
**HOW MANY GUNS DID THE U.S. LOSE TRACK OF IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN?
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS.**

-

25.08.2016

NY Times, 24 August 2016

By C. J. CHIVERSAUG.

Early this year, a Facebook user in Baghdad using the name Hussein Mahyawî posted a photograph of a slightly worn M4 assault rifle he was offering for sale. Veterans of the latest war in Iraq immediately recognized it. It was a standard American carbine equipped with a holographic sight, a foregrip that was military-issue during the occupation and a sticker bearing a digital QR code used by American forces for inventory control. Except for one detail — an aftermarket pistol grip, the sort of accessory with which combatants of the current generation often pimp their guns — it was a dead ringer for any of the tens of thousands of M4s the Pentagon handed out to Iraqi security forces and various armed militias after toppling Saddam Hussein in 2003. And here it was on the open market, ready for bids.

Was this a surprise? No. A little more than four years after the United States withdrew all its military forces from Iraq, and not quite two years after a smaller number of American troops began returning to the country to help fight the Islamic State, the open sale of such an M4 was part of Iraq's day-to-day arms-trafficking routine. Mahyawî's carbine was another data point attesting to an extraordinary and dangerous failure of American arms-trafficking and public accountability and to a departure from a modern military's most basic practice: keeping track of the guns.

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the United States has handed out a vast but persistently uncountable quantity of military firearms to its many battlefield partners in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today the Pentagon has only a partial idea of how many weapons it issued, much less where these weapons are. Meanwhile, the effectively bottomless abundance of black-market weapons from American sources is one reason Iraq will not recover from its post-invasion woes anytime soon.

An inkling of just how expansive these arms transfers were, and how stubbornly resistant they are to precise measurement, is apparent in a new attempt at weapons-tallying compiled in a project led by Iain Overton. Overton is a former BBC journalist who is now the executive director of Action on Armed Violence, a charity based in London that researches and lobbies against weapons proliferation and violence against civilians; he is also the author of *The Way of the Gun*, a dark

examination of some of the roles firearms play in modern society. With a string of Freedom of Information Act requests that began last year, he and his small team of researchers pooled 14 years worth of Pentagon contract information related to rifles, pistols, machine guns and their associated attachments and ammunition, both for American troops and for their partners and proxies. They then crosschecked the data against other public records. Overton is releasing the data and his analysis today. It covers 412 contracts and merits pause for reflection as the parties to the international Arms Trade Treaty gather this week in Geneva. The treaty, which took effect in 2014 and of which the United States is a signatory, is intended to promote transparency and responsible action in the transfer of conventional arms and to reduce their diversion to unintended hands — exactly what the United States often failed to do in recent wars.

In all, Overton found, the Pentagon provided more than 1.45 million firearms to various security forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, including more than 978,000 assault rifles, 266,000 pistols and almost 112,000 machine guns. These transfers formed a collage of firearms of mixed vintage and type: Kalashnikov assault rifles left over from the Cold War; recently manufactured NATO-standard M16s and M4s from American factories; machine guns of Russian and Western lineage; and sniper rifles, shotguns and pistols of varied provenance and caliber, including a large order of Glock semiautomatic pistols, a type of weapon also regularly offered for sale online in Iraq.

Many of the recipients of these weapons became brave and important battlefield allies. But many more did not. Taken together, the weapons were part of a vast and sometimes minimally supervised flow of arms from a superpower to armies and militias often compromised by poor training, desertion, corruption and patterns of human rights abuses. Knowing what we know about many of these forces, it would have been remarkable for them to retain custody of many of their weapons. It is not surprising that they did not.

As an illustration of how haphazard the supervision of this arms distribution often was, last week, five months after being asked by The New York Times for its own tally of small arms issued to partner forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Pentagon said it has records for fewer than half the number of firearms in the researchers count — about 700,000 in all. This is an amount, Overton noted, that only accounts for 48 percent of the total small arms supplied by the U.S. government that can be found in open-source government reports.

This gap between the tallies, the Pentagon said, is partly because at first the United States military was trying to stand up to two governments that were busily fighting wars. Speed was essential in getting those nations security forces armed, equipped and trained to meet these extreme challenges, Mark Wright, a Pentagon spokesman, wrote in an email. As a result, lapses in accountability of some of the weapons transferred occurred. Wright also said that the Pentagon's current practices have improved, and that to ensure that equipment is only used for authorized purposes, its representatives inventory each weapon as it arrives in country and record the distribution of the weapon to the foreign partner nation.

