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Croatia Profits from Syria's Gruesome War

Zagreb made record-breaking sales of aging ammunition and weapons to Saudi Arabia in 2016 - ignoring well-founded concerns that the stocks would be diverted to Syria.

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Croatia drastically increased its sales of Yugoslav and wartime era munitions to Saudi Arabia in 2016, despite warnings from human rights groups that deliveries are being illegally diverted to warzones, in breach of EU and international law.

In the first nine months of last year, Zagreb sold 83 million euros (\$88 million) worth of ammunition and rocket or grenade launchers, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, OCCRP, can reveal. The figures from October to December have yet to be published.

A Caucasus-based Islamist fighter holds up two Croatian-made RBG-6s in Syria.
Photo: Twitter @BM21_Grad

Videos and images emerging from Syria provide convincing evidence of the presence of Croatian-made ammunition and weapons in the country.

Croatia was among the first countries to supply weapons to Syrian rebels, offloading munitions from its stockpiles in the winter of 2012.

[The equipment was routed via Jordan - paid for by Saudi Arabia and coordinated by the CIA - along an arms pipeline worth more than one billion euros, funnelling weapons from Central and Eastern Europe.](#)

Since those first deliveries were exposed, Croatia has done its best to keep details of this trade out of the headlines by removing key information, such as the final destination of exports, from official reports.

Reporters have, however, sidestepped the secrecy, using little-known UN trade data to discover that Croatia exported more than 2,600 tonnes of decades-old ammunition, deemed surplus to requirements by Zagreb's armed forces, to Saudi Arabia's high-tech army between February and September 2016.

Since December 2012 and the start of the Syrian war, Croatia exported 126 million euros (\$134 million) of arms and ammunition to Saudi Arabia and 44 million euros (\$47 million) to Jordan,

according to UN's Comtrade website which publishes detailed international statistics on the trade in 99 different commodities, including munitions. Prior to this, trade was virtually nonexistent.

In total, Croatia has supplied more than 6,000 tonnes of ammunition for small arms and light weapons – which likely included bullets, mortars, rockets and grenades – to the Gulf kingdom alone. This is the equivalent weight of 750 million AK-47 bullets.

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Arms start flowing after 2012:

A BIRN and OCCRP investigation published last July revealed that between 2012 and 2014, Croatia agreed export licences worth 302 million euros to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, UAE, four key suppliers of the opposition in Syria. The figures, the latest available, are based largely on reports published by the European Commission.

UN trade data shows that prior to 2012, Croatia exported less than a million euros of ammunition a year, but this surged with the start of the Syrian civil war to 4.7 million euros (\$5 million) in 2012; 30 million euros (\$32 million) in 2013; 35 million euros (\$37 million) in 2014; 6.6 million euros (\$7 million) in 2015; and 77 million euros (\$82 million) in 2016.

Croatia has no largescale active production of ammunitions and has imported relatively small quantities in previous years, indicating these exports originated from the Croatian Ministry of Defence's large stockpiles dating back to the Yugoslav era and its war of secession in the early 90s.

Croatian arms expert Igor Tabak, who runs the defence and security web portal OBRIS, noted that Croatia had no current ammunition factories, so had to dip into its stockpiles for sales.

"It is quite likely that the exports come from old ammunition, possibly from the inventory of the former Yugoslavia and Eastern [Bloc] production," he said.

Croatia has consistently refused to acknowledge that it is making a huge profit by liquidating its stocks on the battlefields of the Middle East, but documents published by a group called the Regional Approach to Stockpile Reduction show a major surge in sales from Zagreb's stockpile which coincides with the start of Syrian civil war.

A series of documents submitted to the regional forum by the Croatian Ministry of Defence detail how Croatia's armed forces sold at least 5,000 tonnes of surplus ammunition in 2013 and 2014 – the same quantity as in the preceding decade – from a stockpile of around 18,000 tonnes.

The surge in sales came immediately after Croatia offered its stockpiles of weapons to Washington for use in Syria and the start of a major airlift of weapons and ammunition to Jordan – an operation first reported by the New York Times in February 2013 and confirmed to BIRN and OCCRP by the former US Ambassador to Damascus, Robert Ford, in an interview last year.

Since 2012, all but a few hundred thousand dollars of ammunition sales have gone to Jordan or Saudi Arabia.

Shipments in February, June and September 2016 – the most valuable to date – accounted for 2,600 tonnes of bullets, mortar shells or rockets, worth 77 million euros (\$82 million).

A further 122 tonnes of rocket or grenade launchers were transported in March and August 2016 to Saudi Arabia, according to the UN data on international trade. Croatia does produce small quantities of grenade launchers, but to date only Yugoslav-era and stockpiled weapons of this type have been seen in Syria.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Trade told BIRN and OCCRP that there had been no exports of rocket or grenade launchers to Saudi Arabia in 2016, but did not respond to further questions when BIRN and OCCRP provided official figures from the UN and Croatia's Bureau of Statistics showing the contrary.

Falling into the wrong hands:

Saudi Arabia's military, one of the most expensively and best equipped in the world, is an unlikely final destination for these Croatian cast-offs. Arms experts have told BIRN and OCCRP that the likely end-users of such material are groups aligned to the Gulf kingdom in Syria or Yemen.

