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Do-It-Yourself Weapons in Syria

Free Syrian Army forces fighting against President Bashar Assad have filled major gaps in their arsenals by building improvised weapons to combat the Syrian government's superior arsenal of artillery, tanks and warplanes. At present, much of the rebels' artillery consists of pipe-bomb slingshots, improvised-grenade catapults, modified shotguns that shoot grenades, and portable mortar and rocket launchers made from miscellaneous weapon parts and scrap metal.¹ The recently developed "Hell Cannon" launches an adapted propane-gas cylinder full of ammonium nitrate approximately one mile.² Eliot Brown, a British arms expert, says it is the most powerful explosive device used by opposition forces.^{3,4} Perhaps the most creative rebel design utilizes a flat-screen, high-definition television and an imitation PlayStation video-game controller to activate a machine-gun turret atop a makeshift armored vehicle, which was originally a car's chassis.^{1,2}




An improvised rocket-assisted mortar used by Hezbollah in Qusayr, Syria.
Photo courtesy of Eliot Higgins.

Most recently, evidence of improvised rocket-assisted mortars/munitions (IRAMs) have appeared in Syria. These repurposed weapons are 107 mm rockets armed with oversized warheads capable of causing significant damage to structures at short range. Shiite insurgents first used IRAMs, informally called "lob bombs," against American bases in the Iraq war. In July 2008, lob bombs were considered "the greatest threat right now that we face," according to Major General Jeffery Hammond, the former commander of U.S. forces in Baghdad.⁵ Interestingly, pro-government forces reportedly fired the IRAMs in Syria in early June 2013 while recapturing Qusayr, a strategic city near the border of Lebanon.

Nevertheless, the use of such weapons underscores the extent to which the rebel and government forces exploit unconventional means to gain the upper hand in the prolonged conflict. Recently, the United States has assessed that the Syrian government used chemical weapons in an 21 August 2013 attack that killed as many as 1,429 people.^{6,7}

An additional 150 people are also suspected to have been killed last year by a chemical attack.⁸ According to the U.N., more than 100,000 Syrians have died since the civil war began in March 2011, with an average of 5,000 persons killed

each month and several million displaced.^{9,10}

It is unknown what explosive remnants of war (ERW) will remain in Syria when the war ends. Since clearance cannot safely begin until fighting ceases, civilians and military alike will be at risk from ERW that fails to detonate when deployed, and more casualties can be expected. 

Endnotes

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