

Russian Arms Sales Policy Toward the Middle East

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In-Depth Reports

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 dealt Middle East rejectionists a crippling blow. For four decades, Moscow supplied "rogue" regimes throughout the region with massive quantities of arms with which to pursue their goals: fighting Israel, sponsoring terrorism, and attacking Western interests. Usually, these weapons were provided on easy credit terms, or even as outright gifts. Political suitability, not economic rationality, was the driving force in Soviet arms sales policy.

The emergence of a democratizing Russia on the ashes of Soviet communism has altered this picture. While Russia intends to remain a player on the international arms market, it now insists that profit, not ideology, will guide its decisions. And where questions of international law arise -- as with UN sanctions against Iraq and Libya -- Russia has complied by severing its military ties with these states, despite their revenue-earning potential.

In response to the disarray resulting from the Soviet collapse, the Russian government has focused much attention on securing its oversight of arms sales, including commerce in nuclear materials. Inter-agency commissions have been set up to establish regulatory procedures. Presidential decrees have been issued to define what is permissible and what is not. But for now, the system remains in flux, as weapons producers fight for greater independence to sell abroad, and new mercantile exchanges across the former Soviet Union offer greater opportunities for circumventing government controls.

While cash has replaced communism as the lodestar of Moscow's arms sales policy, the results are by no means entirely sanguine from a U.S. perspective. Russia inherited more than 70 percent of the gigantic Soviet defense sector. This military-industrial complex remains a potent political force; it employs millions and produces one of the few Russian products with any short-term export potential. In today's dire economic circumstances, the pressure is mounting to sell as many weapons as possible -- including the most advanced -- at cut-rate prices to whomever is willing to pay. The motives may be economic, but the outcomes can have significant geopolitical consequences.

Russia has made a concerted attempt to break into arms markets traditionally dominated by the West, such as the Persian Gulf, but to date with only minimal success. Consequently, it increasingly seems inclined to fall back on military relationships with former Soviet clients, provided they offer some economic payoff. Most alarming is Russia's commitment to expanding ties with Iran, an impulse bolstered by Moscow's conviction that Iran can be a useful partner in efforts to promote stability on Russia's volatile southern borders.

To sway Russia from this course, America's best hope is to convince Moscow that the economic costs -- in terms of lost aid, trade, and investment -- outweigh the benefits. But such a strategy would require a coordinated approach by the entire Western community, a policy for which no consensus currently exists. Until it does, Russia's arms sales to the Middle East are likely to pose growing headaches for U.S. interests.

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