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Saudis supply militants in Syria with Croatian arms: Report

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A new report has revealed that Saudi Arabia has supplied foreign-backed militants in Syria with large cargos of infantry and heavy weapons through Jordan.

Citing anonymous American and Western officials, *The New York Times* newspaper reported on Monday that "the weapons began reaching rebels in December via shipments shuttled through Jordan."

One Western official said "thousands of rifles and hundreds of machine guns" and an unknown quantity of ammunitions were among the weapons shipped to Syria.

The daily quoted one senior American official as describing the shipments as "a maturing of the opposition's logistical pipeline."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the official said that the recent Saudi purchase of heavy weapons from Croatia was "not in and of itself a tipping point."

"I remain convinced we are not near that tipping point," the official added.

The report confirmed that Persian Gulf Arab nations have been sending military equipment and other assistance to the militants fighting government forces in Syria "for more than a year," but the scale of the recent shipments is not comparable with the previous weapons supplies.

Officials told that the Times that "multiple planeloads of weapons have left Croatia since December, when many Yugoslav weapons -- , previously unseen in the Syrian crisis, began to appear in videos posted by militants on the YouTube."

The heavy weapons include a particular type of Yugoslav-made recoilless gun, as well as assault rifles, grenade launchers, machine guns, mortars and shoulder-fired rockets for use against tanks and other armored vehicles, it said.

Officials familiar with the transfers told the American newspaper that "the arms were part of an undeclared surplus in Croatia remaining from the 1990s Balkan wars."

An official in Washington also confirmed that a senior Croatian official visited Washington in summer last year and suggested to American officials that Croatia had many weapons available should anyone be interested in moving them to Syria's armed group.

"Both Ukrainian-made rifle cartridges that had been purchased by Saudi Arabia and Swiss-made hand grenades that had been provided to the United Arab Emirates were found by journalists to be in rebel possession," the report added.

Croatian newspaper *Jutarnji list* reported on Saturday that "there had been an unusually high number of sightings of Jordanian cargo planes at Pleso Airport in Zagreb, Croatia's capital in recent months."

Disclosing the possible US role in the Croatian weapons shipments, the daily said that Ilyushin 76 aircraft owned by Jordan International Air Cargo had been seen at Pleso Airport on Dec. 14 and 23, Jan. 6 and Feb. 18.

On Sunday, Britain and the US vowed to provide more assistance to the armed groups in Syria.

"We must significantly increase support for the Syrian opposition. We are preparing to do just that," British Foreign Secretary William Hague said at a joint press conference with US Secretary of State John Kerry in London on Monday. Kerry agreed with Hague.

The US and its Western allies, as well as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, claim that they want to see the Syria crisis end, but at the same time they continue to arm and fund the militants.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since mid-March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security personnel, have been killed in the violence, and several international human rights organizations say the foreign-sponsored militants have committed war crimes.

The Syrian government says the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and there are reports that a very large number of the militants fighting the Syrian government are foreign nationals.