

FRONTLINE PERSPECTIVE

# ILLICIT WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN

– ISSUE 01 –

Taliban seizures of US equipment are only a fraction of the story

September 2021

## BACKGROUND

Recent Taliban seizures of equipment previously provided to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) by the United States and NATO probably constitutes one of the most significant large-scale diversions of military equipment in recent history. As district centres and provincial capitals fell to the Taliban between April and August 2021 (Roggio, n.d.), so too did the equipment on ANDSF bases and airfields across the country. These seizures allowed the Taliban to gain momentum and strength leading up to the collapse of the Afghan government on 15 August 2021.

Since then, a great deal of media coverage has focused on how these weapon seizures might bolster the Taliban's military capabilities going forward, but very little attention has been paid to the group's long-standing ability to exploit weaknesses in US and Afghan government controls over weapon supplies. Taliban access to weapons and ammunition intended for Afghan security forces is not new, but it has expanded significantly over time. While there is evidence to suggest the Taliban benefitted from regional backers, CAR's Afghanistan data set indicates that the group's



Conflict Armament Research (CAR) is an independent investigative organisation based in the UK. Established in 2011, CAR documents weapons, ammunition, and related military materiel in conflict zones, and traces chains of supply to identify points of diversion.

Between February 2019 and July 2021, CAR investigators have worked in Afghanistan to document illicit weapons in the country. CAR's data set comprises some 1,600 small arms and light weapons, more than 1,300 rounds of ammunition, and dozens of related items, such as night vision equipment, riflescopes, and components for improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In this Frontline Perspective series, CAR explores the supply dynamics that have sustained and supported the Taliban over the past few years.

*Left: A CAR investigator assessing captured weapons prior to documentation at an ANA storage facility in Helmand Province in March 2021.*

sustained access to small arms, light weapons, and ammunition within the country limited its dependency on external supply lines.

The moment for exerting improved controls and oversight over weapon supplies to the ANDSF has passed, but recent events in Afghanistan highlight the need to address persistent challenges and weaknesses in the US supply of weapons, ammunition, and military equipment to government-backed forces in other countries affected by armed conflict and terrorism.

This Frontline Perspective is the first in a series that will draw out key findings from CAR's Afghanistan data set. It explores the long-standing capacity of the Taliban and other armed actors in Afghanistan to access weapons that had been supplied by the US and NATO to ANDSF, and considers the systemic challenges that have enabled weapon diversion from national custody in the past. It focuses on small arms and light weapons and does not delve into issues around the seizure of aircraft or other equipment.

CAR cannot speculate on the total value or quantity of equipment recently seized by the Taliban, as figures circulated on social media fail to account for weapons and equipment that may have been unserviceable, destroyed, or removed from circulation over the past few years. One of the main challenges for CAR's Afghanistan operations has been the persistent absence of adequate record-keeping on equipment handovers and weapon losses by the US and Afghan forces.

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## **THIS PERSPECTIVE CONSIDERS THE SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES THAT HAVE ENABLED WEAPON DIVERSION FROM NATIONAL CUSTODY IN AFGHANISTAN.**



*CAR investigators embedded with the ANA fly into Kabul in a Black Hawk after investigating the crash site of an ANA Mi-17 helicopter that was shot down two weeks earlier in mid-March 2021.*

