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What the West Owes Syrians:
*US and European Arms Sales to the
Middle East 2011-2014*¹

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While the last two years have seen heated discussions in Europe and the US about the costs of hosting Syrian and other refugees, debate is lacking about another aspect of Western countries' involvement in the region's conflicts: the extent of arms sales to the Middle East. Between 2011 and 2014 - based on conservative estimates - Europe earned €21 billion from the arms trade with the Middle East while it spent €19 billion on hosting approximately one million Syrian refugees. During that same period, the US earned at least €18 billion from weapons sales, while accepting only about 11,000 Syrian refugees.

This study aims to address, as much as data availability allows, the balance between Westerns countries' income from official weapons export to the Middle East and the cost of hosting Syrian refugees fleeing a conflict that has witnessed imbrications of most of the region's countries. Accordingly, we will assess the value of official weapons sales between arms producing countries and the Middle East between 2011 and 2014. The focus will be on trade with Jordan, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Turkey (abridged as JUQKKT), countries that have close links with the Syrian armed opposition. We then compare arms sales revenues with the cost of hosting Syrian refugees seeking protection in arms-exporting countries² - while taking note that comparing earnings from the arms trade with the costs of hosting refugees does not address or assume away the immorality of weapons sales. We grouped weapons manufacturers and transfer countries under the

‘Friends of Syria’ banner – in reference to the group formed in 2012 by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy composed of France, UK, US, Germany, Italy, Turkey, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt - and the rest under Eastern Europe. We assess JUQKKT’s entire weapons purchases consisting in both the build up of their national militaries as well their weapons imports intended for delivery to the war in Syria. In our view, it is as important to consider the replenishment of JUQKKT’s national arsenals, which are key to the repressive regimes contributing to the wars and crackdown campaigns of the region. Indeed, over the 2012-2016 period, there has been an unprecedented build-up of the military arsenal of Gulf countries and Turkey with investments significantly increasing the capabilities of their armed forces.³

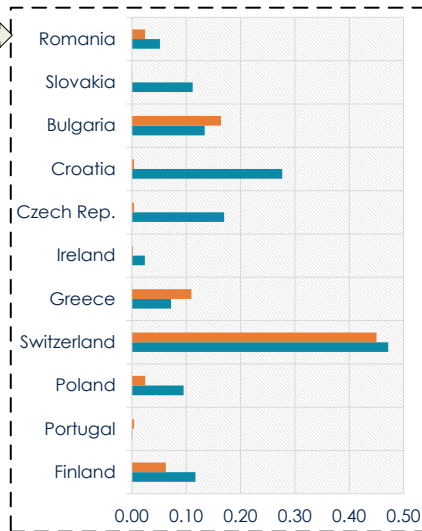
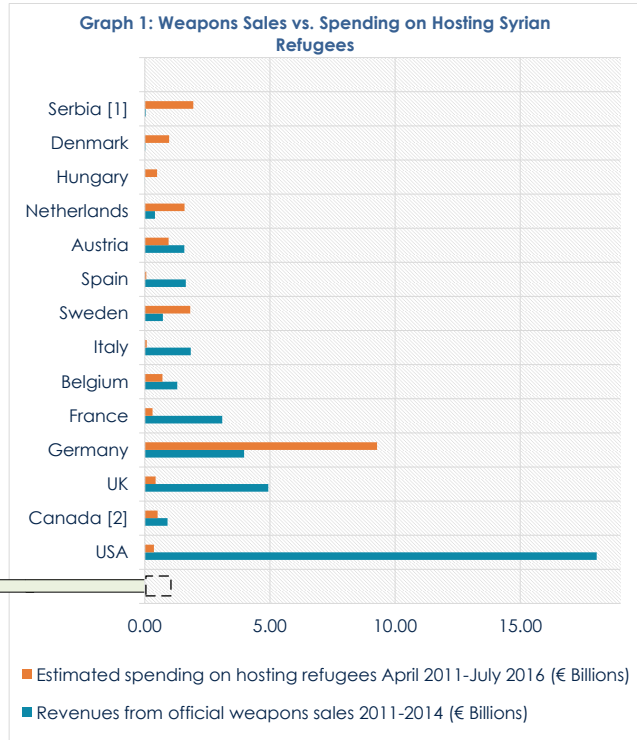
The focus on Western countries does not imply that they are the only weapons exporters to the region. However, reliable data on arms exports from China, Russia and Iran are not readily available. Nevertheless, we do try to provide some plausible estimates based on the very limited data available.⁴ While this prevents us from including these three countries in our calculations, it does not impact our main premise of the indirect but foreseeable link between Western arms transfer to the Middle East and the wave of refugees.

We based our findings on official national reports, which record approved weapons export licenses rather than actual weapons shipped to the importing country (except for the case of Canada where records reflect actual weapons exports). The difference lies in that while export licenses may be approved in a given year, delivery may only occur several years down the line due to extended production cycles of military equipment. By extension, this also indicates that, even if export licenses cease to be approved today, weapons will continue to flow to the region for years to come. Furthermore, we note that official arms sales figures are conservative estimates knowing that at least 2%⁵ of the arms trade is unaccounted for and is conducted through behind-the-door deals. As we will also show, there is

strong evidence of countries exporting to JUQKKT without it being reflected in their national records.

In calculating the cost of hosting refugees starting from April 2011⁶, we assumed that governments have continued to support refugees from the time of their asylum applications up until the end of the period under study (July 2016)⁷. Also, for countries where specific data on the cost of hosting refugees is not available, in particular East European countries, we used Spain's per capita cost as a proxy given closer costs of living in southern Europe to those in Eastern Europe.⁸

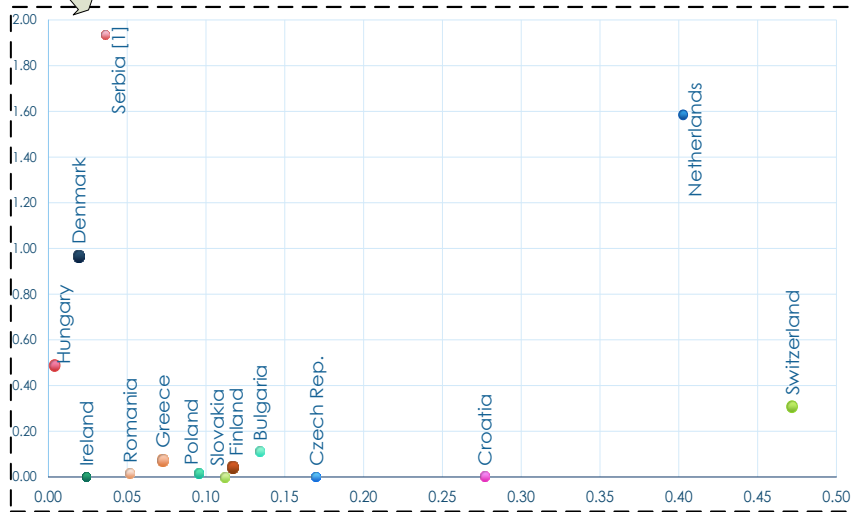
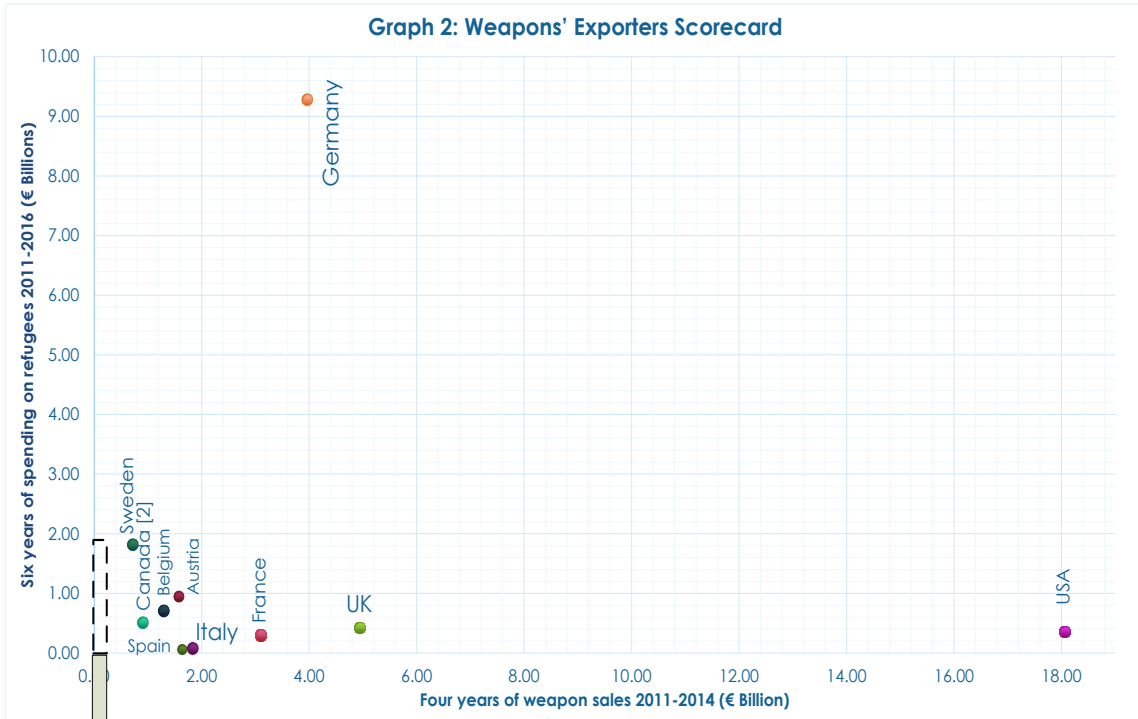
The following table, graphs and Appendices developed by the author will form the basis of our discussion.⁹



Country	Number of Refugees	Income from Weapons 2011-2014 (€ Billions)	Ratio of Income from Weapons vs Cost of Hosting Refugees	Ratio including 2015-2016 RRP's cf. Footnote 9
Slovakia	64	0.11	283.56x	81.88x
Croatia	448	0.28	100.22x	100.22x
Czech Rep.	417	0.17	66.07x	39.55x
USA	11,883	18.05	49.58x	8.29x
Spain	9,562	1.64	27.81x	22.08x
Italy	3,291	1.83	24.10x	19.05x
UK	9,897	4.93	11.52x	4.87x
France	12,142	3.09	10.03x	7.83x
Poland	787	0.10	5.72x	5.72x
Finland	1,752	0.12	2.74x	1.56x
Belgium	16,384	1.30	1.84x	1.65x
Canada [2]	25,000	0.91	1.78x	1.24x
Austria	40,949	1.58	1.66x	1.62x
Switzerland	13,282	0.47	1.54x	1.32x
Bulgaria	18,167	0.13	1.20x	1.19x
Greece	12,138	0.07	0.97x	0.97x
Germany	401,018	3.97	0.43x	0.38x
Sweden	109,044	0.72	0.40x	0.40x
Netherlands	32,289	0.40	0.25x	0.22x
Denmark	19,738	0.02	0.02x	0.02x
Serbia [1]	314,327	0.04	0.02x	0.02x
Hungary	79,116	0.00	0.01x	0.01x

Table 1: Country Ranking

Ranking of countries in terms of ratio of income from the arms trade vs. spending on refugees. Countries included in this table are those with more than €100 million in weapons exports or with more than 10,000 asylum seekers. Most countries earned several times more from the sales of weapons than they spent on refugees: the highest profits go to Slovakia which made 283 times more, while the US earned 50 times more and Spain 28 times more. Greece broke even and others such as Sweden, Slovenia and Portugal spent slightly more on refugees.¹⁰



Based on our calculations, since 2011, Europe, the US and Canada have spent around €20.1 billion to host approximately one million Syrian refugees over five years. At the same time, Western arms manufacturers are benefitting from an increase in military equipment supplied to the Middle East, a considerable number of which has ended up in the war in Syria. Comments by UNHCR's Europe Director are quite telling: the weapons industry "kills and creates refugees"¹¹.

Friends of Syria: Traditional proponents of the weapons industry

The primary source of weapons to the Middle East remains by far the United States, which has historically - at best - misassessed the consequences of its foreign policy across the region. Leading European democracies are second to the US in arms trade to the region (until 2014) and are quick to entertain the largest Middle Eastern arms purchasers. Looking closer at governments' policy in terms of the arms trade, it seems that international law and national regulations become malleable.

