

THE SYRIA QUESTION

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

An air war would likely be tougher there than what the US saw in Serbia or Libya.

AP photo via Aleppo Media Center



Here: Syrian rebels stand in the rubble of a building damaged by government airstrikes on Feb. 13. Right: A Syrian L-39 strike aircraft fires a rocket during an airstrike on Tel Rafat, a village north of Aleppo.

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SYRIA'S air forces seem to be facing one of two fates: either to be destroyed by a US or coalition air armada imposing a no-fly zone on the country, or be inherited by a loose alliance of rebel groups after overthrowing the Bashar al-Assad regime. In the latter case, the victors may then use captured elements of the air force to battle each other for ultimate control of the country.

Either way, the disposition and condition of Syrian defenses—the Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF) and Syrian Arab Air Defense Force (SAADF)—are of intense interest to the US Air Force, which in one way or another may have to engage them.

Opinions as to the strength and lethality of Syrian air defenses vary widely. While some public interest groups that keep tabs on the Syrian order of battle describe a highly

credible and practiced air defense system, others—including some recent high-level Syrian defectors—suggest it is a paper tiger, neglected and ineffective.

Assad's regime has used attack helicopters, strike aircraft, medium bombers, and even Scud tactical ballistic missiles against opposition forces already—often indiscriminately and with heavy loss of civilian life. Although opposition forces have made great gains during the two-year civil war and are, at this writing, within the capital of Damascus, Assad's key asymmetric advantages have been heavy ground weapons—including tanks—and aircraft, chiefly attack helicopters.

The regime has been supplied with weapons and technical assistance from both Iran and Russia. Opposition forces have had the financial backing of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf patrons. France, having recognized the opposition forces



Reuters photo by Goran Tomasevic

as the legitimate authority of Syria, has pledged to provide the rebels with weapons.

Opposition forces have consistently asked NATO and the US to establish a no-fly zone over Syria to prevent Assad from using his air force. Short of that, there has been discussion of establishing “safety” or “exclusion” zones within Syria—but not a nationwide no-fly zone—where noncombatants could be secure from air or ground attack along the border with Turkey.

In early December, the US Senate, by a 92-to-six vote, passed an amendment to the 2013 defense bill directing the Defense Secretary to develop plans for implementing a no-fly zone over Syria. The amendment specified targeting Assad's forces' ability “to use airpower against civilians and opposition groups in Syria.”

The move followed many congressional calls for intervention, the most prominent from Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who has complained the US and its allies have stood by while



Top: Syrian air defenses include anti-aircraft missile launchers such as these, shown in a 2011 live-fire exercise. **Above:** Wreckage of a Turkish RF-4 Phantom shot down by Syrian forces. Syrian officials said the Turkish jet was flying in its airspace; Turkish officials insist the jet was in international airspace.

tens of thousands of Syrians have been killed by the Assad regime.

The White House has countered that the loose coalition of opponents to the Assad regime includes elements of al Qaeda and other Islamists. The Obama Administration doesn't want to provide those groups with weapons or an opportunity to gain power in an influential state. It also wants more time for sanctions and other diplomatic efforts to subdue the crisis, or to wait and see if the rebels achieve victory on their own.

In late November, McCain, speaking in Washington, D.C., said Assad's regime can be ousted "without boots on the ground," in

an operation modeled on the 2011 operation in Libya. There, NATO's imposition of a no-fly zone prevented Muammar Qaddafi from using his aircraft to attack opposition forces. NATO then upped the ante by attacking regime ground forces moving toward the opposition forces—effectively, though not officially, serving as the opposition's air force. The strategy led to Qaddafi's ouster in seven months. His regime was replaced by one seemingly appreciative of Western assistance.

In Libya, the US led for the first few weeks, then turned over the preponderance of kinetic attacks to its NATO partners.

Support from the US Air Force, in the form of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as with aerial refueling, continued throughout the conflict.

McCain predicted in November that Syrian air attacks on its own citizens would stop immediately if NATO imposed a no-fly zone on the country and shot down just one aircraft.

