



PolicyWatch 2218

Egypt's Arms Deal with Russia: Potential Strategic Costs

[David Schenker](#) and [Eric Trager](#)

Also available in [العربية](#)

March 4, 2014

Cairo's possible purchase of advanced weapons systems from Russia could become another irritant in U.S.-Egyptian relations.

As the crisis in Ukraine enters its second week, Egyptians are contrasting Washington's support for the popular revolt that toppled President Viktor Yanukovich with U.S. criticism of last year's coup in Cairo. The prevailing sentiment -- reflected in the op-eds of Egypt's leading dailies -- is that America is inconsistent and unreliable.

Last month, this same mistrust of Washington prompted Egyptian military leader Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to choose Russia as the destination of his first visit to a non-Arab country since the July removal of Islamist president Muhammad Morsi. In the wake of that coup, the United States suspended the transfer of some weapons systems to Egypt, spurring Sisi to seek Moscow's help in diversifying the country's sources of military procurement. According to various reports, he inked deals to purchase \$2 billion worth of weapons from Russia during the February 12-13 visit. Going forward, those arms sales could erode Israel's qualitative military edge and become yet another irritant in the U.S.-Egyptian relationship.

BACKGROUND

Since 1979, the United States has provided Egypt with nearly \$70 billion in funding, more than half of which has gone to purchase American-made military equipment. At \$1.3 billion per year, U.S. security-assistance grants account for 80 percent of the Egyptian military's annual procurement budget. In addition to standardizing Cairo's arsenal and enhancing interoperability with U.S. forces, the arms sales give Washington a small degree of policy leverage with -- and insight into -- Egypt's most important and notoriously opaque institution.

At first glance, Cairo's purchase of Russian weapons would seem unnecessary and perhaps risky given America's ongoing financial commitments to Egypt, which have endured since the 1978 Camp David Accords. Yet Washington's post-coup limitations on several key military systems raised the need to seek a supplemental vendor. Among other systems, the Obama administration has put an indefinite hold on the handover of four F-16s, five Harpoon ship-to-ship missile systems, dozens of M1A1 tank kits slated to be assembled in Egypt, and -- most significantly -- ten Apache attack helicopters.

FOCUS ON HELICOPTERS

For Egypt, which is facing a burgeoning Islamist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula, obtaining additional Apaches is critical. The American helicopters appear to be Cairo's platform of choice in its Sinai counterterrorism campaign, but availability may be a problem. Routine maintenance schedules typically ground more than a third of its existing force of thirty-five Apaches. Complicating matters, Egyptian defense sources note that State Department travel warnings and the sporadic and temporary evacuations of "nonessential" U.S. personnel from Egypt over the past three years have interrupted the crucial ongoing maintenance provided by American contractors.

Details of the February deals with Moscow have not yet been confirmed, but Egyptian press reports indicate that Russian Rostvertol Mi-35 attack helicopters and/or Mi-17 multipurpose helicopters are part of the package. Egypt already has nearly 100 of these aircraft and the older Soviet-era Mi-8 helicopters, which have troop-transport, cargo, signals-intelligence, and attack variants, the latter equipped with 23 mm guns and the capacity to carry 500 kg bombs and antitank guided missiles. Some of these systems are operating in Sinai; in late January, for example, Islamist militants used a man-portable air-defense missile (MANPAD) to shoot down an Mi-17 reportedly on a reconnaissance mission over the peninsula, killing five Egyptian soldiers.

MORE CONTROVERSIAL PROCUREMENTS

Neither Washington nor Israel would likely take issue with the transfer of additional Russian helicopters, since there is broad consensus that Egypt's Sinai counterterror effort might benefit from more such equipment. Yet other items on Egypt's apparent shopping list are more controversial. For example, Cairo is reportedly seeking air-defense systems from Moscow -- potentially including advanced S-300 missiles -- as well as MiG fighter jets and Kornet antitank weapons.