Why counting weapons, and making a record of serial numbers and recipients, was seen as so time-consuming that it would have slowed down war is not clear. Anyone who has served in a military unit knows that documenting who received what weapon is both a fundamental task and a habit that fits easily into a routine. It takes no more time than issuing a uniform to a soldier or feeding him a meal. But often the Pentagon did not require these steps — although Wright noted that once a weapon is provided to another force, it is their responsibility to account for that weapon.

As Overton worked earlier this year on his own exercise in accounting, I asked Nic Marsh, a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, to take a crack at the same tally, but using other sources he tracks, most notably export data from the European Union and American military inspector-general reports. Marsh's back-of-the-envelope total for the two wars also exceeded the Pentagon's by a large margin. By examining declared arms transfers from Europe, he found official reported totals of more than 465,000 firearms provided by the Pentagon to Afghanistan since 2001. Marsh said the exports included weapons from Albania, Britain, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United States. He also found at least another 628,000 firearms exported to Iraq from 2003 to 2014, from a similar list of nations, plus Bosnia, Estonia, France, Latvia and Turkey. His Iraq count does not include almost 300,000 more firearms that he suspects were moved there for the Pentagon but for which the records are not quite clear. The number is much larger than 628,000, he said, but we are not certain the exact number exported from Bosnia.

The weapons sent from Europe to Iraq, and the crates of ammunition necessary to keep them fed, filled cargo planes — though Marsh said the available data also does not say how many were directly paid for by the United States, as opposed to those bought by Iraqi ministries with American-donated funds or those donated by countries unloading old stock. This is an important observation, because the latter two categories — state-to-state gifts via American handlers or otherwise and firearms purchased directly by Afghanistan or Iraq — might not be in Overton's final count. This is one of many reasons to suspect that the 1.45 million tally might understate the real quantity of weapons disbursements during a long run of years when the Pentagon played the role in Afghanistan and Iraq of small-arms provider. It could be twice as much, as far as we know, Overton said last Friday, not entirely in jest.

Overton's analysis also does not account for many weapons issued by the American military to local forces by other means, including the reissue of captured weapons, which was a common and largely undocumented practice.

Adding to the suspicion that the number is even larger, Overton is certain that his tally missed shipments, because the data that the Defense Department made available was incomplete or

laden with contradictions that were not readily reconciled. For example, the contracts it released were for more than \$6.5 million or \$7 million, depending on the year. Overton suspects that this hides many smaller purchases. And the contract data often labeled purchases vaguely, sometimes making it difficult to determine exactly what was bought, much less for whom. The Pentagon's data, in short, did not declare much of what the Pentagon actually bought.

One point is inarguable: Many of these weapons did not remain long in government possession after arriving in their respective countries. In one of many examples, a 2007 Government Accountability Office report found that 110,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles and 80,000 pistols bought by the United States for Iraq's security forces could not be accounted for — more than one firearm for every member of the entire American military force in Iraq at any time during the war. Those documented lapses of accountability were before entire Iraqi divisions simply vanished from the battlefield, as four of them did after the Islamic State seized Mosul and Tikrit in 2014, according to a 2015 Army budget request to buy more firearms for the Iraqi forces to replace what was lost.

These spectacular losses were on top of the more gradual drain that many veterans of the wars watched firsthand — including such scams as Afghan National Army recruits showing up for training and disappearing after rifles were issued. They were leaving, soldiers suspected, to sell their weapons. On the outposts where American troops and Afghan and Iraqi units worked together, the local units were often a fraction of their reported strength and dwindled as ever more national police officers or soldiers disappeared or deserted, vanishing with their firearms. The American arming of Syrian rebels, by both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department, has also been troubled by questions of accountability and outright theft in a war where the battlefield is thick with jihadists aligned with Al Qaeda or fighting under the banner of the Islamic State.

By this year, various internet arms traders, including many on Facebook, were hawking a seemingly unending assortment of weapons of obvious American origin, including the M4 offered by Hussein Mahyawis, whose Facebook profile spoke of his background in interior design. In April, after being approached by The New York Times and reviewing data from Armament Research Services, a private arms-investigation consultancy, Facebook closed many pages in the Middle East that were serving as busy arms bazaars, including pages in Syria and Iraq on which firearms with Pentagon origins accounted for a large fraction of the visible trade. Hussein Mahyawis' profile vanished. But many new arms-trading Facebook pages have since cropped up, including, according to their own descriptions, virtual markets operating from Baghdad and Karbala. The trade goes on.

The new data also suggest ways in which ground combat for American troops raged and changed over the past decade and a half. According to its tally, the American military issued contracts potentially worth more than \$40 billion for firearms, accessories and ammunition since Sept. 11, including improvements to the ammunition plants required to keep the cartridge production going.

