

THE ARMS LEFT BEHIND IN AFGHANISTAN

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(Photo by Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images)

WHAT'S AT ISSUE?

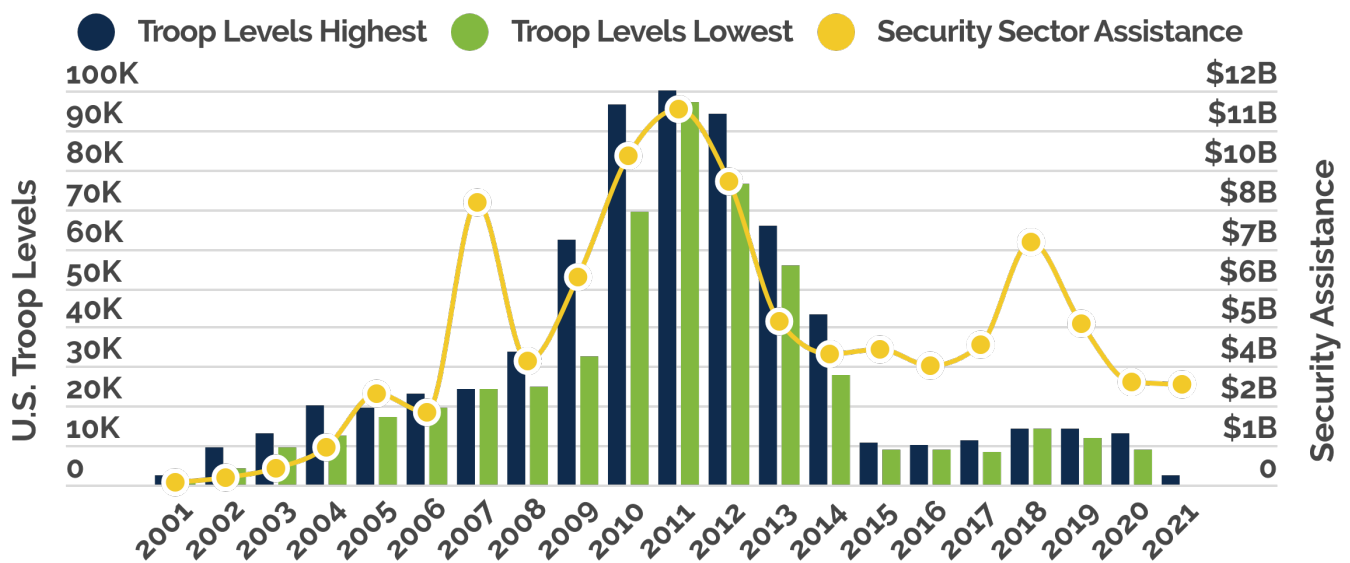
Over its two-decade-long [war effort](#) in Afghanistan, the United States transferred billions of dollars' worth of arms, equipment, and other materiel to the country, for use by both American and Afghan forces

But with the rapid departure of U.S. troops and the even swifter collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the Taliban is set to take control of the arsenal of equipment the United States and its partners have left in their wake. Taliban fighters are already [showcasing](#) their newfound collection – touring around [Blackhawk](#) helicopters and toting U.S. M4 rifles and other American combat gear. Although a full accounting of what arms Taliban fighters have captured is impossible, we know the approximate quantities of weapons systems the United States delivered to the ANDSF, as well as a general understanding of the risks posed by the acquisition of those weapons and other equipment by the Taliban.

THE CHALLENGE OF ACCOUNTING FOR AFGHANISTAN'S ARMS

The most complete public accounting of U.S. defense transfers to the ANDSF has been captured in two reports – a 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) [report](#) and a 2020 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) [report](#). But even this accounting cannot fully capture the exact make-up of the ANDSF’s arsenal in the lead-up to its collapse. The Afghan security sector had an [unfortunate record](#) of losing track of its arms and equipment – a fact detailed in a recent SIGAR report, among others. Equipment can also break down, become damaged, or otherwise become inoperable. Additionally, the United States made efforts to [destroy](#) some pieces of equipment as it departed, and Afghan forces also managed to [take some key items](#), including aircraft, out of the country before the Taliban takeover. On the other hand, the United States was continuing to transfer arms to the ANDSF up until the very end of its operations. In other words, a full accounting of the arsenal now controlled by the Taliban is not immediately possible. To be sure, U.S. military and intelligence agencies will be working to assess what was captured, and lawmakers have already indicated their desire for a more complete picture, but that will take time to complete.