Though "they may like" Assad, McCain said, Syrian pilots "are not going to fly into certain death."

McCain also voiced his support for a NATO decision to deploy Patriot missile batteries to Turkey, arguing they could be used to help enforce a no-fly zone over Syria. NATO, however, has maintained that the deployment is for purely defensive purposes, possibly prompted in part by the shootdown of a Turkish RF-4 Phantom by Syrian air defense forces last summer.

Syria Is Not Libya

Nearly two years into the Syrian uprising, opposition forces have taken government air bases and reached the suburbs of Damascus. The Assad regime has bombed suspected rebel-operating areas in the region with its most powerful attack aircraft: Russian-made, swing-wing Su-24 Fencer bombers. It has dropped bombs within the Yarmouk refugee camp—which is home to more than 150,000 Palestinians—reportedly killing dozens of people and broadening the list of groups whose enmity Assad has earned.

Besides bombing, the regime has resorted to attacks on rebel-held areas with Scud tactical ballistic missiles, armed with conventional warheads, and continued attacking rebels with armed helicopters and fixed wing aircraft such as MiG-23s and L-39 Albatross counterinsurgency aircraft, which have been filmed making such attacks.

Despite the similarities between the situation in Libya and that in Syria—an oppressive dictator resorts to wildly disproportionate force to suppress dissent—Libya is no direct analogy for Syria, and imposing a no-fly zone would be substantially more difficult.

With 22.5 million people, Syria is far more densely populated than Libya and has a substantially larger air force and air defense system than Libya had under Qaddafi.

A variety of open sources converge on a figure of about 450 flyable combat aircraft in Syria's inventory, including about a hundred reasonably capable aircraft such as Russian MiG-29 fighters or older aircraft such as MiG-21s, upgraded with more modern avionics. In addition,

Syria has in recent years upgraded its air defense systems with modern radars and missiles, including “double digit” surface-to-air missile systems like the SA-22 Pantsir, a mobile SAM capable of engaging low-flying targets and even precision munitions. Between 30 and 50 of the mobile systems were delivered, with more on order.

In addition, Syria has large numbers of SA-2 through SA-6 missile batteries. Though largely fixed-site weapons susceptible to jamming and anti-radiation missile attack, the older SAMs are still considered functional and potentially deadly.

More problematic is the possible activation of Russian S-300, or SA-10 Grumble, air defense systems considered analogous to the US Patriot system, with a range in excess of 50 miles and the ability to track and target multiple aircraft simultaneously. Russia has refused to agree to stop supplying Syria with spare parts, technical assistance, and other support for its air defenses, echoing Syria’s claim that the opposition forces are “terrorists” and not legitimate challengers for national authority. Russia, however, has conceded that Assad’s government may not be able to survive indefinitely.

The SA-22 (NATO code name Greyhound) may be the system Syria used to shoot down the Turkish RF-4 reconnaissance jet that may or may not have entered Syrian airspace near Latakia last June. Syria offered a near-apology for the incident, suggesting its gunners thought the aircraft was Israeli. Though they condemned the attack as unprovoked, neither NATO nor Turkey launched any retaliation. Turkey then requested the Patriots to prevent Syrian offensive use of missiles or aircraft over the border.

Syria Is Not Serbia, Either

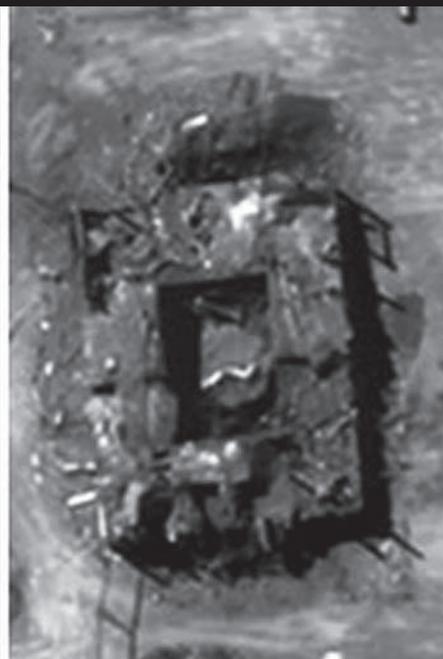
Some military observers suggested the RF-4 was testing Syrian air defenses, while others have proposed the aircraft was conducting surveillance, to see if Syrian refugees to Turkish border camps were being pursued by military forces. Thousands of such refugees have fled to Turkey to escape Syrian government attacks.

