

Journalist Interrogated, Fired for Story Linking CIA and Syria Weapons Flights

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A months-long investigation which tracked and exposed a massive covert weapons shipment network to terror groups in Syria via diplomatic flights originating in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe under the watch of the CIA and other intelligence agencies has resulted in the interrogation and firing of the Bulgarian journalist who first broke the story. This comes as the original report is finally breaking into mainstream international coverage.

Investigative reporter Dilyana Gaytandzhieva authored a [bombshell report for Trud Newspaper](#), based in Sofia, Bulgaria, which found that an Azerbaijan state airline company was regularly transporting tons of weaponry to Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Turkey under diplomatic cover as part of the CIA covert program to supply anti-Assad fighters in Syria. Those weapons, Gaytandzhieva found, ended up in the hands of ISIS and al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq and Syria.

While it's long been understood that the US-Gulf-NATO coalition arming rebels inside Syria [facilitated](#) the rapid rise of the Islamic State as the group had steady access to a "jihadi Wal-Mart" of weapons (in the words of one [former spy and British diplomat](#)), the Trud Newspaper report is the first to provide exhaustive documentation detailing the precise logistical chain of the weapons as they flowed from their country of origin to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq. Gaytandzhieva even traveled to Aleppo where she filmed and examined labeled weapons shipping containers held in underground jihadist storehouses.

The Bulgaria-based journalist obtained and published dozens of secret internal memos which were leaked to her by an anonymous source as part of the report. The leaked documents appear to be internal communications between the Bulgarian government and Azerbaijan's Embassy in Sofia detailing flight plans for Silk Way Airlines, which was essentially operating an "off the books" weapons transport service (not subject to inspections or tax under diplomatic cover) for the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), Saudi Arabia, Israel, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. Silk Way Airlines has been the subject of other recent [investigations](#) involving weapons supplies for the Saudi war on Yemen. In addition, the military monitoring site [Balkan Insight has exposed similar weapons cargo flights](#) in and out of neighboring Serbia.



Silk Way Airlines flight over Birmingham (UK). Image source: Flickr

But perhaps the more explosive finding involves private American companies contracting with the US government to help train and equip militants in Syria. An [investigative series](#) by BuzzFeed – the first of which was [published in 2015](#) – named military contractor Purple Shovel LLC as the recipient of two no-bid contracts totaling more \$50 million as part of the US train and equip program for Syria. Gaytandzhieva’s report definitively links Purple Shovel and other private American military contractors to the Azerbaijan Silk Way Airlines shipments. One leaked memo includes a cargo manifest for multiple tons of anti-tank grenades purchased in Bulgaria by Purple Shovel which were ostensibly designated for the official consignee – the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan – but which never made it to Azerbaijan. The documents, however, reveal that the military cargo was offloaded at Turkey’s Incirlik air base, which is one of the US and NATO’s main command centers for covert operations in Syria.

Though Gaytandzhieva’s report is months old and began through a series of smaller investigations, it gained little traction in Western or international press, even though it was promoted on social media and discussed among some of the world’s foremost experts on Syria and the Middle East. However, on Sunday Qatar-based [Al Jazeera featured the story](#) while reporting the shocking news that Gaytandzhieva had been interrogated by Bulgarian authorities before being fired from her newspaper:

Gaytandzhieva said on Thursday in a tweet that she was fired from her job at Trud after she was interrogated by the Bulgarian national security which tried to find out her sources.

She said she first got suspicious of the weapons transferred to Syria when she found Bulgarian-made weapons at the hands “terrorists” in Aleppo while reporting on the Syrian war there.

She said that she then traced those weapons to its Bulgarian manufacturer only to find out that those weapons were legally exported to Saudi Arabia, which in turn supplied it to “terrorists” in Syria.

