



US LEFTOVER WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Special Report

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

Preface

The proliferation of NATO weapons, left behind in Afghanistan, has fueled a surge in terrorism not only in Pakistan but bordering states as well. Since 2021, several international reports have substantiated the acquisition of these weapons, and its usage by the militants operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. This widespread availability of NATO weaponry among terrorist groups severely threatens regional stability, necessitating a concerted regional and global efforts to prevent the region from descending into terrorism again.

This report titled ‘US Leftover Weapons in Afghanistan’ offers a comprehensive overview of the abandoned US weapons in Afghanistan in August 2021. While doing so, the report highlights US and Taliban’s tackling the issue of the abandoned weapons since 2021 to date, and also discusses Pakistan and other regional and international countries’ concerns and perspectives regarding the leftover weapons. The report also provides key recommendations to address the lingering issue of the recovery of the weapons that fueling terrorism in Pakistan and bordering countries as well.

Snapshot of US Leftover Weapons in Afghanistan

The US provided the equipment to Afghanistan to arm its security forces and the alternative government the US attempted to support. While some equipment may have been evacuated with US personnel, the majority, difficult to transport, was likely abandoned during the chaotic withdrawal and will ultimately fall into Taliban control.

The Times of London reports that the US abandoned a significant arsenal, including an estimated 22,174 Humvees, nearly 1,000 armored vehicles, 64,363 machine guns, 42,000 trucks/SUVs, 358,530 assault rifles, 126,295 pistols, and nearly 200 artillery units (Annex, figure 1).

According to a report by the US-based Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (Sigar), the Afghan Air Force was having 167 aircraft that included attack helicopters and planes. (Annex, figure 2). According to US Government Accountability Report, between 2003 and 2016, the US unloaded a huge amount of military hardware on the Afghan forces it fought alongside: 358,530 rifles of different makes, more than 64,000 machine guns, 25,327 grenade launchers and 22,174 Humvees (all-terrain vehicles). ¹

According to CNN, abandoned weapons worth over \$7.2 billion that included arms, munitions, military vehicles, communications equipment, and PVS night-vision goggles, some of which was even non-US sourced but left behind in the botched withdrawal of the NATO forces.² The Briefing Paper published by Small Arms Survey titled ‘Open Markets: Documenting Arms Availability in Afghanistan

¹ Ibid

² Oren Liebermann and Zachary Cohen, "Taliban Celebrate Their New American Arsenal," *CNN*, August 21, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/21/politics/us-weapons-arsenal-taliban-afghanistan/index.html>.

Under the Taliban’ also provides the estimates of equipment left behind in Afghanistan.³ (Annex, figure 3)

The report also reveals that US supplied nearly 20,000 M16 rifles in 2017 alone. In subsequent years, it contributed at least 3,598 M4 rifles and 3,012 Humvees among other equipment to Afghan security forces between 2017 and 2021. Between 2017 to 2021, the Afghan National Army had 3,012 HMMWV, (Humvees), and around 3,598 M4 Carbines, and 31 Mobile Strike Force Vehicles (MSFV) by 2020 .⁴ Moreover, it had 20, 040 grenades, 10 AC-208 Light counter-insurgency planes, 7, 035 Machine guns, 1,394 Grenade Launchers.⁵

The Aftermath: (Mis)Handling Leftover Weapons

Managing the leftover arms remains a challenge for the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (IEA), owing to incapability and internal tensions among various factions of the Taliban. This concern was also reflected in a recent Briefing Paper published by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey.⁶ The paper alluded to the weak control of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) on the captured arms and munitions of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) some of which were either sold or redistributed immediately after their takeover in August 2021. Apart, the fear of small arms may start appearing on the black market and fueling other insurgencies within the region and around the world was predicted immediately after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

³ Briefing Paper, ‘Open Markets: Documenting Arms Availability in Afghanistan under the Taliban’, March 2025, *Small Arms Survey*, available at [SAS-BP-2025-Taliban-Arms-Markets-EN_0.pdf](#). The paper was based on the field investigations into the availability and prices of small arms in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions conducted from 2022 to 2024.

