

Who is Profiting from Syria?

by Shoal Collective - 06/09/2017 14:42



As all the world's conflicts are played out in Syria, arms companies are making a killing.

In 2011 a series of uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” began to sweep across North Africa and the Middle East. Huge protests erupted in almost all of the Arab countries as people took to the streets to demand change. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, decades-old regimes appeared to topple like dominoes. The overriding narrative was of ordinary people rising up against dictators – and this was true – but there were also other forces at work beneath the surface.

By the time the Arab Spring spread to Syria, all the world's state powers, extremist groups, and capitalists with interests in the region had plenty of time to develop their strategies. There is evidence that the United States wanted to overthrow the Assad regime. However, narratives that emphasise the role of the United States tend to de-emphasise the role of other actors, such as Russia, Turkey, Israel and Iran, who also hold big stakes in the mess that Syria has become. Such narratives also tend to paint Assad as an innocent bystander to the conflict.

The ideological background of the Syrian regime is Ba'athism – a form of nationalist (pan-Arab) socialism inspired by Nazism and state communism. Fuad*, a 36 year old man who grew up in Syria, describes life under Assad:

“Education and healthcare were free; there were very low taxes; there were no private companies for services and basic necessities. Flour, sugar, oil and water were owned by the state: it was socialism – but in return, you had no right to give your opinion about anything. You could get arrested, but without going to court or anything. You could just disappear. There were torture chambers. Everybody knew they were there.”

The Syrian conflict is often called the Syrian Civil War – but in fact, it is nothing of the kind. Despite the diverging narratives on how the uprisings began, it's clear that this revolution was brutally hijacked by all the world's great superpowers, and turned into the battleground for a proxy world war.

From the pre-war population of 24 million, at least 470,000 Syrians are estimated to have been killed [the UN stopped counting in 2012 because they were unable to independently verify the numbers], and 12 million have been displaced from their homes.

Who is fighting in Syria?

The Assad Regime and his loyalist forces (SAA), including irregular thugs (shabiha) – Since the fall of the rebel-held eastern half of Aleppo in December 2016, Assad controls Syria's five most populated cities. The Assad family is Alawite, and Alawite and Sunni Muslims make up the vast majority of his remaining soldiers and loyalist militia members. Assad still maintains an air force and carries out air strikes. He is armed predominantly by Russia and Iran, whose armies are also active on the ground – and in the case of Russia – in the skies. Assad has proven that he will do literally anything to hold onto power.

The Free Syrian Army – Once the major force against Assad and made up primarily of defectors from his army at the start of the uprisings, the FSA has been decimated by factionalism, desertions, trickery and complications in the war. In November 2015, the FSA was reportedly made up of more than 2,050 factions, many allied with competing sides. The FSA supported the Syrian National Council (SNC) as a replacement to Assad from the start of the uprisings in 2011, but it no longer has a unified position on anything other than the downfall of Assad. Based in Turkey, the SNC played the role of a government in exile from 2011 and has strong ties with the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria – also supported by Britain, the United States and France, among others.

The Islamic State [ISIS / Daesh] – Originally an offshoot of Al Qaeda, ISIS has been present in Syria since 2013, after overrunning swathes of Iraq, erasing the border between the two countries and claiming the annulment of the Sykes Picot Agreement. ISIS is the most extreme of all the Wahhabi groups and has been disavowed by even Al Qaeda. Until its defeat in Kobani by Kurdish-led YPG/J forces with US air support, ISIS had been spreading rapidly across the country.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham – Another fundamentalist Wahhabi group to grow out of Al Qaeda was the Al Nusra Front, which later re-branded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham after announcing a divorce from Al Qaeda in July 2016 – though this was widely seen as a tactical move. In January 2017 it joined forces with a number of other Salafist groups to create Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Other assorted Sunni Muslim militias – These are potentially thousands of different armed groups that fall somewhere on the spectrum between moderate Islamist and extreme Wahhabist. “You have this wide tapestry of jihadi groups now, like a spider’s web,” said Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “All of these groups have the same ideology, they’re part of the jihadi framework, but they might have different focuses.”