The Free Syrian Army—the name of the largest armed coalition opposing Assad and formed by dissident military officers in 2011—has claimed the downing of a number of Syrian Air Force jets, using a combination of captured anti-aircraft guns and man-portable, shoulder-fired missiles captured when rebels took control of an air base.

US military leaders have warned that Syria shouldn’t be considered a pushover.



Reuters photo by Youssef Boudial



Top: A Syrian Air Force helicopter prepares to fire a rocket during an August 2012 airstrike on Aleppo. Above: Before and after surveillance photos of the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor destroyed in a mission flown by Israeli pilots in September 2007.

At a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2012, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey said the US military “can do just about anything we’re asked to do” regarding Syria.

He deferred specifics to a closed session, but said, “I’ll just say this about [Syria’s] air defenses. ... They have approximately five times more sophisticated air defense systems than existed in Libya, covering one-fifth of the terrain. All of their air defenses are arrayed on their western border, which is their population center.” He added that Syria has “about

10 times more [air defense capability] than we experienced in Serbia.”

In Serbia, NATO aircraft were vexed by mobile SAM systems that hid throughout the conflict, unexpectedly popping up often enough to knock down several aircraft, including an F-117 stealth attack jet.

The last time the US engaged Syria’s air defenses was in 1983, in retaliation for Syrian missiles fired from anti-aircraft positions in Lebanon at US reconnaissance jets. In that raid, the US launched attacks on 20 targets and lost two carrier aircraft—an A-6 Intruder and an A-7 Corsair—to Syrian air defense missiles. One pilot died and

his bombardier-navigator was captured and held for 30 days before his release was negotiated.

Syrian Air Force defections began last June, when Col. Hassan Merei al-Hamade broke away from a formation of MiG-21s and landed in Jordan, where he requested political asylum. Other SAAF officers began appearing in opposition videos, and the rebels claim more than a dozen attack helicopter pilots have come over to their side since last summer.

In October, a retired Syrian general, Akil Hashem, who supports the opposition and wants Western intervention in Syria, claimed that a single US aircraft carrier and combat jets from a nearby country could establish and maintain a no-fly zone. An analyst told UPI news service that Hashem said the no-fly zone could be established just over opposition strongholds like Aleppo and Idlib, both near the Turkish border. Long-range missiles could keep Syrian fighters at bay, he said.

Another former Syrian Air Force general who has joined the opposition—Maj. Gen. Mohammed Fares, a former cosmonaut—was quoted by Fox News in November as saying air attacks against opposition forces are being carried out by only a third of the regime's pilots because Assad cannot count on the loyalty of the other two-thirds. He also said that while spare parts for the Syrian Air Force are running low, Assad still has hundreds of aircraft available for combat. Fox said it was impossible to verify Fares' comments.

In September 2007, Syria's air defenses suffered a humiliating defeat when Israeli aircraft successfully penetrated Syrian airspace and destroyed what the International Atomic Energy Agency had concluded was a nuclear reactor. Operation Orchard saw Israeli F-15Is (the equivalent of the USAF F-15E) and F-16Is attack the facility, leveling it. The ability of Israel to get through Syrian air defenses—apparently undetected—led to an internal investigation in Syria, along with Russia, whose SAM systems were protecting the area.

Various aviation experts have suggested that Israel defeated the Syrian air defenses with a cyber attack that misdirected radars and other sensors away from the target. The remains of the reactor—which bore a strong resemblance to those constructed by North Korea—were quickly cleared away and the remaining hole filled in by the Syrian government, which denied there had been any military purpose at the site.

