

Putin's 'Merchant of Death' Viktor Bout Returns to Arms Trading Business – WSJ

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Viktor Bout. **Sergei Karpukhin / TASS**

Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, nicknamed the “Merchant of Death,” has made a comeback to the arms trading business and is seeking to broker sales of small arms to Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi militants, The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) Monday.

Bout, 57, was freed in a December 2022 [prisoner swap](#) with U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner. Throughout his two-decade criminal career, Bout is believed to have aided both rebels and legitimate governments in an array of conflict zones, including Afghanistan, Yemen and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In August, Bout met with two Houthi emissaries in Moscow to negotiate the purchase of \$10 million worth of automatic weapons, WSJ wrote, citing a European security official and other individuals familiar with the matter.

It was not clear whether the negotiations were taking place at the Kremlin's behest or with its tacit approval, the newspaper wrote. WSJ also said that it could not determine the source of the planned arms supply.

The first two deliveries will mostly comprise AK-74 assault rifles, WSJ reported, but the Houthi emissaries also reportedly discussed other possible weapons purchases including Kornet anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft weapons.

The deliveries could start as early as October to the Yemeni port of Hodeidah, where Russia has already carried out several grain deliveries, under the cover of food supplies, WSJ's sources said.

Related article: [Who is the Russian 'Merchant of Death' the U.S. Exchanged for Brittney Griner?](#)

Although the potential arms transfers, which have not yet been delivered, are not enough to significantly threaten U.S. efforts to protect global shipping from Houthi attacks, Washington would oppose even small arms shipments to the Houthis, which it has designated a terrorist group.

U.S. intelligence [said](#) this summer that Russia could provide the Houthis with advanced anti-ship missiles in retaliation for Washington's support of Ukraine, but there is no evidence that those missiles have been sent or that Bout is involved in such a deal.

Steve Zissou, a lawyer who represented Bout in the U.S., would not discuss whether Bout had met with the Houthis.

"Viktor Bout has not been in the transportation business for over 20 years," Zissou told WSJ. "But if the Russian government authorized him to facilitate the transfer of arms to one of America's adversaries, it would be no different than the U.S. government sending arms and weapons of mass destruction to one of Russia's adversaries as it has sent to Ukraine."

A Houthi spokesman declined to comment on the report, and the Kremlin did not respond to WSJ's request for comment.

On Monday, state-run news agency RIA Novosti [quoted](#) longtime Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, saying, "The Kremlin is inclined to categorize publications about Victor Bout's alleged arms sales as fakes."

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