

Lebanon to Acquire Mi-24 Helicopters

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President Dmitry Medvedev and Suleiman meeting in Moscow last week. **Dmitry Astakhov**

BEIRUT, Lebanon — Russia has agreed to provide Lebanon with an unspecified number of helicopter gunships instead of MiG-29 fighter jets, the Lebanese president's office said.

The announcement came after President Michel Suleiman returned home from a three-day visit to Moscow where he held talks with senior Russian officials about arming Lebanon's military and the situation in the Middle East.

Suleiman's office said in a statement released late Friday that Russia agreed to Beirut's formal request to provide Lebanon with Mi-24 helicopters instead of the 10 MiG-29 fighters originally planned.

"The army needs this type of helicopters, especially if they are supplied with missiles," the statement said. Suleiman is a former army commander.

Lebanon's military fought a three-month battle in 2007 against the al-Qaida-inspired Fatah Islam group inside the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr el-Bared in northern Lebanon.

The Lebanese army crushed the group, but the clashes left 220 militants, 171 soldiers and 47 Palestinian civilians dead. During the battle, the army used French-made Gazelle helicopters against the militants.

The United States also has been arming Lebanese troops for years, hoping that a stronger Lebanese military could impose the state's authority across the country.

A strong national military is also seen as a possible counterweight to the Islamic militant group Hezbollah, which has been increasing its power behind an arsenal of rockets that threaten another U.S. ally — Israel.

Last year, Washington stepped up its military aid program to Lebanon and decided to supply Beirut with battle tanks — the first since the early 1980s — after Russia promised in late 2008 to give Lebanon 10 MiG-29 fighter jets.

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