With the onset of the 'Arab Spring', Western governments and think tanks were enthusiastic about the prospects of democratization in the Middle East. Nevertheless, one year after the 'Arab Spring', EU and US licensed arms sales to the region increased by 22%¹² and 300%¹³ respectively.¹⁴ Several Gulf regimes, troubled by the tide sweeping the region, launched a counter-revolutionary campaign. The West played right into this campaign through, among other ways, the supply of military equipment. Arms imports by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait increased respectively by 212%, 245% and 174% between the periods of 2007-2011 and 2012-2016; UAE's purchases increased by 63% with continuous high levels of imports since 2001.¹⁵ The war in Syria represents an extension of this trend: since the start of the conflict, Western-made weapons have been transferred to various Syrian opposition groups fighting the Syrian regime as well as each other.¹⁶

The Obama administration's involvement in the Syrian war has been criticized for being 'hands off'. At the same time, official involvement includes direct delivery of non-lethal weapons to rebel groups. Evidence indicates that Washington also seems to relinquish the transfer of lethal equipment to its Arab allies, yet tacitly approves Syria as final destination.¹⁷ Evidently, US manufactured TOW missiles,¹⁸ previously sold to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, frequently appear in videos shot by Syrian rebels. We would thus argue that America's imbrication in the war is rather substantial: in February 2017, the Financial Times reports¹⁹ of a Syrian rebel commander who was on the one hand coordinating weapons transfers and salary payments to the Free Syrian Army (a loosely defined group) in Syria while also acting as a CIA informant. The commander explains that regular planning meetings with US and other representatives were held at the covert operations room in Turkey known as Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi, modeled after the one in Jordan. There, commanders "regularly inflated their forces' numbers to pocket extra salaries, and some jacked up weapons requests to hoard or sell on the black market. Inevitably, much of that ended up in ISIS hands. Other groups cut in Jabhat al-Nusra on deals to keep it from attacking them." According to the now unemployed commander, the CIA and everyone else was aware of such practices, which were "the price of doing business."²⁰

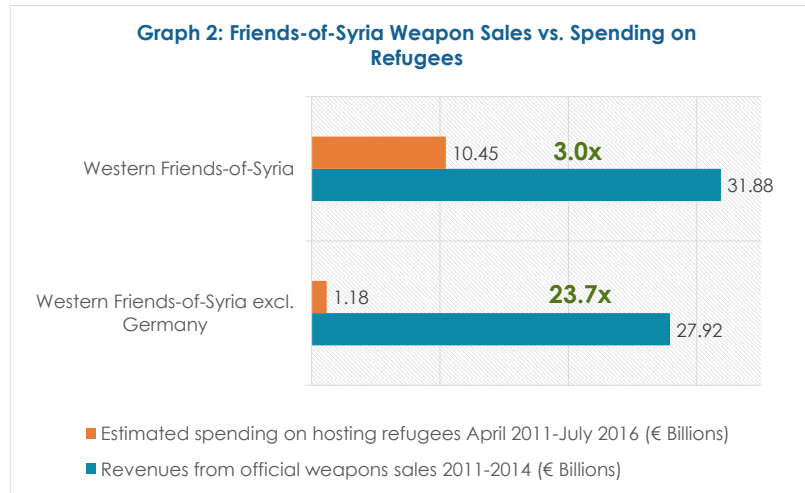
Furthermore, one of the latest revelation of US contribution in sustaining the war comes in the form of a leaked audio recording²¹ of former Secretary of State John Kerry who acknowledged "putting an extraordinary amount of arms in [rebel hands]" before noting that the US could send even more weapons but that it could be destructive for the armed opposition as it would drive "everyone [to up] the ante". In addition, the war has benefited US weapons industry: at an annual conference, Lockheed Martin's Executive Vice President Bruce Tanner is recorded²² explaining the benefit from the war in Syria where he highlights the 'unexpected' upsurge in demand for

support of the F-22 Raptor aircraft and other products in follow-up to the shooting down of the Russian aircraft by the Turkish air force. He added that Lockheed Martin, through its equipment, aims to heed the consequent increase in danger for US over-flights of Syrian territory. He also underscored that the company's increase in earnings is due to UAE's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the war in Yemen.

Along the same lines, reports surfaced in 2012 that Syrian rebel groups²³ used Swiss-made hand grenades initially sold to the United Arab Emirates. As a result, Bern decreased its arms exports to UAE from €132 million in 2012 to €10 million the following year, yet increased it again to €14 million in 2014. Weapons produced in Belgium were also transported²⁴ to the various warring factions in Syria. Switzerland, which prides itself in being a harbinger of peace, earned between 2011 and 2014 from weapons sales to the region 1.5 times what it spent on hosting 13,000 Syrian refugees. Similarly, while Belgium's revenues from arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE amounted to €1.18 billion, it spent €0.71 billion on hosting 16,000 Syrian refugees. For other arm producing countries, these ratios are astoundingly higher as will be shown below.

We note here that the EU implemented an arms embargo as well as other restrictive measures on Syria from May 2011 to May 2013, with several amendments and extensions²⁵. Its aim was mainly to prevent the export of equipment used in the violent repression by government forces while allowing the supply of non-lethal equipment to the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces. The European Council declared in May 2013 it would review its position before 1 August 2013, which however never took place. We note that this arms embargo was quite lax in nature, as it has been continuously breached. Based on an interview with the former Head of the European Union Delegation to Syria from 2013 to 2016²⁶, the EU decision not to reconvene on the subject points to a tacit policy of consent on the status quo of weapons deliveries to the Syrian National Coalition and their armed affiliates

on the ground. Also, according to the former official, the embargo's two-year timeframe at the time of adoption was set based on the misguided perception of the imminent fall of Bashar Al-Asad.



Based on our findings, ‘Friends of Syria’ earned €31.88 billions in weapons sales to JUQKKT and spent €10.45 billions on hosting Syrian refugees. Discounting Germany’s numbers, the US, France, UK, and Italy made €27.92 billion in sales versus €1.18 billion spent on refugees, i.e. they earned 23 times more from weapons sales.

