

Russia to Sell at Least 10 MiG Fighters to Syria

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A MiG-29M2 jet in flight.

The MiG aircraft maker said Friday it plans to sign a new agreement to ship at least 10 fighter jets to Syria, a move that comes amid international criticism of earlier Russian weapons deals with Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime.

MiG's director general, Sergei Korotkov, said a Syrian delegation was in Moscow to discuss the details of a new contract for the delivery of MiG-29 M/M2 fighters. In remarks carried by Russian news agencies, he said Syria wanted to buy "more than 10" such fighters, but would not give the exact number.

Russia has said it is only providing Assad with weapons intended to protect Syria from a foreign invasion, such as air defense missile systems. It has claimed it is not delivering weapons that could be used in Syria's two-year civil war, which has killed more than 70,000 people and sent millions fleeing the country.

The move opens Russia up to more international criticism amid reports that it blocked a Security Council declaration against the Syrian regime.

But the delivery of MiGs would contradict that claim and expose Russia to global criticism, so the Kremlin might think twice before giving the go-ahead.

A MiG spokesman would not comment on Korotkov's statement, and the MiG chief could be referring to a deal the company previously negotiated with Syria that apparently has been put on hold amid the civil war.

Moscow has shipped billions of dollars' worth of missiles, combat jets, tanks, artillery and other military gear to Syria over more than four decades. Syria now is Russia's last remaining ally in the Middle East and hosts the only naval base Moscow has outside the former Soviet Union.

Russia has shielded Assad from U.N. sanctions and has continued to provide his regime with weapons despite the uprising against him that began in March 2011.

On Sunday, The Associated Press cited a U.N. diplomat as saying Russia had blocked a Security Council declaration that would have criticized the Syrian regime's offensive against the town of Qusair.

The Security Council diplomat said Russia blocked the declaration because the council made no statement when rebels seized the town.

Syria's political opposition cited the dire situation in Qusair as one of the reasons for not attending peace talks with the regime in Geneva.

Russian media reports say Syria placed an order a few years ago for 12 MiG-29 M/M2 fighters with an option of buying another 12. The Stockholm Peace Research Institute also has reported that Russia planned to provide Syria with 24 of the aircraft.

The MiG-29 M/M2 is an advanced version of the MiG-29 twin-engine fighter jet, which has been a mainstay of the Soviet and Russian air force since mid-1980s. Syria had about 20 fighters of the original make among scores of other Soviet- and Russian-built aircraft.

Other Russian weapons deals have apparently been put on hold during Syria's civil war, including a recent contract to deliver Yak-130 combat training jets that could also be used for ground attacks.

PARIS – French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius suggested on Sunday that an international peace conference aimed at ending the Syrian civil war could take place in July.

The United States, Russia and others have been pressing for the conference to take place this month. But details of how it could be organized have yet to be agreed and there is still no firm agreement on the date.

"The Geneva II conference is the last chance. I hope it will take place. I think it could take place in July," Fabius said in an interview with Europe 1 radio and i-tele television.

Fabius said the Syrian government and the opposition must attend.

"It's not just about getting round the table and then asking what are we going to talk about. It needs to be prepared. That is why I say that the July date would be suitable," he said.

(Reuters)

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