While experts have previously highlighted video and photographic evidence of Croatian-made RBG-6s grenade launchers and RAK-12s multiple-launch rocket systems in Syria, Croatian officials have disputed their origin, pointing out that similar weapons are produced elsewhere.

However, new analysis by BIRN and OCCRP of the social media profiles of brigades fighting in Syria, as well from online enthusiasts who monitor the spread of weapons, provide clear evidence that these weapons are Croatian-made.

Three images shared on twitter in [2015](#) and [2016](#) show grenade-launchers marked "RBG-6" in use or for sale in Syria. This specific model is made only in Croatia.



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Imarat Kavkaz soldier with two RBG-6

Croatia's "troubling decline" in transparency

Croatia's Ministry of Economy abruptly stopped publishing detailed data on arms export in 2013.

The decision coincided with a flurry of embarrassing reports about Zagreb's role in providing arms and ammunition to Syrian rebels via Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

Since then, Croatia has removed all details of the destination of its arms exports from its 2013, 2014 and 2015 reports.

The ministry of economy told BIRN and OCCRP that a law on personal data protection adopted in 2012 prohibits it from giving out this information – although the Croatian Data Protection Agency disputes this, writing in a statement that the legislation applies only to individuals, not to companies or countries.

A submission by five NGOs to a UN Human Rights panel on Croatia, published in March 2015, described a "troubling decline in transparency".

Croatian arms expert Igor Tabak, whose organisation was among those to make the submission to the UN, said the decision to slash transparency was motivated by "the inconvenience" caused by Croatia's exports to Jordan, which ended in Syria, being made public in 2013.



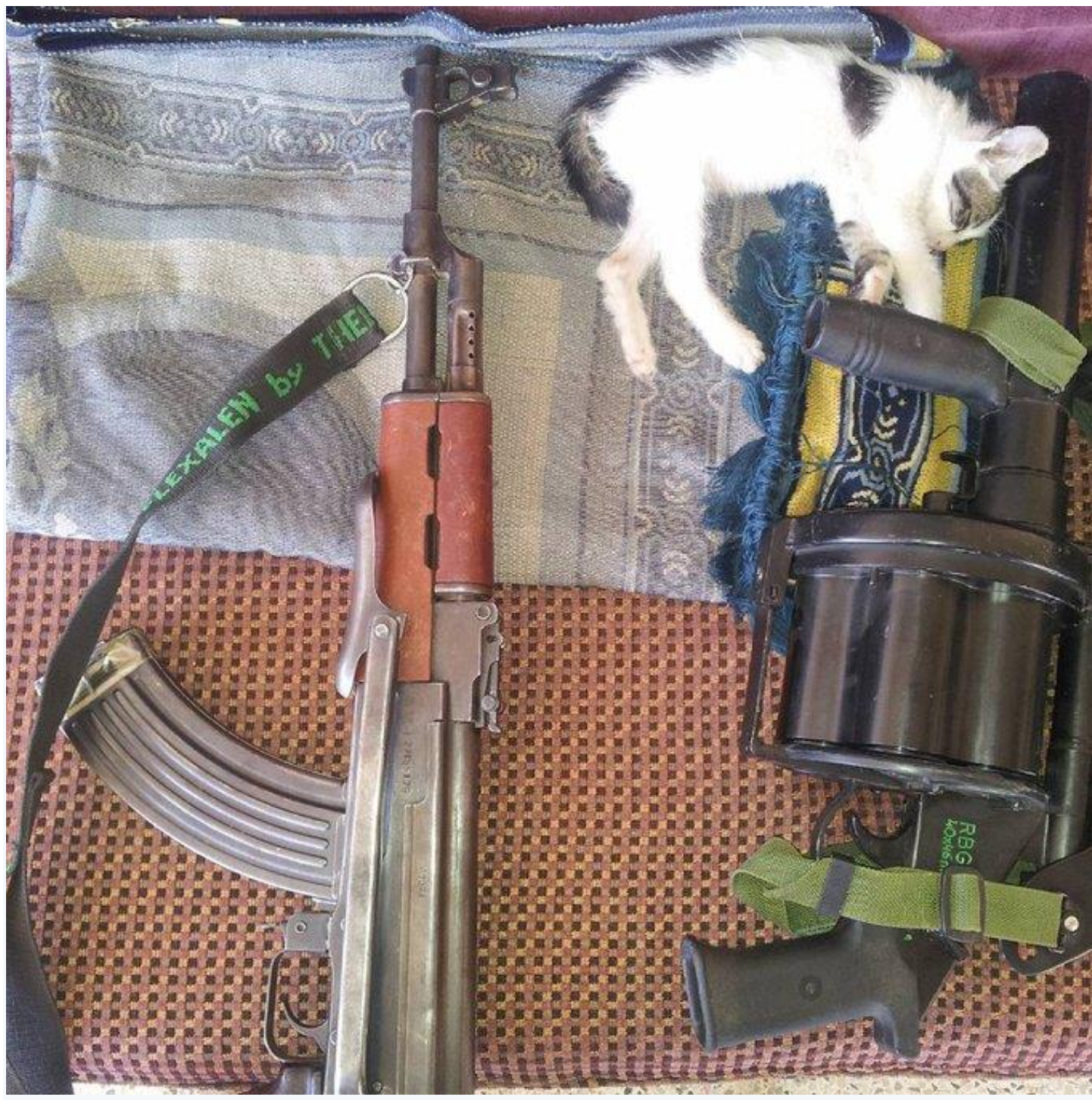
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If you had any doubts the MGLs in Syria are of Croatian origin (RBG-6) pic.twitter.com/A4Lu2itKyQ