The United States – leading a coalition against ISIS and opposed to Assad. A long-running conflict with Russia – seen as an “existential threat” – is also playing out as one of the main undercurrents in the war, and Iran is also an arch enemy. Since Trump came to power, the USA are openly arming the Kurdish-led SDF (and probably still some other 'moderate' Sunni militias), despite being in NATO alongside Turkey – a virulent opponent of any support for Kurdish autonomy. The United States joined the conflict in 2014, launching air strikes against ISIS. They are active primarily in the skies, but also on the ground, often covertly. They have also been engaged by proxy, probably for a lot longer, arming and training 'moderate rebels' in a CIA-backed programme which was announced frozen in February 2017. The Pentagon already said they would scrap their own programme backing FSA factions in October 2015. At times, insurgents trained in these different US-backed programmes had even been fighting one another.

Russia – Allied with Assad and a long-term ally of Syria, Russia is fighting by land and air against all of the regime’s opponents, but mostly targets Free Syrian Army-aligned groups. Russia has also carried out air-strikes against ISIS and has been active in the skies since September 2015. The so-called “Shiite Axis” – Iran, Hezbollah and the Assad Regime – are primarily armed by Russia. There is considerable effort to ensure that the United States and Russia do not directly confront one another, since this could quickly spiral into a much greater conflict,

leading to considerable loss of life on Earth thanks to the nuclear arms race.

The SDF / Kurdish forces – The Syrian Democratic Forces are a multi-ethnic coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian militias, led by the predominantly Kurdish YPG and their women's army, the YPJ. The SDF are being armed by the United States and have undoubtedly received arms from Russia in the past. The SDF have proven themselves as the strongest fighting force in Syria after running ISIS out of Kobani and changing the tide of the war in January 2015. The YPJ and YPG are arch enemies of Turkey, who they also accuse of providing arms, training and support to ISIS. Many opposition groups accuse the YPG/J of being secretly allied with the Assad regime, or at least of coordinating with it to their own ends. While there has undoubtedly been some tactical coordination, there have also been conflicts between the two and there are regular clashes, though usually comparatively minor.

Iran – strategically allied with Assad and ideologically allied to Shia groups, Iran signed a security pact with Syria in 2005. It is absolutely ideologically opposed to both Israel and the United States, and is sometimes described as a hidden hand in the Syrian conflict. Iran (backed by Russia) is also in direct competition with Qatar (backed by the USA) over competing gas pipeline projects in Syria.

Hezbollah and other assorted foreign Shia militias – Lebanese Hezbollah is a Shia militia allied primarily with Iran, but also with Assad. Its main enemy is Israel, but also the United States and most Sunni regimes and militias. Hezbollah has received arms and military training from the Iranian regime since its inception in 1982. Much of that equipment travels via Syria, and Hezbollah believes that its future rests on the survival of Assad. There are also said to be 20,000 Shia Afghan fighters in the Iran-backed Fatimiyon force, which allegedly operates as an unofficial Iranian "foreign legion".

US-led Global Coalition – Currently made up of 73 partners, including NATO, the EU, Arab League and Interpol, as well as a large number of states, including Britain. This coalition represents the broadest united front against ISIS/Daesh. However, it is in diametric opposition to the other united front against ISIS, represented by Russia, the Shiite Axis and Assad himself. Some of these partners, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and France, have taken a more active role and have stakes of various kinds in the conflict. A large amount of weapons have entered Syria from members of this coalition and are now being used by potentially all of the different sides against one another. The United States, Britain and France have also been training rebels since early in the conflict and have called for Assad to step down.

Saudi Arabia – Part of the Global Coalition, Saudi Arabia is against ISIS and Assad. However, there is also evidence that Saudi Arabia has provided at least tacit support

to ISIS itself, as well as a number of other extremist, fundamentalist Wahhabi groups. Saudi Arabia smuggled old Yugoslav weapons bought from Croatia into Syria via Jordan in early 2013, which were then seen on videos being used by various rebel factions right across Syria.