⁴ Vikas Pandey & Shadab Nazmi, ‘Afghanistan: Black Hawks and Humvees - military kit now with the Taliban’, August 29, 2021, BBC, available at [Afghanistan: Black Hawks and Humvees - military kit now with the Taliban](#)

⁵ Taz Ali, ‘How much military equipment was left in Afghanistan? The US helicopters and arms now under Taliban control’, September 01, 2025, *Inews*, available at [‘How much military equipment was left in Afghanistan? The US helicopters and arms now under Taliban control – The i Paper](#)

⁶ Ibid, Ref.3

According to the paper mentioned above, the arms were making it across the border into the tribal areas of Pakistan and elsewhere. The report documented the export of 258,300 M-4, M-16, and AK variant assault rifles; 6,300 sniper rifles; 56,155 machine guns of various kinds; 31,000 rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers; 64,300 pistols of various kinds; and other small arms to Afghanistan between 2005 and 2021. It estimated that 316,270 such weapons worth around \$512 million were still remaining in Afghanistan. It further highlighted tens of thousands of mortar rounds and small arms munitions left over by the NATO forces in Afghanistan to support the Afghan forces after their departure but were captured by the Taliban after their takeover of Kabul.

In July 2023, the Australian investigative journalist Lynne O'Donnell wrote an article for the *Foreign Policy* magazine in which she documented how the members of the Taliban movement, including functionaries of the IEA, were involved in arms dealings.⁷

The leftover weapons from NATO forces at the disposal of the Taliban do not seem limited to light arms. In January 2025, the Taliban government announced completion of a one-month training course for its armed forces personnel on operating the armour-piercing infantry-operated Konkurs and Milan guided missiles.⁸ The announcement of the training alluded to the availability of the Russian-made Konkurs and the Franco-German Milan missiles in the Taliban's arsenal.⁹ A more recent news report¹⁰ refers to the release of a video by the Tehrik-

⁷ Lynne O'Donnell, "The Taliban Are Now Arms Dealers," *Foreign Policy*, July 5, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/05/taliban-afghanistan-arms-dealers-weapons-sales-terrorism/>.

⁸ "Guided Missile Activated in Afghanistan for First Time," *Tolo News*, January 5, 2025, available at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-192480>.

⁹ For details on the two missile systems, see <https://roe.ru/eng/catalog/land-forces/missile-systems-multiple-rocket-launchers-mrl-atgm-systems-and-field-artillery-guns/konkurs-m/> and <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/milan-anti-tank-missile/>.

¹⁰ Arshad Aziz Malik, "New threats to Pakistan's security: TTP acquires US Javelin missiles," *The News*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1299473-new-threats-to-pakistan-s-security-ttp-acquires-us-javelin-missiles>

i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that shows their rank and file receiving training on the use of the US-made shoulder-fired Javelin missiles renowned for their ability to lock targets and guide themselves to it. While Javelins were not part of the \$28 billion worth of arms US transfers to the Afghan government from 2002 to 2017, the then Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that the US had left behind over 100 Javelins in Afghanistan during its withdrawal in August 2021.¹¹

The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan acknowledged the US lacks full accountability for all supplied defense materials. Compounding this, looting occurred at Bagram Airbase after the US withdrawal due to a miscommunication with the Afghan National Army.¹² Even before the US withdrawal, the Taliban possessed a substantial arsenal, including Kalashnikov-pattern assault rifles, light and heavy machine guns, RPGs, mortars, shotguns, and handguns.¹³ President Trump during his first cabinet meeting of the new administration said that "Afghanistan is one of the biggest sellers of military equipment in the world, you know why? They're selling the equipment that we left, I want to look into this. If we need to pay them, that's fine, but we want our military equipment back."¹⁴