Syria's Air Force is heavy with air-to-air fighters. The most modern are MiG-29s:

Syria has about 80, of which almost 70 are deemed operational. There are also about 30 flyable MiG-25 Foxbats, high-flying interceptors that some analysts suggest could be a threat to patrolling AWACS or tanker aircraft. More than a hundred MiG-21s and a hundred MiG-23s are available, and Syria has been relying on the latter for ground attacks.

In the March 2012 SASC hearing, Dempsey said the US "almost unquestionably" would have to take the lead in any attack on Syria's air defenses and airfields in order to pave the way for a no-fly zone—a campaign that he agreed would probably take "several weeks." Only the US, he said, possesses the "electronic warfare capabilities necessary to do that."

No-Fly Zone Logistics

While senior US military leaders privately express complete confidence that a Syrian no-fly zone could be established in relatively short order, the logistics would be a significant challenge.

Short-range fighters would likely be positioned at Incirlik AB, Turkey, not far from Syria's northern border. More fighters could be positioned at the British garrison of RAF Akrotiri on Cyprus. But the presence of combat aircraft at both locations would displace aerial tankers, which would have to be based much farther away, assuming basing privileges are not granted by Jordan or Saudi Arabia.

Basing aircraft in Iraq or Israel is not considered a plausible scenario.

Maintaining a no-fly zone would require tankers and AWACS or E-2C Hawkeye-like aircraft to maintain station off the Syrian coast along with fighters available for a quick intercept of any Syrian aircraft launched.

Senior USAF officials have said any engagement of the Syrian air defense system would require the use of F-22 stealth fighters, given the overlapping radars and numbers of SAMs Syria fields in the western portion of the country.

Besides land-based aircraft, the US could use aircraft carriers to enforce the no-fly zone. A US carrier air wing has only about 30 fixed wing combat aircraft, however, most of which would be F/A-18 Hornet strike fighters, while about four would be EA-6B Prowler or EA-18G Growler electronic attack aircraft.

Dempsey, at the SASC hearing, urged that any action be undertaken as part of a coalition. That way, Dempsey said, "we increase our capability and capacity, but also we've shown that that produces an enduring outcome."

In Libya, there was a clear demarcation between where regime forces were and where the opposition forces were, making it easier to strike the loyalists from the air. The war in Syria, by contrast, is marked by fluid battle lines within cities, changing by the day, if not the hour. Striking Syrian ground forces from the air, according to one Pentagon analyst, would require "exquisite intelligence" and probably spotters on the ground.

Furthermore, government-backed militias that are not in uniform are also fighting the rebels in Syria, making it extremely hard to distinguish between the warring forces.

Alexander R. Vershbow, NATO's deputy secretary general, told reporters last August that Syria's air defenses are "more formidable" than Libya's but are nothing NATO "couldn't handle." However, he acknowledged that NATO countries, hampered by budget cuts, have been slow in restocking the munitions they expended in Libya. NATO members, he said, "recognize their responsibility" to have enough weaponry on hand for "the next one, whatever it might be." He also confirmed that one of the key lessons learned from Libya was that NATO European partners don't maintain an adequate weapons inventory. America's NATO partners, running low on munitions, had to rely on US stocks for the bulk of the Libyan campaign.

The American public is not enthused about the prospect of intervention in the Syrian conflict. A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll conducted in mid-December found some 73 percent of those polled felt the US "should not get involved" in the Syrian civil war, and nearly half disapproved even of the Obama Administration's recognition of the loose-knit opposition group as the legitimate authority in Syria.

However, the poll also showed that support for intervention ratcheted up sharply—to 62 percent—if the intervention was confined to creating a no-fly zone over the country. About the same percentage would want full US military intervention if Assad used chemical weapons against his own people, and the number rose to 70 percent if Assad's regime lost control of its chemical weapons.

In early December, based on intelligence reports that the Syrian regime was readying chemical weapons for use against the opposition, President Obama issued stern warnings that Assad would be "held accountable" for such an event.

"The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable," Obama said, and would represent a trigger for US involvement in the conflict. ■