

Arms Trade With Syria Forging Ahead, Report Says

By [The Moscow Times](#)

June 26, 2012



Russia is expected to start delivering 12 top-of-the-line MiG-29 fighter jets to Syria this year. Above, a MiG-29 at an air show in India in 2009.

Russia is expected to deliver air defense systems, reconditioned helicopters and fighter jets to Syria this year worth nearly half a billion dollars, a defense think tank said Tuesday.

The report by CAST, a Moscow-based think tank, is likely to fuel concerns that Russia is supplying Syrian President Bashar Assad with arms that are being used against protesters and air defense systems that could be deployed in the event of international military intervention.

The report shows a series of contracts signed between 2005 and 2007 that are at the heart of Russia's arms sales to Syria, which has been rocked by a vicious cycle of violence for the past 16 months.

The deals were signed long before the start of the rebellion in Syria and after Moscow wrote off some 70 percent of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt to Russia and the former Soviet Union.

The debt was a stumbling block that froze Moscow's arms cooperation with Damascus throughout the 1990s.

Russia is expected to start delivering 12 top-of-the-line MiG-29 fighter jets this year and to deliver a batch of repaired Mi-25 attack helicopters, the report said.

It said air defense systems expected to be delivered to Syria this year include the Buk-M2E, which Moscow began delivering in 2010, and Pantsir-S1 armored rocket complexes, which are designed to help protect troops against air attacks.

President Vladimir Putin says the arms Russia delivers cannot be used in civil conflicts, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says the supplies are defensive weapons sold in contracts signed long ago.

But U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Russian statements that the weapons are unrelated to the violence inside the country are "patently untrue."

The capabilities of Syria's air defense systems, which are almost completely supplied by Russian manufacturers, are in focus following its shooting down of a Turkish jet last week, an act that increased regional tensions.

The \$600 million contract for the MiG-29s includes an option for 12 more to be delivered. At least one prototype was completed by the end of last year.

"According to information we have obtained, the delivery of the first part (and perhaps all 12 airplanes) to Syria is expected at the end of 2012," the report said.

The jets are expected to be equipped with air-to-air and air-to-surface rockets, giving them the capability to flout any "no-fly zone" over Syria.

France has said a no-fly zone is being considered as part of international efforts to end the crisis in Syria. A no-fly zone was also imposed over Libya during the conflict there last year.

"Syria's air defense systems are better than Libya's," said Ruslan Aliyev, one of the authors of the report, which will be published in the group's Moscow Defense Brief later this year.

"On the one hand, Syria has tough, solid air defense systems of many different kinds, but what condition they are in and whether Syria is properly trained to use them is a different question. ... The only real way of knowing what shape it's in is to test it," Aliyev said by phone.

Moscow is also obliged to fulfill a contract for 36 of the Pantsir-S1 armored rocket complexes. Twelve have already been delivered, and the contract is expected to be fulfilled by 2013.

The report did not mention accusations, made by a Syrian defense official who defected as well as by rebels, that deliveries of Russian small arms have increased since the uprising against Assad's 14-year rule began.

The report from CAST, which maintains good relations with Russia's arms industry, also made no mention of contracts between Moscow and Damascus for BMP-2 vehicles, which amateur videos show operating in Homs and other cities during army shelling.

Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with the power of veto, has been one of Assad's staunchest allies and has shielded Syria from harsher international sanctions.

But the report suggested that Russia would be amenable to freezing arms sales if it were convinced that ending its relationship with Assad is in its best interests.

"Arms cooperation with Syria does not carry so much importance for Russia, neither on a commercial nor a defense relationship," the report said. "If there is a break in future deliveries to Syria, it is probable that [state arms dealer] Rosoboronexport would not have any difficulty in giving the arms ordered by the Syrians ... to a third country."

Russia has already frozen delivery of an S-300 missile system and Iskander missiles following concerns expressed by Israel that the systems could end up in the hands of the Islamist movement Hezbollah, the report said.

A ship carrying Mi-25 helicopters reportedly left Russia on Sunday after a failed attempt earlier this month. The delivery was initially stopped after its insurer withdrew its policy last week.

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