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Two videos also show the First Army and the Nouredine Zanki movement, moderate, US-backed factions in Syria, using rocket launchers with “RAK” visible on its side, demonstrating their Croatian origin. Croatia was the only producer of RAK-12s.

Other videos published in [2015](#) and [2016](#) by different factions also show Croatian-made rockets in use in Syria. The markings on them reveal they were made in the mid-1990s, after Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia.

Mortar shells produced in Croatia in the 1990s have also been identified in large quantities on the Syrian battlefield based on the serial numbers visible from the social media posts.

Fresh supplies of ammunition apparently continue to arrive in Syria. [Two videos of arms stashes captured by Syrian government troops](#) from rebels, filmed in December 2016 by Russia Today, reveal unused Croatian-made mortar shells and rockets. These are likely to have been delivered in the preceding months given the need to constantly replenish stocks in a warzone.

So-called moderate opposition groups in Syria are not the only military formations that have secured Croatian weaponry, according to human rights organisations.

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra obtained Croatian and Yugoslav-made launchers as early as in 2013, according to reports by groups such as Amnesty International.

Ivica Nekic, president of Alan Agency, the state-owned Croatian arms broker, which sells items such as RAK-12, RBG-6s and stockpiled mortar shells, told BIRN and OCCRP that the agency had “nothing to do with” any items found in Syria.

He added that weapons may have been captured on the battlefield or arrived from Iraq, which has been buying weapons from Central and Eastern Europe for decades.

Asked about the spread of Croatian-made weapons in Syria, Eliot Higgins, a London-based investigative journalist and researcher specialising in open-source investigations, said: “We’ve now seen groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra using these weapons, although how they acquired them is unclear. They could have been looted from other groups, sold between groups, or provided directly.”

Higgins was one of the first to identify Balkan-sourced armaments in use in the Syrian war.

Failure to check where arms end up

Darko Kihalic, head of Croatia’s arms licensing department at the Ministry of Economy, told BIRN and OCCRP in an interview from last summer that Zagreb has no qualms about selling arms to Saudi Arabia as long as it provides the correct documents.

“How are you going to stop someone from exporting where there are no restrictions, as that will influence its income and profit?” he asked.

In response to further questions from BIRN about the latest sales, a ministry spokesman wrote last week that exports in 2016 were as a result of export licences approved in 2015.

He added that some export licences to Saudi Arabia had been rejected in 2015 and none approved in 2016, a statement which appears to contradict what Kihalic had argued during the earlier interview.

The spokesman did not respond to a request for clarification and failed to address why exports were allowed to go ahead in 2016 after the ministry had earlier rejected licences to Saudi Arabia.

No further licences have been issued in 2016, the spokesman said, although he did not provide any

details for 2017.

Asked whether he was aware that Croatian weapons bought by Saudi Arabia were turning up in Syria, Kihalic said: “There is nothing more for us to check, as the [export] document says their ministry of defence or police forces [in Saudi Arabia] will use it [the weapon] and that they won’t resell it or export it.”

He said that this approach meant Croatia had met its international obligations, including the EU Common Position on arms exports, which it is obliged to fulfil since joining the European Union in 2013 and the UN’s Arms Trade Treaty of 2014.

Human rights groups dispute Kihalic’s view.

Patrick Wilcken, arms researcher for Amnesty International, said Croatia is obliged to prevent weapons being diverted to another country and used in serious human rights violations, not just check documents. Failure to do so, he explained, is a breach of international law.

“Given the mounting evidence of the systematic diversion of arms supplies from Saudi Arabia to armed groups in Syria, a failure to take due diligence to prevent further diversion could result in a breach of the EU Common Position and the Arms Trade Treaty,” he added.

Amnesty has warned that weapons sold to Saudi Arabia have ended up with armed groups committing war crimes, including indirectly, Islamic State, ISIS.

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to repeated request for comment.

The Netherlands have already halted arms exports to Saudi Arabia following reports that weapons were being used to commit wars crimes in Yemen. Calls are also growing for the UK and Germany to follow suit.

Bodil Valero, a Green MEP from Sweden and the European Parliament's rapporteur on arms, criticised Croatia and called on the EU to tighten its grip on arms exports among its members.

“Croatia has used Saudi Arabia as it is not allowed to export to Syria, and it ends up in the hands of ISIS and the Kurds. We have to do much more,” she said.

Additional reporting by Jelena Cosic.

This investigation is produced by BIRN as a part of Paper Trail to Better Governance project.

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