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Russia provides 10 MiG fighter jets to Lebanon for free

Tony Halpin in Moscow

Russia gave Lebanon ten MiG fighter jets yesterday in a deal to boost defence cooperation.

The MiG29 Fulcrum fighters would be provided free to Lebanon under an agreement on military-technical assistance, the head of Russia's defence cooperation service said. Mikhail Dmitryev said that the jets would come from Russia's existing stock.

He said that Moscow was also in talks to supply Beirut with heavy armour, adding that supplies of such weaponry were "now possible after the situation in this nation has stabilised".

He said: "We view the Lebanese army as the main guarantor of this nation's stability, therefore the armed forces of this country must be strengthened." The deal followed a meeting in Moscow between Anatoly Serdyukov, the Defence Minister, and Elias Murrhis, his Lebanese counterpart. Mr Serdyukov said that Russia had received a detailed list of armaments sought by Lebanon.

When details of the deal emerged on Tuesday it was suggested that the aircraft would be sold at a discount. Mr Dmitryev confirmed yesterday however that they would be free, with delivery paid by the Russian Defence Ministry. He said: "Military-technical assistance, this means assistance in budgetary funds."

The MiG29s, one of Russia's best fighter jets, will provide considerable additional firepower for the Lebanese air force, which currently has only five outdated Hawker Hunter jets and 16 helicopters.

The gift is certain to strengthen Russian influence in the Middle East as Moscow seeks to restore a position that was lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The agreement is likely to prompt concern in Israel and the United States, given the continuing power and influence of the Islamic militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon. Ria-Novosti news agency reported that Lebanese officials were also seeking tanks, antitank rockets, air defence systems and helicopters.

Russia is already a major weapons supplier to neighbouring Syria, which is keen to acquire the latest MiG29s and was reported to be seeking the latest Sam S300 air defence missiles earlier this year.

Moscow denied that it would sell the systems to Syria.

The northern Syrian port of Tartus has also been identified as a possible base for the Russian navy to gain a permanent presence in the Mediterranean. Russian warships visited Cuba this week for the first time since the Cold War after taking part in their first war games with Venezuela.

Russia announced plans in September to sell anti-aircraft systems to Iran despite American objections. It is already building a nuclear power plant for Iran that the West suspects is part of Tehran's plans to acquire an atomic bomb.

The Kremlin is rearming Russia's military too. Colonel-General Nikolai Solovtsov, head of the Strategic Missile Forces, told Russian news agencies yesterday that Russia would commission a new intercontinental ballistic missile, the RS24, next year with multiple warheads.

He said that Russia's Strategic Missile Forces planned 13 practice launches in 2009, almost double the number this year. They would include five test launches of new missiles as part of plans to overhaul Russia's Soviet-era nuclear arsenal by 2020 and counter American defence systems.



(Yuri Kadobnov/AFP/Getty Images)

Russian MiG-29 fighters

“By 2015-2020 the Russian strategic rocket forces will have new complete missile systems with improved combat characteristics,” General Solovtsov said. “They will be capable of carrying out any tasks, including in conditions where an enemy uses antimissile defence measures.”

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