



# Bellingcat funded by U.S. and UK intelligence contractors that aided extremists in Syria

Originally published: [The Grayzone](#) [↗](#) on October 9, 2021 by Kit Klarenberg (more by [The Grayzone](#)) [🐦](#) | [f](#) (Posted Oct 11, 2021)

# Ideology, Media, Philosophy, Strategy ↗ Syria, United Kingdom, United States [☰](#) Newswire [📌](#) Bellingcat, Eliot Higgins

Since its launch in July 2014, the self-styled open-source investigations website Bellingcat has cemented itself as a darling of mainstream Western media, with its dives into alleged Syrian government [chemical weapon attacks](#) and Russian intelligence operations showered with praise, puff pieces, and glitzy awards.

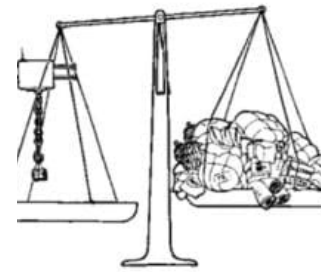
While vehemently insisting that it is independent of government influence, [Bellingcat is funded](#) by both the U.S. government's [National Endowment for Democracy](#) and the European Union. CIA officials have declared their "love" for [Bellingcat](#), and there are unambiguous signs that the outlet has partnered closely with London and Washington to further the pair's imperial objectives.

Now that the media consortium [has obtained access](#) to high-tech satellites capable of capturing 50cm resolution imagery of any place on Earth, it is time to place these connections under the microscope.

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Society is made up of parts that work together, sometimes more and sometimes less successfully, to produce its livelihood and reproduce itself.

To explore the relationship between Bellingcat and centers of imperial power, look no further than its officially published financial accounts from 2019 to 2020. According to these records, Bellingcat has accepted enormous sums from Western intelligence contractors.

These war-profitereering firms have in turn provided direct support to Al Qaeda-allied jihadist groups in Syria—the same elements that have provided Bellingcat with “evidence” to convict Damascus in absentia on all manner of dubious charges.

16	Income from companies	Actuals 2020	Budget 2020	Actuals 2019
	Zandstorm CV	100.000	100.000	0
	Adam Smith International	65.428	0	0
	Zinc Network	54.511	160.000	5.000
	Chemonics International	5.323	0	0
	Other companies	3.995	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>228.857</b>	<b>260.000</b>	<b>5.000</b>

17	Income from governments	Actuals 2020	Budget 2020	Actuals 2019
	EU	0	50.000	0
	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	3.876	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3.876</b>	<b>50.000</b>	<b>0</b>

Bellingcat does not accept direct government funding, it only accepts contributions from international or intergovernmental institutions like the EU, OSCE or the UN.

From Bellingcat's public financial accounts

Bellingcat's cast of Western intelligence-connected funders is just the latest indication that its founder Eliot Higgins receives privileged, slanted information from extremist sources within Syria, and that his organization's media operations have been conducted in concert with these elements.

Higgins' recent history of promoting ISIS' top Twitter propagandist raises further serious questions about Bellingcat's reliance on Salafi-jihadist elements in Syria.

## Funding from shady U.S. and UK firms

Journalist and academic Alan MacLeod has exposed in detail Bellingcat's deep and cohering ties to the Western national security state. The supposedly open-source operation has employed a staggering number of former military and intelligence operatives, deploying them to reinforce imperial narratives while reaping sponsorship from an array of governments and quasi-governmental bodies.

Nonetheless, mainstream reporters have continued to peddle the fiction that Bellingcat is “independent,” and not in receipt of funding from any state. The Times of London, for example, has falsely asserted the organization “wisely refuses money from governments.”

For its part, Bellingcat's website states it doesn't “solicit or accept funding *directly* [emphasis added] from any national government,” but “can solicit or accept contributions from international or intergovernmental institutions” and “funding that is distributed by a private foundation that accepts government funds.”

Given this duplicitous sleight of hand, Bellingcat's most recent accounts make for fascinating reading.

The records indicate that Higgins and company raked in €100,000 from Zandstorm BV, a Dutch shell company established by Joseph Peeraer,

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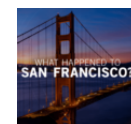
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the energy mogul who chairs Bellingcat's supervisory board. Ironically, Peeraer's Twitter [biography](#) describes him as "founder of a few failed ventures."

Further, Bellingcat has received financial backing from several organizations heavily bankrolled by Western governments, and which serve as effective fronts for them, supporting Higgins' activities on their financiers' behalf.

In 2019 to 2020, Bellingcat received just over €5,000 from Washington-based contractor Chemonics. As [The Grayzone](#) has documented, this company conducts U.S. government-funded intelligence and destabilization operations the world over.

