FRONTLINE PERSPECTIVE

ILLICIT WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN

– ISSUE 02 –

High-profile attacks claimed by the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan Province in Kabul

February 2022

BACKGROUND

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in mid-August 2021, concerns have grown over the changing terrorist landscape in the country and the threat posed by groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). In recent months, ISKP has claimed responsibility for conflict activity across Afghanistan, including prominent attacks in Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Nangarhar provinces, which have killed and wounded scores of civilians.[1] Understanding how terrorist and insurgent groups continue to gain access to weapons and ammunition is critical to countering these threats moving forward. Although the Taliban now seek to consolidate power, they do so against a host of shifting internal alliances and interests, which are further complicated by the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation across the country.

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 worked in Afghanistan to document illicit weapons in the country. CAR's Afghanistan 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 armed groups in Afghanistan 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.

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This is the second Frontline Perspective highlighting key findings from CAR's Afghanistan data set. It focuses on weapons used in two high-profile attacks in Kabul: the May 2019 Taliban-claimed attack on Counterpart International, a contractor of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the November 2020 ISKP-claimed attack on Kabul University. Given that such incidents have been all too common in Afghanistan, this sample is narrow, but it reveals distinct commonalities among the weapons chosen for such high-profile attacks. This publication also marks the first time that detailed photographs of the weapons used in these urban attacks have been shared publicly. Analysis of the weapons used in these two attacks highlights subtle similarities in the preparation and profile of the selected weapons. It helps shine a spotlight on tactics previously deployed by the Taliban and by ISKP in Kabul. By providing insights into weapon selection for such high-profile attacks, it can also help inform security monitors and analysts moving forward.

THIS PUBLICATION MARKS THE FIRST TIME THAT DETAILED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE WEAPONS USED IN THESE URBAN ATTACKS HAVE BEEN SHARED PUBLICLY.

A view of Kabul city, overlooking Darulaman Road, May 2019.

Former Taliban fighters return their arms during a reintegration ceremony, Ghor province, 28 May 2012. Credit: Lt. j. g. Joe Painter, US Department of Defense.

A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE DEFINED BY COMPLEX LOCAL INTERLINKAGES

The relationship between the Taliban and ISKP in Afghanistan is complex. Ever since the latter emerged on Afghanistan's terrorist landscape in 2015, the Taliban have fiercely challenged those pledging allegiance to ISKP. They have expended significant resources to fight ISKP's territorial advances in the East, forcefully subdued ISKP sympathisers elsewhere, and regularly promote antagonistic propaganda against the group (Osman, 2016).[2] In turn, ISKP has bolstered rhetoric aimed at the Taliban, renewed its recruitment efforts, and taken up the insurgent flag against any government led by or including the Taliban (UNSC, 2021).

Interactions on the ground are often more nuanced, however. Despite a history of inherent sectarian difference between the Hanafist-associated Taliban and Salafist-oriented ISKP, dynamics are often intertwined with complex local undercurrents. For instance, the Taliban have never been a monolithic entity; rather, they are characterised by polycentric nodes of power whose views and priorities may not always internally align (Watkins, 2020). Elements of the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network have allegedly coordinated with ISKP on occasion (Doxsee, Thompson, and Hwang, 2021). Moreover, ISKP has often recruited from disenfranchised Taliban fighters and commanders. ISKP may also become a focal point for any individuals who have grievances against or want to resist Taliban rule, regardless of their ideological adherence to the group (Trofimov, 2021).[3] Compounding these factors is a severe economic downturn in the country, which can be expected to fuel financially motivated recruitment to armed groups in general. Meanwhile, these dynamics are further complicated by a myriad of other terrorist groups operating in and around Afghanistan.

THE WEAPONS RELIED UPON BY THESE GROUPS TO CARRY OUT ATTACKS REFLECT THE NATURE OF THEIR EXISTING STOCKPILES AND RECENT SUPPLIES.

The result is a multifaceted, continually shifting landscape where the relationships between attackers, attack coordinators, and networks of logistical and tactical support may overlap, regardless of distinct claims of attack authorship. Terrorist attacks in Kabul have long been a topic of debate in this regard. From 2015 until the Taliban takeover in 2021, high-profile attacks in Afghanistan's capital were claimed by the Taliban, ISKP, and, in some cases, both.[4] Attackers from both groups deployed similar tactics and targets often bore similar profiles.

