

Saudi Arabia and Egypt want to buy the Mistral vessels which France originally agreed to sell to Russia. Stratfor sources in the region have largely confirmed French media reports, indicating that there is at least a preliminary interest in acquiring the vessels. Despite the considerable obstacles that Riyadh and Cairo would have to surmount before they could effectively utilise Mistral-class ships, the vessels could eventually offer these Arab countries increased capability to respond to varying threats in the region. Analysis on next page.

Saudi Arabia is making considerable efforts to bolster its air and land force capabilities, and now Riyadh appears increasingly focused on investing in its naval forces. The acquisition of potent new ships easily fits within the envisaged Saudi maritime upgrade. Mistral-class vessels are flexible amphibious assault platforms that are ideal for the projection of force in littoral waters. In missions of short duration, a battalion - approximately 400-900 troops - can deploy from the Mistral, using landing craft or helicopters. In addition to carrying an infantry-based force, the vessels can be configured to lift significant numbers of vehicles (armored or otherwise) that can deploy by landing craft to a designated landing zone. The helicopter air wing aboard the Mistral can also be configured to the task at hand, with the ability to deploy large numbers of anti-submarine warfare helicopters for sub-hunting missions. However, the vessels have little self-defense capacity and rely on other surface warships to escort them and to provide protection.

There is definitely a requirement for Mistral-type ships in Riyadh's arsenal. The vessels, if correctly manned and equipped, would have been very useful in the Saudi-led coalition's operations in Yemen. It often takes offensive action for an armed force to understand that a capability gap exists, and the ability to project force from sea to shore is critical for a modern military. The Saudis could also benefit from using the vessels in and around the Persian Gulf, especially close to the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs islands. These islands are disputed by Iran as well as the United Arab Emirates, but Riyadh could very rapidly deploy forces from a Mistral to capture terrain.

As Stratfor has noted in the past, Saudi Arabia has a strong desire to set up a joint Arab intervention force to counter threats to individual and collective interests in the region. The U.S. rapprochement with Iran and increased Turkish assertiveness mean that the Saudis are looking to their Arab brethren to reinforce their own military alliance system. As alluded to in the French reports, the Saudis may be interested in procuring the Mistral-class vessels as part of the greater joint Arab force project.

Military capabilities alone are not enough to create a viable and effective joint force - that requires strong political will. Indeed, there are several obstacles that work against the success of a joint Arab intervention force, especially one where Riyadh is vying for leadership. The Sunni Arab states, though willing to work closely on occasion, have disparate goals and interests that will continue to undermine their unity. Egypt would likely host the envisaged joint Arab force, and it would make considerable sense to base the Mistral in Egypt. In this case, one or both of the Mistral would be docked in Egypt close to the headquarters of the Arab force. Alternatively, one could be stationed in Egypt while the other would be deployed with the Saudi navy. This raises the question, would Cairo be willing to foot the bill for one or both of the Mistral?

Financing the Purchase

The Egyptians lack money and are principally concerned with countering threats in their immediate locale. Therefore, Cairo would be unlikely to go ahead with any purchase without Saudi financial backing. Assuming the Saudis fund the purchase, the Egyptians would benefit from the considerable prestige of maintaining one or both Mistral vessels within their own fleet. Furthermore, Egypt is involved in a number of regional conflicts where the deployment of a Mistral vessel might be useful, the Libyan conflict being the most obvious example.

While Saudi Arabia may be willing to finance the acquisition of the Mistral, there are several obstacles that will continue to hamper the Saudis and the Egyptians when it comes to using the equipment. The biggest obstacle is the absence of trained crews to operate the vessels, and even more important, well-trained forces to deploy from the Mistral. While both Egypt and Saudi Arabia maintain small marine forces, neither nation has previously operated large amphibious assault vessels and will need considerable time and investment to build up the necessary institutional knowledge to use the Mistral effectively.

Furthermore, procuring the Mistral is only the first step. The Saudis and Egyptians would still need to purchase the associated specialized helicopters and landing craft that would operate from each Mistral. Additionally, the Mistral vessels in question were specifically built for the Russians, and Riyadh and Cairo will undoubtedly have to refurbish the ships and modify them to suit their own particular command, control, communications and climate requirements.

Despite these constraints, there is a high likelihood that Egypt and Saudi Arabia will purchase

the Mistral. Assuming Riyadh is willing to fund their purchase and associated costs, in time the Egyptians and the Saudis could have a considerable rapid response force ready to deploy from these vessels for missions across the Arab world. That would fit in neatly with the current Saudi-led efforts to create a potent unified Arab force that would help safeguard shared interests across the region.

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