Arms and the Terrorist

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On March 14, 2005, eighteen members of an illicit small arms trafficking network were arrested in New York, Los Angeles, and Fort Lauderdale in the midst of preparations for the shipment of an undetermined number of rocket launchers, anti-tank missile systems, and machine guns to the United States. Once these weapons arrived in the U.S., they would have most likely been lost in the American criminal underworld of black market arms dealers, potentially winding up in the hands of militiamen, criminal organizations, or terrorists.

The March 2005 seizure focused national attention on an issue that has bedeviled the international community for years: illicit small arms trafficking. Small arms (that is, non-nuclear, man-portable personal and military weapons and ammunition) are the lifeblood of groups such as al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and the insurgents now operating in Iraq. Curb the small arms trade, and you can effectively neuter the threat posed by these organizations. Yet so far, the United States and its foreign allies have failed to develop a proactive strategy to combat the global small arms trade and its increasingly evident intersection with international terrorism.

The Cold War legacy

The world is awash with weapons. Conflict-ridden regions in Africa, Asia,

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and portions of Latin America have been inundated with small arms since the end of World War II. Current estimates put the number of small arms available worldwide at around 550 million, or approximately "one [gun] for every 12 people."[1] And, while few would ascribe the availability of these weapons alone as the cause of conflicts, there is widespread agreement that their presence and accessibility "exacerbate" and "prolong" regional instability.[2]

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The vast majority of these weapons were not produced by the countries they currently reside in. They have been trafficked by second and third parties over a period that spans almost six decades. During the Cold War, the strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union facilitated such transfers, with both Washington and Moscow propping up sympathetic regimes with economic aid, military training and, most importantly, weapons.[3]

With the collapse of the USSR, however, things got much worse. The end of the ideological competition between the U.S. and the USSR signaled a withering of superpower support for third world proxy wars. It also heralded the end of the uncompetitive economies that had been sustained by that competition, as trade barriers fell away and "globalization" became the watchword of the day.

For the countries of the Soviet bloc, the effects were devastating. Arms manufacturing industries and brokers in the Soviet Union had enjoyed a constant supply of state-supported (and state-run) business. Consequently, entire economies had become built around arms. Ukraine, for example, boasted "a third of the USSR's defense industries," industries that "contributed as much as 45% of the republic's gross national product. It was producing enough hardware to equip five war fronts…"[4] And Ukraine was not the only state in crisis; The Soviet collapse similarly left a number of Third World dictators "broke but well armed."[5]

Today's arms merchants and illicit dealers found their callings in this turmoil. Former intelligence officers, military personnel, diplomatic officials, and weapons manufacturers were left without jobs as defense industries downsized and privatized. Of those fortunate enough to remain employed, many lacked consistent pay and compensation. Soldiers without pay, and having to care for loved ones, sold the one thing they had: their guns. Unlike the Cold War weapons market that was driven by demand, the weapons market of the 1990s was driven by supply: the burgeoning stockpiles of weapons left behind by the Soviet Union.

Illicit arms traffickers took advantage of economic globalization to expand the availability of, and the demand for, their products. This process transpired concurrent with the decline of the Soviet Union and the violent dissolution and secession of numerous states. The two trends made for a volatile mix, and a more efficient business process that allowed weapons and money to travel farther, faster, and with less obstacles—fueling a number of new regional conflicts in the process.

The networks that have been built to move weapons are as diverse as the

people who operate them. They may be regional or worldwide. They may be goods-specific, limiting themselves to transactions in only weapons, or the networks may facilitate the transfer of a wide range of legal and illegal goods. The weapons that move within these networks can be bought from numerous sources, but many experts believe that the "major point of origin" for most illicit small arms is Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics.[6]