The weapons relied upon by these groups to carry out attacks reflect the nature of their existing stockpiles and recent supplies. Analysis of these weapons provides important insights, not only into the materiel within a group's possession, but also the scale and organisation of a group's weapon management practices and how these may shift if violence continues.

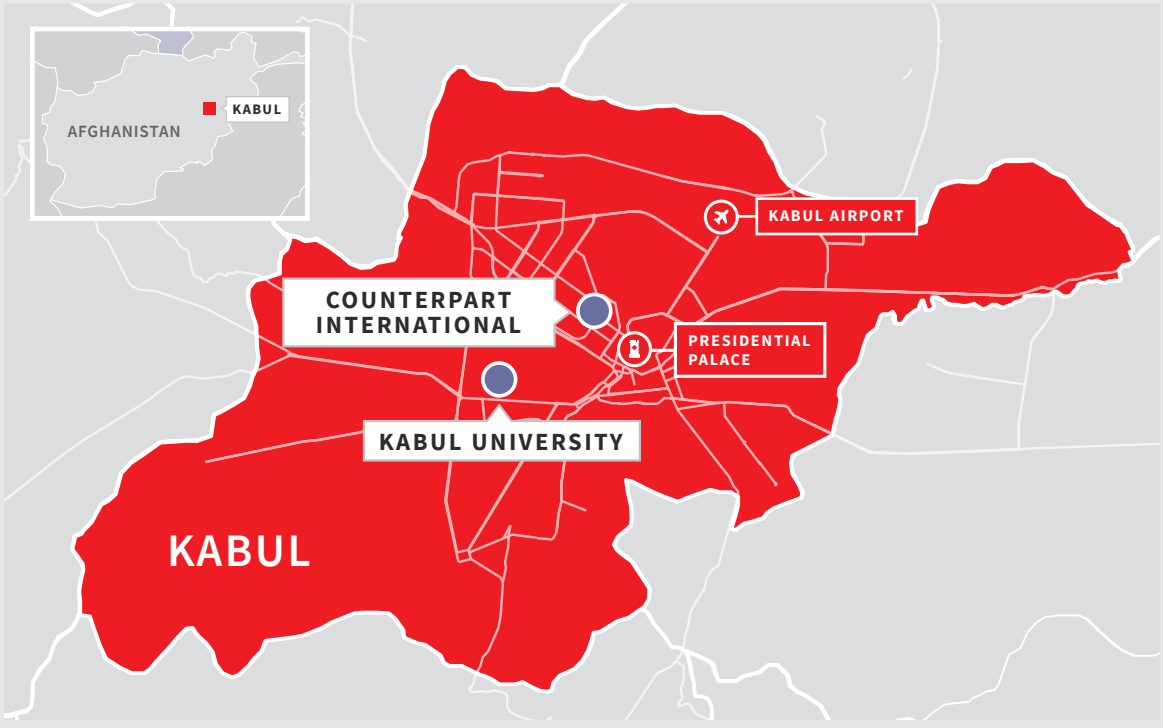
HIGH-PROFILE ATTACKS IN KABUL: WEAPONS DEPLOYED BY ISKP AND THE TALIBAN

Although CAR investigators documented hundreds of weapons recovered from the Taliban and other armed groups in Afghanistan, very few of these could be directly attributed to specific attacks. In rare circumstances, CAR investigators accessed weapons that had been recovered by the former Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) following notable attacks in Kabul. This Frontline Perspective considers six such recovered firearms:

- four assault rifles used in the May 2019 Taliban-claimed attack on USAID contractor Counterpart International; and
- two assault rifles used in the November 2020 ISKP-claimed attack on Kabul University (see Map 1).

The rifles used in these two high-profile attacks show subtle similarities that distinguish the weapons from the larger data set that CAR documented in Afghanistan. They point to a distinct nature of attack preparations undertaken by both groups in Kabul.

