

Report: Russia to Send Syria Jets

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Russia is to send 36 Yak-130 jets, like the one shown above, to Syria. **Misha Japaridze**

Russia has signed a contract to sell combat jets to Syria, Kommersant reported Monday, in apparent support for President Bashar Assad and open defiance of international condemnation of his regime's bloody crackdown.

The newspaper, citing an unidentified source close to the Rosoboronexport state arms trader, said the \$550 million deal envisions the delivery of 36 Yak-130 aircraft.

A spokesman for Rosoboronexport refused to comment on the report.

If confirmed, the deal would cement Russian opposition to international efforts to put pressure on Assad's regime over its attempts to snuff out the country's uprising. The United Nations says more than 5,400 people have died over 10 months. The report of the sale comes the same day that Human Rights Watch called Russia's backing of the Syrian regime "immoral."

The Yak-130 is a twin-engine combat trainer jet that can also be used to attack ground targets. The Russian Air Force has recently placed an order for 55 such jets.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last week that Moscow doesn't consider it necessary to offer an explanation or excuses over suspicions that a Russian ship had delivered munitions to Syria despite an EU arms embargo.

Russia was acting in full respect of international law and wouldn't be guided by unilateral sanctions imposed by other nations, he said.

Lavrov also accused the West of turning a blind eye to attacks by opposition militants and supplies of weapons to the Syrian opposition from abroad and warned that Russia will block any attempt by the West to secure United Nations support for the use of force against Syria.

Russia has been a strong ally of Syria since Soviet times when the country was led by the president's father Hafez Assad. It has supplied Syria with aircraft, missiles, tanks and other modern weapons.

Igor Korotchenko, head of the Center of Analysis of the World Arms Trade, an independent think tank, said the jet deal apparently reflected Moscow's belief that Assad would stay at the helm.

"With this contract, Russia is expressing confidence that President Assad would manage to retain control of the situation, because such deals aren't signed with a government whose hold on power raises doubts," Korotchenko told RIA-Novosti. "It's another gesture by Moscow underlining its confidence that Damascus will remain its strategic partner and ally in the Middle East."

But another Moscow-based military analyst, Ruslan Pukhov, said Russia might be too optimistic about Assad's prospects.

"This contract carries a very high degree of risk," Pukhov told Kommersant. "Assad's regime may fall and that would lead to financial losses for Russia and also hurt its image."

Human Rights Watch warned Russia that by supporting Assad it is repeating the mistakes of some Western governments during the Arab Spring, saying they were too slow to recognize the popular desire for democratic change in places like Egypt and Bahrain.

"Armed elements shooting at government soldiers is materially different from government representatives shooting deliberately at unarmed civilians," Carroll Bogert, the group's deputy executive director, said at a news conference in Moscow that followed the release of HRW's annual report.

She added that the overwhelming number of victims in Syria is on the side of the demonstrators.

"The continued support of this regime is immoral and not permissible," Bogert said. "The West has already made serious mistakes with the support of Arab regimes. Russia's repetition of those mistakes will lead to tragic consequences."

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