

War or No War on Syria: Conflict of Interest of “Experts” who Commented in Favor of Military Intervention

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During the public debate around the question of whether to attack Syria, Stephen Hadley, former national security adviser to George W. Bush, made a series of high-profile media appearances. Hadley argued strenuously for military intervention in appearances on CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and Bloomberg TV, and authored a Washington Post op-ed headlined [“To stop Iran, Obama must enforce red lines with Assad.”](#)

In each case, Hadley’s audience was not informed that he serves as a director of Raytheon, the weapons manufacturer that makes the Tomahawk cruise missiles that were widely cited as a weapon of choice in a potential strike against Syria. Hadley earns \$128,500 in annual cash compensation from the company and chairs its public affairs committee. He also owns 11,477 shares of Raytheon stock, which traded at all-time highs during the Syria debate (\$77.65 on August 23, making Hadley’s share’s worth \$891,189). Despite this financial stake, Hadley was presented to his audience as an experienced, independent national security expert.

Though Hadley’s undisclosed conflict is particularly egregious, it is not unique. The following report documents the industry ties of Hadley, 21 other media commentators, and seven think tanks that participated in the media debate around Syria. Like Hadley, these individuals and organizations have strong ties to defense contractors and other defense- and foreign policy-focused firms with a vested interest in the Syria debate, but they were presented to their audiences with a veneer of expertise and independence, as former military officials, retired diplomats, and independent think tanks.

The report offers a new look at an issue raised by David Barstow’s 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning [New York Times](#) series on the role military analysts played in promoting the Bush Administration’s narrative on Iraq. In addition to exposing coordination with the Pentagon, Barstow found that many cable news analysts had industry ties that were not disclosed on air.

If the recent debate around Syria is any guide, media outlets have done very little to address the gaps in disclosure and abuses of the public trust that Barstow exposed. Some analysts have stayed the same, others are new, and the issues and range of opinion are different. But the media continues to present former military and government officials as venerated experts without informing the public of their industry ties – the personal financial interests that may be shaping their opinions of what is in the national interest.

This report details these ties, in addition to documenting the industry backing of think tanks that played a prominent role in the Syria debate. It reveals the extent to which the public discourse around Syria was corrupted by the pervasive influence of the defense industry, to the point where many of the so-called experts appearing on American television screens were actually representatives of companies that profit from heightened US military activity abroad. The threat of war with Syria may or may not have passed, but the threat that these conflicts of interest pose to our public discourse – and our democracy – is still very real.

Key Findings

The media debate surrounding the question of whether to launch a military attack on Syria in August and September of 2013 was dominated by defense industry-backed experts and think tanks. These individuals and organizations are linked to dozens of defense and intelligence contractors, defense-focused investment firms, and diplomatic consulting firms with strong defense ties, yet these business ties were rarely disclosed on air or in print. This report brings transparency to these largely undocumented and undisclosed connections.

For more on the methodology used to identify commentators, think tanks, and industry ties, please see the “Methodology” section below.

Commentators

- **22 commentators.** The report identifies 22 commentators who weighed in during the Syria debate in large media outlets, and who have current industry ties that may pose conflicts of interest. The commentators are linked to large defense and intelligence contractors like Raytheon, smaller defense and intelligence contractors like TASC, defense-focused investment firms like SCP Partners, and commercial diplomacy firms like the Cohen Group.
- **111 appearances, 13 attempts at disclosure.** These commentators made 111 appearances – as op-ed authors, quoted experts, or news show guests – in major media outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Bloomberg, and the *Washington Post*. Despite the commentators’ apparent financial and professional stakes in military action, major media outlets typically failed to disclose these relationships, noting them, often incompletely, in only 13 of the 111 appearances (see table below for media outlet breakdown).
- **Varying types of conflicts of interest.** In some cases, commentators have undisclosed industry ties that pose significant and direct conflicts of interest. In other cases, the undisclosed ties were less direct, but still suggest that the commentator has a financial interest in continuing heightened levels of US military action abroad. A number of consultants are included because their business relationships are foreign policy-focused and likely involve work for defense clients, though most do not disclose client lists. One consulting relationship highlighted in the report is with the Department of Defense – not an industry connection, but a significant conflict of interest.
- **Largely supportive of military action.** The commentators profiled have largely expressed support for military action in Syria, and many have framed the decision as an issue of national security. However, the opinions they expressed were not uniformly supportive of military action. Several commentators identified, such as Robert Scales, opposed military intervention outright. (see [correction](#))

The following is a selection of commentators, profiled at greater length below, who have

multiple undisclosed ties to the defense industry and have expressed strong support for military intervention in Syria in multiple appearances:

- [Jack Keane](#) has strongly supported striking Syria on PBS, the BBC, and Fox News. Though Keane is currently a director of [General Dynamics](#), one of the world's largest military services companies, and a venture partner of [SCP Partners](#), a defense-focused investment firm, only his military and think tank affiliations were identified in all sixteen appearances.
- [General Anthony Zinni](#) has expressed support for military action in Syria during three appearances on CNN and one on *CBS This Morning*, and has been quoted in the *Washington Post*. Though a director with major defense contractor [BAE Systems](#) and an advisor to defense-focused private equity firm [DC Capital Partners](#), only Zinni's military experience was considered relevant by the media outlets interviewing him all five times.
- [Stephen Hadley](#) has voiced strong support for a strike on Syria in appearances on Bloomberg TV, Fox News, and CNN, as well as in a *Washington Post* op-ed. Though he has a financial stake in a Syria strike as a current [Raytheon](#) board member, and is also a principal at consulting firm [RiceHadleyGates](#), he was identified all four times only as a former National Security Advisor to George W. Bush.
- [Frances Townsend](#) has appeared on CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360* six times strongly favoring action in Syria. Though Townsend holds positions in two investment firms with defense company holdings, [MacAndrews & Forbes](#) and [Monument Capital Group](#), and serves as an advisor to defense contractor [Decision Sciences](#), only her roles as a CNN national security analyst and member of the CIA and DHS advisory committees were revealed in all six appearances.

Think Tanks

- **Seven think tanks.** The report profiles seven prominent think tanks with significant industry ties that weighed in on intervention in Syria. These think tanks were cited 144 times in major US publications from August 7th, 2013 to September 6th, 2013. The Brookings Institution, Center for Strategic and International Studies, and The Institute for the Study of War were the most cited think tanks from our dataset.
- Experts with [The Brookings Institution](#) were cited in 31 articles on Syria in our dataset, more than any other think tank. Brookings is an influential think tank that is presented in the media as an independent authority, yet it receives millions in funding from the defense industry, including \$1 - 2.5 million from [Booz Allen Hamilton](#) and \$50,000 - \$100,000 from [Boeing](#), [General Dynamics](#), [Lockheed Martin](#), [Northrop Grumman](#), and [Palantir Technologies](#). Brookings Executive Education's Advisory Council Chair, Ronald Sanders, is a Vice President and Senior Fellow at [Booz Allen Hamilton](#).
- The [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) was cited in 30 articles on Syria. CSIS has ample individual connections to the defense industry through its advisors and trustees, including CSIS Senior Advisor Margaret Sidney Ashworth, Corporate Vice President for Government Relations at [Northrop](#)

[Grumman](#), and CSIS Advisor Thomas Culligan, Senior Vice President at [Raytheon](#). CSIS President and CEO John Hamre is a director for defense contractor [SAIC](#).

- Analysts representing [The Institute for the Study of War](#) were cited in 22 articles on Syria in our dataset. One such article by former ISW Senior Research Analyst Elizabeth O'Bagy was cited by Secretary John Kerry and Senator John McCain during congressional hearings in their effort to justify intervention.¹ ISW's Corporate Council represents a who's who of the defense industry and includes [Raytheon](#), [SAIC](#), [Palantir](#), [General Dynamics](#), [CACI](#), [Northrop Grumman](#), [DynCorp](#), and [L-3 Communication](#).

The report also includes profiles on the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Enterprise Institute, the Atlantic Council, and the Center for American Progress. Each profile includes a selection of commentary from analysts associated with the think tank and a selection of defense industry ties. These ties are both organizational (corporate sponsorships and donations) and individual (ties through their directors, advisors, trustees, fellows, and analysts).

Methodology

Commentators were identified in articles, videos and transcripts gathered from Factiva and Google News searches, for the period August 20, 2013 to September 18, 2013. Research on the commentators' backgrounds was then conducted, drawing on data from SEC EDGAR, news archive searches, online biographies, and other sources. Commentators with current industry ties were selected for inclusion in the report. Each piece was reviewed for relevance and only those directly related to discussions around Syria were counted toward the total. Potentially conflicted commentators were included in our dataset regardless of their support or opposition to military intervention. Where possible, videos of appearances were reviewed to determine whether industry affiliations were noted on-screen in a way that would not appear in transcripts.

The think tanks were identified through a review of articles appearing in major US publications for a slightly different period, from August 7th, 2013 to September 6th, 2013, and included the keyword "Syria" in the headline and/or lede paragraph. Searches were conducted using the Factiva database. Each article was reviewed for relevance to the Syria intervention debates. Only articles directly related to discussions around Syria were counted toward the total. Research was then conducted on the think tanks' industry ties through reviews of annual reports, news articles, SEC data, and sources such as Right Web (<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/>), a database which includes extensive information on some of the think tanks profiled in the report.

In each case, data was reviewed and compiled on LittleSis.org (the opposite of Big Brother), PAI's investigative research platform. The data in this report is available on LittleSis.org. At times, citations link to LittleSis.org profiles; additional, original sources for information about these individuals and organizations can be found on these pages.

Commentators and think tanks were included if they had significant current ties to the following types of firms:

- Defense and intelligence contractors.

- Investment firms with a significant defense or intelligence focus.
- Consulting firms with a significant focus on defense, intelligence, or commercial diplomacy.

Some consulting firms identified in the report function as shadow diplomatic firms, working for foreign governments and corporate clients seeking overseas business. These firms, such as the Albright Stonebridge Group, usually do not disclose their clients, so it can be difficult to discern their defense industry ties. In the absence of disclosure, this report includes these firms, and notes their defense ties where possible. Regardless of whether they have defense clients, principals at these firms likely have business relationships that complicate their public personas as expert foreign policy commentators.

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