TERRORIST ATTACKS IN KABUL HAVE LONG BEEN A TOPIC OF DEBATE [...] FROM 2015 UNTIL THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN 2021, HIGH-PROFILE ATTACKS IN AFGHANISTAN'S CAPITAL WERE CLAIMED BY THE TALIBAN, ISKP, AND, IN SOME CASES, BOTH.



Map 1

Locations of two attacks in Kabul: the 8 May 2019 Taliban-claimed Counterpart International attack in Police District (PD) 10 and the 2 November 2020 ISKP-claimed Kabul University attack in PD 3.

TALIBAN-CLAIMED ATTACK ON USAID CONTRACTOR COUNTERPART INTERNATIONAL

On 8 May 2019, the Taliban carried out an attack targeting USAID contractor Counterpart International.[5] The attack killed nine and wounded three in Kabul's Shahr-e Naw neighbourhood (Al Jazeera, 2019). The Afghan security forces recovered four assault rifles used by the attackers and CAR investigators documented all four weapons in their custody on 13 June 2019.

Three of the weapons used in the attack were 7.62 × 39 mm AKM assault rifles produced in 1961, 1967, and 1970 during the Soviet Union-era by factories based in what is today the Russian Federation;[6] the fourth was an AKMS assault rifle manufactured in Romania in 1985.[7] All four appeared well maintained for their age and featured their original internal working components, except one rifle whose return spring guide had been replaced (see Table 1 and Figures 1–4).

Table 1
Components of the four rifles used in the Counterpart International attack in May 2019

Model (Manufacturing Country)	Weapon serial number	Year of manufacture	Bolt carrier	Bolt	Return spring guide	Top cover	Rear sight (underleaf)	Receiver (internal)	Gas tube (underside)
AKM (Russian Federation)[8]	ИФ1166	1961	ИФ1166	ИФ1166	Illegible	ИФ1166	ИФ1166	166	ИФ1166
AKM (Russian Federation)	БИ1578	1967	БИ1578	БИ1578	894	БИ1578	БИ1578	578	Component not documented
AKM (Russian Federation)	НШ5800	1970	НШ5800	НШ5800	НШ5800	НШ5800	НШ5800	800	НШ5800
AKMS (Romania)[9]	1985 S-BD 1234	1985	S-BD 1234	S-BD 1234	Component not documented[10]	S BD 1234	S BD 1234	234	S-BD 1234

Note: = Highlighting indicates that an original component was replaced.

Given that artisanal rifles are in common illicit circulation in Afghanistan, it is worth noting that none of the four rifles was of artisanal or local manufacture. Roughly half of the weapons in CAR's Afghanistan data set are local copies of Chinese, European, Russian, and US models that are commonly produced in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan. These artisanal weapons constitute a significant source of illicit cross-border supply due to their low cost and widespread availability. Their reliability and performance vary considerably, however, which may explain their absence from the sample of weapons used in high-profile attacks.

IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT NONE OF THE FOUR RIFLES WAS OF ARTISANAL OR LOCAL MANUFACTURE.

Counterpart International's compound following the Taliban-claimed attack on 8 May 2019.

Figure 1

A 7.62 × 39 mm AKM assault rifle, manufactured by Izhmash in 1961 and recovered by the former ANDSF following the 8 May 2019 Taliban attack on Counterpart International. CAR documented the serial number (ИФ1166) on the weapon's components, including the gas tube (left), top cover (right), and bolt carrier (bottom left, top).

Figure 2

A 7.62 × 39 mm AKM assault rifle, manufactured by Izhmash in 1967 and recovered by the former ANDSF following the 8 May 2019 Taliban attack on Counterpart International. CAR documented the serial number (БИ1578) on the weapon's components, including the bolt (right) and bolt carrier (bottom left, top). The return spring guide (left) bears a non-matching mark (894), indicating that this component originated with a different weapon.

Figure 3

A 7.62 × 39 mm AKM assault rifle, manufactured by Tula Arms Plant in 1970 and recovered by the former ANDSF following the 8 May 2019 Taliban attack on Counterpart International. CAR documented the serial number (НШ5800) on the weapon's components, including inside the receiver (left), the underside of the rear sight leaf (right), and the bolt carrier (bottom left, top).

