

The Military Balance

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THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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The Libyan Weapons Lollapalooza

Malou Innocent

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The White House is in full-scale damage control mode amid reports that a significant number of the 20,000 shoulder fired anti-aircraft missiles Libya possessed before the war have gone missing. Among the many other costs and consequences of intervening in Libya, it seems neither the U.S. nor NATO fully considered the possibility of conventional proliferation before entering the conflict.

The AFP reports that Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) was quick to react to this news—somewhat hysterically—and wrote to Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, arguing that the United States should “equip wide-body passenger jets with anti-missile countermeasures.” She writes that “while many US military aircraft are outfitted with defenses against these deadly weapons, commercial aircraft remain at risk.” Boxer, who strongly defended Obama’s no-fly zone-cum-regime change operation in Libya, may want to pay attention to more than just portable missiles.

Another worrying weapon is semtex, a plastic explosive once manufactured in the Czech Republic. According to a reliable U.S. military source this author spoke to, the semtex Libya has is the old school, early-Cold War variety made before the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to add sniffer agents to make it detectable.

The weapons free-for-all in Libya may or may not risk destabilizing the region, but it is reasonably safe to assume that had the U.S. and NATO not intervened, the Libyan conflict—along with its weapons—might have been self-contained.