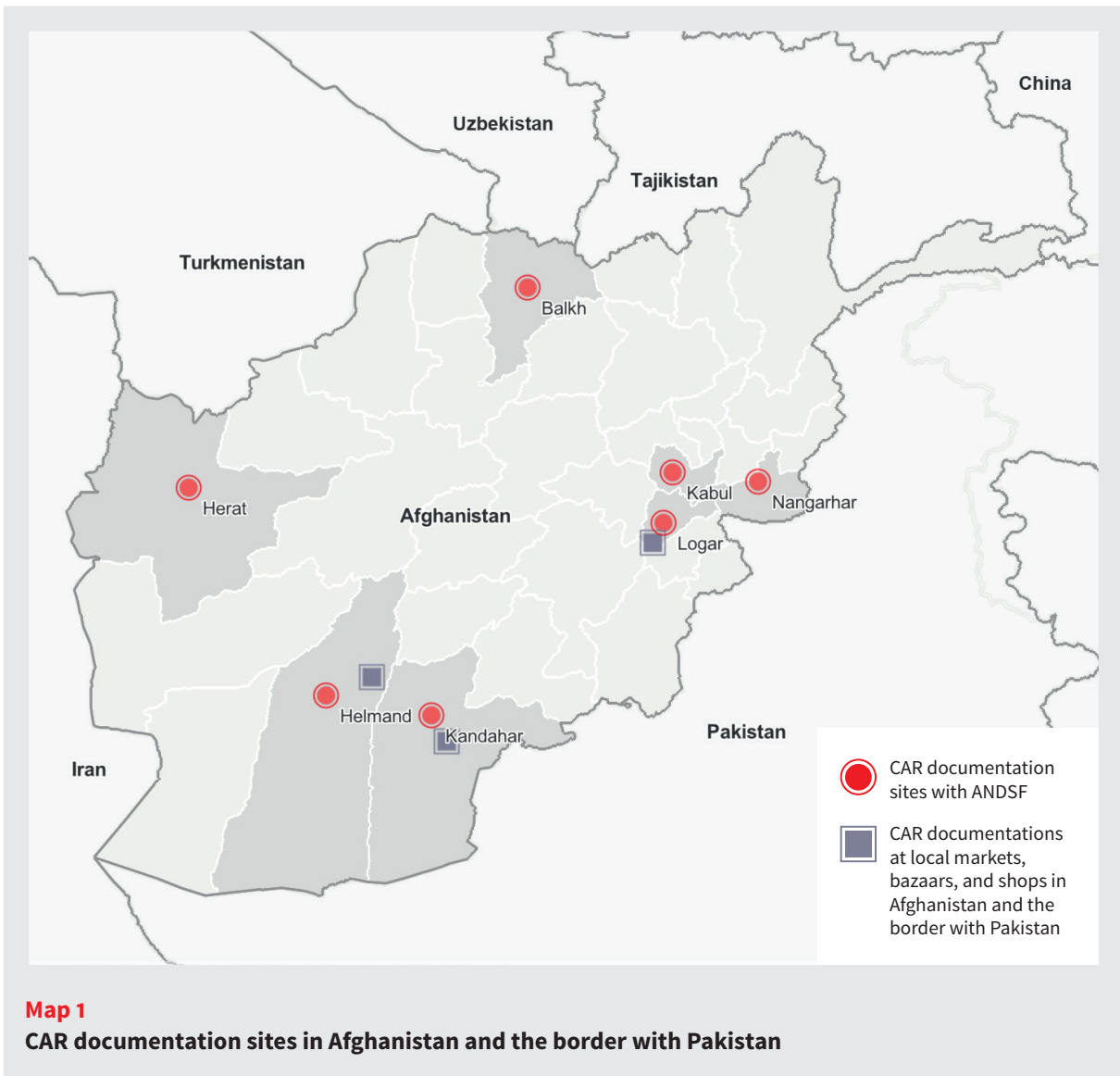
## CAR’S ON-THE-GROUND DOCUMENTATION WITH AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

Between February 2019 and July 2021, CAR field investigation teams have physically documented weapons, ammunition, and related military equipment seized by the ANDSF from the Taliban, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), criminal networks, and other illegal armed groups operating in Afghanistan. CAR undertook its last large-scale documentation of weapons seized from the Taliban in Helmand Province in March 2021. By June, weapon depots in the western city of Herat had been emptied in a last-ditch effort to arm pro-government militias. As a result, CAR’s data set does not reflect the large-scale Taliban seizures of US-supplied weapons that took place between April and August; rather, the data provides insights into Taliban supply lines over the past few years.

During dozens of missions conducted in seven provinces across the country—Balkh, Helmand,

Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Logar, and Nangarhar—CAR field investigation teams documented more than 1,600 weapons and 1,300 rounds of ammunition, including weapons used in high-profile terrorist attacks claimed by both the Taliban and ISKP. The teams also documented seized night vision equipment, riflescopes, and explosive material used in the production of IEDs. CAR’s Afghanistan data sample also includes items for sale on black markets in Taliban-controlled areas in the south and east of the country (Map 1). A forthcoming CAR report will expand on these findings, the supply of commercially available night vision equipment, and the cross-border supply of locally made artisanal weapons from Pakistan.

By necessity, CAR’s Afghanistan data set is opportunistic and access-dependent; it should not be regarded as a comprehensive national baseline.