Victor Bout is a key player in this game. A former Soviet KGB officer of Tadjik origin, Bout—like many of his former Soviet military colleagues—was forced out of the military when his air force regiment was disbanded at the end of Cold War. But Bout had the experience required to connect the demand for weapons with the abundant supply that dotted the landscapes of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Bout created his first airline, Air Cess, just as the Soviet Air Force was reducing its forces. Drawing from old Soviet cargo planes, he managed to create what experts describe as "one of the world's largest private fleets of aircraft."[7] Bout used these aging but still operable aircraft to ferry various and sundry military supplies to conflict zones worldwide. And Air Cess proved to be just the beginning; as of 2001, the U.S. government has been able to identify at least five airlines owned by Bout, and approximately 300 people directly employed by him.[8]

Today, Bout specializes in busting sanctions, and he does it well. He has flown weapons to the Philippines in support of Abu Sayyaf, and is known to have provided the Libyan government with weapons.[9] Likewise, Bout has facilitated the shipment of small arms to various rebel movements in countries such as Liberia, Angola, and the Congo. Bout's chief motive is financial profit, and he sees no problem with supporting a number of warring factions against one another.

Bout, moreover, is not alone. In Europe, a Ukrainian named Semion Mogilevich smuggles weapons from Russia through an elaborate network that ends in Spain.[10] Routinely, they travel by air or land through Ukraine to Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania. They traverse the Mediterranean Sea by boat through Gibraltar for a brief stop in Spanish Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, and then double back across to the Spanish resort of Marbella.[11]

These operations are just a small sampling of the numerous weapons trafficking networks that exist throughout the world, but they provide an illustration of the complexity of the phenomenon—and its worldwide reach.

The trafficking-terrorism nexus

Unlike most periods in history, the post-"post-Cold War era" began at a definitive date and time: September 11th, 2001, at 8:46am. At that moment, the foreign policy fumbling that characterized much of the 1990s stopped abruptly, and a clear objective and set of guiding principles began to emerge. Henceforth, the number one foreign policy priority of the United States would be the defeat of international terrorist organizations and their supporters at home and abroad.

Logic would dictate that America's stance toward weapons traffickers would also have changed. The mere existence of trafficking networks makes them a threat to the national security and stability of numerous nations. Moreover, the fact that these networks are increasingly becoming intertwined with terrorist organizations highlights the need to monitor their activities. And Victor Bout, the dozens of illicit arms traffickers like him, and the networks

within which they conduct their business can provide the United States and its allies with the means to infiltrate, undermine, and shut down terrorist organizations and their supporters.

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"September 11th produced a decisive impact alerting the international community to the link between illicit arms trade and terrorism," says Ambassador Kuniko Inoguchi of Japan. According to her, "trafficking in small arms and light weapons is at the core of this nexus" since it allows them to train and equip their followers and exert their influence over weak nations.[12] No two networks illustrate this better than Victor Bout's operations in Liberia and Semion Mogilevich's operations in Morocco and Spain.

During the 1990s, Bout became a key player in the long and bloody Liberian civil war, and in Liberian dictator Charles Taylor's active support of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. Earning a reputation as "someone who could fly virtually anything anywhere in Africa," Bout was the natural choice to provide Charles Taylor with the weapons he needed to fight for control over Liberia and support the RUF as it pillaged neighboring Sierra Leone.[13] These operations, however, also connected Bout's organization to an industry deeply infiltrated by Islamic radicals, ranging from Hezbollah to al-Qaeda. Combined with his alleged support of the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines, his provision of the surface-to-air missiles fired at an Israeli airliner in Mombassa in 2002,[14] and his documented support of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Liberian connections display a tangled relationship between Bout's weapons trafficking networks and terrorist organizations. Bout—and others like him—either provide the actual weapons that terrorists use to conduct their training and operations, or indirectly supply the arms and logistical backbone used by those who support terrorists with havens from which to conduct attacks.

Mogilevich's activities tell a similar story. Just before the attacks of 2001, the Ukrainian mobster emerged at the center of a European investigation into the arrest of an al-Qaeda-linked group in Paris. When apprehended in August 2001, the group had in its possession a suitcase containing uranium-235.[15] Subsequent investigations into the incident have determined that the group attained the uranium via Mogilevich's Ukraine-Marbella route—a transit corridor that, prior to September 11th, had been a favorite among transnational criminals and terrorists entering Europe from the Maghreb.[16]

Patterns of interaction

In its study of the subject, the U.S. Library of Congress found three broad patterns connecting terrorism and transnational crime in Europe.