I've just got fired for telling the truth about weapons supplies for [#terrorists](#) in [#Syria](#) on diplomatic flights <https://t.co/wSJTRlZKnr>

— Dilyana Gaytandzhiev (@dgaytandzhieva) [August 24, 2017](#)

Al Jazeera is now belatedly [highlighting the story](#) in the midst of the current Qatari-Saudi diplomatic war which has resulted in a general airing of dirty laundry as each side continues to accuse the other of supporting terrorism. Regardless, Al Jazeera’s coverage constitutes the first time this story has entered the mainstream. While we’ve reported the recent [Trump decision to end the CIA covert program](#) of regime change in Syria, it appears the apparatus for external weapons shipments to jihadists in Syria remains in place through the continuing Silk Way Airlines weapons pipeline. As [Al Jazeera reports](#):

Speaking to Al Jazeera by phone on Sunday from Bulgaria, Gaytandzhieva said: “Saudi Arabia, UAE and the US must stop using the cover of Silk Way Airlines diplomatic flights to supply Eastern European weapons which end up in the hands of terrorists around the world. Diplomatic flights are exempt from checks and inspection.”

Tracking weapons from Eastern Europe to Syrian al-Qaeda: December 2016 Bulgarian news broadcast by Dilyana Gaytandzhieva. Brief English commentary begins at 1:00 mark. The report investigates Bulgarian origin rockets and weaponry said to have been in possession of Nusra Front (AQ in Syria). Leaked documents would later confirm Bulgarian weapons shipped to Saudi Arabia as part of the covert Syria program.



Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) also carried out their own lengthy investigations which are consistent with Trud News journalist Gaytandzhieva's findings. Infographic source: [Balkan Insight](#)

The CIA program [relied heavily on US ally Saudi Arabia](#) to arm anti-Assad [jihadists](#), and while it appears that the White House recently ended the CIA side of things, there's no evidence to suggest that Saudi Arabia or other participating allied countries ever ceased or even slowed their part of the operations. Also, given that both the CIA and Pentagon contract with private firms acting as middle men to get weapons to the Syrian battlefield, it is uncertain if all aspects of the CIA program have really been shut down. Historically, the CIA has sometimes farmed out legally questionable activities to private contractors for the sake of ['plausible deniability'](#). Furthermore, the Pentagon side of the program, which supplies Kurdish and Arab groups in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) appears to be ramping up of late.

Given the latest development of [Trud Newspaper](#) firing its own journalist and Bulgarian authorities attempting to locate her sources, it is entirely possible and likely that pressure is building for Trud to remove the story from its website. The new Al Jazeera story has brought fresh international attention to Gaytandzhieva's findings, which is sure to increase the controversy.

Below are excerpts from the [original Trud report](#) with images of select leaked documents. The original report contains dozens of downloadable leaked memos which were translated with contents summarized by Dilyana Gaytandzhieva.



Government docs leaked by hackers (“Anonymous Bulgaria”) reveal weapons pipeline to terrorists in Syria:

According to these documents, Silk Way Airlines offered diplomatic flights to private companies and arms manufacturers from the US, Balkans, and Israel, as well as to the militaries of Saudi Arabia, UAE, and US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), and the military forces of Germany and Denmark in Afghanistan and of Sweden in Iraq. Diplomatic flights are exempt of checks, air bills, and taxes, meaning that Silk Way airplanes freely transported hundreds of tons of weapons to different locations around the world without regulation. They made technical landings with stays varying from a few hours to up to a day in intermediary locations without any logical reasons such as needing to refuel the planes.

U.S. sends \$1 billion worth of weapons

Among the main customers of the “diplomatic flights for weapons” service provided by Silk Way Airlines are American companies, which supply weapons to the US army and US Special Operations Command. The common element in these cases is that they all supply non-US standard weapons; hence, the weapons are not used by the US forces.

According to the register of federal contracts, over the last 3 years American companies were awarded \$1 billion contracts in total under a special US government program for non-US standard weapon supplies. All of them used Silk Way Airlines for the transport of weapons. In some cases when Silk Way was short of aircrafts due to a busy schedule, Azerbaijan Air Force aircrafts transported the military cargo, although weapons never reached Azerbaijan.

The documents leaked from the Embassy include shocking examples of weapon transport. A case in point: on 12th May 2015 an aircraft of Azerbaijan Air Forces carried 7.9 tons of PG-7V and 10 tons of PG-9V the supposed destination via the route Burgas (Bulgaria)-Incirlik (Turkey)-Burgas-Nasosny (Azerbaijan). The consignor was the American company Purple Shovel, and the consignee - the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. According to the documents, however, the military cargo was offloaded at Incirlik military base and never reached the consignee. The weapons were sold to Purple Shovel by Alguns, Bulgaria, and manufactured by Bulgaria’s VMZ military plant.