In 1993, Chemonics' founder openly [admitted](#) that he created the firm to "have [his] own CIA." The contractor was the [conduit](#) through which U.S. funds and equipment reached [bogus humanitarian group Syria Civil Defense](#), providing it with the now famous—or infamous—white helmets that earned them their nickname, along with much more expensive communications and video gear.

More substantially, Bellingcat was allocated €160,000 by Zinc Network, a shadowy intelligence cutout that conducts information warfare operations on behalf of numerous UK government ministries, the U.S. State Department, and USAID, a U.S. intelligence front. It appears this cash injection was related to the [Open Information Partnership](#), a Foreign Office-financed "troll factory" led by Zinc and dedicated to "weakening the Russian state's influence" in Central and Eastern Europe.

As [The Grayzone](#) editor [Max Blumenthal](#) has revealed, Bellingcat was dispatched under the Open Information Partnership's auspices to North Macedonia, at the UK Foreign Office's express request, to "respond" to the country's 2019 elections, which pitted a pro-NATO, pro-EU candidate against a pro-Russian one.

A local media organization was provided "cyber security training, mentoring on digital forensics, open-source investigation and media ethics" by Bellingcat, and the Atlantic Council's DFR Lab, which Eliot Higgins helped create. The pro-NATO candidate [comfortably prevailed](#) in the second round, after the first produced a virtual tie, suggesting this state-directed meddling may have influenced the result.

Bellingcat also received just over \$65,000 from Adam Smith International (ASI), which has reaped [hundreds of millions](#) from the UK government for conducting all manner of skulduggery overseas. It remains unclear what sort of activities were covered by this sum.

Bellingcat did not respond to a request for comment from this reporter. ASI, meanwhile, initially responded to a request for details on the payment to Bellingcat through its head of legal, ethics, and compliance, Nimisha Agarwal, who promised to "follow up internally" on the issue. Agarwal ultimately dropped off the radar, however, never following up or providing further information.



**attempts to persuade China to commit suicide**



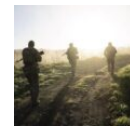
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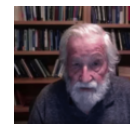
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Given ASI's sordid history, and direct connection to the proliferation of jihadism in Syria over the course of the country's grisly, decade-long crisis, its financial relationship with Bellingcat further undercuts the media organization's already risible claim to independence.

## BBC documentary exposes massive ASI scandal in Syria

Adam Smith International brands itself as "a global advisory company that works locally to transform lives by making economies stronger, societies more stable, and governments more effective."

In reality, ASI's activities abroad have frequently placed it in extremely close collaboration with some of the most brutal human rights abusers on the planet, directly and indirectly resulting in death and destabilization on a massive scale.

ASI also has a deplorable track record of corruption and grift. In February 2017, the UK's Department for International Development froze all future contracts with the company, after it was found to have committed numerous grave ethics breaches. For one, the firm hired a former department staffer who passed on sensitive internal government documents, which it then used to gain a competitive edge in contract bids.

ASI then sought to mislead a parliamentary inquiry investigating allegations it was engaged in "excessive profiteering," by concocting bogus glowing testimonials from beneficiaries. A House of Commons international development committee report condemned the contractor's "deplorable" and "entirely inappropriate" actions.

In response, four founding directors resigned without severance packages, and the contractor pledged to undertake internal reforms. Meanwhile, ASI continued to manage a large portfolio of projects for the Foreign Office. This included the NATO member state-backed Access to Justice and Community Security (AJACS) program, which funded, trained, and equipped the Free Syria Police (FSP), an unarmed civilian force set up in opposition-controlled areas of Syria such as Aleppo, Daraa, and Idlib.

ASI's U.S. partner on the project was the CIA cutout Creative Associates, which has reaped billions from overseas meddling in the interests of Washington. As The Grayzone's Ben Norton has documented, Creative Associates has been one of USAID's go-to contractors for organizing a renewed attempt to orchestrate insurrection against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. The firm has also played a direct role in U.S. intelligence efforts to foment destabilization in Cuba.

The Free Syrian Police project initially received fawning coverage in the Western media. A BBC article presented the group as a heroic band of volunteers committed to nonviolence, resolving local disputes through peaceful means, and working "closely" with the White Helmets in the

aftermath of air raids to fight fires, rescue people from rubble, and provide them with medical assistance.

The British state broadcaster was nonetheless forced to acknowledge that the FSP's ability to bring armed actors to justice was "limited." The UK-backed police force was similarly unable to interfere in disputes involving extremist elements, although the media repeatedly emphasized that the force did not collaborate with jihadist groups.

In December 2017, the BBC's own Panorama documentary, Jihadis You Pay For, blew that farcical notion out of the water. Relying on ASI whistleblowers as sources, it exposed how ASI had identified links between several FSP stations and Sharia courts run by Al-Nusra that carried out summary executions of citizens who violated its medieval legal codes. The intelligence contractor not only failed to cease funding these extremist elements; it allowed the Free Syrian Police to maintain the relationship.