For years, Washington and Israel have successfully pressured Russia not to transfer the S-300 to Iran, fearing its advanced capabilities might preclude a preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear weapons facilities. And in the 2006 Lebanon war, Hezbollah employed Syrian-donated Kornets to great effect against Israeli armor. Clearly, Egypt does not constitute the type of threat represented by Iran and Hezbollah -- Cairo has honored its commitment to peace with Israel for more than three decades. Still, if these platforms are transferred to Egypt, they would degrade Israel's qualitative military edge. And given Egypt's ignominious record of violating the U.S. Arms Control Export Act, the idea that Russian MiG technicians might be co-located at bases with U.S.-made F16s does not inspire confidence.

Another concern is Saudi Arabia's increasing willingness to use its largesse to signal

displeasure with Washington. Along with the United Arab Emirates, Riyadh is underwriting Egypt's purchase of Russian munitions. This contribution follows the kingdom's December announcement that it would provide the Lebanese Armed Forces -- most of whose procurement budget was previously underwritten by Washington -- with \$3 billion to acquire French weapons. Riyadh's decision to fund \$5 billion in Russian and French weapons for traditional U.S. clients is an unmistakable sign of Saudi discontent with U.S. policy on sensitive regional issues, particularly Iran, Syria, and Egypt. Continued U.S.-Saudi discord may enable Cairo to procure unprecedented, highly advanced, and controversial weapons systems despite objections from Washington and Israel.

THE VIEW FROM EGYPT

Egyptian political and military leaders insist that they have no interest in downgrading relations with Washington, and they acknowledge that Egypt cannot immediately replace its reliance on U.S. weapons even if they were so inclined. But the Egyptian media reaction to Sisi's Moscow trip suggests that Cairo has strong support for diversifying its weapons suppliers. Washington's rather limited criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood during its year in power, as well as the intensifying swirl of conspiracy theories about the U.S. role in Egypt, have fostered a severely anti-American political atmosphere that may welcome a shift away from Washington. Moreover, Russian president Vladimir Putin's apparent endorsement of a prospective Sisi presidency has fueled popular enthusiasm for stronger relations with Moscow, particularly among the critical mass of Egyptians who supported the July coup. In some quarters, Sisi's outreach to Russia has been favorably compared to former president Gamal Abdul Nasser's pivot toward the Soviet Union in the 1950s. Indeed, the Egyptian news portal al-Youm al-Sabaa characterized the Russian arms sale as a "rebalancing" of international relations and a "revolution against Washington's policies."

Beyond such populist sentiment, however, some Egyptian analysts view a tilt toward Russia -- even if gradual -- as a reflection of their country's strategic interests. For example, former Egyptian ambassador to Russia and ubiquitous media figure Raouf Saad has argued that the two governments share a common view of terrorism, and that Moscow's close relationship with Ethiopia will help Cairo address concerns regarding the construction of the Renaissance Dam on the Nile. Egyptian military officials have also noted that Russia's absence of conditions on weapons sales makes it a more reliable partner than Washington, which has withheld weapons pending political reform. Still, these and other officials largely believe that a continued relationship with the United States -- notwithstanding its recent hiccups -- remains in Egypt's strategic interest, and they do not advocate a complete shift away from Washington.

CONCLUSION

Despite reassurances from Egyptian officials, the Russian weapons deal -- if concluded -- portends a gradual reduction in Washington's ability to control the quality and quantity of weapons that Cairo receives, and to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge in the region. If Egypt does in fact intend to procure game-changing systems such as the S-300 and the Kornet, Washington should warn Cairo of the risks such an acquisition would pose to U.S. security assistance and the broader bilateral relationship. To be sure, the strategic cooperation and level of trust between Israel and Egypt, particularly on Sinai, has never been better. But changing the status quo could undermine that trust and perhaps even

the Camp David peace treaty.

Moreover, Saudi funding of Egyptian weapons procurements has nullified Washington's policy of tying military aid to political reform. In any event, given that Egypt's current leadership views the conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and the burgeoning jihadist insurgency in Sinai as existential threats, U.S. efforts to leverage weapons sales for more inclusive governance are unlikely to succeed. While the Obama administration is correct in criticizing Cairo's repressive policies, continuing to withhold military aid will not produce democracy in Egypt, and may carry short-term costs for some of Washington's strategic interests.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. Eric Trager is the Institute's Wagner Fellow.