systems C music anti missile Protection suite, July 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWBh3K5TPuc>



Previously, the US government and US airlines have mulled adding their own countermeasures to civilian flights. But both declined due to the high cost and comparatively low risk of a domestic MANPAD attack. However, after Hamas fired rockets near Ben Gurion airport and the downing of the Malaysian airliner in Ukraine in 2014, Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL) stated he was petitioning the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to rethink such security measures.

In contrast to the US, Russia and China may face a higher risk for MANPAD attacks, given the presence of thousands of Chechen and Uyghur militants in the Syrian opposition. In the aftermath of the ISIS downing a Russian airliner over Sinai in October, and the risk of Chinese and Russian militants in the Army of Conquest acquiring MANPADS, Moscow and Beijing may need to consider following El Al's footsteps in using anti-missile technology for civilian aircraft. They may also need to undertake additional military counter-measures to neutralize the growing terrorist threat in Syria.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by *Asia Times* on April 8, 2016.