

Will Libya Again Become the Arsenal of Terrorism?

By Scott Stewart

During the 1970s and 1980s, Libya served as the arsenal of terrorism. While this role may have received the most publicity when large shipments of weapons were intercepted that Libya was trying to send to the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Libyan involvement in arming terrorist groups was far more widespread. Traces conducted on the weapons used in terrorist attacks by groups such as the Abu Nidal Organization frequently showed that the weapons had come from Libya. In fact, there were specific lot numbers of Soviet-manufactured F1 hand grenades that became widely known in the counterterrorism community as signature items tied to Libyan support of terrorist groups.

As we have discussed, the conflict in Libya could provide jihadists in Libya more room to operate than they have enjoyed for many years. This operational freedom for the jihadists might have an impact not only in Libya but also in the broader region, and one significant way this impact could manifest itself is in the supply of arms. The looting of the arms depots in Libya is reminiscent of the looting in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003. There are also reports that foreign governments are discussing providing arms to the Libyan rebels in the eastern part of the country. While it is far from clear if any of those discussions are serious or whether any potential patron would ever follow through, past operations to arm rebels have had long-lasting repercussions in places like Afghanistan and Central America.

In light of these developments, a tactical discussion of the various classes of weapons contained in Libyan supply depots and how they could be utilized by insurgents and terrorists is in order.

The Nature of Weapons

First of all, it is important to realize that weapons are durable and fungible goods that are easily converted to cash. By durable, we mean that while certain types of weapons and weapon components have a limited shelf life — such as battery-coolant units for the FIM-92A Stinger missile — many other weapons remain functional for many decades. It is not unusual to find a militant or a soldier carrying an AK-47 that was manufactured before he was born — and in many cases even before his father was born. Weapons provided to the anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s are still being used against coalition troops in Afghanistan and weapons provided by the United States and the Soviet Union to rebels and governments during Central America's civil wars are still making their way into the arsenals of the Mexican drug cartels. Weapons are fungible in the sense that an AK-47-style rifle manufactured in Russia is essentially the same as one manufactured in China or Egypt, and an M16 manufactured in Israel can easily replace an M16 manufactured in the United States.



One good illustration of the durable and fungible nature of weapons is the fact that some of the weapons seized by the North Vietnamese following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam were traded to Cuba in the 1970s and 1980s in exchange for sugar. The Cubans then provided these weapons to Marxist militant groups in Central and South America. These weapons originally shipped to U.S. forces in Vietnam were then used by insurgents in Latin American civil wars and some of them were even used in terrorist attacks in the 1980s in places such as Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala. More recently, some of these Vietnam-era weapons have made their way from South and Central America to Mexico, where they have been used by the drug cartels. Another example are the Lee-Enfield rifles manufactured in the early 1900s that can still be found in arms markets in places like Yemen and Pakistan. These antiques are still being used by militants in many parts of the world, including Afghanistan, where they have proved to be more effective in longer-range engagements typical of the theater than the newer and more common AK-47s.

The arms depots in Libya have been looted by a number of different actors ranging in motivation from anti-Gadhafi freedom fighters to jihadists to outright thieves and thugs. While the weapons are now being used mostly to fight Col. Moammar Gadhafi's remaining forces, they could later be diverted to other uses. Arms, ammunition and explosives looted from Libyan arms depots today will likely be serviceable for decades, and the thriving transnational black arms market will provide a mechanism for groups and individuals to sell looted weapons or those received from foreign governments. The bottom line is that weapons from Libya will be available on the black arms market for many years to come.

Types of Weapons

So far, the media discussion of Libyan weapons has focused on two classes of weapons: Libya's chemical weapons stockpiles and its "man-portable air defense systems," or MANPADS. These are important to consider in evaluating the threats posed by an uncontrolled military arsenal in Libya, but before discussing these weapons it is worthwhile to look at many other types of weapons that could prove useful to insurgents and terrorists.

One category is small arms, which includes rifles, hand grenades and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). A large number of weapons in this class have been looted from arms depots in Libya and widely distributed to rebel fighters. As noted above, such weapons tend to be highly durable and can remain functional for decades. From a militant perspective, such weapons are useful not only in irregular warfare operations but also in armed robberies and kidnappings that are conducted to raise funds for the group. From a terrorism perspective, small arms are useful for assassinations and armed assaults.

Yet another category of munitions of interest to militants is military-grade explosives. Militants in many parts of the world have learned to manufacture improvised explosive mixtures, but such compounds are simply not as compact, stable, reliable or potent as military-grade explosives. Because of this, military-grade explosives have an obvious application for terrorist attacks and are highly sought after on the black arms market.