In response to President Trump's claim of "getting a lot of it back,"¹⁵ the Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid asserted that the military equipment leftover by NATO was now the property of Afghanistan, calling them the 'spoils of war' which

¹¹ "US Leaves Behind Large Cache Of Deadly Missiles In Afghanistan That Can 'Wreak Havoc' On Neighbors," Eurasian Times, September 2, 2021, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/us-leaves-behind-large-cache-of-deadly-missiles-in-afghanistan-that-can-wreak-havoc-on-neighbors>

¹² Oliver Weaver, "Inheritance of loss: the weapons left behind for the Taliban in Afghanistan", August 31, 2021, Action on Armed Violence, available at [Inheritance of loss: the weapons left behind for the Taliban in Afghanistan - AOAV](#)

¹³ Schroeder, Matt., and Benjamin King, "Surveying the Battlefield: Illicit Arms in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia," Small Arms Survey, 2012, p.330-336

¹⁴ Yasin Rasuli & Zia Shahreyar "US weapons left in Afghanistan sold to militant groups, sources tell BBC, April 18, 2025, BBC, "US weapons left in Afghanistan sold to militant groups, sources tell BBC

¹⁵ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump Before Cabinet Meeting," *The White House*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/02/remarks-by-president-trump-before-cabinet-meeting/>.

no one could take away¹⁶. The reality, however, deviates from this statement. Had the Taliban followed through with their assertion, keeping the weapons confined solely to use within Afghanistan by the Taliban to defend their sovereignty and independence, Pakistan's concerns might have been limited to regional security implications. The weapons Mujahid promised to utilize to repel invaders have instead contributed to the booming business in illicit arms in Pakistan, becoming an easy path to acquire top of the line equipment for the terrorists in Pakistan.

Pakistan: Raising Concerns Over Terrorists Using US Weapons

Pakistani officials have for long been making noises¹⁷ about the threat posed by the More recently, Pakistan's Counsellor at its Mission to the UN Security Council told an "Arria-Formula" meeting held in Sierra Leone that terrorists in Pakistan were in possession of large caches of weapons from the billions of dollars' worth of arms left over by the NATO forces in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pakistan has also released an official statement 'calling upon the de facto authorities in Kabul to take all necessary measures to ensure that these weapons do not fall into the wrong hands.'¹⁹ Pakistan has also provided 'sufficient proof' to Afghan Taliban that militants were using US-left weapons for cross-border terrorism.²⁰

¹⁶ Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Threaten to Use US Arms to Thwart Attempts to Retake Them," *Voice of America*, February 4, 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-threaten-to-use-us-arms-to-thwart-attempts-to-retake-them-/7962251.html>.

¹⁷ "Left-behind US weapons in Afghanistan fueling terror attacks in Pakistan: FO," *The Express Tribune*, January 30, 2025, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2525340/left-behind-us-weapons-in-afghanistan-fueling-terror-attacks-in-pakistan-fo>

¹⁸ Statement by Counsellor Atif Raza at UN Security Council Arria-Formula Meeting on Small Arms and Light Weapons Management in UN Sanctions Regimes, *Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations*, April 4, 2025, <https://pakun.org/official-statements/04042025-01>.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Pakistan), "Statement by the Spokesperson regarding US weapons left behind in Afghanistan," January 29, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/us-decision-to-take-back-advance-weapons-left-behind-in-afghanistan>.