## LONGSTANDING TALIBAN ACCESS TO US-WEAPONS

Although US-manufactured weapons make up a relatively small share of CAR's Afghanistan data set (3 per cent of the entire weapon data set and 7 per cent of non-artisanal weapons seized prior to the most recent Taliban offensive), they speak to long-standing risks associated with the loss of US-supplied weaponry that have plagued the conflict in Afghanistan for decades.

CAR documented a small sample of 5.56 x 45 mm M4 and M16 rifles recovered by the ANDSF from the Taliban and other armed groups over the past few years. The sample includes nine rifles produced by the US-based manufacturer Colt Defense LLC and 13

rifles produced by FN Manufacturing LLC. CAR has been able to confirm that some of these rifles were supplied to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and that most of them probably originated in ANA stockpiles.

Several of these rifles are highlighted here (Figures 1-3). CAR has issued trace requests for the US-produced materiel documented in Afghanistan. Given the rapidly evolving situation on the ground, CAR has temporarily waived its usual 28-day response period. CAR will update this publication with any information that it receives from trace recipients and welcomes further clarification from national authorities.



**Figure 1**

A 5.56 × 45 mm M16A4 seized by ANA Commandoes during operations against the Taliban in Helmand province between March 2020 and March 2021. CAR documented this weapon with the ANA in Helmand on 20 March 2021.



**Figure 2**

A 5.56 × 45 mm M4 Carbine fitted with a US-manufactured Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight, seized during operations against the Taliban in Helmand province. CAR documented this weapon with the ANA in Helmand on 20 March 2021.



**Figure 3**

**A 5.56 × 45 mm M16A4 rifle that the Afghan National Police seized in Kabul. CAR documented the item with the ANP on 9 December 2019.**

CAR's data set also confirms that criminal actors have also gained access to some US-manufactured M4 and M16 rifles. This underscores how battlefield diversion may in turn supply black markets and

criminal networks. CAR has also observed US-manufactured M4s that have been documented at local weapon markets in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region.

## THE IMPACT OF RECENT EQUIPMENT SEIZURES ON THE TALIBAN'S FIGHTING CAPABILITIES

Recent Taliban seizures of US-manufactured equipment have undoubtedly bolstered the group's arsenal across the country, but this is not a new trend.

The Taliban have long had access to US-manufactured M4 and M16 rifles, but they have also demonstrated a preference for meticulously maintained Soviet-era weaponry to carry out high-profile terrorist attacks. AK-pattern variants will probably continue to dominate their arsenal. Spare parts for these variants can be easily fabricated in the region, and ammunition resupplies are widely available. In contrast, US rifles are notoriously difficult to maintain, and the availability of spare parts and ammunition is limited in neighbouring countries.

Afghan defence and security forces—including the army, police, and intelligence service—previously operated workshops to repair and produce components for Soviet-designed weapons, yet they never developed independent capabilities to repair M4 or M16 rifles, let alone more sophisticated US-manufactured equipment.

Perhaps the most striking advantage of the massive seizures of US equipment is their use in Taliban propaganda videos and to outfit their elite units in Kabul. The Taliban may have little interest or need in transitioning their main fighting force to US-made equipment, although they have clearly demonstrated their ability to effectively use this equipment against the very forces it was supplied to uphold.



*Weapons laid out for documentation at an ANA depot in Helmand Province in March 2021.*

## TALIBAN ACCESS TO US-PURCHASED EQUIPMENT

CAR's data set points to broad challenges associated with US and Afghan government efforts to manage and oversee the distribution of weapons and ammunition over the past 20 years. The sample identifies a steady diversion of US-supplied equipment in the years preceding the most recent Taliban offensive. These challenges are not unique to Afghanistan; in 2016, a US Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit found nearly USD 1 billion worth of equipment was unaccounted for in Iraq.

As noted above, US-manufactured equipment makes up a small percentage of CAR's Afghanistan data set, which comprises materiel documented in Afghanistan prior to major gains made by the Taliban between April and August 2021. In addition to the easily identifiable US-produced M4s and M16 rifles, US- and NATO-supplied weapons include Soviet-era, Eastern European-manufactured, 'Kalashnikov-type' rifles, machine guns, RPGs, mortars, artillery, and other weaponry

whose link to US procurement networks may not be immediately apparent. CAR relies on trace communications with manufacturing states, export control authorities, and private companies to verify these details and trace the supply chain. These US- and NATO-supplied 'non-standard' Soviet-designed weapons feature more prominently in the sample.

