

U.S. arms showing up in hands of pro-Assad militias

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(Photo: Garrett Hubbard for USA TODAY)

U.S. and Western weapons have been reaching Iranian-backed Shiite militias fighting to keep Bashar Assad's forces in power in Syria.

Analysts say it's unclear if the weapons were captured, stolen or bought on the black market in Syria, Turkey, Iraq or Libya. Propaganda photographs from Shiite militias posted on dozens of websites and Facebook pages show the weapons were acquired in new condition, said Phillip Smyth, an analyst for Jihadology.net, a site affiliated with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Many of the weapons are things the militias "shouldn't really have their hands on," Smyth said. Iranians love to show "they have weapons and systems that are very close to the Americans."

The ability of Assad's allies to obtain U.S. weapons is one of many reasons the United States should not supply Syrian rebels with weapons, which President Obama said he would start to do last month, said Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., former chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Syria is "already overflowing" with weapons being supplied to the Assad regime and to the rebels "that could one day be turned against the U.S.," Ros-Lehtinen said.

It's "extremely difficult" to distinguish between friend and foe in Syria, she said, and "no amount of safeguards can guarantee that weapons will not fall into the wrong hands."

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the administration has taken steps "to do everything possible to ensure that any aid is making its way into the right hands" in Syria. That is why the United States and its partners have agreed to direct military aid through the secular-leaning, anti-Assad Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council and its chief, Gen. Salim Idris.

Many of the U.S. weapons in the hands of pro-Assad militia could have reached the black market after a major U.S. sales to Iraq in 2009, said Christopher Harmer, a senior analyst at the Institute for the Study of War. Almost 10 years of fighting there left thousands of loose weapons floating around Iraq and available for sale on the black market.

The U.S. sale included 80,000 M-16s, 25,000 M-4s and 2,550 M-203 grenade launchers, according to an announcement Dec. 9, 2009, by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency.

U.S. arms are transferred to foreign militaries only under strict controls that prohibit transfers to third parties without State Department approval, said Neil Hedlund, a spokesman for the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which administers U.S. assistance to foreign militaries.

Nevertheless, U.S. weapons have often been diverted to militant groups across the Middle East, said Nic Jenzen-Jones, an independent arms specialist based in Perth, Australia. He noticed U.S. weapons in images from the Syrian battlefield since last year, primarily in the hands of Syrian rebel forces.

"The most likely source is Lebanon," where the United States has supplied the Lebanese military and Israeli soldiers armed with American rifles fought as recently as 2006, he said. "Weapons are not fragile, they last for quite some time and will keep on killing as long as there's ammunition and people to fire them."

Smyth points to photos on social media sites linked to the Iranian military showing "martyred" Shiite fighters toting U.S.-made M-16s and M-4s fitted with laser and holographic sights and M-203 grenade launchers.

Based on more than 30 online forums and 100 Facebook pages, Smyth has found images of U.S. and Belgian weapons in the hands of members of various Iran-backed militias. Liwa'a abu Fadl al-Abbas uses Iraqi, Lebanese and Afghan fighters. Liwa'a Zulfikar uses Iraqi fighters who prefer working with Iraqi and Shiite commanders, under the leadership of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps rather than Syrian leadership, Smyth said.

Similar weapons appear in the hands of rebel fighters, including fighters with al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate the State Department has designated a terrorist group, in videos and photos from the civil war. This year, Eliot Higgins, a British military analyst, discovered video footage and photos posted to jihadi social media sites showing that al-Nusra had weapons purchased with Saudi money in Croatia and transferred to Syrian rebels through Jordan.

"This operation was run with full U.S. knowledge, and the arms were only meant to go to the FSA," Higgins said, referring to the secular-leaning Free Syrian Army that U.S. officials prefer to deal with. "After a couple of months, they began to appear in the hands of groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, showing they had spread beyond the FSA."

Harmer said there's a propaganda aspect to everything Iran does, and the images probably have a dual purpose, for both domestic and Western consumption.

"They're heavily involved through state-owned media and attempting to influence Shiite groups throughout the Middle East," Harmer said. "It's absolutely plausible Iran is purposely highlighting U.S. weapons in their hands."

Their goal is to show the world that Iranian-backed Shiite militiamen have a much higher degree of training and professionalism, and they're using Western tools to keep Assad in power, Smyth said.

Many of the most recent martyrdom photos resulted from fighting in Qusair, a strategic town on the border with Lebanon that regime forces retook after a three-week battle joined by fighters from Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shiite militia.

One of the photos shows Jusoor Muhammed Isma'il, a Lebanese Hezbollah fighter, whose death was announced May 24. In the photo, Isma'il stands in a clearing in the woods by a rudimentary camp stove. Slung from his shoulders is an M-4 fitted with what looks like an EOTech targeting sight and an M-203 grenade launcher.

EOTech is an American company that sells holographic accessories to the military and civilians that help shooters aim in a hurry. Pentagon contract documents show the company sold \$25 million worth of its sites to the U.S. Special Operations Command in May 2010.

In other images, Shiite militia fighters wear camouflage fatigues and tactical gear, including body armor, kneepads, gloves and elbow pads, much like U.S. troops wore to battle in Iraq. In one post, Hezbollah fighters gloated about using netting on their helmets to aid in camouflage, like Israeli forces do. "We're fighting the Zionists with their own tools," the author wrote.