

Russia 'delivers SAMs to Syria'

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MOSCOW, Sept. 4 (UPI) — Russia has begun deliveries of Pantsir S1 air-defense missiles to Syria, some of which are expected to be passed on to Iran, Syria's strategic ally that has largely bankrolled the deal, according to the Interfax-AVN military news agency.

Interfax quoted Yuriy Savenkov, deputy director general of the Instrument Design Bureau, or KBP, as saying that deliveries started several weeks ago. KBP produces the Pantsir and other high-precision weapons.

Meantime, Kommersant quoted Alexei Fedorov, head of Russia's United Aircraft Corp., as confirming the existence of a 2007 contract with Syria for eight twin-engined MiG-31E interceptors.

This aircraft, NATO codename Foxhound, can fly at three times the speed of sound and engage several targets at a range of up to 110 miles simultaneously.

But Fedorov said that none has been delivered because work on the jet fighters at United Aircraft's Sokol plant in the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod had been suspended because of strenuous objections by Israel against upgrading Syria's rundown military.

The MiG contract is worth an estimated \$400 million to \$500 million.

This and other reported contracts have been shrouded in ambiguity and repeated contradictions by Russian sources over the last two years, as an increasingly assertive Moscow, striving to restore its Cold War influence in the Middle East, sparred with the United States.

Russia's media has reported that contracts were signed, but government officials denied that any existed.

On May 20 Kommersant reported Russia had scrapped plans to sell the MiG-31s to Syria. Four days later, Syria denied there were any problems. But no MiGs have showed up in Syria.

If the Interfax report is correct, the Pantsir shipments were made four years after Damascus signed a contract worth an estimated \$730 million with Moscow.

The Syrians were reported to have ordered 36 Pantsir units, which are designed primarily for point defense of key military and industrial facilities as well as air-defense for military units in the field.

Syria's dire need to upgrade its long-neglected military, supplied almost exclusively by the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, was made evident in September 2007 when Israeli aircraft bombed a suspected nuclear reactor near the Turkish border.

They destroyed the facility without encountering any resistance after blinding Syria's largely antiquated air-defense system.

No reason was given for why Moscow was only now delivering the units ordered by Syria, but it is likely this resulted from pressure by the United States and Israel on Russia not to strengthen the military capabilities of Syria or Iran.

Israel has threatened to launch pre-emptive strikes against Iran's nuclear program unless Tehran halts its alleged quest for nuclear weapons.

The Americans have sought a diplomatic dialogue but stress they have not abandoned the military option as a last resort.

Jane's Defense Weekly, published in London, reported that "a source close to the Syrian contract" said that Iran "would acquire at least 10" of the Pantsir launch units delivered to Syria.

The source was quoted as saying that this "would part-finance the Syrian acquisition to recompense Damascus for its compliance in the deal."

Pantsir surface-to-air missiles would enhance Iran's expanding air-defense system and make any airstrikes against it more costly.

Jane's noted that when Syria signed the Pantsir contract in 2007, the missiles were to have been equipped with "what at the time was the latest Roman I-Band fire-control radar."

If Syria had the MiG-31, NATO codename Foxhound, it would have a greater ability to intercept Israeli aircraft en route for Iran, its ally, than it has at the moment.

Damascus is also reported to have ordered a number of MiG-29M/M2 fighters, which have greater range and improved radar than earlier models and can carry a broader array of weapons.

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