Most of these planned expenditures were for American forces, and the particulars tell the story of two wars that did not go as pitched. More than \$4 billion worth of contracts was issued for small arms, including pistols, machine guns, assault rifles and sniper rifles, and more than \$11 billion worth was issued for associated equipment, from spare machine-gun barrels to sniper-rifle scopes, according to Overtons count. A much larger amount — nearly \$25 billion — was issued for ammunition or upgrades to ammunition plants to keep those firearms supplied. That last figure aligns with what most any veteran of ground combat in Iraq and Afghanistan could tell you — American troops have been involved in a dizzying number of gunfights since 2001, burning through mountains of ammunition along the way.

Certain lines in Overtons spreadsheets hint at profound tactical shifts. The United States military entered Afghanistan in 2001 with a small contingent of troops, who pushed the Taliban from power by maneuvering with local allies supported by naval and air-to-ground firepower. It invaded Iraq in 2003 with mechanized columns protected by an overpowering rollout of fire support, including airstrikes, cruise missiles, incendiary bombs and cluster submunitions. The combination swiftly routed Iraqs conventional forces. Then came years of occupation duty and efforts at reconstruction and nation-building across a sprawling geography. Rotations of soldiers and Marines became bogged down in changing missions and faced the familiar threats of guerrilla warfare reborn — roadside bombs, ambushes and (in Iraq, particularly) snipers.

The data show large purchases of heavy-machine guns and barrels. This is a wink at the shift in many American units from being foot-mobile to vehicular, as grunts buttoned up within armored trucks and needed turret-mounted firepower to defend themselves — a matériel adaptation forced by ambushes and improvised bombs, the cheaply made weapons that wearied the most expensive military in the world.

Now look away from the data for a moment to consider what it does not show. The Pentagon provided Overton with contract information on small arms up to a caliber of 30 millimeters. This meant that certain classes of infantry weapons were not included, among them mortars, shoulder-fired rockets and powerful Mark 19 automatic grenade launchers that were mounted on many American vehicles and also used in outpost defense. That omission means the data offer no insight into a startlingly risky aspect of the Pentagons arming of local forces with infantry arms: the wide distribution of anti-armor weapons, including RPG-7s, commonly called rocket-propelled grenades, and recoilless weapons, including the SPG-9. Each of these systems fires high-explosive (and often armor-piercing) projectiles, and each was commonly used by insurgents in attacks. After the opening weeks of each war, the only armor on either battlefield was American or associated with allied and local government units, which made the Pentagons practice of providing anti-armor weapons to Afghan and Iraqi security forces puzzling. Why would they need anti-armor weapons when they had no armor to fight? All the while rockets were somehow mysteriously being fired at American convoys and patrols in each war.

All together, the sheer size of the expenditures, the sustained confusion about totals and the multiple pressures eroding the stock combine to create a portrait of the Pentagons bungling the already-awkward role it chose for itself — that of state-building arms dealer, a role that routinely led to missions in clear opposition to each other. While fighting two rapidly evolving wars, the American military tried to create and bolster new democracies, governments and political classes; recruit, train and equip security and intelligence forces on short schedule and at outsize scale; repair and secure transportation infrastructure; encourage the spread or restoration of the legal industry and public services; and leave behind something more palatable and sturdy than rule by thugs.

Any one of these efforts would be difficult on its own. But the United States was trying all these things at once while buying and flying into both countries a prodigious quantity of light military weapons and handing them out to local people and outfits it barely knew. The recipients were often manifestly corrupt and sometimes had close ties to the same militias and insurgents who were trying to drive out the United States and make sure its entire nation-building project did not stand. It should not have been a surprise that American units in disaffected provinces and neighborhoods, and their partners, could encounter gunfire at every turn.

The procession of arms purchases and handouts has continued to this day, with others involved, including Iran to its allies in Iraq and various donors to Kurdish fighters. In March, Russia announced that it had given 10,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles to Afghanistan, already one of the most Kalashnikov-saturated places on earth. If an analysis from the United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or Sigar, is to be believed, Afghanistan did not even need them. In 2014 the inspector general reported that after the United States decided to replace the Afghan Armys Kalashnikovs with NATO-standard weapons (a boon for the rifles manufacturer with a much less obvious value for an already amply armed Afghan force), the Afghan Army ended up with a surplus of more than 83,000 Kalashnikovs. The United States never

tried to recover the excess it had created, giving the inspector generals office grounds for long-term worry. Without confidence in the Afghan governments ability to account for or properly dispose of these weapons, it noted, Sigar is concerned that they could be obtained by insurgents and pose additional risks to civilians.

Kaynak/Source: