

In his living room, blogger traces arms trafficking to Syria

By Atika Shubert, CNN

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Leicester, England (CNN) -- Elliot Higgins has never been to Syria. He has no friends and family there. Nor does he have any military experience or background in weapons analysis.

But when he lost his job last year, he used the extra hours to indulge an interest in current events, particularly the Arab Spring.

Sitting in his living room in Leicester, England, he started a blog under the handle Brown Moses, after a Frank Zappa song.

"I literally thought: No one is going to read this. But I'm doing it for my own entertainment."



Syrians use humor and weapons to survive



Obama says no to non-lethal help to Syria

New zali for yria ildr In fact, by sifting through hundreds of battle videos posted online, Higgins has shown the Syrian army's use of cluster bombs -- now documented by

Human Rights Watch -- although Syria has denied using cluster bombs. He's also showed a trail of Croatian weapons supplied to Syria's rebels by Saudi Arabia with the consent of Western allies -- an investigative expose published in the New York Times.



Is the red line for Syria turning pink?

"It's really about finding the patterns of what's going on," Higgins says. "With the cluster bombs the Syrian government still seems to have the official policy of refusing to state that they are using them. And I've collected a vast amount of evidence of cluster bombs in Syria. There is video of cluster bombs dispersing from helicopters.

That's something that can't really be faked."

He tracks the weapons of the war in Syria on his laptop from a cream-colored sofa in his living room.

"When the Syrian air force started using helicopters, I was looking at that," he recalls. "Then I saw my first partly exploded bomb and identified that. That was really the start of weapons identification."

Higgins describes a daily routine that's part Mr. Mom, part intelligence analyst.

"I have to take care of my 18-month-old daughter during the day. So, I'm sort of checking my e-mails off and on, just keeping an eye on Twitter. And when my daughter's in bed, I'll sort of sit down and look at videos. I've got a list of about 450 activist channels on YouTube."

Elliott shows CNN one video of a Syrian rebel fighter with a grenade launcher tucked into his shoulder. He freeze-frames and points to two tiny bolts that he says prove this is a Croatian weapon, not a South African version.

"It shows a Croatian RPG-6 grenade launcher. And one of the things I was looking for was the specific type. Because they're an exact copy of another grenade launcher that's virtually identical."

It's this unerring eye for detail that has made him a bona fide member of an online community of experts that's monitoring the war and has put him in high demand with Syria watchers. He now contributes to [Foreign Policy](#) magazine and helps to compile a cluster bomb database for [Human Rights Watch](#).

"I think I'm sort of a hybrid between an analyst, a researcher and an archivist," Higgins says. "One thing, I don't consider myself a journalist. I find things that I want journalists to make use of themselves."

But as far removed from the war as Higgins is, the images of war can still be disturbing. He never watches these videos with his daughter in the room and he tends to play them with the sound turned down.

He shows CNN video of a 4-year old being handed an AK-47, his tiny finger on the trigger.

"Some of the videos are disturbing just because of content. It sort of amazes me the sort of footage you see. Some of it is incredible."

He shows another video where his talent for weapons spotting reveals a terrifying image.

"This is a group of children and that's a 240mm mortar that's not exploded and that's the largest kind of mortar in use today. Look, they're kicking at it."

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