Still another class is heavier, crew-served weapons, such as heavy machine guns, automatic grenade launchers, recoilless rifles and mortars. Such weapons systems are



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powerful on the battlefield and can be very useful for insurgents if properly employed, although they are difficult to conceal and transport. Crew-served weapons also use heavier ammunition than small arms and in some cases rapidly consume ammunition, so employing them can also present a significant logistical strain. Because of these factors, they are somewhat difficult to use for terrorist applications. Mortars have been heavily used by insurgents in Iraq, and to a lesser extent by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, but these groups have not demonstrated the ability to adjust their mortar fire to effectively engage targets.

Perhaps the biggest worry right now in terms of Libya's uncontrolled military arsenal is the looting of MANPADS, which is quite possibly the biggest blow to worldwide MANPADS counterproliferation efforts since Iraq in 2003. Historically, MANPADS have been very appealing to insurgents and terrorists. Libya is estimated to have at least 400 SA-7 Grail (9K32 Strela-2) surface-to-air missiles in its military inventory. With Libya's largest perceived regional air threat coming from Egypt, it is likely that a substantial portion of its MANPADS stocks were positioned in the eastern part of the country when the current civil war started. We have seen open-source photos of Libyan rebels carrying SA-7 missiles (not always with gripstocks), and one photo even depicted a rebel launching an SA-7 at a pro-Gadhafi warplane. While the airstrikes by pro-Gadhafi aircraft have been largely ineffective, the attention these attacks have been receiving in the press could lead some countries to supply additional, and perhaps even more advanced, MANPADS to the Libyan rebels.

As noted in STRATFOR's previous coverage of MANPADS, at least 30 civilian aircraft have been brought down and approximately 920 civilians killed by MANPADS attacks since 1973. These attacks brought about the concerted international effort to remove these weapons from the black and gray arms markets. While MANPADS attacks against civilian aircraft have declined in the last decade, sting operations and seizures of illicit arms shipments clearly demonstrate that militant groups continue to work hard to get their hands on the weapons. This means that any MANPADS not used against pro-Gadhafi aircraft in the current conflict will be sought out by militant groups in the region and by arms dealers, who will seek to sell them elsewhere for a profit.

The next class of military ordnance to consider — and this is where the chemical threat comes in — is artillery ammunition. A recent video of Libyan arms depots shows that most of the small arms and smaller crew-served weapons have been taken and what is left behind are large stockpiles of artillery ammunition. In Iraq and Afghanistan, insurgents have been able to use artillery rockets to attack large targets like military bases or the Green Zone in Baghdad. This fire does not amount to much more than harassment, since the insurgents do not have the skill to deliver the accurate, massed fire required to use such weapons in a militarily effective manner.

That said, artillery ammunition is filled with military-grade high explosives, and militants in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Algeria have been able to remove the explosive filler from artillery shells, artillery rockets and mortar rounds in order to use it in improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Militants in Iraq also became quite proficient in using artillery rounds (sometimes several of them chained together) as the main charges in roadside IEDs and vehicle-borne IEDs. A 152 mm howitzer shell contains approximately 13 pounds of a high explosive such as TNT or composition B. The explosive fillers used in these rounds are very hardy and include stabilizers that give them virtually unlimited



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shelf life. Untold thousands of neglected artillery projectiles could very well be the most under-appreciated threat in the Libyan arms depots.

And one type of artillery ammunition that has been getting quite a bit of press is artillery ammunition capable of delivering chemical agents. Libya has admitted to producing tons of mustard gas, and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is currently in the process of overseeing the destruction of Libya's mustard-gas stockpile (a process no doubt disrupted by the current civil war). There is concern that if Gadhafi gets desperate, he could use mustard gas or some other chemical munitions he had not declared. However, while mustard gas can be deadly if used in high concentrations, it is very difficult to use in a militarily effective manner, which requires a heavy concentration of chemical munitions fire. In World War I, fewer than 5 percent of the troops exposed to mustard gas died. As far as terrorist application, as evidenced by the many chemical attacks conducted by Aum Shinrikyo in Tokyo and the few chemical shells employed in IED attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq, it is also very difficult to effectively employ chemical weapons in a terrorist attack.

In Libya, as a result of the current strife, literally tons of weapons have recently entered into free circulation where there is little or no government control over them. If foreign powers decide to arm the Libyan rebels, more large shipments of arms may soon follow. Given the durable and fungible nature of arms, these weapons could have an impact on the region for many years to come, and Libya could once again become the arsenal of terrorism.

In the past, this role was an intentional policy of the Gadhafi regime, and it was possible to direct international policy against the regime to curtail such activity. In the near future there may not be a stable government with control over all of Libya. The weapons that have been looted from Libyan arms depots have been taken by a number of different actors, and the weapons will almost certainly proceed from Libya via a number of divergent channels. Because of this, controlling these arms may pose an even more difficult challenge than the arms intentionally proliferated by the Gadhafi regime.

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