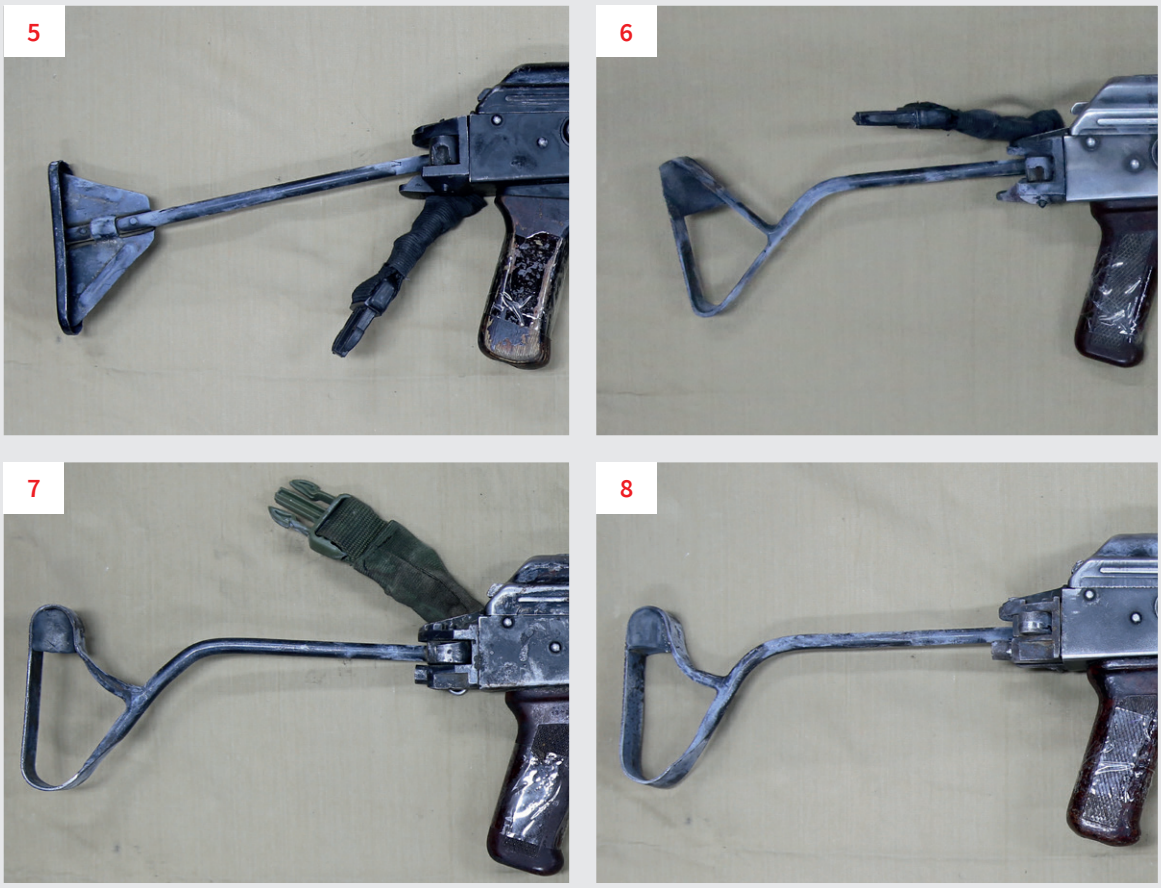
Figure 4

A 7.62 × 39 mm AKMS assault rifle, manufactured by Uzina Mecanică Sadu S.A. in Romania in 1985 and recovered by the former ANDSF following the 8 May 2019 Taliban attack on Counterpart International. CAR documented the serial number (1985 S-BD 1234) on the weapon's components, including the bolt carrier (left) and gas tube (right).

Loose small-calibre ammunition recovered in Kandahar province, 20 February 2020.

The four rifles were fitted with side-folding buttstocks. In the case of the three AKM rifles, this modification took place after production, since no Soviet-era manufactured AKM-pattern rifles were fitted with side-folding stocks at manufacture. The rifle in Figure 1 was fitted with an Egyptian-pattern side-folding stock, recognisable by its distinctive triangular shoulder plate and straight stock strut (Iannamico, 2012, p. 440; see Figure 5). The rifle in Figure 2 bears a generic East German-style side-folding stock, which is often available on the open market (see Figure 6). The weapons in Figures 3 and 4 are both fitted with Romanian-style side-folding stocks, identified by their push-button release and the slight curve in the metal where the shoulder plate folds back into the strut (Iannamico, 2012, p. 385; see Figures 7 and 8).[11] Figures 9–12 show the buttstock attachments in detail.

