

Russia's Role as Weapons Supplier to Syria Draws Ire

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The  Moscow Times

Russia faces a growing international outcry over its arms sales to Syria but shows no sign of bowing to pressure and has even increased deliveries of arms that critics say are helping keep President Bashar Assad in power.

Rebel soldiers and an official who defected from the government say Moscow's small arms trade with Damascus is booming, and the government doubled its military budget in 2011 to pay for the crackdown on the opposition.

"I would say that on average the funds [for Defense Ministry expenditure] were doubled for 2011," said Mahmoud Suleiman Haj Hamad, former chief auditor for Syria's Defense Ministry who defected in January.

He said by telephone from Cairo that Russian arms accounted for 50 percent of all deals before Assad's crackdown on the protesters. China and North Korea provided 30 percent, and Iran and other suppliers 20 percent, he said.

The government had boosted its defense budget and arms imports by cutting funds to other ministries in areas such as education and health by as much as 30 percent, he said.

Reuters shipping data show at least four cargo ships since December that left the Black Sea port of Oktyabrsk — used by Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport for arms shipments — have headed for or reached the Syrian port of Tartus.

Separately there was the Chariot, a Russian ship that docked at the Cypriot port of Limassol during stormy weather in mid-January. It promised to change its destination in accordance with a European Union ban on weapons to Syria but, hours after leaving Limassol, reset its course for Syria.

A Cypriot source said it was carrying a load of ammunition, and a European security source said the ship was hauling ammunition and sniper rifles of the kind used increasingly by Syrian government forces against protesters.

Numerous Russian weapons advisers work in Syria and Rosoboronexport has an office with a staff of about 20 in the country, a source close to the company said.

CAST, a Moscow-based defense think tank, says Russia sent Syria at least \$960 million worth of heavy arms — which included several missile systems — in 2011 and has some \$4 billion in outstanding contracts.

Hamad, the former military auditor, said many sales of Russian small arms are carried out through traders. It was not clear whether they had the Kremlin's blessing to trade the weapons.

"I know that Syria is paying for some of the weapons through traders and middlemen, not through contracts between states," Hamad said.

A spokesman for Rosoboronexport said Russia's arms delivery program to Syria was running on schedule without any increases in volumes.

"The rate of delivery is not being changed. They are going according to plan. They are not being sped up or increased," spokesman Vyacheslav Davidenko said.

Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, denied Moscow had a hand in aggravating the conflict in Syria, "especially when what we are delivering is not what can be used to shoot demonstrators."

Russia has suggested that the arms the Syrian military is using are copies of Soviet weaponry.

"I would not make any statements that they are killing demonstrators with Russian arms," Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov told Itar-Tass news agency. "If Kalashnikov machine guns are being used for these ends, then it is obvious that they are counterfeit."

But a former army lieutenant who defected in August and gave his name only as Omar explained how he and dozens of other fighters use a network of port workers to find out when shipments of arms arrive and where they are going, sometimes ambushing convoys.

“Every few weeks, trucks move weapons from the coast to bases in the interior,” he said.
“Almost all of them are Russian.”

A Russian-made weapons system that delivers the world’s largest mortar round could have a role in the bombardment of the Syrian city of Homs, where dozens of civilians and two Western journalists died Wednesday in an ongoing government assault.

Marie Colvin, a war correspondent for Britain’s Sunday Times, and Remi Ochlik, a freelance photographer, were killed when artillery rained down on the Homs house used as an opposition news hub, the Times [reported](#).

In a statement, the Foreign Ministry acknowledged Colvin’s and Ochlik’s deaths. “This tragic event once again underscores the need for immediately halting the violence by all sides of this internal Syrian conflict and for shifting this conflict to a political course,” the ministry said Wednesday.

Video images of mortar fragments from Homs indicate that Syria’s military was using the Russian-made Tulip weapons system, Human Rights Watch emergencies director Peter Bouckaert [told](#) The Christian Science Monitor.

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