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$6Bln in Weapons Sales a Factor in Syria

By The Moscow Times

February 01, 2012



Syrian rebels are trying to overthrow a regime that is among the best customers of the Russian arms industry.

Russia is counting on President Bashar Assad to keep his grip on power to see through potential arms contracts worth up to $6 billion and help Moscow reach a record defense export year, according to the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, or CAST.

Moscow has been Assad's main defender as Western and Arab countries push for a UN Security Council resolution that would call for Assad to step down.

A veto-wielding permanent member, Russia has already criticized the resolution saying it will lead to civil war.

Having lost tens of billions of dollars in arms contracts with Libya after leader Moammar Gadhafi was ousted last year, Moscow is looking to Damascus to maintain a foothold, both politically and economically, in the region.

At stake for Russia — the world's No. 2 arms exporter — is billions of dollars in potential and current arms contracts with ally Syria, including deliveries on an order of 24 MiG-29M2 fighter jets signed in 2007.

Syria, where Russia maintains a naval base, is also the only ally Russia has left in the Middle East. "[If Assad goes] Russia will lose everything," CAST director Ruslan Pukhov said.

"Syria is one of Russia's top five clients. Russia already concluded with Syria contracts for $4 billion and has $2 billion more in potential contracts on the way," Pukhov said.

Tests for the jet fighters began in December of last year, CAST said in a report obtained by Reuters before its publication. Damascus was also likely to receive deliveries of Buk anti-aircraft missiles this year, it said.

Russia exported a record $12 billion in weapons to customers around the world in 2011, CAST said in an annual report released before official data, boosted by sales to embattled Arab leaders and Asian countries eyeing China's rising military might.

Pukhov said the funds are crucial for Russia's defense industry, which Putin built up during his 2000-08 presidency and lacks enough domestic orders to keep it profitable, but they have little bearing on Russia's $1.85 trillion economy.

CAST said Damascus received 8 percent of Russia's 2011 deliveries or nearly $960 million in jet fighter upgrades and anti-ship missile systems.

Western UN envoys, who support the plan calling for Assad's removal, have already condemned arms sales to Damascus, where the United Nations says more than 5,000 civilians have been killed in a 10-month-old crackdown on opposition to Assad's rule.

In addition to upgrades and repairs to Syria's MiG-23 and MiG-29 fighter jets last year, it also received three different missile systems, including Bastion anti-ship missile units and another anti-aircraft missile system.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said Moscow's arms exports to Syria need no explanation. While European Union and U.S. embargoes prevent selling arms to Assad's government, no international treaty with Russia is in place.

Russia said it will use its veto in the UN Security Council to block any resolution on Syria it considers unacceptable and would not abstain from a vote.

The remarks by Moscow's UN envoy, Vitaly Churkin, are the clearest threat yet of a Russian veto on a Western-Arab draft resolution calling for Assad to step down.

"We will not allow it to be passed," he said. "That is unequivocal."

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