The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Iskander Missile Could Have First Foreign Buyer in Saudi Arabia

By Matthew Bodner

August 12, 2015



Iskander-E missile system

Saudi Arabia may become the first foreign buyer of Russia's deadly Iskander-E missile system, Kommersant newspaper reported Wednesday in the wake of a meeting between the Russian and Saudi foreign ministers in Moscow, citing unidentified Russian defense industry sources.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir officially confirmed his country's interest in the Russian missiles at a press conference on Tuesday, and according to IHS Jane's 360 defense analysis group, the Saudis are interested in a wide variety of hardware, including new frigates for their navy.

“Intensive contacts are taking place between the military delegations and specialists from both countries and a wide range of intended types of armaments from Russia is being discussed, including Iskander missile systems,” al-Jubeir was quoted by Russian news

agencies as saying Tuesday.

But according to Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Moscow-based defense think tank, it is highly unlikely that a Saudi-Russian arms deal will go through.

“The Iskander is a very deadly system, and we don't know how Saudi Arabia might use it ... and they are close allies of the U.S., so there is a risk that if we deliver Iskanders to them, the U.S. will get to inspect the system and then develop countermeasures against it, because it's also designed to hit U.S. allies in Europe, such as Poland,” Pukhov said.

Lethal Weapon

The Iskander missile system is one of the most deadly weapons in the Russian arsenal. First fielded in the 1990s, the Iskander is a high-precision tactical ballistic missile system optimized for use at close ranges — under 500 kilometers.

Iskander missiles are capable of being loaded with nuclear warheads, a fact that has riled the West amid the Ukraine crisis, as Russia has openly mulled deploying the weapons to the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad in response to U.S. missile defense plans in eastern Europe and NATO exercises in the region.

Though it is nuclear capable, the primary use for the Iskander missile is to attack troops and hardware in a frontline fight. The missiles can be guided by troops sighting targets, by satellites, or by unmanned aerial vehicles in the area. Adding to the flexibility of the Iskander system, the missiles can be retargeted in mid-flight, and are extremely maneuverable — enabling them to evade missile defenses.

Iskander missiles have generated interest among Russian export partners, but so far the system has not been exported beyond the Belarussian border as part of a broader defense arrangement between the two economically integrated post-Soviet states.

Saudi Spending Spree

According to unidentified military industrial sources quoted by Kommersant, Saudi Arabia has submitted to Russia a concrete proposal for buying Iskander systems, along with a handful of other high-value hardware, but pre-contract negotiations have not started.

The sources, however, cautioned that Russian and Saudi arms deals have historically fallen through before reaching agreements, and Saudi Arabia in recent years has rapidly become the largest arms importer in the world, buying almost exclusively U.S. equipment.

Saudi Arabia has been on a massive military spending spree over the past several years. In 2014, the country overtook India to become the world's largest importer of military hardware, increasing its buys by 54 percent over 2013 to $6.4 billion of purchases, according to IHS Jane's.

Saudi Arabia frequently dangles the prospect of massive arms contracts to exporters it is seeking to influence diplomatically. It has tried to coax Moscow into easing support for rival regimes in the Middle East, such as Iran and Syria.

In 2008, the Saudis reportedly offered to spend $4 billion on Russian weapons in exchange for Moscow to curtail cooperation with Tehran. The deal would have seen Saudi Arabia buy 150 T-90 tanks, over 100 helicopters and armored vehicles, but the deal was never signed.

In 2013, the Reuters news agency reported that Saudi Arabia had offered Russia a $15 billion arms contract and assurances not to interfere with Moscow's dominant position in the European energy market if it would distance itself from Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Yury Barmin, a Russian expert in the Middle East arms trade, said he doubted that Saudi Arabia is trying to use arms procurements as a means to influence Russian policy in the region, and is more likely sending a message to the U.S. and Iran that it is unhappy with the recent Iran deal in which the U.S. and other countries agreed to soften economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for promises regarding its nuclear program.

Saudi Arabia in 2007 purchased Chinese-made DF-21 medium range ballistic missiles, which are similar to Russia's Iskander, but Beijing modified the system to ensure the Saudis couldn't carry nuclear warheads. Iskanders can carry nuclear warheads, and Barmin argued that Saudi Arabia might want that option.

“Saudi Arabia thinks that the [Iranian nuclear] deal last month unties Iran's hands and that the country will still go ahead and develop nuclear weapons, so it may be Riyadh’s way of showing the world it reserves the right to do the same,” he said.

Moreover, it's doubtful that the Saudis are trying to use an arms contract to influence Russian policy toward Syria, since the 2013 attempt at a $15 billion buy didn't work, Barmin concluded.

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