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British “aid” diverted to jihadi forces in Syria

UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials were forced to suspend a multi-million-pound foreign aid project directed to opposition groups in Syria that were supporting jihadi forces.

The funding for the project, ostensibly aimed at training a civilian police force in rebel-held Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa provinces, was halted after a BBC *Panorama* investigation exposed how officers from the force worked with courts carrying out brutal sentences.

The *Jihadis You Pay For* investigation targeted the Access to the Justice and Community Security Scheme (Ajacs), running since late 2014 in areas outside Syrian government control. The project, managed by British consultants Adam Smith International (ASI), began after David Cameron’s Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition failed to persuade parliament to support military action in Syria in August 2013.

The revelations confirm Britain’s covert support of jihadi forces as proxies to topple President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which is aimed at weakening Iran and preparing for a US-backed Israeli war against that country.

According to the BBC, the scheme was supposed to train police in the Free Syrian Police (FSP) to restore “law and order”, and not to cooperate with the Islamist extremists who largely controlled the three provinces. The opposite was true. As well as showing how the FSP was complicit in extra-judicial killings and torture, *Panorama* also revealed how the project was mired in corruption and mismanagement.

Extremists linked to al-Qaeda had handpicked police officers to serve at Ajacs-funded police stations in Idlib province. The officers were cooperating with courts run by the al-

Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda offshoot, which handed out extreme punishments including summary executions. In one case, police officers closed the road near Sarmin in December 2014 so that the execution of two women by stoning could take place.

According to an ASI report of July 2016, the police handed over cash, up to 20 percent of their funds at one point, to an extremist group, Nour al-Din al-Zinki. The group is linked to human rights abuses and atrocities including the beheading of a young prisoner in 2016. Justification cited for the payments was “the military and security support that Zinki provides to the five Free Syrian Police stations located in areas under its control.”

The BBC saw documents that ASI was aware that the police officers had collaborated with Al-Zinki’s unsanctioned courts “by writing up warrants, delivering notices, and turning criminals over to the court.”

Furthermore, the police payroll included the names of dead and fictitious people. The BBC cited Koknaya in Idlib province that was supposed to be the base for around 57 officers, but where there were none in 2016.

An ASI spokesman said the company “strongly refutes Panorama’s allegations,” calling them “entirely inaccurate and misleading.” ASI added that it operated “under the close supervision of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and five other governments.”

This only raises the question of how much Britain’s FCO and other governments knew about such relations.

ASI was set up in 1992 and grew rapidly, with its turnover tripling between 2010 and 2015 to £130 million. It has received £450 million in aid contracts from the Department for International Development (DfID).

This is not the first time that the company, whose senior executives pay themselves around £250,000 a year, has come under fire for profiteering and unethical behaviour.

According to the Global Justice Network, electricity consumers in Nigeria faced price increases of up to 45 percent because of “a controversial energy privatisation programme supported by UK aid through a multimillion-pound project implemented by ASI.” In Afghanistan, local NGOs reported that a new minerals law, drawn up with ASI’s support, had done little to help them.

In February, DfID cut off funding after it emerged that ASI had tried to take advantage of confidential department documents to gain additional contracts. The parliamentary select committee on international development said that ASI had “overstepped the mark” in soliciting testimonials submitted as evidence to the MPs’ inquiry into the government’s use of aid contractors. It called ASI’s actions “deplorable”, “entirely inappropriate” and

showing a “serious lack of judgment.” The scandal led to the resignation of four senior ASI executives and later, its chairman Sir Martin Davidson.

DfID spends £13.3 billion a year on “development” projects to build “a safer, healthier, more prosperous world for people in developing countries and in the UK.”

While the government makes much of its commitment to spend 0.7 percent of national income on aid—and it is popularly believed that this is spent on developments aimed at alleviating poverty—most of it is spent on promoting Britain’s commercial, “national security” and geostrategic interests. Many students are brought to British universities via a plethora of aid programmes.

Much aid has now been “securitised,” with aid money used to prevent migration from Africa and the Middle East, and to provide security, meaning military, and police operations and training. It is channelled through a handful of corporations.

The Ajacs project was funded via the little known Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) set up in 2015, replacing the previous Conflict (Prevention) Pool.

CSSF receives funding of over £1 billion a year to tackle conflict and instability overseas, as part of its international development programme. Overseen by the National Security Council, it draws funding from various government departments “to help prevent conflict that affects vulnerable people in the world’s poorest countries, and tackle threats to British security and interests from instability overseas.” It includes programmes delivered directly or through the government’s contractors, such as developing human rights training, strengthening local police and judiciaries, and facilitating political reconciliation and local peace processes.

While more than 80 percent of its budget comes from DfID, it is largely administered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. According to Sir Mark Lyall Grant, National Security Adviser, most of the fund in 2016 was spent in Afghanistan (£90 million), Syria (£60 million) and Somalia (£32 million), with some 40 countries also receiving money. One of the projects relating to Syria included providing a press office for the Free Syrian Army’s fighters in Syria.

While the media has decried the fraud and mismanagement of Britain’s aid budget, it has said nothing about Britain’s flagrant breach of Syria’s sovereignty. Neither has it noted that all this is in direct contradiction of former Prime Minister David Cameron’s promise not to intervene in Syria after the August 2013 vote in parliament.

Covert support of Syrian proxies to bring about Assad’s ouster is in addition to Britain’s participation in the US-led air operations in Syria in late 2014 that only became public

knowledge long after it had begun and well before parliament voted in favour of air strikes in Syria in autumn 2015.

British special forces have been operating on the frontline in Syria, most notably in May 2016, in support of an opposition outfit known as the New Syrian Army near al-Tanf near the Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian border.

In December 2016, the government reported that the Royal Air Force's (RAF) operations in Syria far outstripped the intensity of the UK's operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last year, the Ministry of Defence announced that British troops would resume training the so-called moderate Syrian rebels—which it did not name—fighting Islamic State. British personnel would teach basic infantry drills, battlefield medicine and skills to avoid mines and booby-traps, working at bases in Turkey and Jordan.

By September 2017, more than 1,000 UK personnel were involved in operations in Syria, with the RAF having conducted around 900 airstrikes, at a cost of £265 million.