In one instance, FSP officers in receipt of UK FCO funds delivered by ASI were present when women were stoned to death for violating Al-Nusra's theocratic codes. They even closed the road to allow the brutal executions to take place. Al-Nusra was further reported to have handpicked FSP recruits at two stations in Idlib.

Internal ASI files featured in the documentary showed that officers in Aleppo had forked over cash to Nour al-Din al-Zinki, a CIA-backed militia linked to hideous atrocities, including the videotaped beheading of a Palestinian teenager in 2016. One document from July of that year warned that 20% of all police salaries were being handed over "to pay for the military and security support that Zinki provides to the five FSP stations located areas under its control," with FSP operatives moreover working with a Zinki court, "writing up warrants, delivering notices, and turning criminals over."

UK funding for the project was eventually suspended, yet it resumed less than a month later following a confidential internal government review which concluded there was a "mitigating context" to all Panorama's disturbing revelations, and the program "did not provide any information that was not already known to [the justice and security scheme known as] AJACS."

Aid experts were outraged by the resumption of the program. The BBC's Panorama, meanwhile, claimed it was never contacted about the probe, and no source material it uncovered was inspected by officials.

## ASI tolerated human rights abuses, Al Qaeda militants in Syria program

Leaked UK Foreign Office files related to the effort made it abundantly clear that the Access to Justice and Community Security program was well-aware such hazards were likely.

One document forecasted a “medium” risk of equipment and money being lost to armed actors, noting jihadist groups have done just that in the past, and the practice was “likely to reoccur.”

The Free Syrian Police collaborating with extremists or committing human rights abuses was considered a medium risk. Meanwhile, the likelihood of jihadist activity producing a “reduced operating space” for AJACS was considered “high,” as the project was “known to attract the attention of extremist groups,” including Al-Nusra and ISIS affiliates, which could “inhibit our work, challenge our agenda, and threaten our staff and partners via kidnap, assault and theft of equipment.”

Proposed methods of dealing with these dangers typically amounted to simply tolerating them. Adam Smith International justified the central role of jihadist groups in its policing project on the grounds that they “don’t have the means or levers” to prevent their participation, and that such an effort would not have been “cost-effective.”

The project could only be “terminated,” according to ASI, if it was not possible to displace responsibility for any dangers or abuses to “a party that does have the means to treat it.” That appears to have been a reference to the Foreign Office, which was ultimately responsible for deciding whether a risk should be tolerated or terminated.

Moreover, ASI outright pledged to, “where feasible,” “present a challenge” to extremist groups for “control of a community,” and “not give ground” to these elements “unless forced to,” advocating the acceptance of a higher level of risk in order to “contest the influence and legitimacy” of armed actors. As such, the UK Foreign Office needed to accept “the potential for equipment losses to a reasonable degree.”

Clearly, loss of weapons, money and life was hardwired into the DNA of AJACS. And given the many millions invested by the British government into the project, the official appetite for accepting these calamities was as high as possible. Indeed, London was willing to pump public funds into the dangerous project because it formed just one strand of a wider attempt to create a series of “moderate,” Western-controlled quasi-states across Syria.

This objective is referenced in another leaked file in which ASI promised to “step up” the coordination of AJACS with other “stabilization and transition” programs in Syria. This included Tamkeen—a UK and EU financed project to “build the governance capacities of local communities”—and White Helmets parent company Mayday Rescue. If successful, ASI noted, the effort could lead to “expansion into newly liberated territory.”

This investment also ensured a steady stream of mawkish human-interest stories and atrocity propaganda, produced by and featuring the Free Syria Police, White Helmets, and other Western-created and funded opposition actors on the ground for the mainstream media to lap up.

Bellingcat has long been a prominent purveyor and legitimiser of these groups. There are moreover clear indications Bellingcat founder Higgins is party to privileged information from local sources, and his organization's media operations are conducted in concert with them.

For example, in the immediate aftermath of the notorious April 2018 Douma "gas attack" incident, which Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) whistleblowers suggest was staged, Higgins tweeted an exclusive photo of one of the cylinders purportedly used in the strike.

Higgins' post was abruptly deleted though, perhaps because the White Helmets subsequently also shared a photo of the same site, in which the same cylinder was in a different position—proof positive that the scene had been manipulated by those staging it.



## ASI bids for shady UK contract to train Syrian extremists

One component of Whitehall's effort to destabilize Syria was the training of opposition groups and fighters. In 2016, the Foreign Office issued a tender for a program dubbed MAO B-FOR (Moderate Armed Opposition Border Force), to provide "training, equipment, and other forms of support" to the Free Syrian Army's Southern Front coalition, in order to "foster a negotiated political transition" and "support moderate

structures and groups in opposition held areas of Syria." Up to 600 fighters were to be trained every year for three years, at a cost of almost \$21 million.

