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Moscow, Baghdad Sign Huge Arms Deal

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It was reported on July 20 that Russia and Iraq have struck a deal on supplying a large batch of T-90 tanks. Vladimir Kozhin, the Russian president's aide for military technical cooperation, confirmed the agreement but declined to provide details, saying only «the number of tanks is substantial». Russian military analyst Ruslan Pukhov told Russian newspaper Izvestia that the deal might cover deliveries of several hundred T-90 tanks, and that the contract may exceed \$1 billion.

The T-90 is among the best-selling tanks in the world. Hundreds of vehicles have been sold to India, Algeria, Azerbaijan and other countries. A small number of tanks has been delivered to Syria to reinforce the military's capabilities of combatting Islamic State (IS). Kuwait, Vietnam and Egypt are considering the option of purchasing T-90s.

Known for its firepower, enhanced protection and mobility, the T-90 features a smoothbore 2A46M 125mm main gun that can fire both armor-piercing shells and anti-tank missiles and the 1A45T fire-control system. Standard protective measures include sophisticated armor, ensuring all-round protection of the crew and critical systems, including Kontakt-5 explosive reactive armor and active infrared jammers to defend the T-90 from inbound rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank missiles and other projectiles.

The agreement to purchase the tanks was also confirmed by the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. The T-90s will reinforce the Iraqi M1A1 Abrams fleet damaged in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) militants. The decision to buy the Russian tanks was prompted by the successful performance of T-90s in Syria. During the battle for Aleppo, Syria, a T-90 was hit by US-made BGM-71 TOW missile. The direct impact caused no damage. For comparison, in October last year, an M1 Abrams was hit by a 9M133 Kornet anti-tank missile at the Qurayyah crossroads south of Mosul. The missile rammed into the turret from behind to make the ammunition compartment explode.

In 2014-2016, Iraq received 15 Mi-28 NE Night Hunter attack helicopters from Russia, The delivery was part of a wider \$4.2 billion defense package signed in 2012. The deal included a combination of 43 Mi-35 (28) and Mi-28NE (15) attack helicopters, plus 42-50 Pantsir-S1 combined short to medium range surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery weapons systems. The contract was fulfilled in October, 2016, as the attack helicopters and anti-aircraft systems had been delivered to the Iraqi military.

In 2014, Russia urgently sent several Su-25 aircraft upon the request of Iraqi government when the country's military was losing ground during the IS offensive. The Iraqi military also uses Russia-produced TOS-1A Buratino heavy flamethrowers, Grad truck-mounted 122mm multiple rocket launchers, 152mm MSTA howitzers, Su-25 attack planes and armored vehicles.

Russia-made weapons were widely used in the battle for Mosul. One of the systems vastly used in the operation was TOS-1A 220mm 24-barrel multiple rocket launcher and thermobaric weapon mounted on the T-72 tank chassis designed for defeating enemy personnel in fortifications, in open country, and in lightly armored vehicles and transport. It can fire incendiary and thermobaric rockets. The munitions disperse a cloud of flammable liquid into the air around the target, and then ignite it to produce an explosion significantly longer and stronger in comparison to a conventional warhead. This is an effective weapon to strike terrorists hidden in bunkers and caves. Iraqi Russia-made Mi-28 and Mi-35 helicopters also effectively launched attacks against IS positions in Mosul.

A joint Baghdad-based Russia-Iraq-Iran-Syria operational center was established in 2015 to exchange intelligence and coordinate activities against terrorists. Iraq has allowed the Russian Air Space Forces to use its airspace for airstrikes against Islamists in Syria.

Trade turnout between the two countries is roughly \$2 billion, mostly made up of Russian exports. In early 2016, a delegation of nearly 100 government and business officials headed by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, visited Iraq to boost cooperation on all spheres. The officials signed a wide-ranging memorandum of understanding that included measures to more than double bilateral trade and boost Iraq's electricity production, which only meets around 60 percent of its peak demand during the hot summer months. The head of the delegation said Russia was ready to sell Sukhoi Superjet civil airliners to Iraq and keep providing it with military aid to fight Islamic State. Moscow has invested millions of dollars in Iraq's energy sector.

Moscow and Baghdad are in talks on opening of a direct air line between Baghdad and Moscow and the abolition of visas for diplomats.

The US still has large influence in Iraq but it does not own it. The impressive performance of Russian weapons in Syria makes them in high demand among the countries facing the terrorist threat. The tank deal between Russia and Iraq reflects the trend. It also serves as an example of Russia's growing clout in the Middle East and North Africa.