The presence of AKM rifles fitted with post-production folding stocks is notable, as CAR identified replacement stocks on only around one in nine of the 100 plus non-artisanal AKM assault rifles in the Afghanistan data set. While this modification may be uncommon in CAR's sample, it is not unique to Afghanistan, and CAR has observed



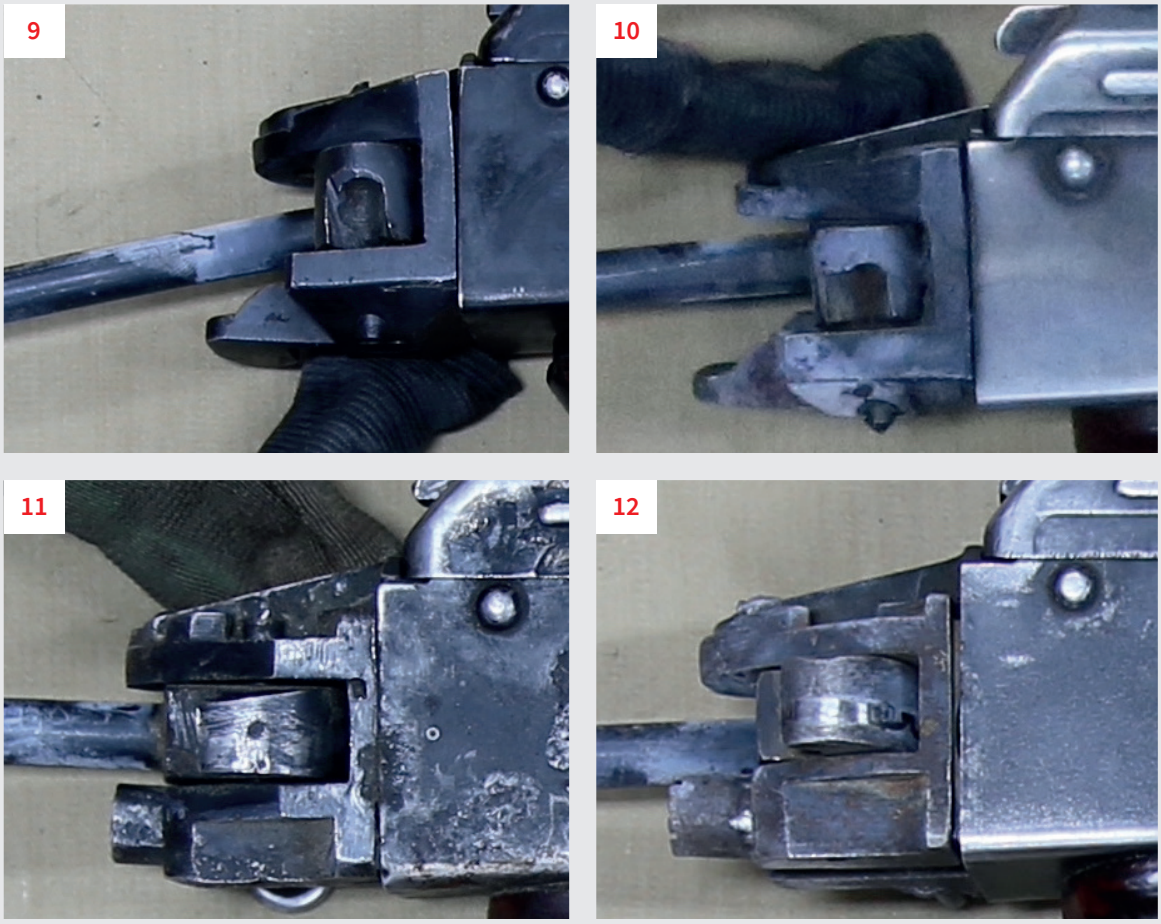
Figures 5–8

The four rifles used in the attack on Counterpart International display different styles of folding buttstocks, as produced in Egypt (Figure 5), East Germany (Figure 6), and Romania (Figures 7 and 8).

such modifications in other conflict theatres. Compared to fixed-stock counterparts, foldable stocks arguably make concealment and transport less onerous. They are advantageous for smuggling items into or moving them around an urban environment such as Kabul, or when operators manoeuvre on motorbikes or in vehicles. It is possible that these weapons were selected, sought out, or modified precisely due to their portability and ease of concealment in the city.

Standard-issue military rifles—that is to say, those commonly issued to dismounted infantry troops—are often fitted with fixed stocks, which improves their accuracy potential. Folding-stock rifles are more often encountered in service with troops who operate from vehicles, perform non-combat duties, or need to deploy from a confined space. CAR posits that fixed-stock military rifles that are diverted and repurposed for criminal or insurgent use are likely to be adapted to suit the needs of the new user, which may include modifying the weapon to accept post-production folding stocks. The side-folding stock can be readily fitted to a fixed-stock AKM-pattern rifle, with little modification to the weapon. Under-folding stocks cannot be as easily retrofitted, which is why side-folding stocks are more often encountered as a post-production modification to fixed-stocked weapons.

Three of the four rifles used in the Counterpart International attack had identical single point sling attachments with a clip at the end (see Figures 13–15). The presence of a clip attachment on the rifle sling is highly distinctive; no other assault rifles—of any model—in CAR's Afghanistan data set display this form of modification. Such clip attachments are typically used by combatants who wear body armour or tactical vests, as they allow them to attach the weapon to their body, drop it, and pick it up repeatedly from the same place over the course of attacks that can be hours long. The use of clip attachments may suggest that the fighters were trained in common military practices or that they observed and imitated the tactics of trained security forces.[12]



Figures 9–12

The side-folding buttstock attachments of the three modified AKMs, while similar, are distinct in their construction (Figures 9–11). The AKMS buttstock attachment was probably fitted at the point of production (Figure 12).

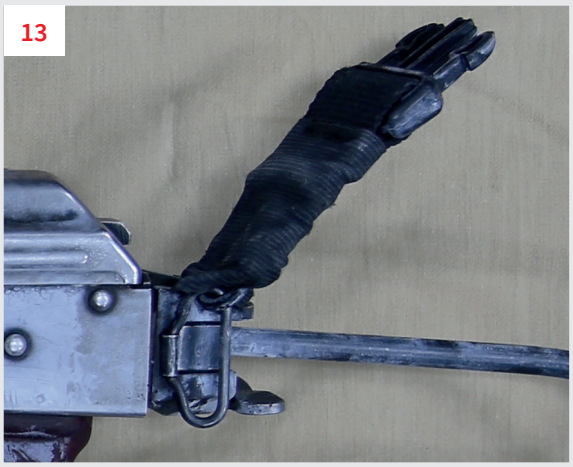


Figure 13–15

Clip attachments on three AKM assault rifles that had been used in the Counterpart International attack on 8 May 2019. CAR has not observed such sling attachments on any other assault rifles in its Afghanistan data set.

Kabul city from TV Hill, prior to the Taliban takeover in mid-August 2021, May 2019

ISKP-CLAIMED ATTACK ON KABUL UNIVERSITY

ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack at Kabul University on 2 November 2020, in which at least 22 people were killed and another 22 were wounded (Faiez and Gannon, 2020). The former Afghan security forces recovered two assault rifles used by the attackers and CAR field investigators documented the weapons in their custody on 1 December 2020.

Both recovered weapons were 7.62 × 39 mm AKS-47 Type 2 non-artisanal assault rifles produced in 1953 and 1954 by Izhmash, a factory based in what is now the Russian Federation (see Figures 16 and 17). Each weapon appeared to be well maintained, with original internal working parts, although one rifle was fitted with a replacement top cover (see Table 2).

The presence of multiple matching internal components in weapons that are almost 70 years old and in active use in conflict is striking. By comparison, CAR investigators documented nine other AKS-47 rifles in Afghanistan with visible serial numbers. Analysis of the markings on the bolt carrier, bolt, top cover, and return spring guide on these nine weapons found that none retained all four of these original components; instead, bore marks suggested that they had been replaced at some point in their lifespan. Intermixing of parts in older weapons is the norm across CAR's entire global weapon database.