The UK would provide the successful bidder with "dedicated training site" in Jordan "at no cost" to providers. The 600-acre site, situated 45 minutes from Amman, comprised "accommodation, ablution, dining, classrooms, driving track, outside rural environment areas, and open space for equipment storage solutions." Militants were to be trained in the effective use of AK-47s, machine guns, and pistols, with 175 able to be accommodated on-site at a time.

In response, the Bellingcat sponsor ASI submitted a pitch to the Foreign Office, pledging to lead a consortium of contractors, composed of GlenGulf, Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR, nicknamed "Kill, Burn & Loot"), Oakas, and Pilgrims Group.

As with AJACS, ASI privately forecast that it would be highly probable that Al-Nusra and ISIS would interfere in the program. "[D]ue to perceptions of an 'international political agenda'," ASI wrote, extremists "may seek to prevent trainees from joining or inhibit them from fulfilling their functions once trained via kidnap, assault and theft of equipment."

It was considered of medium probability that fighters trained under the program would join other groups and/or collaborate with extremist actors, and end up committing human rights abuses.

ASI's solution was simple: it would "transfer" responsibility for "owning and managing" problems that arose to the Foreign Office, and the loss of equipment was to be "tolerated" to "a reasonable degree." Strikingly, ASI stated that its "experience and knowledge" of running AJACS would be "leveraged" to ensure optimal delivery of B-FOR.

In an emailed statement to this journalist, ASI alleged that the company didn't implement B-FOR, and "had no involvement in it at any stage beyond the formal submission of a bid." ASI added a veiled, empty threat of legal action if the company or its staff were associated publicly with the project, in order to maintain its "good public record and professional reputation."

This warning confirms the documents' authenticity, while seemingly breaching the company's non-disclosure agreement with the Foreign Office, compelling ASI to adhere to the draconian confidentiality requirements of the Official Secrets Act.

If ASI's bid was not accepted, another contractor's almost certainly was. A UK- and U.S.-managed training site in Jordan is confirmed to have operated from the early days of the Syrian crisis. It remains unknown how many fighters were trained there over the years, how many went on to join jihadist groups, and how much equipment was "lost" and used to slaughter innocent civilians. The Foreign Office almost certainly has no idea either.

ASI has continued to conduct cloak-and-dagger work for Whitehall abroad ever since. In February 2018, the company was permitted to start applying again for Whitehall contracts. Its most recent accounts, for 2019, indicate turnover stood at £54.5 million. Over the first half of 2020, its Foreign Office receipts alone totaled £6 million.

Were the funds it provided to Bellingcat drawn from this sum?

## ‘Substantiated complaints’ about Bellingcat activities

An ever-growing number of rights groups and international bodies have “partnered” with Bellingcat. The organization’s website brags that its open-source investigations have informed the activities of the International Criminal Court’s Technology Advisory Board, as well as the UN’s newly-created International Independent and Impartial Mechanism on Syria.

Bellingcat has also listed the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) as a “partner,” before abruptly removing the disclosure. Higgins implausibly claimed this entry was just a mistake resulting from a careless copy and paste.

While the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. intelligence cut-out, has contributed extensively to Bellingcat, the extent to which the Foreign Office has partnered with the media organization cannot be ascertained.

A Freedom of Information request submitted to the department in January 2019 asked for all internal documents related to research on the Syrian crisis mentioning the organization, particularly those relating to the use of chemical weapons in the country, and “any documents that refer to the reliability of Bellingcat as a source when drafting research assessments.”

In response, the Foreign Office stated it could “neither confirm nor deny it holds information relevant to [the] request,” on the grounds of “safeguarding national security.”

Still, a leaked Foreign Office-commissioned appraisal of Bellingcat spells out in damning terms the department’s view of the organization’s “reliability.” Bellingcat was found to be “somewhat discredited, both by spreading disinformation itself, and by being willing to produce reports for anyone willing to pay.”

Given Bellingcat’s intimate relationship with such devious players in the dirty war on Syria, it can only be considered extremely concerning that it boasts similarly intimate ties with the same official bodies charged with investigating alleged government crimes committed therein.

There are however indications that the wheels are coming off the Bellingcat bus. On August 9, the European Press Prize announced that it was retracting the laureate status bestowed on now-former Bellingcat

staffer Daniel Romein for his work geolocating images related to child abuse in Eastern Europe, due to numerous “substantiated complaints.”

Perhaps the day will come too when Eliot Higgins and company outlive their usefulness to Western intelligence agencies.

**Kit Klarenberg** is an investigative journalist exploring the role of intelligence services in shaping politics and perceptions.

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#### ◆ Bellingcat, Eliot Higgins

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