

U.S. Trial Begins for Bout's Accused Conspirator

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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NEW YORK — A U.S.-Syrian citizen conspired with convicted Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout to buy aircraft, using fake names to get around sanctions that had been imposed against him, a government prosecutor told a jury in New York federal court.

Richard Chichakli deceived a Florida aviation company in an effort to sidestep a presidential executive order prohibiting him from conducting any transactions with U.S. businesses, Assistant U.S. Attorney Christian Everdale said at the start of Chichakli's criminal trial.

"The defendant deceived legitimate business people in the U.S.; he violated the sanctions against him," Everdale said. "And he did it for money."

Chichakli, representing himself, told the court that the government had concocted a false story about him because of his ties to Bout, known as the "Merchant of Death" for his purported willingness to ship arms to anyone who could pay him.

"It is your job to try to separate the facts from the fiction," Chichakli told the jurors at Wednesday's hearing. "A whole lot of this story is fiction."

Chichakli faces one count of conspiring to violate international sanctions, one count of conspiring to commit money laundering, one count of conspiring to commit wire fraud and six counts of wire fraud.

Bout led an international weapons smuggling operation by assembling a fleet of airplanes that he could use to ship large quantities of arms to warlords and leaders in some of the world's most violent regions.

He was convicted in 2011 of conspiring to sell weapons to the rebel group known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and is serving a 25-year prison sentence in the U.S.

Bout's case strained relations between Washington and Moscow, which opposed his criminal trial in the U.S. and said he was the victim of political pressure.

Chichakli was arrested in Australia, where prosecutors say he was living under a false name, and extradited in May to New York.

The government says Chichakli was working with Bout and tried to acquire Boeing airplanes in 2007 for a foreign company the two men operated, Samar Air.

The U.S. Treasury Department blocked the transaction and froze more than \$1.5 million in funds when federal agents became aware that Chichakli was behind the deal, Everdale said.

But Chichakli said the transaction was lawful, as Bout did not actually own Samar Air and Chichakli was not barred from working with foreign companies. He accused prosecutors of charging him to have something to show for years of investigation.

"Did the government tell you the entire story?" he said. "Not even close."

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