
IN IRAQ, WEAPONS ARE EASILY SOLD ILLEGALLY ONLINE

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Military equipment worth millions of dollars was recently stolen by an un-known armed group from an airbase south of Baghdad in Basra, Iraq's third-larg-est city.

Similar incidents have been fre-quently reported but the identity of the groups, whose members of-ten wear official security uniforms, is generally unknown.

"Nothing is easier in Iraq than establishing an armed group or a gang," said Yahya Ali, an Iraqi se-curity expert. "The different uni-forms of Iraq's military and secu-rity forces, as well as other related items, are being sold in major cit-ies, including Baghdad."

Ali said he bought a special forces uniform at a shop. "I paid 20,000 Iraqi dinars [about \$15] for it and the seller did not ask for any ID confirming that I'm an army of-ficer," he said.

That shop, he said, sells different styles of military and security uni-forms, bulletproof vests, helmets, stun guns, night-vision goggles and black masks. Once bought, the gear is often transported via tinted-glass, four-wheel-drive ve-hicles, which are often not stopped at security checkpoints as they are assumed to belong to the security services, Ali said.

Criminal groups can readily find weapons and uniforms displayed on social media platforms, includ-ing Facebook.

Police say they are cracking down on many of the groups but others remain elusive. "Dozens were arrested but the groups have their own networks to continue the highly profitable trade," said a police officer speaking on condition of anonymity. "The buyers and sellers contact each other through passwords to avoid police raids."

Ali said arms dealers find it easier to sell weapons in the virtual world. Buyers can simply search for souk al-silah (weapons market) to find scores of Facebook pages dedicated to selling arms in Iraq, he said.

"Our customers are those who want arms to defend themselves," reads one of the headings.

Some Facebook posts promise that the arms deal would not attract police attention, providing a mobile phone number to contact. Others require would-be purchasers to sign up with certain groups.

A man who identified himself as Abu Hassan said he bought an automatic weapon from one of the pages. "I collect antiques. I bought a second-hand gun. The dealer asked \$600 but I bought it for \$400," he said.

Another man, who gave his name as Abu Samir, said he bought ammunition. "I work at a private security company and we were in urgent need of ammunition. We could not wait to receive it in the proper channels, as it takes a lot of time, so we got it from Facebook, which is quicker," he said.

Abu Samir said the dealers did not ask him about his work. "Any-one can buy weapons, ammunition or military equipment without any questions," he said.

Dealers say the prices in the virtual world are the same as in traditional arms markets. Facebook has banned many of these pages, especially after the rise of the Islamic State, but many remain active.

"Iraq's Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Communications are coordinating to follow such pages and shut them down," said Aziz Makki, an Iraqi blogger who tracks Iraqi social media. "Many pages were closed but every day we find new ones up."

Kaynak/Source: