



Written by [Mallory Sauer](#) on June 10, 2013

Russia to Arm Syria, EU Lifts Embargo on Rebels

Heightening tension in the Middle East, the European Union recently decided to lift the embargo on weapons to the rebels in Syria. Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime and its ally, Russia, oppose the EU's move, accusing the bloc of supporting "terrorists."

Perhaps in response, Russia boldly announced intentions to supply the Syrian army with anti-aircraft missiles.

The Syrian civil war increases in scope and bloodshed by the day. Last month, three Lebanese soldiers [were shot and killed](#) by gunmen in the Lebanese city of Hermel. Residents blame either Syrian rebels or the rebels' Lebanese Sunni sympathizers. Now Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters, that country's Shiite movement, have united with Assad's regime. Last week the combined forces [took the Syrian city of Qusair](#), after crushing the rebels in a three-week-long battle.

When the fighting reached the city of Quneitra, Syria violated the 1974 Disengagement Agreement by driving tanks and armored personnel carriers into the "area of separation," prompting Israel to [threaten the Syrians with military action](#) unless they withdrew from the UN-patrolled demilitarized zone between the two countries.

Not one to back down from a fight, [Israel also challenged Russia](#) about supplying missiles to the Syrians. "The shipments haven't set out yet, and I hope they won't. If they do arrive in Syria, God forbid, we'll know what to do," said Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, telling reporters that he considered the move by Russia "a threat." Israel has reportedly targeted weapons with at least three strikes against Syria since the civil war began in March 2011 and may do the same to the impending Russian shipments. Russia, however, has made no effort to halt its plans. Israeli Air Force chief Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel stated last week that the Russian arms shipment "is on its way."

Nevertheless, the true spark to ignite the powder keg throughout the Middle East seems to be the involvement of Lebanon's Hezbollah Shiites. Many Sunnis consider the attacks from the Lebanese guerrillas a call for Sunni-Shiite war. Already, thousands of foreign radicals — some with al-Qaeda ties — have been pouring into Syria and are believed to be [fighting beside the rebels](#).

Egyptian cleric Sheik Mohammed el-Zoghbi recently called on "young men in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Kuwait, Jordan, Yemen," to go fight for the rebels in Syria. "We must all go to purge Syria of this infidel regime, with its Shiites who came from Iran, southern Lebanon and Iraq," he shouted on Al-Khalijiya TV, a Saudi station.

Along with threats of retaliatory strikes from Syrian rebels, the Lebanese Shiites must also deal with





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infuriated Sunni groups in Lebanon that will undoubtedly join the conflict. The founder of Lebanon's Sunni Salafi movement, Sheik Islam al-Shahal, spoke to a crowd in Tripoli on Wednesday: "The (Iranian) occupation of Lebanon must be confronted by preparing every Sunni family and every young Sunni man to defend his faith, his home and his honor. We are clearly targeted."

Although the EU lifted the arms embargo, the Sunni rebels in Syria may not benefit from the move one bit. Even with EU members such as the UK and France voicing support for the rebels, no one is actually planning to supply arms — at least [not before the Geneva peace conference](#) set for July.

The United States, on the other hand, may decide this week in a series of scheduled White House meetings [if it will arm the rebels](#) — a shocking prospect, considering that many of the rebels are al-Qaeda terrorists. The Obama administration will also discuss the possibility of deploying U.S. airpower to establish a no-fly zone over Syria, according to officials.

No matter how many countries join the conflict, the only certainty for the Middle East, according to Sheik el-Zoghbi, is that "the time for jihad is now."

Photo of Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missile system: AP Images



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