

Arming the Enemy in Afghanistan

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By Jonathan Broder and Sami Yousafzai On 5/18/15 at 12:36 PM

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"Sir, don't go out that far," the soldier warned.

It was 2010, and Jeffrey Brown, a Pentagon auditor, was walking with a U.S. Army escort through Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, an Afghan city near the Pakistani border. They had just stepped toward one of several sand-colored buildings on campus when the soldier stopped Brown and looked out at the sun-bleached hills in the distance. "If the Taliban were shooting only AK-47s, we wouldn't have to worry," he said. "But we know they have M-16s, and we've taken sniper fire from those hills."

For decades, the M-16 has been the U.S. military's preferred automatic rifle. It has more than twice the range of the AK-47, the legendary Russian assault weapon. Which is why the Taliban favors the M-16, too. On another inspection tour, Brown got a better sense of the Taliban's preference. As his convoy rumbled out of Bagram Airfield, the Army combat veteran recognized the distinctive clatter of M-16 fire as bullets ricocheted off the sides of his armored troop carrier. The Taliban were firing on his convoy with American arms and ammunition.

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There are only a few ways the Taliban get U.S. weapons. Insurgents sometimes capture them from Afghan police or soldiers. But usually, U.S. and Afghan officials say, they just buy them from corrupt members of the Afghan security forces. One Afghan army colonel, who asked to be identified only by his last name, Ahmadzai, said entire groups of soldiers manning various checkpoints have sold their weapons and ammunition to the insurgents. And Taliban commanders say there's a thriving black market for U.S.-supplied guns that even includes dealers from neighboring Iran.

"People in the business know how to get weapons from the police and the Afghan army," said one Taliban commander in the southern province of Helmand. (Like many of those who spoke to *Newsweek*, he asked for anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.)

It's difficult to know how many American weapons the Afghan army and police have sold to the Taliban. But few in Afghanistan find this trend surprising. The same thing happened, Ahmadzai said, during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, when Afghan soldiers routinely pawned their Russian-supplied arms to the *mujahedeen* for money and political protection. In one instance, the colonel recalls, an Afghan pilot flew his Russian Hind helicopter over the border to Pakistan, where he sold the aircraft.

Before the bulk of U.S. troops left Afghanistan last year, some were killed and wounded by Taliban militants firing American-supplied arms. The first [reports](#) began to surface in 2009, when coalition forces discovered American weapons on the bodies of insurgents they'd killed. But over the past few years, the problem seems to have grown exponentially. These days, with Afghan security forces taking the lead on the battlefield, they're facing an enemy that in many cases has been armed by their own comrades.



U.S. Army 1st Lt. Jason Davis, left, pats an Afghan National Army soldier on the helmet after he and his team conducted a search of the village of Barakzai, in Sangesar, Afghanistan, April 12, 2012. Bryan Denton/The New York Times/Redux

Last year, a U.S. [audit](#) revealed that the Pentagon lost track of many of the 465,000 light weapons the U.S. supplied to Afghan security forces. Part of the problem: shoddy American record-keeping. Many of the serial numbers on the guns were duplicated or entered erroneously in two databases. But the audit also found that some 80,000 of the weapons in question were surplus AK-47 assault rifles, which the Pentagon had replaced with M-16s but failed to

take back from the Afghans.

"If you have 80,000 weapons sitting in a warehouse and you have poor records for them, 10,000 of those can get sold, and it's unlikely anyone would ever know," said Brown, who conducted the audit for the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction (SIGAR), an agency created to independently monitor how U.S. reconstruction money is being spent across the country. Brown also said Afghan officials obstructed attempts by his office to inspect the warehouses where the weapons were allegedly being stored. "It's direct corruption," he said. "Things just walk out the backdoor."

In some cases, U.S. officials say, their Afghan counterparts order weapons they don't need and sell them to their enemies. The money they earn from these illicit sales is significant in a country where a soldier or police officer earns roughly [\\$165 per month](#). The Taliban commander in Helmand province said an M-16 can fetch about \$5,000 on the black market. Ahmadzai, the army colonel, said that the rifle's armor-piercing ammunition is also in great demand; a dozen U.S.-made bullets sell for between \$40 and \$50. Shells for grenade launchers go for roughly \$60. And U.S.-supplied sidearms, such as Smith & Wesson or Beretta 9 mm semi-automatic pistols, are in such high demand that Afghan officials recently imposed \$1,500 fines and an automatic court-martial on members of the security forces who say they've lost them.

To pass periodic inspections by their superiors, some Afghan police commanders even let the insurgents "rent" their American-made weapons for attacks, then reclaim them after the assault, according to U.S. officials. Other times, the Taliban use novel ways to acquire guns and ammunition from Afghan government forces without risking direct contact.

"We have evidence that during the night, the Taliban cut loose a trained donkey which then heads for a checkpoint," Khalil Hotak, a police official in the eastern province of Ghazni, told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in a December 2013 [account](#). "The donkey stops there, the police bring out ammunition cases and load them onto the donkey, and it returns the way it came...taking them to the Taliban."

Since SIGAR published its arms audit, Brown said, the Pentagon has begun to clean up its weapons databases. But in the latest twist to the problems plaguing the U.S. effort in Afghanistan, the State Department says it wants major reductions of SIGAR's staff, ostensibly as part of a plan to reduce U.S. Embassy personnel in Kabul by next year. Such a move would not only violate legal guarantees of independence for the agency; it would also mean much less oversight for the Afghan reconstruction effort. Since 2002, Washington has doled out nearly \$110 billion to rebuild Afghanistan; when adjusted for inflation, that's more money than the U.S. spent rebuilding Western Europe after World War II. In a litany of reports over the past few years, SIGAR already has identified billions of dollars lost through waste, fraud and other forms of corruption.

John Sopko, the special inspector general, said the planned reductions are particularly ill-timed because the new Afghan government has been far more responsive to the agency's recommendations than its predecessor. In January, Sopko's inspectors uncovered a scheme by local contractors to overcharge the Afghan government—and U.S. taxpayers—by some \$200 million on a \$1 billion fuel contract. President Ashraf Ghani immediately fired the contractors, canceled the deal and launched a government probe.

"This is a total 180-degree turn from the way it was under [Hamid] Karzai," Sopko said. "Ghani is not only saying the right thing about corruption; he's actually doing the right thing."

Ghani's approach could eventually result in a crackdown on the sale of American arms to the Taliban. But ground-level U.S. officials like Brown caution against expecting too much too soon. Both the Pentagon and the Afghans, he said, will first have to improve their weapons-tracking systems before anything changes. Until then, Brown said, "accountability is so poor," if the security forces sell more guns to the enemy, in most cases "we wouldn't know."