Table 2
Components of the two rifles used in the Kabul University attack in November 2020[13]

Model (Manufacturing Country)	Weapon serial number	Year of manufacture	Bolt carrier	Bolt	Return spring guide	Top cover
AKS-47 (Russian Federation)	ФК 6180	1953	ФК 6180	ФК 6180	ФК 6180	ФК 6180
AKS-47 (Russian Federation)	ЛК9177	1954	ЛК9177	ЛК9177	ЛК9177	ИК2208

Note: = Highlighting indicates that an original component was replaced.

Figure 16
A 7.62 × 39 mm AKS-47 Type 2 assault rifle, manufactured by Izhmash in 1953 and recovered by the former ANDSF following the 2 November 2020 ISKP attack on Kabul University. CAR documented the serial number (ФК 6180) on the weapon's components, including the bolt carrier (left) and bolt (right).

Figure 17

A 7.62 × 39 mm AKS-47 Type 2 assault rifle, manufactured by Izhmash in 1954 and recovered by the former ANDSF following the 2 November 2020 ISKP attack on Kabul University. CAR documented the serial number (ЛК9177) on the weapon's components, including the return spring guide (left). The top cover bears a non-matching mark (ИК2208), indicating that this component originated with a different weapon.

Military equipment confiscated by the former ANDSF, Kabul province, 20 April 2019.

SIMILARITIES ACROSS WEAPONS USED BY DIFFERENT GROUPS IN BOTH HIGH-PROFILE ATTACKS

There are subtle similarities in the apparent preparations undertaken for the two attacks analysed in this Frontline Perspective. The six weapons used stand out in several ways when compared to CAR's larger data set of nearly 600 rifles that the ANDSF recovered from the Taliban, ISKP, criminals, and other armed groups in Afghanistan (see Box 1 below).

First, the combatants appear to have selected specific rifle models for each attack. By choosing three modified AKMs and an AKMS with side-folding buttstocks, and two AKS-47 models with standard factory-folding buttstocks, they ensured the weapons would be relatively easy to transport and conceal in an urban environment.

Second, the age of the selected weapons is significant for investigators. The rifles deployed in the Taliban attack on Counterpart International were 34–58 years old, while the ones used in the ISKP attack on Kabul University were nearly 70 years old. Due to their age, these weapons are nearly impossible to trace. While it is unlikely that such considerations played an overt role in the selection of these weapons for these two high profile attacks, the observation raises questions as to how these items may have been stored over time, and why their age was not considered a deterrence to selection.

Third, while it is not uncommon to find well-maintained weapons in illicit circulation, these weapons exhibit a higher degree of maintenance than many of those observed in the rest of CAR's data set from Afghanistan. Their good condition may be attributable to exceptional care over several decades, but it could also be indicative of a short chain of custody or limited battlefield use, despite the weapons' ages.

Fourth, all items were of Soviet-era design and manufacture, despite the prevalence in Afghanistan of other options, such as readily accessible artisanal weapons, or the documented availability of US models (CAR, 2021). This finding indicates that groups carrying out such high-profile attacks in Afghanistan may opt for well-maintained Soviet-era weaponry that is both familiar and reliable.

Perhaps most notably, particularly given their advanced age, the weapons still featured nearly all their original working parts. These included bolts, bolt carriers, and return spring guides, as identified by the components' markings, which matched the main serial numbers on the left side of their forward trunnions or receivers. Of all the main components of the rifles used in these two attacks, only one return spring guide and one top cover had been replaced.

Matching components are not necessary for the proper functioning of a rifle. CAR has observed a high degree of 'cannibalisation' of decades-old weaponry in Afghanistan and across many other countries, where worn or faulty components are swapped with replacement parts from weapons with different serial numbers. In contrast, the weapons used in the Kabul attacks were not subject to such widespread replacements, and they appear to have been well kept for decades, raising questions as to their provenance and storage prior to their use in these attacks.

Box 1: Similarities across weapons used in high-profile attacks in Kabul.