In June 2019, CAR documented a Hungarian-manufactured 7.62 x 39 mm AMD-65 assault rifle with the serial number EE 8672 (see Figure 4). ANDSF forces reportedly seized the item during counter-terrorism operations against the Taliban in Herat province. The Government of Hungary promptly responded to a formal trace request issued by CAR, detailing that the rifle had been provided to Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior Affairs among four shipments totalling 35,173 AMD-65 rifles, under a contract authorised by the US Army Security Assistance Program for the exclusive end use of the ANP.



**Figure 4**  
A Hungarian-manufactured 7.62 x 39 mm AMD-65 with the serial number EE 8672.



Numerous other weapons recovered from the Taliban have similar histories, in that the United States procured them from Eastern European countries via brokers and shipped them directly to the ANDSF. The broker for the four Hungarian shipments was a US contractor, Sweet Analysis Services Inc, based in Alexandria, Virginia. The company is typical of the myriad entities—often small and short-lived—involved in the brokerage of US-procured weapons destined for US partner governments in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. On 20 November 2013, the company filed for voluntary bankruptcy in the Eastern District of Virginia (Sweet Analysis Services Inc, 2013). As a result, CAR has been unable to contact the broker regarding this transfer.

These findings demonstrate that the Taliban have consistently benefitted from stockpile leakage of US- and NATO-supplied weapons—including ones that are not of readily identifiable, US-

## **THE TALIBAN HAVE CONSISTENTLY BENEFITTED FROM STOCKPILE LEAKAGE OF UNITED STATES AND NATO-SUPPLIED WEAPONS.**

manufactured types. While photographs of Taliban fighters with M4 and M16 rifles have garnered a great deal of media attention, the United States and NATO also supplied significant quantities of Soviet-designed weapons and ammunition to Afghan security forces. The widespread leakage of these weapons sustained the Taliban insurgency and reduced the group's reliance on large-scale, cross-border support from its regional backers.

### **ENDURING, SYSTEMATIC ISSUES WITH WEAPON HANDOVERS TO AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES**

CAR's Afghanistan data set indicates that the Taliban had access to significant quantities of equipment provided by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and later the Resolute Support (RS) Mission. The handover and monitoring of this equipment for ISAF and later RS was the responsibility of the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC-A), tasked with managing international support and assistance to the ANA and ANP, including weapon donations, salaries, fuel, and equipment maintenance, up until June 2021.

While some weapon losses are unavoidable on the battlefield, long-term, systematic issues have plagued efforts to exert more effective controls over US- and NATO-supplied equipment to the ANDSF. In a series of reports over the past few years, the GAO and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) have identified specific shortcomings in oversight and accountability

over weapons that CSTC-A handed over to Afghan forces. According to a 2009 GAO report, these shortcomings were due to unclear guidance, as well as staffing shortages and other factors that led to significant lapses in oversight and accountability (GAO, 2009, p. 3-5).

If tighter controls over equipment handovers—such as improved record-keeping, routine physical end-use checks, and enhanced remote tracking capabilities—had been introduced early on, they could have prevented significant weapon losses that ultimately reduced the Taliban's dependence on external supply lines. By identifying the shortcomings that previously plagued equipment handovers, it may be possible to better understand the challenges that have continually undermined logistics management and accountability, as observed by CAR and widely reported by GAO and SIGAR (GAO, 2009, p. 3-5).

CSTC-A was primarily responsible for managing the distribution of weapons to the ANA and ANP, including end use checks of sensitive equipment (GAO, 2009, p. 2). Between 2002 and 2005, the majority of international donations consisted of non-standard equipment, including Soviet-designed weaponry, sourced primarily from Eastern European countries. The first major purchase of US-manufactured rifles consisted of 37,000 M16 rifles for the ANA in 2005 (GAO, 2009, p. 7-9).

The US Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC) and the US Navy International Programs Office (IPO) were responsible for the bulk of weapon purchases. Until July 2008, however, the USASAC did not require contractors to provide serial numbers for non-standard weapon supplies, even though contractual obligations had long required serial numbers for weapons procured under US Foreign Military Sales (GAO, 2009, p. 14). Up until 2009, CSTC-A did not record the serial numbers of non-standard weapons that passed through the centralized depots in Kabul (GAO, 2009, p. 4). In many cases, CSTC-A simply counted pallets of weapons as they arrived at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) (GAO, 2009, p. 16-17). Weapons were distributed to ANDSF units from the central depots without recording their serial numbers up until July 2008 (GAO, 2009, p. 37).