Western European and US officials defend weapons sales on various grounds. For the German Chancellor, the market is strategic: the Merkel Doctrine²⁷ defends the export of weapons as an *essential instrument for peacekeeping* in countries where Germany is not directly active but has vested interests. Accordingly, the Chancellor calls for sustained arms deliveries in order for partners to carry out common objectives. This included a 2011 deal, unthinkable under previous governments²⁸, selling 270 modern tanks to Saudi Arabia, with tacit Israeli approval. Furthermore, German commentators may worry that were Germany to refrain from exporting weapons, others countries

will not hesitate to. German journalist Jürgen Grässlin argues²⁹ however that the opposite is in fact true: when the Dutch parliament refused to export used Leopard tanks to Indonesia, Germany jumped in and approved the same deal. In the meantime, German opposition groups have called for a blanket ban on arms sales to Saudi Arabia over its human rights violations. This drove the Chancellor and Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel to “critically review” arms sales to Riyadh and decided in 2015³⁰ to focus exports to Saudi Arabia on “defensive” military gear, including all-terrain armored vehicles, aerial refueling systems, combat jet parts, patrol boats, and drones. Still, German exports to Saudi Arabia increased³¹ from €179 million to €484 million in the first half of 2016. While Germany has been applauded for taking in the majority of Europe’s Syrian refugees (about 400,000), it should be pointed out that Germany’s weapons industry has and continues to profit from conflicts in the Middle East prolonged by arms exports. One could argue that Germany’s perceived generosity in hosting refugees comes at a high cost to Syrians.

Other arguments for military exports advance *threats to the domestic labor market* in case of implementing restrictions on the weapons industry. As such, not only industry-affiliated think-tanks but also mainstream media explicitly endorse the sale of weapons: long-time CNN news anchor, Wolf Blitzer³² expressed concern about the possibility of halting sales to Saudi Arabia. In his view, the consequent risk of job losses across US defense contractors by far outweighs the moral argument of supporting Saudi war crimes in Yemen. Beyond the moral aspect, Wolf Blitzer overrates the industry’s job creation potential. In many countries in fact, the arms industry is a dying sector in need of government subsidies: in Germany, the industry employs 100,000 people while the renewable energy sector, where skills could be transferred, is currently creating 300,000³³ jobs yearly. In the case of the US, allocating national spending to the clean energy, health or education sectors would

create between 50 to 140%³⁴ more jobs than spending it on the military.

Other officials counter-intuitively advocate for Western weapons sales based on *humanitarian grounds*. UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said³⁵ that were the UK to stop supplying Saudi Arabia, “other Western countries [...] would happily supply arms with nothing like the same compunctions or criteria or respect for humanitarian law [as the UK]”. Some UK ministers have also said that Saudi Arabia, which has cleared its own military from any violations in the war in Yemen, is best placed to investigate its own alleged war crimes with Boris Johnson adding “the Saudi government has approached this matter with great seriousness³⁶, and the seriousness it deserves”. Moreover, the UK’s former business secretary Vince Cable recently said he was misled³⁷ by the Ministry of Defense in signing off on the sale of laser-guided Paveway IV missiles to be used in Saudi Arabia’s bombing of Yemen. Cable initially blocked the export license due to concerns for civilian deaths, yet was promised “oversight of potential targets” which the Ministry now denies.

Lastly, for some politicians, the case for weapons exports is made on a *purely monetary* basis. Former UK Prime Minister David Cameron boasted³⁸ of his efforts to help sell “brilliant things” such as Eurofighter Typhoons to Saudi Arabia, on the same day the European Parliament voted for an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia over its bombardment of Yemen. His successor, Theresa May carried over a position in defense of weapons exports and said that London’s close relationship with Riyadh played a vital role in the fight against terrorism and that the Saudi regime’s co-operation was “helping keep people on the streets of Britain safe.”³⁹ Ironically, politicians who are the most candid about using the threat of refugees as a scaremongering tactic are also the most ardent defenders of the weapons industry: UKIP’s Nigel Farage is a case in point.

In the case of France, ties with Saudi Arabia seem at an all time high⁴⁰ with President Hollande awarding Crown Prince

Mohammed ben Nayef the Légion d'Honneur for Riyadh's efforts 'fighting terrorism and extremism'. With over €3 billion in sales to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and Turkey, France⁴¹ has spent ten times less (€0.31 billion) on hosting approximately 12,000 Syrian refugees. For Italy, Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, proposes exempting defense equipment manufacturers from paying VAT⁴² and allowing the industry to apply for EU research grants. Italy made an astounding 24 ratio in arms sales compared to its spending on 3,300 Syrian refugees.

The majority of Western leaders in countries with powerful military industries defend their weapons manufacturing companies. They seem to however disregard any correlation of their national arms exports with refugees fleeing conflicts. Rather, for the most part, they express a varying range of contempt, disdain, or increasingly, xenophobia towards the waves of people seeking refuge. In countries welcoming asylum seekers, refugees are expected to assume the mantle of indebtedness towards their hosts, despite the fact that they are asylees by necessity and in part as a consequence of their hosts' economic gains.

New kids on the block: Revival of E. Europe's weapons industry

Through the recent boost in arms trade to the Middle East, East European countries have opened the doors to weapons stock from former Yugoslavia and have revived their domestic weapons industries. At the same time, refugees on their soil are treated with considerable levels of discrimination.

An investigation⁴³ published in July 2016 by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project indicates that eight East European countries (Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Montenegro, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania) have since 2012 approved weapons and ammunition exports in value of just under €1.2 billion to Saudi Arabia (€806m), Jordan (€155m), UAE (€135m) and Turkey (€87m).

As indicated by the investigation, Saudi Arabia, the largest purchaser of these deals, does not count East European countries as a traditional source for the replenishment of its military arsenal – it rather opts for more modern US equipment⁴⁴ such as the Abram battle tank. Yet, since 2012, there is a surge of arms exports from Eastern Europe to Riyadh, which arguably is not intended for the country's national forces. In fact, the BIRN report indicates that these East European exports, mainly destined for Syria, are distributed by Saudi Arabia to its regional allies, Jordan and Turkey⁴⁵ who steer two command hubs transferring the weapons by road or through airdrops into Syria. Gradually, ex-Yugoslav-made weapons started appearing⁴⁶ in the hands of a plethora of armed groups around Syria's battlefields. This has been documented by Eliot Higgins, an investigative journalist and researcher specializing in open-source investigations, writing under the name of Brown Moses⁴⁷, who has mapped the weapons' spread throughout the conflict.