1. Easy to transport and conceal
2. Nearly impossible to trace
3. High degree of maintenance
4. Familiar and reliable models
5. Nearly all their original working parts

THE RIFLES DEPLOYED IN THE TALIBAN ATTACK ON COUNTERPART INTERNATIONAL WERE 34–58 YEARS OLD, WHILE THE ONES USED IN THE ISKP ATTACK ON KABUL UNIVERSITY WERE NEARLY 70 YEARS OLD.

CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that ISKP has established distinct and effective sources of supply in Kabul that are completely independent of those previously used by the Taliban. Based on a decade of investigations in various conflict theatres, CAR has found that supply lines to different non-state actors in any given theatre tend to be consolidated. While the assessment of the rifles used in the two Kabul attacks does not speak directly to the associated sources of supply, it does show that, prior to the fall of the former Afghan government, the Taliban and ISKP employed comparable weapon selection and preparation tactics in opting for firearms with similar characteristics.

These similarities distinguish the six weapons used in the two high-profile attacks in Kabul from those in CAR's larger Afghanistan data set, which covers more than 1,600 weapons documented between 2019 and 2021. In selecting these six rifles, the attackers appear to have shown a preference for familiar, reliable, Soviet-era weaponry, and specifically for ones that retain their original components decades after manufacture and remain in good condition.

The multifaceted security landscape in Afghanistan will likely continue to shift and develop. In a country where the Taliban have yet to consolidate control, ISKP and other terrorist groups in the region remain a threat, networks of logistical support between these groups may overlap, and decades of war have left a plethora of weapons in circulation, further investigations of illicit arms flows in and around Afghanistan will continue to be necessary.

ATTACKERS HAVE SHOWN A PREFERENCE FOR SOVIET-ERA WEAPONRY AND FOR THOSE THAT RETAIN THEIR ORIGINAL COMPONENTS DECADES AFTER MANUFACTURE.

Storage container holding seized weapons, Logar province, 25 June 2019.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANDSF	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces
CAR	Conflict Armament Research
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
PD	Police District
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Al Jazeera (2021), Beaumont (2021), Graham-Harrison and Rauf Wafa (2021), and Trofimov, Youssef, and Engel Rasmussen (2021).
2. The most notable examples of Taliban action against ISKP sympathisers came from Jawzjan, Kunduz and Baghlan, and Zabul provinces. For Jawzjan province, see Ali (2018); for Kunduz and Baghlan provinces, see Ali (2016); and for Zabul province, see Osman (2016) and Blue, Gibbons-Neff, and Goldbaum (2021).
3. See also Asey (2021) and Sarwary (2021).
4. On 27 September 2017, for instance, both ISKP and the Taliban claimed responsibility for that day's rocket attack on Kabul airport (Copp, 2017).
5. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid issued a claim of responsibility for the attack via Twitter on 8 May (Mujahid, 2019).
6. On 5 November 2021, CAR submitted a trace request to the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations regarding these items. At the time of writing, CAR had not received a response. Given the absence of a trace response, CAR cannot assess the legality of the transfer/s in question.
7. On 24 September 2021, the Government of Romania responded to a formal trace request issued by CAR on 28 August 2021. This response confirms: 1) Uzina Mecanică Sadu S.A. manufactured the AKMS assault rifle bearing the serial number '1985 S-BD 1234', the subject of CAR's trace request, in 1985; and 2) taking into consideration that the rifle was manufactured and exported more than 30 years ago, the exporter could not provide details regarding the export of this item.
8. This Frontline Perspective refers to countries of manufacture using present-day place names. For instance, 'Russian Federation' refers to the current territory of the Russian Federation both before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
9. The Government of Romania uses the model designations AKM and AKMS and CAR also employs this terminology.
10. Although CAR field investigators make every effort to document each component of a rifle with its corresponding marks, photo-documentation can be limited by time restraints or dynamic conditions on the ground.
11. See also Jimmy C, Gunboards.com (2009).
12. Notably, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops, the multinational Western-led military mission in Afghanistan in 2001–14, adopted this sling attachment early on in their campaign.
13. Although CAR field investigators make every effort to document each component of a rifle with its corresponding marks, photo-documentation can be limited by time restraints or dynamic conditions on the ground.

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Published online by Conflict Armament Research.

First published in February 2022.

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