

Surveying the Battlefield

ILLICIT ARMS IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ, AND SOMALIA

A decade after the adoption of the UN Programme of Action on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, public understanding of the types and sources of illicit small arms and light weapons remains extremely limited. Most accounts are based on data that is vague and anecdotal. Thus, we are left to wonder what models of small arms and light weapons are most readily available to terrorists, insurgents, and criminals. How technologically advanced are these weapons? Is it possible to keep them out of the hands of individuals and groups that are likely to misuse them? How old are they, and how many are still functional? What are the most significant sources of illicit small arms and light weapons? Answers to these questions have the potential to shape efforts to stem the flow of illicit weapons and shed light on the threat they now pose. This chapter inaugurates a multi-year project by the Small Arms Survey and the Federation of American Scientists to provide such answers through analysis of previously unreleased or under-utilized data on illicit small arms and light weapons.

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The project consists of three overlapping phases. This chapter distills the findings of the first phase, focusing on ‘war weapons’, namely small arms and light weapons illicitly acquired and used by non-state actors in high-intensity conflict zones. Phase two will look at illicit small arms in low-intensity armed conflicts and in countries affected by high-intensity organized criminal violence. The third and final phase will examine countries affected primarily by individual criminal violence.

To date, the project has collected and analysed data on 80,000 illicit small arms, light weapons, and light weapons ammunition in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia, making it the largest study of its kind. Data on illicit weapons in Iraq and Afghanistan was compiled from documents summarizing the contents of more than 1,500 seized arms caches. The data includes hundreds of previously unreleased records obtained directly from the governments of Australia, the UK, and the United States. Analysis of illicit weapons in Somalia is based on a comprehensive review of reports published by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia from 2004 through 2011.

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While the scope, specificity, and comprehensiveness of the data vary considerably from country to country, overall the data sheds new light on illicit weapons in war zones, confirming some common assumptions and challenging others. The main findings from this first phase of the project include:

- The vast majority of illicit small arms in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia appear to be Kalashnikov-pattern assault rifles. Other types of small arms are comparatively rare.
- Most illicit light weapons and light weapons ammunition studied appear to be versions of Soviet- and Chinese-designed weapons first fielded decades ago.
- Data compiled for this study suggests that armed groups in Afghanistan and Iraq have access to very few technologically sophisticated or latest-generation light weapons.
- Newly acquired data on weapons seized in Iraq suggests that a significant percentage of seized Iranian weapons were manufactured recently.

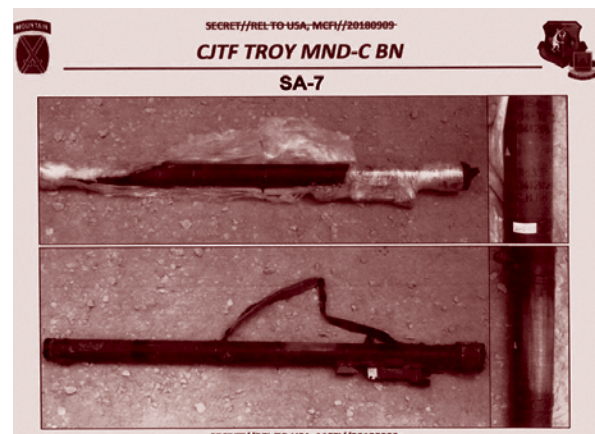


Image 10.4 SA-7b MANPADS recovered from an arms cache in Iraq.



A member of the armed militia for the Islamic Courts Union poses with a recoilless rifle near Mogadishu, December 2008. © AP Photo

- Despite the large quantities of small arms and light weapons that are trafficked into Somalia, the variety of available items is limited.

The chapter begins by defining key terms and concepts. A brief overview of the data used in the study is then provided. Illicit small arms and light weapons in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia are then assessed in more depth. The chapter concludes with additional observations about 'war weapons'. ❏