Accordingly, Belgrade, Zagreb, Bratislava and Sofia have become main export hubs to the Middle East. Specifically, in 2015 Serbia agreed to €135 million of arms⁴⁸ export licenses to Saudi Arabia. Back in 2013, Serbia had rejected similar requests for fear weapons would be diverted to Syria; these were worth \$22 million based on Serbia's national reports.⁴⁹ Also in 2013, the Serbian government denied four arms and military equipment import applications from the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Belarus, and the Czech Republic. These imports worth \$9.9 million were intended for re-sales (in the form of exports) to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ At a press conference in August 2016 following the BIRN investigation, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said that, while he was defense minister in 2013, he "probably received" intelligence that arms could end up in Syria. "Do not ask me what has changed. In 2015, I was not defense minister and I can't know [what happened]. I will take a look," he said. Vucic was candid about the benefit of the arms trade and said at the 2016 press conference: "I adore it when we export arms because it is a pure influx of foreign currency."

Serbia's involvement in the seemingly lucrative production and transfer of weapons to the Middle East is also attracting new partnerships⁵¹: in 2013 UAE invested \$33 million in the first phase of a joint development project of the Advanced Light Attack System missile system, one of the most modern land forces. The project will consist of a total of \$220 million invested over a period of four years. Moreover, and as an additional point of interest regarding the indirect forces at play in the Syrian theater, a Serbian-owned consortium,⁵² CPR Impex, one of the region's most important arms brokers,⁵³ and Israel's ATL Atlantic Technology bought Montenegro Defence Industry (MDI) in February 2015. Since August 2015, MDI arranged export deals of 250 tons of ammunition and 10,000 anti-tank systems to Saudi Arabia in value of over €2.7 million. At the time of writing, MDI is under investigation by Montenegro's special prosecution for organised crime and corruption over its alleged arms trading with Libya, Ukraine and Saudi Arabia, and the credibility of the end-user certificates, especially with countries under an international arms embargo.⁵⁴ We note that prior to 2015 and since 2006⁵⁵ (availability of reports), Montenegro had not conducted any significant arms trade with the Middle East except for Israel, where the end user country was stated to be Afghanistan, Iraq or USA, and with Yemen in 2010. We also highlight here that the recent rapprochement between Serbia and the UAE has been achieved thanks in part to the close involvement of Mohammed Dahlan,⁵⁶ a former Palestinian official close to UAE's top leadership, who facilitated the arms trade between both countries. In 2015 Mohammed Dahlan and his family (as well as his political connections and business partners) were awarded Serbian citizenship as a "sign of gratitude for" the rapprochement with UAE. Dahlan and his wife were also awarded Montenegrin citizenship in 2010.⁵⁷

In Bratislava, public broadcaster Slovak Radio and Television reported that in 2015 Slovakia exported to Saudi Arabia 40,000 assault rifles, more than 1,000 mortars, 14 rocket launchers, almost 500 heavy machine guns and more than

1,500 RPGs. The Prime Minister defended the arms deal noting “if we don’t sell [arms], somebody else will, but don’t come crying to me if a lack of arms deals causes the loss of jobs for our people.”⁵⁸ Slovakia welcomed 64 Syrian refugees costing Bratislava €400 thousands, translating into a 284 ratio of weapons sales to cost of hosting refugees.

For Croatia, data indicates that in 2013 and 2014 Zagreb sold over €155 million in ammunition to Saudi Arabia and €115 million to Jordan.⁵⁹ We note that such deals do not follow regular trade patterns as, specifically for Jordan and based on official reports, there is little history of weapon exports between Zagreb and Amman: previous arms deals consisted of fifteen pistols worth USD \$1053 sold to Jordan in 2001. More recently, the OCCRP reports that in December 2012 alone, exports to Jordan amounted to over USD\$6.5 millions.⁶⁰ The New York Times also reported 36 round-trip flights conducted between Amman and Zagreb from December 2012 through February 2013 where Jordanian cargo aircrafts airlifted a large Saudi purchase of infantry arms from Zagreb to Amman.⁶¹ As Croatia’s national reports do not indicate any exports to Jordan in 2012 one can safely assume the existence of under-the-table deals, which go unreported. A considerable amount of Croatian-made weapons has been documented in the hands of rebel groups such as the Al-Nusra affiliated Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. More recently Elliot Higgings confirmed that both ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra are using Croatian-made weapons, although “how they acquired them is unclear. They could have been looted from other groups, sold between groups, or provided directly.”⁶²

As for Bulgaria, the largest state-run arms producer, VMZ-Sopot has also hit the jackpot: after being insolvent in 2008, the plant has been working at full capacity since 2015.⁶³ It paid off around €11 million in debt and has created 1,200 new jobs. Furthermore, sales growth went from around €19 million in the first half of 2015 to around €86 million in the first half of 2016. VMZ Sopot’s net profit surged to around €600,000 from a net

loss of €35 million in the same period. While Bulgaria took in 18,000 Syrian refugees, a 2015 report by the German Pro Asyl foundation entitled “Humiliated, ill-treated and without protection” provides shocking accounts from asylum seekers in Bulgaria.⁶⁴ Refugees are subject to inhumane and degrading treatment by police and prison guards including extortion, abuse as well as torture.

Based on reports by Balkan Insight, Bulgaria’s government issued export permits for munitions and military equipment sales worth €85.5 million to Saudi Arabia in 2014 — including ammunition worth €65.4 million, large caliber weapons valued at €12.5 million and small calibre weapons (€5 million).⁶⁵ According to Ben Moores, a senior analyst at defence consultancy IHS Janes, such type of weapons were “very unlikely to be used by the Saudi military” but are very heavily used in Yemen, Iraq and in Syria. The director of the British-based consultancy group Armament Research Services also confirmed this in pointing to “notable quantities of arms and munitions produced in Bulgaria [...being] documented in Syria.”