²⁰ Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan says Afghan-based 'terrorists' increasingly use US arms for cross-border attacks", January 30, 2025, [Pakistan says Afghan-based 'terrorists' increasingly use US arms for cross-border attacks](https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/01/30/pakistan-says-afghan-based-terrorists-increasingly-use-us-arms-for-cross-border-attacks/)

Rick Novak's recent report for *The Washington Post*²¹ about how Pakistani militants have gained a deadly advantage due to access to the leftover US weaponry from Afghanistan is significant because, first, it traces 63 of the weapons used in the deadly terrorist attack on a train in Pakistan that resulted in the loss of at least 21 lives to NATO's leftover stockpiles in Afghanistan. Second, it verifies the weapons initially provided by NATO to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) by tracing their identification numbers, establishing a definitive connection between NATO-issued arms and their subsequent procurement by militant factions operating in Pakistan. The group's access to advanced weaponry has terrorized Pakistan, leaving its under-equipped police force vulnerable to militants.²² Although militant groups especially the Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP) have conducted deadly attacks in Pakistan for years, the recent increase in the precision and lethality of its raids against Pakistani security forces was concerning.

The news emanating from Kabul is that the IEA officially rejects the *Washington Post* investigation regarding American weapons in Afghanistan falling into the hands of terrorists in Pakistan. The IEA Deputy Spokesperson Hamdullah Fitrat claims that even though the practice of selling leftover NATO weapons took place in the past, that was not the case anymore. Fitrat instead suggested that the weapons illicitly flowing could have originated from previous attacks on NATO convoys passing through Pakistani land, particularly from Karachi and other ports, where shipments for foreign forces in Afghanistan were frequently intercepted during their presence. Fitrat pressed on the fact that all necessary measures had been taken to prevent smuggling.²³

²¹ Rick Novak, "U.S. weapons from Afghan war give Pakistani militants a deadly advantage," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/04/14/afghanistan-war-weapons-pakistan-taliban-militants/>

²² Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistani armed groups obtain U.S weapons left behind in Afghanistan" Radio Free Europe Radio Library, March 29, 2023, available at [Pakistani Armed Groups Obtain U.S. Weapons Left Behind In Afghanistan](#)

²³ Noorullah Zazai, "Fitrat Rejects Washington Post Report About US Weapons," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, April 15, 2025, <https://pajhwok.com/2025/04/15/fitrat-rejects-washington-post-report-about-us-weapons/>.

While reports of stealing from NATO-bound shipments in Afghanistan through Pakistan are available,²⁴ the stolen cargo did not generally involve high-level military equipment the presence of which in the hands of terrorists in Pakistan is questioned by the Pakistani government. Moreover, the magnitude of the leftover weapons in Afghanistan and evidence presented above suggesting the mismanagement of the weapons by the IEA indicates that the weapons in possession of terrorists in Afghanistan most probably landed in their hands through the Taliban after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The proliferation of NATO weapons, left behind in Afghanistan, has fueled a surge in terrorism in Pakistan, exacerbating its two-decade struggle against the terrorism. Since the 2021 US withdrawal, Pakistani security forces have conducted operations, recovering foreign weapons from the terrorists killed during the operations. Several international reports have substantiated the acquisition of these weapons, and its usage by the militants. This widespread availability of NATO weaponry among terrorist groups severely threatens Pakistan and regional stability, necessitating a concerted regional and global efforts to prevent the region from descending into terrorism again.

This proliferation is continued, fueling a large illicit arms market in Afghanistan. Terrorists profit from and use these weapons, particularly against Pakistani security personnel, making Pakistan the primary victim. This readily available arsenal destabilizes the region, exacerbated by porous borders and difficult terrain. The influx of sophisticated weaponry, such as night vision equipment and advanced explosives, enables more complex and devastating terrorist attacks.