1) Alliances for mutual benefit, in which terrorists enter agreements with transnational criminals solely to gain funding, without engaging directly in commercial activities or compromising their ideologically based mission;

2) Direct involvement of terror groups in organized crime, removing the middleman but maintaining the ideological premise of their strategy, and;

3) The replacement of ideology by profit as the main motive for operations.[17]

Al-Qaeda's dealings with Mogilevich in Spanish Morocco and Bout in Liberia fall into the first category. In these instances, the cooperation has been based upon nothing more than mutual benefit, with neither group compromising its primary mission. The weapons traffickers, in short, view the terrorists as little more than clients, and business is business.

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A group that epitomizes the second pattern is alleged to have been responsible for the March 11, 2003 train bombings in Madrid, Spain. Takfir wal Hijra is an al-Qaeda-linked extremist organization that currently operates throughout Western Europe and portions of the Maghreb. What separates it from other al-Qaeda affiliates is the open acceptance of crime and vice by its members as a means of waging war against the West.[18] Takfir accepts drinking and drug use, encourages short hair and Western dress, and permits drug and weapons trade—all as a means of blending into Western society and funding their *jihad*.

Progressing from the second pattern to the third pattern tends to be detrimental for a terrorist group, especially an Islamic fundamentalist one. By losing sight of their ideological goal, the groups risk erosion in their base of popular support, and a slowdown of funding from higher echelons of their parent organizations.

Some well-known terrorist organizations have drifted between the second and third patterns, and have paid for it dearly. In the early 1990s, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria was a major ally for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda heavily funded the organization during the bloody Algerian civil conflict, until the GIA began to lose track of its ideological purpose.[19] Its involvement in mass executions of innocent Muslims and its "lapse into pure criminality" caused al-Qaeda to withdraw its financial and logistical support, and the two groups appear to have drifted apart. Similarly, the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines has strayed from initial, "righteous" path toward the more lucrative business of kidnapping for ransom. This has caused it to fall out of favor with the al-Qaeda leadership, which is now actively courting the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as its "favorite Filipino group" in Southeast Asia.[20]

A new approach

In the summer of 2004, President George W. Bush signed an executive order barring American citizens and U.S. companies from conducting business with companies owned by Victor Bout.[21] Such orders have been the standard Western response to illicit arms trafficking. By and large, however, they have not been matched in developing nations, especially those that benefit from doing business with such illicit arms dealers. In fact, according to experts, only eighteen states throughout the world have so far "adopted controls that capture the entire chain of arms transfers."[22]

In short, for all intents and purposes, arms trafficking networks cannot be shut down completely. Nor

should they be. Rather, their existence and methods of doing business should be exploited by the West.

An indication of just how that might be done has been proffered by former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) case officer Robert Baer. Writing in the journal *Foreign Policy*, Baer recommends a number of steps available to the new Director of Central Intelligence in better orienting the intelligence community to fight the War on Terror. He writes:

> The directorate [of operations] needs to recruit a third class of employees: those who skirt the law. I have in mind the dealers in embargoed and stolen oil who beat a path to Baghdad through the 1990s and who stayed up late drinking and partying with Saddam's son Uday.[23]

Throughout the numerous works Baer has written on the failures of the CIA to recruit the required cadre of informants needed to properly fight the War on Terror, he has never minced his words, and seldom has he been wrong. Just as a member of Uday's inner circle would have been a huge asset prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, so too would insiders within illicit arms networks be an asset to future fronts in the War on Terror.

Why should Western intelligence agencies infiltrate illicit arms markets? Quite simply, because they provide the ideal vehicle for gaining access to terrorist organizations.