As is the case with Croatia, Saudi Arabia has not been a major customer for Bulgarian weapons until 2014. According to a former Bulgarian military officer, the flights between Sofia and Tabuk, Saudi Arabia transported Bulgarian weapons, which were shipped by land to a distribution center in Jordan for Syrian opposition forces. In a BBC interview in late October 2015, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir openly acknowledged his country’s supply of arms to Syrian opposition fighters aimed at “[contributing] to changing the balance of the power on the ground.” Furthermore, Bulgaria was considerably involved in the US “Train and Equip” program intended to ready Syrian rebels whom Washington vetted as “moderate” for battles against the Syrian regime and ISIS. The US Special Operations Command, in charge of the US military support to Syrian rebels contracted a Bulgarian based company

for over €24.6 million in December 2014 to supply foreign weapons and ammunition.

Through indirect transfer of considerable weapons quantities to rebel factions, East European countries have acquired an unexpected but important role in the war in Syria, one driven by monetary benefits. Nonetheless, East European countries are quick to encourage and push Syrian refugees towards continental Europe while accepting a symbolic number of asylum seekers. We note that this block of countries does not hold known political or strategic interests in the Middle East, neither now or in the past when they have been historically absent from the region's major conflicts.

With regards to Russia, Moscow has historically been a major weapons supplier to the Syrian government – despite limited availability of data – we know that at least 10% of its arms exports went to Syria. “Russia reportedly has \$1.5 billion worth of ongoing arms contracts with Syria for various missile systems and upgrades to tanks and aircraft, reportedly doubling that investment in small arms sales since the beginning of the Syrian civil war”. Furthermore, military training provided by Russia since the beginning of the conflict ought to also be quantified. Despite the very direct role Russia has played in the Syrian war, the country has currently only accepted 1,395 Syrian refugees on temporary asylum and has even deported one Syrian refugee.⁶⁶ Still, Russia's armed forces benefited from the war in Syria: in his February 2017 speech at the Lower House of Parliament, the Russian defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, reported that 162 samples of modernized armament have been tested during the war in Syria, including new jets - Su-30SM and Su-34 - as well as Mi-28N and Ka-52 helicopters.⁶⁷ Syria also has been the testing ground for high-precision munitions, sea-based cruise missiles, used for the first time in combat. Furthermore, the defense minister noted that close to all of the flight personnel of the Russian Aerospace Forces, 86% of them, including 75% of the crews of long-range aviation, 79% of tactical aviation, 88% of military transport and

89% of army aviation, have received combat experience in Syria.

Cases of one-time weapons exporters & regular component suppliers

In the previous sections we have highlighted how Middle Eastern countries have purchased record high amounts of weapons from traditional and non-traditional arms manufacturer and directed considerable amounts of those to their allies in Syria. In this section, we will aim to provide a brief overview of some covert transfers and flows of weapons into Syria. Such an overview will be non-exhaustive by definition given the underground nature of and limited availability of sources on the subject. We note that such transfers are not accounted for in national export figures and form a significant part of the illicit weapons trade sustaining the war in Syria. This further underscores the premise of the conservative estimate of national arms trade figures, which we relied upon for our study.

Transfers by third party states under civil strife

There is evidence of weapons transfer from countries with ongoing conflict where government authority is limited and exports controls are lackluster. As such, Libyan missiles, looted during the 2011 upheaval were reportedly bound for Syria through Lebanon: according to an investigation by the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, Lebanese authorities seized on 27 April 2012 a shipment of various arms and ammunition on board the Letfallah II cargo ship near the port of Tripoli, Lebanon. The Panel concluded that Belgian-made FN Herstal FAL rifles found on the ship are “likely to be part of materiel deliveries made by Qatar during the uprising [in Libya]” which had “since been illicitly transferred out of Libya, including towards other conflict zones”. According to the Panel, these rifles were loaded with a type of Pakistani ammunition that had been previously supplied by Qatar to Libya and had also been found on board the Letfallah II. Knowing that Syria did not purchase

Belgian FN Herstal FAL rifles after 1969, the use of post-1969 models by the Syrian armed opposition groups and ISIS fighters suggests they may have come from an external source.⁶⁸

Similarly, according to a 2014 study conducted by the Small Arms Survey on the proliferation of Man Portable Air Defence Systems in Syria⁶⁹, some MANPADS in rebel hands were smuggled into Syria, including Chinese FN-6 systems not known to be exported to the Syrian government. Sudan was identified as a possible source of such missiles, which were reportedly purchased by Qatar and shipped through Turkey. Sudan is in fact among a handful of known importers of FN-6 MANPADS and in view of the widespread proliferation of Sudanese weapons and ammunition among armed groups. Similarly, the Conflict Armament Research (CAR) report of February 2015 documenting material seized from ISIS during the battle of Kobane between 2014-2015 provides evidence of Chinese rifles, which had their identification obliterated.⁷⁰ The same configuration of weapons had been found in South Sudan.

IED components consistently supplied to ISIS

According to Amnesty International, the majority of weapons seized by ISIS originate from looted Iraqi government stock. Still the group's large arsenal seems to originate from 25 different countries.⁷¹ Following two years of investigation into ISIS' weapons in Iraq and Syria, Conflict Armament Research revealed in its February 2016 report that Turkey is the most important source of components used to manufacture the majority of ISIS' improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁷² These consist of chemical precursors including a mixture of aluminum and nitrate-based fertilizer such as ammonium nitrate, as well as containers, detonating cord, cables, and wires. The investigation found that such elements were manufactured by or sold through 13 Turkish companies/intermediaries before being acquired by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. CAR notes that most of the companies involved serve the Turkish market and do not export goods to Iraq or Syria. The report also highlights

the speed at which ISIS forces acquire IED materials, at times as little as one month following their lawful supply to commercial entities, which speaks to the lack of monitoring by national governments and of companies alike according to the report.⁷³ While the trade itself is conducted lawfully, it is the smaller commercial entities transferring the materials to groups affiliated with ISIS forces, which “appear to be the weakest links in the chain of custody.” Additionally, in a related report on ISIS’ weapons manufacturing in Mosul, CAR research “provides stark evidence of an extremely robust procurement network” with consistent acquisition of identical products from the same sources, “almost exclusively from the Turkish domestic market.”⁷⁴

Private individuals trading weapons

News articles abound with evidence of arms also being smuggled into Syria through private deals. Balkan Insight reported on one such case: Bulgarian weapons were reported to be trucked into Homs in August 2012 and paid for by a Syrian businessman in the amount of €1.4 million for AK-47 rifles, grenade launchers and ammunition.⁷⁵ A former Syrian opposition fighter said he was involved in 12 transfers of Bulgarian weapons as of 2013, the largest of which was worth €6.4 million. The shipments were delivered at the Turkish-Syrian border in two trucks and were arranged by Syrian and Turkish nationals with connections to Bulgarian arms dealers.