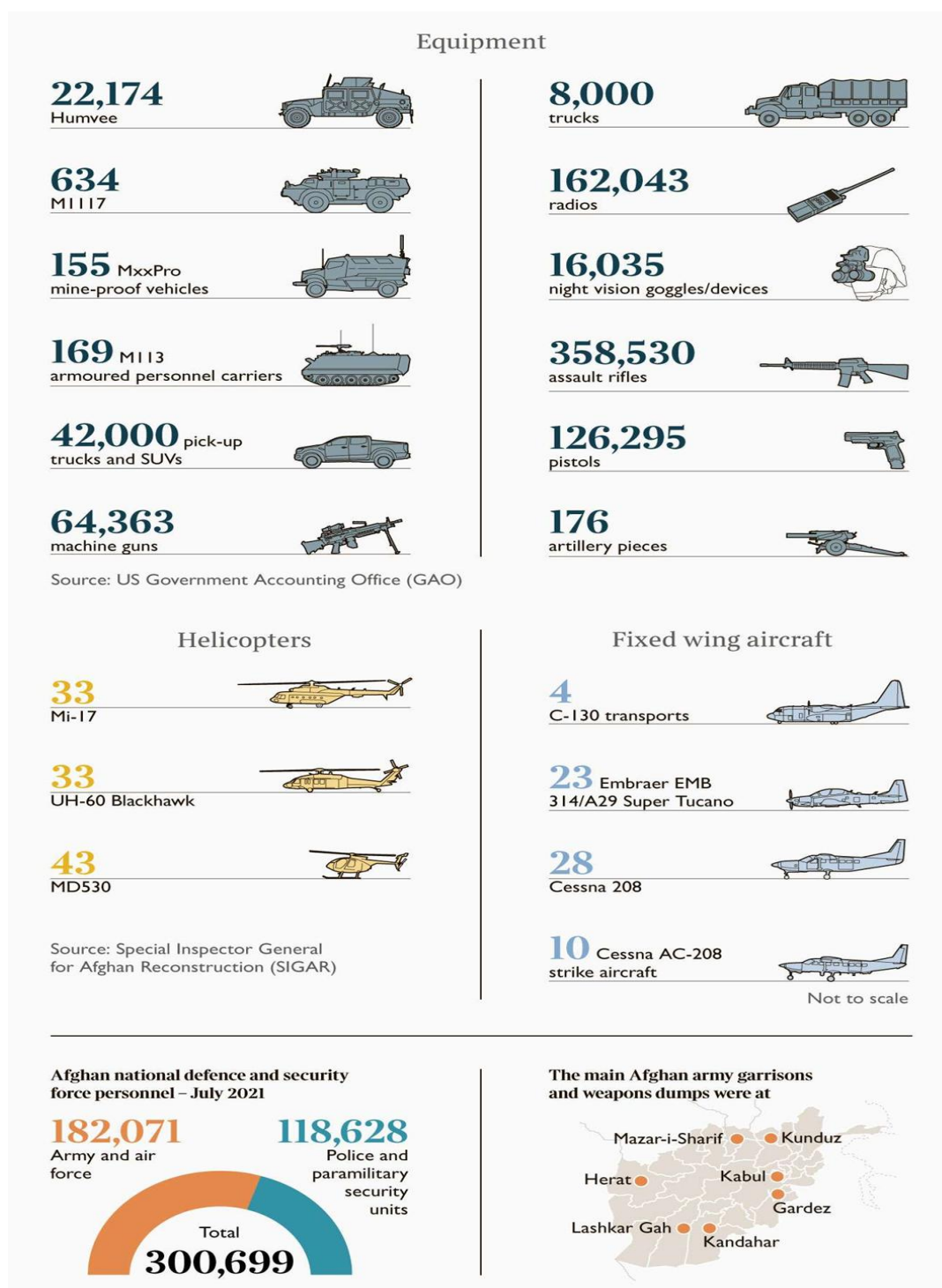
²⁴ Amir Saeed, "Around the corner from the GHQ, a market for stolen NATO goods," <https://www.dawn.com/news/1020684/around-the-corner-from-the-ghq-a-market-for-stolen-nato-goods>

Failure to address this issue will embolden terrorists and further destabilize the region, leading to increased terrorism and extremism. Whether a coordinated weapons recovery effort will occur remains to be seen; meanwhile, concerns persist about proliferation in the region and access by militant groups. Preventing this proliferation hinges on the US's will to pursue a concerted and coordinated approach. Following are few recommendations in that regard.

