TAL SHIAR DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE REPORT

UNCLASSIFIED//AOR ETHIOPIA, RUSSIA

Ethiopia Acquires Russian Su-35 Flankers, Bolstering Air Power Amid Regional Tensions

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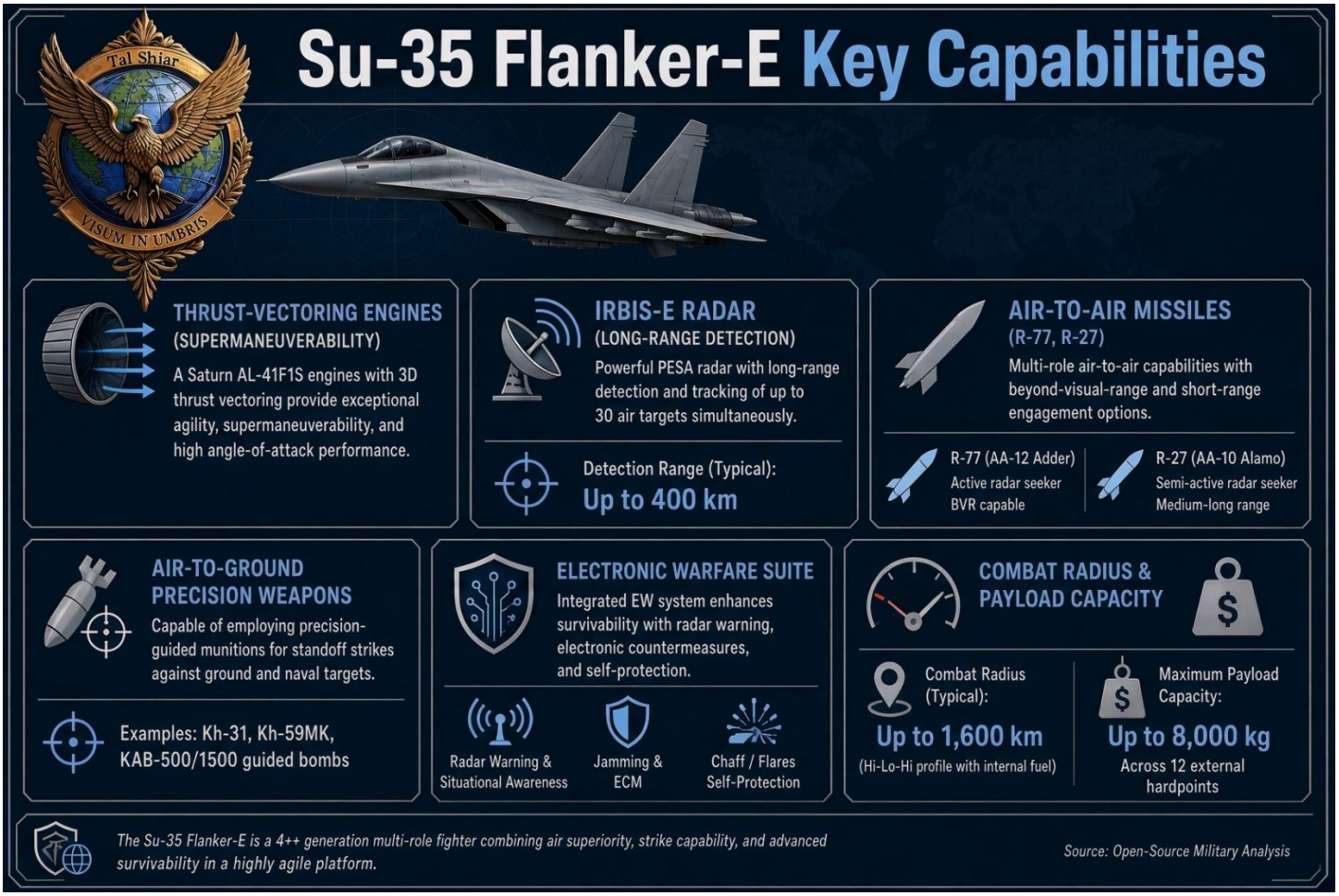
Ethiopia's October 2026 acquisition of 12 Su-35 Flanker fighters from Russia marks a major upgrade to its air force at an estimated cost of $1.25 billion. The deal strengthens multi-role air superiority and strike capabilities against aging Su-27s and limited Su-30Ks. Delivery of the first aircraft occurred a year ahead of schedule during the Russia-Africa Summit in Moscow. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed described the jets as a milestone for national defense and deterrence. The purchase occurs amid renewed fighting in Tigray and rising tensions with Eritrea. Some reporting indicates only an initial batch of two jets has physically arrived so far. The addition of these fighters will enhance Ethiopia air superiority against regional rivals as well as give them added strike capabilities.

- Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced receipt of the first 12 Su-35 4++ generation fighters under a prior multi-year agreement with Russia, thanking President Putin for accelerating delivery by one year, according to BBC and Reuters reporting on 28–29 October 2026.



- The Su-35 adds thrust-vectoring engines, an Irbis-E radar, long-range air-to-air missiles, and improved air-to-ground and electronic warfare capacity over Ethiopia's existing Su-27 Flankers acquired in the late 1990s, according to National Interest and Military Africa analyses.

- The announcement coincided with intensified government-TPLF fighting in Tigray near the Eritrean border and broader Horn of Africa security concerns, according to BBC and Al Jazeera reports.



Broader Russian Arms Package Expands Ethiopia's Layered Defense

We assess that the Su-35 deal forms part of a larger Russian arms package that includes four S-400 air defense batteries plus earlier deliveries of Su-30K fighters, Yak-130 trainers, and Orion-E UAVs. Combined estimates for the Su-35s and S-400s alone reach $3.5–5 billion, equivalent to multiple years of Ethiopia's defense budget. These systems add long-range interception, pilot training pathways, and persistent ISR/strike capacity. Integration, maintenance, and financing remain open questions given ongoing internal conflicts. Russia gains continued arms revenue and influence in the Horn of Africa.

- Abiy stated Ethiopia will receive four S-400 batteries under the same framework agreement; no delivery timeline or exact configuration has been disclosed, according to Al Jazeera, Reuters, and BBC.

- Ethiopia received two ex-Indian Su-30Ks in January 2024 and displayed Yak-130 advanced trainers plus at least one Orion-E UAV in early 2026, supplementing Turkish Akinci drones and older Soviet-era aircraft, according to DefenceWeb and Janes reporting.

- Open-source cost benchmarks from prior Su-35 export deals (Indonesia, Egypt) and S-400 sales (Turkey) produce a $3.5–5 billion package estimate excluding sustainment; Ethiopia's 2025/26 defense allocation is roughly $500 million, according to BarazaBrief analysis.

Conclusion

Ethiopia is modernizing its air force and air defenses with advanced Russian systems to address internal rebellions and external threats from Eritrea. The Su-35 fleet and planned S-400 batteries raise the country's regional air power profile. Cost, training, and sustainment burdens are substantial relative to the defense budget. Russia deepens its security footprint in the Horn of Africa. Actual operational impact will depend on full delivery, pilot proficiency, and logistics support.





Tal Shiar was founded by Nadeem Iqbal, a national security expert who served over 16 years as an intelligence officer for the Department of Defense from 2006-2022. His career began as a counter-insurgency analyst on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force (2006–2013), followed by 9 years as a military analyst in the Syria Branch (2013–2022). He deployed five times in support of combat operations (3× Afghanistan, 2× Iraq), including two rotations with Special Operations Forces focused on counter-terrorism missions in the CENTCOM theater. Additional roles included rotations to CIA Headquarters as the military analyst for the DNI Middle East Task Force and served as the Syria Country Director for Office of Secretary of Defense Policy (OSDP). He was recognized with Joint Civilian Commendation/Achievement Medals, the NATO Medal(x3), the Secretary of Defense GWOT Medal, DoD Expeditionary Award and the OSD Excellence Award.