Transfers possibly in breach of international weapons embargos

The Conflict and Armament Report of 2015 documented various Iranian cartridges, which the People’s Protection Units (YPG) ceased from ISIS forces in Kobane. Most of these cartridges have been manufactured in 2006, with some as recently as 2013. Their presence outside Iran may indicate a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1737 (2006), which prohibits Iranian exports of weapons and related products to all countries.⁷⁶

In addition to weapons transfers sanctioned by national governments in support of rebel factions in Syria, arms and component smuggling and transfer from private groups and companies into Syrian territory add to the plethora of entities with stakes in the war in Syria. The acknowledgment of these illicit activities by governments and halting the flow of weapons and funds sustaining the war would be the first step in containing the drain of Syrians from Syria.

A Dishonest Debate – for the most part

Weapons industries are by and large applauded for turning the wheels of the economy at home. Little scrutiny is however carried out over the consequences it is creating elsewhere in the world. In the last few years, with unprecedented quantities of weapons sold to the Middle East including those transferred to Syria, the conflict has driven millions of Syrians to seek refuge in Western countries. Aware of the consequences of weapons proliferation, European politicians may have opted for a tradeoff: making their taxpayers shoulder the short term cost of hosting refugees in exchange for profits to the arms industry. With reality of wars hitting closer to home, time may be opportune for a different debate in Western capitals.

According to the former economic adviser to the president of the European Commission, Philippe Legrain, refugees are in fact unlikely to decrease wages or raise unemployment for native workers. Most significantly, calculations indicate that while the absorption of so many refugees will increase public debt for the EU by almost €69 billion between 2015 and 2020, during the same period refugees will help GDP grow by €126.6 billion.⁷⁷ In fact, a €1 investment in welcoming refugees can yield nearly €2 in economic benefits within five years. Legrain also highlights how refugees could solve an impending demographic challenge in Europe. Along these lines, Portugal considers the refugee influx as an opportunity to revive some regions of the country.⁷⁸ Lisbon is in fact offering to welcome up to 5,800 more refugees in addition to the 4,500 it already

agreed to take in as part of the European Union's refugee quota system. Portugal has 'only' sold €500,000 worth of weapons to the Middle East.

We thus deem the debate over the flows of refugees and the heavy burden on societies as flawed. Some European and North American societies unjustly blame refugees for fleeing war and seeking stability. By hosting them, they draw asylum seekers into financial and/or emotional indebtedness towards these societies. Yet these same societies, for the most part, disregard Western countries' complicity in cashing in on the wars refugees are escaping. Even more so, the question remains as to the distribution of profits from the global arms trade between national governments brokering the deals and arms manufacturers, knowing that it is the former who covers the cost of resettling refugees.⁷⁹ Rather than at refugees, anger and protest should thus be directed towards the weapons industries and the revolving doors linking them to policy makers. The latter ought to face greater opposition to the war-profiting policies they espouse.

While this study focused on the case of Syrian refugees and the war in Syria, other conflicts in the Middle East deserve as much scrutiny. Arms sales by the US, Canada, Germany, UK and France feeding conflicts in Iraq, Yemen and Libya should also be taken into account in calculating the debt the West has towards the Iraqi, Libyan and Yemeni people. The sole reason keeping Yemenis from joining Syrian refugees in Europe and beyond is that Yemen is landlocked by Saudi Arabia on the one hand and by a naval blockade on the other. Over 3 million Yemenis are currently internally displaced and over 14 million are food insecure.⁸⁰

The sustained economic, political and military support of Western democracies to Arab rulers of the Middle East, ranging from the repressive, autocratic and most regressive regimes, remains the main guarantor for drawn-out wars and sustained impoverishment of the region's populations. Such continuous support trumps any inherent cultural or religious characteris-

tics, which may be advanced as endogenous reasons for the Middle East's seeming inability for progress. Western military equipment guaranteed to the Gulf is an essential element of the Gulf-led counter-revolution aimed at repressing citizens and residents of these countries. The concentration of national resources in the military industry and away from more productive sectors limits the advancement of these societies. Such militarization is both fueled by and feeds the region's escalating power interplays and contributes to the cycle of violence and subjugation, ensuring an omnipresent -or at minimum- looming threat of war. As we have outlined, there is considerable monetary return from the military aspect of such support. Still, the West and its local clients seemingly agree on the ensuing political benefits which remain as important: citizens of Gulf countries do not get to question the standing of their rulers and the unabated flow of oil to the West, while the deep-rooted support of the Palestinian cause against Israeli occupation and oppression remains subdued.