For one thing, terrorists need to conduct business with weapons traffickers if they are to succeed in their *jihad*. Since small arms allow terrorists to acquire power, train, conduct operations, and exert influence over weak states, these same terrorists, and those who support them, are a consistent source of revenue for illicit traffickers. Moreover, traffickers are one of the few groups of outsiders that terrorists regularly associate with. Indeed, as the experiences of notorious dealers like Bout and Mogilevich have shown, the business of trading arms is one in which politics and ideologies are set aside in favor of monetary profit and asset acquisition. This provides Western intelligence agencies with a way to get close to Islamists without hiding the fact they are Westerners or trying to convince them of a John Walker Lindlike Islamic conversion.

For another, the overwhelming allure of profit makes traffickers easy marks. Buying the loyalty of these individuals is a comparatively easy alternative to convincing a hardcore Islamic radical to sell out his fellow Muslims. Whether they are pilots, crew chiefs, document forgers, customs officials, or the dealers themselves, their overriding motive is money. And individuals who are driven by money are usually willing to answer questions from, or gather information for, someone who is willing to pay them a little more.

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Finally, weapons trafficking networks should be appealing to intelligence collectors because of the ease with which traffickers establish their reputations. Vice cops and drug enforcement agents regularly infiltrate criminal organizations by posing as someone they are not. Often this means "walking the walk" of those they are targeting in order to be accepted. Establishing credentials in the weapons trafficking business,

and gaining the attention of terrorists in need of weapons is certainly easier than proving a willingness to become a martyr. Just as the CIA used stockpiles to arm anti-communist tyrants during the Cold War, similar arming of shady regimes or insurgent groups in Africa or Asia by persons on the CIA's clandestine payroll will gain attention quickly, particularly if the price is right and the inventory is attractive.

Without question, this is a dangerous policy to pursue. If such weapons are found to have been used to fight an ally of the United States, or—worse still—to kill Americans, the political and diplomatic damage could be catastrophic. Yet few would argue against the sale of AK-47s to the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda if there was a reasonable chance that doing so would gain the attention of al-Qaeda logisticians and eventually enable U.S. agents to get closer to al-Qaeda's North African networks.

To manage such an intricate policy, however, Western intelligence agencies would need a comprehensive and well-funded co-option strategy, one that includes:

- *The recruitment of assets within already existing trafficking networks*. These assets may be the pilots who fly the planes, the crew chiefs who load and unload the equipment, or the middle-management brokers who conduct the smaller deals. The purpose of gaining assets in these positions is to gain familiarity with the business of these established networks; find out who they are selling to and what they are selling; and identify who the major brokers in the networks are.

- *The acquisition of small arms stockpiles currently available on the black market*. Agency personnel should be scouring the globe looking for stockpiles to buy, and setting up the front companies that will be needed to start buying them. The greatest advantage the CIA and other agencies have over private brokers is the availability of clandestine monies. The rule-of-thumb is clear: offer more than the private brokers are offering, and start controlling the supply-side of the weapons business.

- *Enter illicit markets and offer cheaper prices*. By doing so, these companies will establish their credentials and hopefully gain the attention of the very organizations the West is trying to shut down. To be sure, this step will take years to implement properly. Then again, few think that the War on Terror is a short-term affair.

- *Use information acquired through front companies and contacts to quietly shut down competing networks*. This can be done either through calculated information leaks to relevant law enforcement agencies, or through the targeted killings and disappearances of key market players. Whatever the modality, the goal is to make your arms network the only game in town for arms buyers. Again, this takes time. But if it is done successfully, the world's most dangerous elements will have few places to turn for their small arms.

- *Track the weapons sold to radical groups and militias*. This step is key to finding terrorist safe houses and distribution points. If successful, tracing weapons that have been tagged electronically or by some other means would allow Western intelligence services to disrupt,

impair and perhaps even destroy terrorist operations throughout entire regions.

Without a doubt, these recommendations are controversial. They may be so controversial, in fact, that policymakers who are more concerned about their legacies than fighting terrorism will not even contemplate pursuing them. But as the recent war in Iraq has shown, a lack of intelligence on enemy regimes and organizations can prove to be costly.

In the end, Robert Baer said it best: "We're waging war, not running a church social."

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