

Russian Arms Sales to the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the number one arms supplier to the Middle East. Moscow's arms transfers during this period were motivated primarily by geostrategic and ideological considerations in particular its competition with the United States and arms were often sold at bargain-basement prices. Yet, with the end of the Cold War and growing economic problems, Russia has terminated its generous military assistance program. Cash has replaced communism, and for the past decade, Moscow has sought arms deals with countries that can pay for weapons in hard currency. As a result, Russia today is no longer the premier supplier of arms to the region; it now ranks fourth, behind the United States, the United Kingdom (UK), and France. Moreover, business with traditional clients has fallen off dramatically, while several new states have joined its list of customers. Russia now supplies the following countries with the various types of equipment (ranked roughly according to the volume of arms transferred): Iran--combat aircraft, submarines, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), tanks, and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs); United Arab Emirates (UAE)--IFVs, SAMs, transport aircraft; Kuwait--multiple rocket launchers (MRLs) and IFVs; Turkey--armored personnel carriers (APCs), helicopters, heavy trucks, and small arms; Algeria--IFVs; Syria--spare parts and anti-tank missiles, and; Egypt--spare parts.

Iran: Moscow's arms supply relationship with Tehran dates to the days of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, when Moscow supplied small quantities of arms to Iran. Given Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's hostility toward communism and Russia's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, however, Moscow sold little of significance to Iran during the 1980s. Following Khomeini's death in 1989, Moscow signed two major arms contracts with Iran, in June 1989 and July 1991. Deliveries under these contracts continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union and included some twenty-four MiG-29 fighters; twelve Su-24 strike aircraft; three Kilo-class diesel submarines; SA-5 and SA-6 SAMs; two hundred T-72 tanks; and more than one hundred BMP-2 IFVs. In June 1995, Russia promised the United States that it would not conclude any additional contracts with Iran, and it subsequently agreed to cease all arms transfers after September 1999. Yet, according to a senior official at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow is currently considering selling Su-25 close-support aircraft, Mi-17 transport helicopters, and SA-10 and SA-18 SAMs to Iran.

United Arab Emirates: In an effort to expand sales, Russia has aggressively marketed its weapons to Arab Gulf states seeking to diversify their arms sources. It has devoted special attention to the UAE, which has bought arms from Russia in an effort to influence Moscow, which has close ties with Iraq and Iran. Since 1992, the UAE has acquired more than four hundred BMP-3 IFVs from Russia, as well as SA-7, SA-14, and SA-16 SAMs. In 1995, the UAE also purchased one SA-12 SAM and leased four Russian IL-76 transport aircraft. Although Russia is a frequent participant in the annual IDEX military exhibition in Abu Dhabi, its sales to the Gulf states have been slow owing to strong historical links between these countries and the United States, UK, and France; the poor showing by Soviet arms in the 1991 Gulf War; and lingering doubts about Russia's ability to provide spare parts and support services.

Kuwait: During the Soviet era, Moscow's ties to the oil-rich shaykhdoms of the Persian Gulf were limited to Kuwait. During this period, Kuwait acquired from the Soviet Union AT-4 Spigot anti-tank missiles; BMP-2 IFVs; SA-6, SA-7, and SA-8 SAMs; and ZSU 23-4 mobile anti-aircraft gun systems. In an attempt to ensure the support of the

permanent member states of the United Nations (UN) Security Council in the event of another crisis with Iraq, Kuwait instituted a policy of purchasing arms from those five nations. It signed its first arms contract with Russia in 1993 and since then has taken delivery of twenty-seven BM-30 Smerch MRLs and nearly fifty BMP-2 and one hundred fifty BMP-3 IFVs.

Turkey: In 1992, Russia signed an arms contract with Turkey, its first ever with a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since then, it has transferred a variety of arms to Turkey, including sixteen Mi-17 transport helicopters, two hundred thirty-nine BTR-80 APCs, heavy trucks, and various small arms. A Russian-Israeli consortium is also interested in selling one hundred forty-five KA-50 attack helicopters to Turkey.

Algeria: Once one of the Soviet Union's largest customers, Algeria has not concluded any major arms deals with Russia in recent years. Transfers since the collapse of the Soviet Union have been limited to some one hundred fifty IFVs.

Syria: Syria was one of the Soviet Union's key allies in the Middle East during the Cold War, and one of its principal customers. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union supplied Syria with truly massive quantities of its most advanced arms. The Soviet Union concluded its last arms deal with Syria in 1991. This sale, which was reportedly worth some \$2 billion, supposedly included forty-eight MiG-29s, three hundred T-72 tanks, SA-10 SAMs, and early warning and command-and-control systems. Except for some of the T-72s, none of the other items have been delivered. In 1992, Moscow halted the supply of spare parts to Syria, in order to pressure Damascus to recognize Russia as the legal inheritor of Syria's \$11 billion debt to the Soviet Union. In response, Syria tried unsuccessfully to find alternative supply sources in Eastern Europe. In February 1993, Syria recognized Russia's claims to Soviet-era debt and made an initial payment of \$100 million, and in April 1994, Russia renewed arms transfers to Syria on a limited basis, supplying \$500 million in spare parts for various Soviet-era weapons. In 1997, Russia sold Syria some 1,000 AT-14 Cornet anti-tank guided missiles. Syrian officials and Russian firms negotiated this \$150 million deal on a commercial basis. Syria is known to be interested in resuming large-scale purchases of arms from Russia, and its shopping list is believed to include MiG-29 and Su-27 fighters, T-80 tanks, and SA-10 SAMs. It is unclear, however, whether Moscow and Damascus have resolved the debt issue or whether Syria has the money for such a purchase.

Egypt: At the height of the Cold War, Egypt was the Soviet Union's closest and most important ally in the Middle East. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the United States had supplanted the Soviet Union as the main arms supplier to Egypt. Soviet (and later Russian) arms transfers to Egypt have been negligible for more than two decades. Since 1992, Russia has been providing Egypt with BMP IFV turrets for Egypt's locally produced Fahd APC, as well as spare parts for Soviet-era arms. During Russian defense minister Igor Sergeev's November 1998 visit to Egypt, his hosts discussed the possibility of Russia improving radar systems of Soviet-made SA-3 anti-aircraft missiles and the possible procurement of SA-12 SAMs. Russia reportedly also expressed its willingness to send experts to help the Egyptian army upgrade its outdated Soviet weaponry. Yet, no new contracts are known to have been signed at this time.

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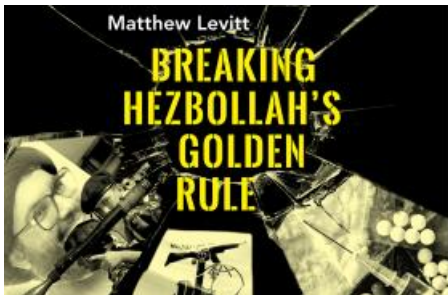
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