

Serbia's prime minister brushed aside criticism of his country's controversial arms trade with Saudi Arabia, arguing that he "adores" weapons exports because they boost the state coffers.

After an investigation by BIRN and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, OCCRP showed how Central and Eastern European weapons are flooding the battlefields of the Middle East, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic on Monday defended his country's arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

"I adore it when we export arms because it is a pure influx of foreign currency," Vucic told a press conference, adding that Saudi Arabia is not on any international blacklist.

He argued that the arms industry was proving a boon to the Serbian economy.

"It is one of the industries from which we earn a lot. I want to increase it even more, to earn even more," he said.

His comments were made after reporters found that since 2012, exports of weapons and ammunition worth at least 1.2 billion euros have been agreed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia, and Romania to four countries supporting Syria's armed opposition.

The bulk of the deals, totalling 829 million euros, were made with Saudi Arabia.

The exporting countries have granted the licences despite ample evidence that many weapons are being diverted to Syria, ending up with armed opposition as well as Islamist groups accused of widespread abuses.

Serbia's Ministry of Trade in 2015 agreed 135 million euros of arms export licences to Saudi Arabia, having rejected similar requests in 2013 for fear the weapons would be diverted to Syria.

The confidential government documents, obtained by BIRN and OCCRP, which detail these concerns also outline how the 2013 deals with Saudi Arabia could damage Belgrade's relations with the EU and Russia if the weapons turned up in Syria.

Vucic told the press conference that in 2013, while he was defence minister, he "probably received" intelligence the arms could end up in Syria.

"Do not ask me what has changed. In 2015, I was not defence minister and I can't know [what happened]. I will take a look," he said.

Arms trade and human rights experts said the diversion of these weapons and their use by groups suspected of committing war crimes raised questions about the legality of the trade. The BIRN and OCCRP investigation, published alongside The Guardian, has made international headlines and sparked reactions from heads of states and senior officials.

On Friday, Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico responded to the investigations by arguing that "if we won't sell, someone else will".

The director of the UN Refugee Agency's Europe bureau, Vincent Cochetel, reacted to the story by saying that some of the European countries turning away refugees were

simultaneously fuelling the refugee flow by selling weapons that end up in Syria.
“Some EU countries lead the sales of weapons in Syria,” Cochetel said on Twitter.
The trade “kills and creates refugees”, he added
Source; Balkan Insight