According to the federal contracts registry, in December of 2014 USSOCOM signed a \$26.7 million contract with Purple Shovel. Bulgaria was indicated as the country of origin of the weapons.

US covert program sent Bulgarian weapons to Al Qaeda via private military contractor

On 6 June 2015, a 41-year old American national Francis Norvello, an employee of Purple Shovel, was killed in a blast when a rocket-propelled grenade malfunctioned at a military range near the village of Anevo in Bulgaria. Two other Americans and two Bulgarians were also injured. The US Embassy to Bulgaria then released a statement announcing that the U.S. government

contractors were working on a U.S. military program to train and equip moderate rebels in Syria. Which resulted in the U.S. Ambassador to Sofia to be immediately withdrawn from her post. They very same weapons as those supplied by Purple Shovel were not used by moderate rebels in Syria. In December of last year while reporting on the battle of Aleppo as a correspondent for Bulgarian media I found and filmed 9 underground warehoused full of heavy weapons with Bulgaria as their country of origin. They were used by Al Nusra Front (Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria designated as a terrorist organization by the UN).

Saudi Arabia – sponsor and arms distributor

Besides the USA, another country that has purchased huge quantities of Eastern-European weapons and exported them on Silk Way Airlines diplomatic flights is Saudi Arabia. In 2016 and 2017, there were 23 diplomatic flights carrying weapons from Bulgaria, Serbia and Azerbaijan to Jeddah and Riyadh. The consignees were VMZ military plant and Transmobile from Bulgaria, Yugoimport from Serbia, and CHIHAZ from Azerbaijan.

The Kingdom does not buy those weapons for itself, as the Saudi army used only western weapons and those weapons are not compatible with its military standard. Therefore, the weapons transported on diplomatic flights end up in the hands of the terrorist militants in Syria and Yemen that Saudi Arabia officially admits supporting.



Report links internationally transported weapons to ISIS

On 5 March 2016, an Azerbaijan Air Force aircraft carried 1700 pcs. RPG-7 (consignor: Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan) and 2500 pcs. PG-7VM (consignor: Transmobile Ltd., Bulgaria) for the Defense Ministry of Saudi Arabia. Diplomatic flights from Burgas Airport to Prince Sultan Airport on 18 and 28 February 2017 each carried a further 5080 pcs. 40 mm PG-7V for RPG-7 and 24 978 pcs. RGD-5. The weapons were exported by Transmobile, Bulgaria to the Ministry of Defense of Saudi Arabia. Such munitions and RPG-7 originating in Bulgaria can often be seen in videos filmed and posted by the Islamic State on their propaganda channels.

Weapons on Silk Way flight manifests appear on the Syrian battlefield months after arrival in Turkey and Saudi Arabia

The 41.2-ton cargo from Baku and Belgrade included: 7.62 mm cartridges, 12 pcs. sniper rifles, 25 pcs. M12 “Black Spear” caliber 12.7x108mm, 25 pcs. RBG 40x46 mm/6M11, and 25 pcs. Coyote machine gun 12.7x108 mm with tripods. The same heavy machine gun appeared in videos and photos posted online by militant groups in Idlib and the province of Hama in Syria a few months later. The aircraft also carried: 1999 pcs. M70B1 7.62x39 mm and 25 pcs. M69A 82 mm. On 26 February 2016, a video featuring same M69A 82 mm weapons was posted on YouTube by a militant group calling itself Division 13 and fighting north of Aleppo.



Interestingly, the aircraft that carried the same type of weapons landed in Diyarbakir (Turkey), 235 km away from the border with Syria. Another type of weapon, RBG 40 mm/6M11, which was from the same flight and supposedly destined for Congo too, appeared in a video of the Islamic Brigade of Al Safwa in Northern Aleppo.

After Turkey, the aircraft landed in Saudi Arabia and remained there for a day. Afterwards it landed in Congo and Burkina Faso. A week later, there was an attempted military coup in Burkina Faso.

Full report and downloadable copies of leaked documents are also [available here](#).

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