Endnotes

- ¹ This paper is an expansion on an article by the same title, initially published on Jadaliyya.com
- ² Our analysis relies on research of open-source data and includes news articles, official EU and OECD data and analysis as well as research by think tanks and NGOs dedicated to the study of the arms trade. We welcome any further information by readers, which may not be available openly to the public.
- ³ “Trends in International Arms Transfers 2016”, Factsheets, *SIPRI*, February 2017, p. 10
- ⁴ We note that Russia and China’s main export destinations since 2011 and until 2016 are, respectively, India, Vietnam, China, and Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia. The Middle East accounted for 8.1% of total Russian exports over the same period and 1.7% of China’s over 2012-2016. Iran’s weapons imports remained at a very low level between 2012 and 2016 due to partial arms embargo imposed by the United Nations as well as economic pressures. The first significant import of major arms by Iran since 2007 was in 2016: Russia delivered four air defense systems, which does not fall under the UN arms embargo. “Trends in International Arms Transfers 2015” and “Trends in International Arms Transfers 2016”, *SIPRI* Factsheets, *SIPRI*, February 2016 and 2017, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1602.pdf> and <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2016.pdf>
- ⁵ “Angela Merkel hat Deutschland zu einem führenden Waffenausporteur gemacht”, *Abendzeitung Muenchen*, Adrian Prechtel, 23 September 2015
- ⁶ Start of UNHCR data availability on Syrian asylum seekers in Europe.
- ⁷ Please refer to Appendix 2 for detailed calculation. We note however that countries vary in the provision of financial support to refugees. As an example, the strongest discrepancy is between the US and European countries: in the former, refugees receive government financial support for the first few months of their resettlement, while it lasts for several years in the EU once asylum is awarded.
- ⁸ Spain’s cost of €3329 for hosting one refugee for one year was thus applied to Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- ⁹ On the question of including Western countries’ contributions to RRP: RRP refers to the yearly UN Regional Response Plan, which is an inter-agency plan to cover the needs of refugees fleeing Syria and people in host communities in Syria’s neighbors (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt) who together took in over 4.8 million refugees. Reliable and consistent data is limited on actual RRP disbursements (versus pledges) for all donor countries under study and for the entire 2011-2016 period. For reference, we included actual disbursements available on OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service for the RRP of 2015-2016 in Table 1. This limitation in data does not impact our analysis as our calculations aim to address the question of hosting refugees in arms exporting countries rather than in Syria’s neighbor countries. While taxpayer money is the source of both (support of refugees at home and in countries around Syria), the question of financially supporting Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt for hosting Syrian refugees has not been an issue of debate in Western capitals. In this sense, this study rather aims to contribute to the Western debate over the wave of refugees at home.
- ¹⁰ Notes from table: [1] Looking at UNHCR refugee figures Serbia has registered in an outstanding 300,000 asylum applications between 2011 and 2016. Belgrade’s situation seems to represent a special case however as it so happens that, when neighbors such as Hungary and Croatia – located along the refugees’ route to Western Europe - sealed off their borders, Serbia had little choice but to accept refugees present on its territory hoping to cross the border. In comparison, according to Serbian Interior Minister Stefanovi, “*only 500 refugees requested asylum in Serbia, and 250 refugees stayed.*” Yet, Amnesty International reports that the number of people apprehended crossing the Serbia-Hungary border has risen by more than 2,500% between 2010 and 2015 (from 2,370 to 60,602). This has resulted in a [sharp jump](#) in the number of asylum seekers in Serbia. As a result, the EU announced it will provide Serbia with over [€3.8 million](#) for expanding temporary shelters and addressing waste disposal, sanitary and other

needs. More recently, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic said that Serbia is looking to host between 5,000 to 6,000 migrants (all nationalities combined), while noting that if the EU was not “angry with Hungary for the way they treated migrants, it will not be angry with Serbia either”. Based on these discrepancies in information, the 300,000 registered refugees figure does not seem reliable, and we choose to depict Serbia as an outlier in the study. Sources: “Serbia happy to help EU, ambivalent about refugee hub status”, *Euractiv.rs*, Smiljana Vukojcic, 10 September 2015; “Fears of humanitarian crisis in Serbia as refugees stream in”, *Euractiv.rs*, 31 July 2015; “Nikolić: Serbia may shut its border as well”, *B92.net*, 3 October 2016.

[2] For Canada, official data reports the value of actual military equipment exported as opposed to licensed goods destined for export. This reflects lower numbers in comparison to other countries. Canada in fact became the [second largest exporter](#) to the Middle East in 2015 after the US. Source: “Canada now the second biggest arms exporter to Middle East, data show”, *The Globe and Mail*, Steven Chase, 14 June 2016

¹¹ Tweet by UNHCR Europe Bureau Director on 28 July 2016 in a comment on the publication of BIRN’s investigation: <https://twitter.com/cochetel/status/758767140803604480>.

¹² “European arms exports to Middle East reach record high in aftermath of Arab Spring”, CAAT, 28 January 2014

¹³ “U.S. Arms Sales Make Up Most of Global Market”, *The New York Times*, Thom Shanker, August 26, 2012

¹⁴ We note that Iran is not included in this grouping. According to SIPRI, “Due to a partial arms embargo imposed by the United Nations as well as economic pressures, Iran’s arms imports remained at a very low level in 2012–16, at 1.2 per cent of total arms transfers to the Middle East. The delivery by Russia in 2016 of four air defence systems, which do not fall under the UN arms embargo, was the first significant import of major arms by Iran since 2007.” Source: “Trends in International Arms Transfers 2016”, Factsheets, *SIPRI*, February 2017, p. 11

¹⁵ “Trends in International Arms Transfers 2016”, Factsheets, *SIPRI*, February 2016, p. 11

¹⁶ According to SIPRI, the Syrian government’s imports between 2012 and 2016 were very low, “with the regime having to rely on stocks of major arms supplied before the war started in 2011”. “Trends in International Arms Transfers 2016”, Factsheets, *SIPRI*, February 2016, p. 11

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⁵⁵ SIPRI National Databases from Montenegro: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/national-reports/Montenegro>

⁵⁶ “The UAE’s shadowy dealings in Serbia”, *The Middle East Eye*, Rori Donaghy, 15 August 2014

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⁵⁸ Fico: Arms Are Business Product, If We Don’t Sell, Someone Else Will July 29, 2016, <https://newsnow.tasr.sk/foreign/fico-arms-are-business-product-if-we-dont-sell-someone-else-will/> “Fico: Arms Are Business Product, If We Don’t Sell, Someone Else Will”, 29 July 2016

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⁶³ “Bulgaria Rejects Blame for Weapons Reaching Syria”, *Balkan Insight*, Mariya Cheresheva, 19 August 2016

⁶⁴ Report available at: https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Bulgaria_Report_en_Dez_2015.pdf

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http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12112634@egNews

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⁶⁹ “Fire and Forget - The proliferation of Man-portable Air Defence Systems in Syria”, *Small Arms Survey*, Issue Brief, Number 9, August 2014, p.9-10, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/G-Issue-briefs/SAS-IB9-MANPADS-and-Syria.pdf>. We note that the study suggests that current evidence of MANPADS held by rebels in Syria is based on blurry videos on social media and unidentified sources in news articles and thus lacks systematic documentation such as serial numbers and concludes that “public knowledge of the sources and suppliers of these weapons will remain limited.” Other research groups confirm stronger evidence as to the source of the equipment as will be shown.

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