Qatar – Part of the Global Coalition against ISIS and therefore ostensibly allied with the United States and Saudi Arabia, Qatar has strong links with the international movement of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has even been described as “a semi-formal patronage”. According to Global Security, “Qatar will continue to modernize its military through the purchase of US weapons systems, with continued competition from French, British, Russian, and other international firms looking to gain a foothold in this expanding lucrative market.”

Turkey – Ideologically opposed to Kurdish autonomy, Turkey has also long been involved with arming and training forces fighting against Assad – allegedly including ISIS and Al Nusra as well as Syrian and Turkmen FSA factions. A member of NATO, Turkey is also militarily allied with the United States and European Union countries, although decreasingly on an ideological basis. Turkey launched its “Euphrates Shield” operation in August 2016, nominally against ISIS, but broadly seen as a strategic measure against the linking of predominantly Kurdish areas in North Syria. Turkey has been occupying part of North Syria since then, despite officially ending the Euphrates Shield operation in March 2017. Clashes and incursions in SDF-held areas are ongoing.

Israel – Israel is not officially partaking in the Syrian “Civil” War, but some of its input becomes clear if we peek just a little under the surface. Israel has carried out strikes on Assad-held territory in Syria since the start of this conflict, including a military target close to Assad’s palace. Israel has also occupied the Golan Heights – a highly strategic region internationally recognised as part of Syria – since 1967 and has been technically at war with Syria since 1948. There have been reports of Israel giving hospital treatment to injured ISIS fighters.

Making a killing

A number of large multinational companies are producing the weapons being used in Syria. Due to the complex mish-mash of allegiances, ulterior motives and the way factions split and align, we can see how the same arms, made by the same companies, can be supplied to different state and non-state actors and used by forces on opposing sides of the conflict.

Some of the biggest players include a number of companies due to exhibit at the 2017 Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI), which runs from 12-15

September at the ExCel Centre at London Docklands. Weapons bought and sold at DSEI will undoubtedly make their way onto the Syrian battlefield, where they will be used to arm multiple sides, often against one another, and continue the escalation of violence.

In a war in which the only winners are the arms companies and states that make a mint from perpetual conflict, an end to that conflict will never come into view.

Here are just a few of the companies making a killing from Syria who are exhibiting at DSEI:

Lockheed Martin – Lockheed Martin Executive Vice President Bruce Tanner boasted in December 2015 of his company getting “indirect benefits” from the Syrian conflict. The biggest arms company on Earth and based in the United States, Lockheed Martin trade in aircraft, armoured vehicles, bombs and missiles, drones, nuclear weapons and warships. Of the forces present in the Syrian conflict, Lockheed Martin have armed Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States.

BAE Systems – Third biggest arms company in the world, British-owned BAE Systems is busy making long-term multi-billion dollar deals with countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who they consider long-term partners. When questioned at the company's 2016 AGM by activists concerned how BAE's weaponry is used in conflicts, Roger Carr, the company's chairman, said: “We are not here to judge the way that other governments work, we are here to do a job under the rules and regulations we are given.” Of the actors in the Syrian conflict, their market includes Israel, France, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK and the USA.

Chemring – Saudi Arabia is a major market for Chemring, another UK-based defence giant. According to campaign group Campaign Against the Arms Trade, “The company is officially associated with Saudi Eraad Defense Systems, an in-country support/marketing company and advisor that provides professional and discreet services relating to sales to the Saudi regime”. Since the start of the Syrian conflict, Chemring have sold weapons to (among many others) France, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Britain and the United States.

Thales – Based in France, Thales is the tenth biggest arms company in the world. By its own admission, “For many years, Thales has been present in the Middle East and Africa, where the Group implements major programmes in Defence and Security and predicts important growth opportunities.” Since 2011, Thales has armed, among others, Israel, France, Jordan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK and the USA.

*some of the names used in this article have been changed to protect people's identities

Considerable effort has been taken to give accurate information in this article, however, when it comes to Syria, all sources are biased. The writer encourages the reader to do their own research, bearing in mind the complexity of the situation and the interests of the key players.