- To mitigate the threat from abandoned weapons in Afghanistan, the US should devise a strategy focusing on their recovery, dismantling, preventing their use by militants, and stopping illicit arms sales in the region.
- The US should engage the Taliban, on the lines of the Doha agreement, to recover or dismantle the abandoned weapons and combat the illicit arms trafficking.
- Pakistan's involvement is key as Pakistan can provide necessary support that can contribute significantly to the wider non-proliferation strategy and for that, a greater coordination between Pakistan and the US would be required.
- Recognizing the wider regional and international threat posed by the abandoned weapons and its misuse, Pakistan should leverage diplomatic channels and provide credible evidence at international forums to garner international support for this effort as international community's focus on this challenging issue is currently lacking.
- Pakistan should mobilize support for Iran, as its collaboration on proliferation is crucial for countering militants using advanced weaponry.
- Pakistan should initiate parliamentary debate on this critical issue and develop a consensus-based policy with clear short- and long-term goals.

Annex

Figure. 1: Equipment left by the US (August 2021)



Source: Thetimes.com

Figure 2: Aircraft under the control of Afghan National Army by 2021



Source: US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (Sigar)

Figure 3: Arms and Ammunition in Afghanistan by 2021

Category	Items	Quantity exported (2005–21)	Value of exports (2005–21)	Quantity remaining in August 2021
Weapons	M4/M16 and AK-variant rifles	258,300	USD 150.7 million	316,260 weapons^a/ USD 511.8 million
	Various pistols	64,300	USD 31.6 million	
	Various sniper rifles	6,300	USD 33 million	
	Individual and crew-serviced light (such as M249), medium (such as M240B/PKM), and heavy machine guns (such as M2/DSHK)	56,155	USD 233.7 million	
	Rocket-propelled and various mobile and hand-held grenade launchers	31,000	USD 51.4 million	
	12-gauge shotguns of various models	9,115	USD 4 million	
	60–82 mm mortar systems	1,845	USD 41.6 million	
	Total	427,015^b	USD 546 million	
Weapons accessories	Associated machine gun mounts	5,500	USD 5.7 million	Unspecified
	M150 weapon optics and PEQ-2/15/18 laser aiming devices	41,350	USD 41.8 million	
	Total	46,850	USD 47.5 million	
Other ground munitions	120 mm and 122 mm mortar rounds	188,000	USD 121.7 million	Unspecified
	81 mm and 82 mm mortar rounds	769,000	USD 84.8 million	
	60 mm mortar rounds	249,000	USD 89.6 million	
	40 mm and 73 mm rocket-propelled or cartridge grenade rounds	3,768,000	USD 269.5 million	
	Total	4,974,000	USD 565.6 million	
Small arms ammunition and specialty munitions	Rounds of specialty 23 × 115 mm and .50 calibre ammunition	6,895,000	USD 38.3 million	1,537,000 rounds total (~1,167,000 rounds of small arms ammunition)
	Rounds of common small arms ammunition (such as 9 mm, 5.56 mm, 7.62 mm)	Millions	USD 3.19 billion	
	Total	–	USD 41.49 million	

Notes:

- a This figure is roughly consistent with the Taliban's estimate of the numbers of small arms and light weapons it seized from the ANDSF. In February 2022, the head of the Taliban's Ranks Clearance Commission told reporters that his group took possession of more than 300,000 'light arms' in August 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2022).
- b These figures exclude 224 D-30 Howitzers listed in the original report because the Survey does not categorize Howitzers as small arms and light weapons, which are the focus of this paper.
- c Data was compiled from the Core Inventory Management System (CoreIMS) and unspecified 'US DoD records' and only includes US DoD-funded materiel procured through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme, Pseudo-FMS cases, and the Excess Defense Articles programme (US DoD, 2022, p. 5).

Source: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org>