Recording weapons by serial number is a basic requirement for proper inventory management and record keeping. In 2010, CSTC-A introduced the Core Inventory Management System (CoreIMS), to track the distribution of weapons and ammunition to the ANA and ANP (SIGAR, 2021, pp. 66-67). But this system was built upon previously flawed

record keeping and inventory control management practices.

CAR observed significant challenges related to data entry and record-keeping by the Afghan security forces. These issues were also widely reported by SIGAR. Multiple databases and manual data entry between the Security Cooperation Information Portal (SCIP), the Operational Verification of Reliable Logistics Oversight Database (OVERLORD), and, later, CoreIMS made it nearly impossible to keep track of weapon losses accurately, particularly in light of capacity and technology gaps within ANA and ANP logistics departments. A 2014 SIGAR report to Congress notes that:

**Errors and discrepancies often occur because these two systems [SCIP and OVERLORD] are not linked to each other and require manual data entry. When SIGAR compared the data in the two systems, it found that the databases did not always match [...]. Of the 474,823 total serial numbers recorded in OVERLORD, 43%, or 203,888 weapons, had missing information and/or duplication (SIGAR, 2014, p. 24).**

During the course of its operations in Afghanistan, CAR did observe that ANA and ANP logistics departments expanded their use of CoreIMS, but the system failed to account for battlefield losses or captures in real time. Items recovered from the Taliban and other armed groups during operations could in some cases be traced back in CoreIMS, but their loss was rarely recorded prior to their recovery. In addition to being undermined by the above-mentioned errors and discrepancies in recorded serial numbers, the system was further



Captured weapons with evidence tags applied stored in a shipping container in Helmand Province in March 2021.

undermined by the absence of physical accounting and end-use checks, particularly for units in remote locations. These monitoring gaps persisted up until the recent collapse of the Afghan government. As stated in a January 2021 SIGAR report to Congress:

A SIGAR audit report issued this quarter focused on the extent to which DOD [US Department of Defense], since the beginning of FY 2017, conducted required routine and enhanced post-delivery end-use monitoring of defense articles such as [Humvees], aircraft, and other types of equipment) provided to the ANDSF, reported and investigated potential end-use violations in Afghanistan, and took steps to ensure corrective actions occurred, when applicable. SIGAR found that DOD did not meet enhanced end-use monitoring requirements to account for all sensitive defense articles transferred to the Afghan government. The requirements are designed to minimize national security risks by preventing the diversion or misuse of defense articles that incorporate sensitive technology (SIGAR, 2021, p. 69).

## RECENT TALIBAN SEIZURES OF UNITED STATES EQUIPMENT ARE LIKELY TO USHER IN A NEW BOOM IN THE SUPPLY OF WEAPONS TO ILLICIT MARKETS IN AFGHANISTAN AND BEYOND.

Inadequate end-use checks, as well as poor oversight and accountability over weapon losses, have long plagued US and NATO equipment handovers to the ANDSF. As a result, an accurate assessment of how many weapons and ammunition the Taliban have seized remains unclear. As noted above, such shortcomings are not unique to Afghanistan, but their scale is likely to have serious security implications in the region for years to come.

### THE IMPACT OF RECENT SEIZURES OF US- AND NATO-SUPPLIED WEAPONRY ON REGIONAL SECURITY

The collapse of US and Afghan government controls over national stockpiles in Afghanistan signals a significant proliferation risk, particularly given the persistent presence of al-Qaeda, ISKP, as well as Pakistani and Central Asian terrorist groups that may operate in the country. Competition between these armed groups, as well as complex, decades-old local and regional dynamics, is likely to feed ongoing conflict and instability in Afghanistan and the wider region.

Taken globally, CAR's investigations show that diversion is often linked to ineffective oversight and accountability mechanisms over national stockpiles. Measures to address weapon supply chain security before and after materiel arrives in a destination country are critical components of a holistic security approach. Such measures include risk assessments that take into account the recipients' ability to secure and account for weapons, as well as post-delivery verification checks. A failure to prioritise and develop such mechanisms undermines the rationale for supplying weapons in the first place.

As in Afghanistan, unsatisfactory oversight and accountability measures in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen

have led to the onward diversion of national stockpiles—a process that has significantly destabilised the security of neighbouring countries. In Afghanistan, these risks are underscored by the presence of M4 and M16 rifles documented for sale on local markets previously: a phenomenon that is likely to continue, particularly as economic conditions continue to deteriorate. Indeed, recent Taliban seizures of US equipment are likely to usher in a new boom in the supply of weapons to illicit markets in Afghanistan and beyond. In this context, US-manufactured materiel is likely to be prized for its prestige, as it was in the early stages of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

Further, hundreds of thousands of US- and NATO-supplied weapons—many of which, to the casual observer, appear no different from the 'Kalashnikovs' that have circulated in Afghanistan for decades—are now in the hands of the Taliban. Whatever the shortcomings of US and Afghan government controls over these stockpiles might have been, it is nearly impossible to reclaim control over weapons and ammunition seized by the group. The weaponry left behind will constitute an enduring legacy of recent events.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>ANA</b>	Afghan National Army	<b>GAO</b>	United States Government Accountability Office
<b>ANDSF</b>	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces	<b>ISAF</b>	International Security Assistance Force
<b>ANP</b>	Afghan National Police	<b>IS-K</b>	Islamic State Khorasan
<b>CAR</b>	Conflict Armament Research	<b>OVERLORD</b>	Operational Verification of Reliable Logistics Oversight Database
<b>CoreIMS</b>	Core Inventory Management System	<b>SCIP</b>	Security Cooperation Information Portal
<b>CSTC-A</b>	Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan	<b>SIGAR</b>	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
<b>DOD</b>	United States Department of Defense		

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## ENDNOTES

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1. CAR uses the term ‘black market’ in reference to locations such as open-air bazaars in Taliban controlled areas where weapons and ammunition were informally sold prior to the collapse of the Afghan government. The markets included weapons supplied to Afghanistan that had been diverted, as well as weapons supplied from neighbouring countries. CAR’s research confirms these weapon sales were in many cases carefully regulated by the Taliban, which required and issued weapon permits.
2. Roughly half the weapons in CAR’s Afghanistan data set are copies of common Chinese, European, Russian, and US models commonly produced in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan. While artisanal weapons are not widely used by the main Taliban fighting force, they constitute a significant source of illicit cross-border supply that has fueled criminality, conflict, and instability in Afghanistan for decades, due to their low cost and widespread availability.
3. Confidential source, on file with CAR.
4. The weapons recovered from these attacks were examined and photo-documented by CAR investigators and will be featured in future reporting.
5. Amnesty International originally obtained the audit in 2017, following a Freedom of Information Act request. See Amnesty International (2017).
6. ‘Non-standard weapons’ refer to weapons that have not been assigned a US National Stock Number. This includes Soviet-designed weaponry that may be procured from Eastern European countries.
7. On 6 January 2020, the Government of Hungary responded to a formal trace request issued by CAR on 31 July 2019. This response confirms that:
  - 1) MFS 2000 Magyar Lőszergyártó Zrt (incorporated with RUAG Ammotec Deutschland GmbH, Germany, since 2009) exported the AMD-65 rifle marked with the serial number ‘EE 8672’, the subject of CAR’s trace request, to Sweet Analysis Services Inc. (1020 N. Fairfax Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, Virginia 22314, United States);
  - 2) Sweet Analysis Services Inc. transferred the item to the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which was the declared end user;
  - 3) the export was authorised on the basis of an end-user certificate issued by the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and an order issued by the US Army Security Assistance Program for the exclusive use of the Afghan National Police; and
  - 4) under two export licences, Sweet Analysis Services Inc. exported a total of 35,173 AMD-65 rifles to the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in four shipments:
    - a) 11,554 in July 2007;
    - b) 12,000 in August 2007;
    - c) 10,000 in October 2007 (shipped under a distinct export licence, separate from the other three shipments);
    - d) 1,619 in November 2007;
  - 5) the subject of CAR’s trace request was probably part of the October shipment; and
  - 6) the Government of Hungary holds no further information regarding these exports, such as the route or means of transportation.

In May and August 2007, the Hungarian Ministry of Defence donated 20,500 AMD-65 rifles and 14,566,500 rounds of 7.62 x 39 mm ammunition directly to the Afghan National Army.
8. For example, of the weapons and ammunition seized from the Taliban and documented by CAR, only very small quantities were manufactured by the state industries of Iran and Pakistan. This finding does not preclude the cross-border supply of materiel manufactured by third parties to the Taliban, but it does highlight the complexity of substantiating such claims.
9. Weapon donations to Afghanistan’s intelligence service were not managed by CSTC-A.
10. The cited report is no longer available on the GAO website. See Andrzejewski (2021).

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