

Revealed: the £1bn of weapons flowing from Europe to Middle East

AK-47s, machine guns, explosives and more travel along new arms pipeline from Balkans to countries known to supply Syria

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Eastern European countries have approved the discreet sale of more than €1bn of weapons in the past four years to Middle Eastern countries that are known to ship arms to Syria, an investigation has found.

Thousands of assault rifles such as AK-47s, mortar shells, rocket launchers, anti-tank weapons and heavy machine guns are being routed through a new arms pipeline from the Balkans to the Arabian peninsula and countries bordering Syria.

The suspicion is that much of the weaponry is being sent into Syria, fuelling the five-year civil war, according to a team of reporters from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).

Arms export data, UN reports, plane tracking, and weapons contracts examined during a year-long investigation reveal how the munitions were sent east from Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Montenegro, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania.

Since the escalation of the Syrian conflict in 2012, the eight countries have approved €1.2bn (£1bn) of weapons and ammunition exports to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey - key arms markets for Syria and Yemen.

In the past, the region had virtually no track record of buying from central and eastern Europe. But purchases appear to be escalating, with some of the biggest deals approved in 2015.

Arms export licences were granted despite fears from experts and within governments that the weapons could end up with the Syrian armed opposition, arguably in breach of national, EU and other international agreements.

Eastern and central European weapons and ammunition, identified from videos and photos posted on social media, are now being used by western-backed Free Syrian Army units, but are also in the hands of fighters from Islamist groups such as Ansar al-Sham, the al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, Islamic State, factions fighting for the Syrian president, Bashar-al-Assad, and by Sunni forces in Yemen.

Markings on some of the ammunition identifying the origin and date of manufacture reveal significant quantities have come off production lines as recently as 2015.

Responding to the findings of the investigation, Patrick Wilcken, an arms control researcher at Amnesty International, and Bodil Valero, the European parliament's rapporteur on arms, said at least some of the transfers probably breached EU, international and national laws on arms exports.

"The evidence points towards systematic diversion of weapons to armed groups accused of committing serious Human Rights Violations," said Wilcken. "If this is the case, the transfers are illegal under ... international law and should cease immediately."

Origins of the trade route

The weapons pipeline opened in the winter of 2012, when dozens of cargo planes, loaded with Saudi-purchased Yugoslav-era weapons and ammunition, began leaving Zagreb bound for Jordan. Soon after, the first footage of Croatian weapons emerged from Syria.

Croatia's government has consistently denied any part in shipping weapons to Syria, but Robert Stephen Ford, the US ambassador to Syria between 2011 and 2014, said Zagreb had concluded a deal in 2012 that the Saudis bankrolled.

This was just the beginning. Arms dealers in eastern Europe procured assets from their own countries and brokered the sale of ammunition from Ukraine and Belarus, even attempting to secure Soviet-made anti-tank systems bought from the UK.

Since 2012, BIRN and OCCRP say, €806m worth of weapons and ammunition exports were approved by the eastern European countries to Saudi Arabia, citing national and EU arms export reports and government sources.

Jordan secured €155m worth of export licences in this period, the investigators say, while the UAE acquired €135m and Turkey €87m, bringing the total for those four years to just under €1.2bn.

In a confidential document obtained by BIRN and OCCRP from November 2013, a senior official at Serbia's defence ministry revealed concerns that deliveries to Saudi Arabia would be diverted to Syria.

Jeremy Binnie, the Middle East arms expert for the publication Jane's Defence Weekly, said: "The militaries of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE and Turkey use western infantry weapons and ammunition, rather than Soviet-designed counterparts. It consequently seems likely that large shipments of such materiel being acquired by - or sent to - those countries are destined for their allies in Syria, Yemen and Libya."

The weapons are delivered by air and by sea. By tracking the movement of aircraft and ships, BIRN and OCCRP were able to follow the flow of arms in real time.

Detailed analysis of airport timetables, cargo carrier history, flight tracking data and air traffic control sources helped pinpoint almost 70 flights that very likely carried weapons to Middle Eastern conflicts in the past year.

Belgrade, Sofia and Bratislava emerged as the main hubs for the airlift. Serbia's aviation authority confirmed that 49 of the flights were transporting weapons in a response to a freedom of information request.

EU flight statistics provide further evidence of the scale of the operation. They reveal that planes from Bulgaria and Slovakia have delivered thousands of tonnes of unidentified cargo since the

summer of 2014 to the same military bases in Saudi Arabia and the UAE pinpointed by BIRN and OCCRP.

Arms bought by the Saudis, Turks, Jordanians and the UAE for Syria are routed through two secret command hubs - called military operation centres (MOCs) - in Jordan and Turkey, according to Ford.

The weapons are then transported by road to the Syrian border or airdropped by military planes. The Saudis are also known to have airdropped materiel, including what appeared to be Serbia-made assault rifles, to their allies in Yemen.

“Each of the countries involved in helping the armed opposition retained final decision-making authority about which groups in Syria received assistance,” Ford said.

The Saudis and Turks are also known to have provided weapons directly to Islamist groups not supported by the US and who, in some cases, are fighting MOC-backed factions.

Washington has also bought and delivered large quantities of military materiel from central and eastern Europe for the Syrian opposition in an attempt to counter the spread of Isis.

Since December 2015, three cargo ships commissioned by the US military’s Special Operations Command (Socom), in charge of the covert supply of weapons to Syria, have left Black Sea ports in the Balkans for the Middle East, according to American procurement documents and ship tracking data.

Some 4,700 tonnes of Warsaw Pact weaponry - including heavy machine guns, rocket launchers and anti-tank weapons, as well as bullets, mortars, grenades, rockets and other explosives - have been delivered from Bulgaria and Romania to military facilities in Jordan and Turkey, according to procurement documents and ship tracking data. The latest US-chartered ship left Bulgaria on 21 June carrying about 1,700 tonnes of the same materiel to an unidentified Red Sea port.

SOCOM said in a statement the “munitions are to support Special Operations and its missions worldwide.

“We will not confirm types of equipment which may be used for training and equipping partnered foreign forces in support of Special Operations missions.”

Two weeks after a March 2016 delivery, Kurdish groups published on Twitter and Facebook a photo of a warehouse piled with ammunition boxes in northern Syria, claiming to have received a supply of US-brokered weapons.

Reading the fine print

End-user certificates - official documents drawn up when receiving an export licence - issued by the Saudi defence ministry to a Serbian arms dealer, as well as a cache of contracts obtained by BIRN and OCCRP, revealed the scope of the buy-up for Syrian beneficiaries.

It ranged from hundreds of ageing T-55 and T-72 tanks to millions of rounds of ammunition, multi-launch missile systems and rocket launchers, although it is not clear what was delivered. Weapons and ammunition listed include materiel from the former Yugoslavia, Belarus, Ukraine and Czech Republic, much of which is present in large quantities in Syria.

An export licence issued to a Slovakian company in January 2015 granted it the right to transport

thousands of rocket-propelled grenade launchers, heavy machine guns and almost a million bullets worth €32m. The materiel was, again, produced across eastern Europe.

The Serbian prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, said at a press conference in June that his country could increase production fivefold and still not meet the demand for arms. “Unfortunately in some parts of the world they are at war more than ever and everything you produce, on any side of the world you can sell it,” he said.

Secrecy surrounding arms deals and a dearth of publicly available data means that the exact items being delivered to the Middle East are often unknown, but evidence collected, including UN and national arms export reports and weapons contracts, reveals that much of it is Cold War-era weaponry not in use by the militaries of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE or Turkey.

BIRN and OCCRP’s analysis of social media shows Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, Serbian, Croatian and Bulgarian weapons being used in training and on the battlefields of Syria, Yemen and Libya.

A Free Syrian Army commander from Aleppo, who asked to remain anonymous to protect his safety, told BIRN and OCCRP that weapons from central and eastern Europe were distributed from centrally controlled headquarters. “We don’t care about the country of the origin we just know it is from eastern Europe,” he said.

He said groups fighting pro-Assad forces rather than Isis were struggling to access arms. “If you say that you are fighting Isis you will get whatever you want but if you say that you are fighting against the regime no one cares about you.”

Arms trade experts have told BIRN and OCCRP that sales of weapons to Saudi Arabia and other countries supplying Syrian rebels are likely to be in breach of national and EU law, as well as the international Arms Trade Treaty. But no clear sanctions mechanism exists to punish countries that do not meet these legally binding agreements.

Valero told BIRN and OCCRP that countries exporting weapons to Saudi Arabia from eastern Europe should feel ashamed.

She said EU member states - such as Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia - are bound by the union’s common position on arms exports, while candidate countries also must align with the rules. This requires governments to carry out risk assessments on the likelihood of weapons being diverted to conflict zones and non-state actors.

“Countries selling arms to Saudi Arabia or the Middle East region are not carrying out good risk assessments and as a result are in breach of EU and national law,” she said. “I think these countries could be taken to the European Court of Justice.”

Darko Kihalic, the head of the Croatia’s arms licensing department at the Ministry of Economy, told BIRN and OCCRP that Zagreb follows the legally binding EU Common Position on arms exports and other international treaties.

Kihalic dismissed media reports that showed Croatian weapons were ending up in war zones saying it did not constitute proof. But asked whether he was aware that Croatian weapons bought by Saudi Arabia were turning up in Syria, he said: “There is nothing more for us to check as the document says that their ministry of defence or police forces will use it [the weapon] and that they won’t resell it or export it.”

Saudi Arabia is not a “blacklisted” country, he said. “Are there misuses? There probably are.”

Valero and Wilcken, from Amnesty International, strongly opposed this view.

“All these states do have clear, legally binding responsibilities to stop the transfer of arms where there is a risk that they will be used for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, and to take mitigating measures to prevent diversion to unauthorised end users,” said Wilcken.

In March, the Netherlands became the first EU country to stop arms exports to Saudi Arabia, citing mass execution and civilian deaths in Yemen.

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