U.S. Troop Levels and U.S. Security Assistance 2001-2021



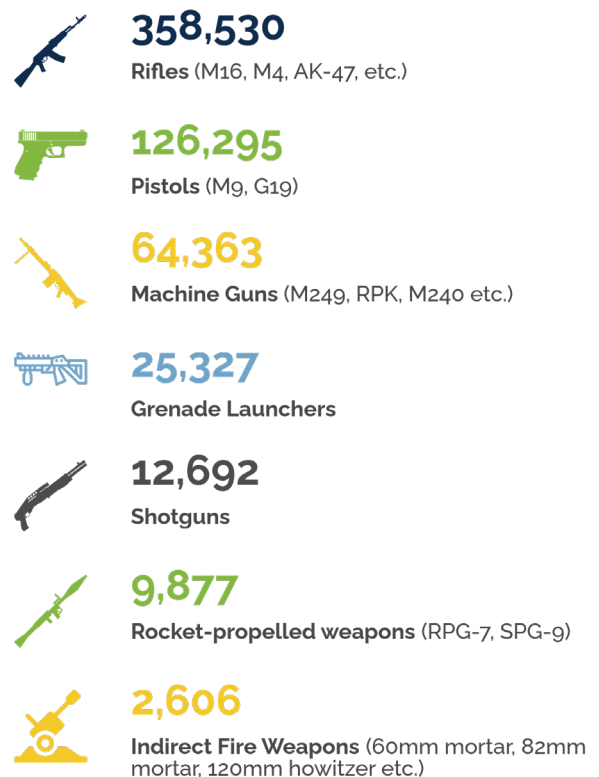
WHAT WE DO KNOW ABOUT ARMS TRANSFERS TO AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

Between fiscal years 2003 and 2016, the GAO estimated that \$18 billion had been spent on equipment and transportation for the ANDSF, or 29% of security assistance expenditures up until that time. Between those years, the United States funded the transfer of 884,311 pieces of equipment to the ANDSF. This included 162,000 pieces of communications equipment; 75,898 vehicles; 599,000 weapons; 29,000 pieces of explosive ordnance disposal equipment; 16,000 pieces of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance equipment; and 208 aircraft.

Quantities of Key U.S. -Funded Equipment for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, by Type





























Quantities and Examples of Key U.S.-Funded Weapons for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, Fiscal Years 2004 - 2016



SIGAR reporting indicates that in the following years – fiscal years 2017-2019 – the United States transferred at least 234,000 additional pieces of equipment. This included 1,300

grenade launchers, 20,000 hand grenades, 10 helicopters, 7,000 machine guns, 3,700 night vision devices, 36,000 rifles, 21,000 rocket-propelled grenades, and 12,000 pistols.

	Items Transferred to ANDSF Between Fiscal Years 2017 and 2019	Number of Items
	Mortars	73,728
	Rifles	36,197
	Rockets	35,680
	Rocket-Propelled Grenades	21,456
	Hand Grenades	20,040
	Pistols	12,079
	Bomb Accessories	10,920
	Machine Guns	7,035
	High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles	4,702
	Night-Vision Devices	3,779
	Bombs	2,520
	Rifle Accessories	2,148
	Grenade Launchers	1,394
	Medium Tactical Vehicles	984
	Other Noncombat Vehicles and Equipment	691
	Laser Guidance Kits	390
	Grenade Machine Guns	165
	Machine Gun Accessories	78
	Rocket Launchers	70
	Artillery Accessories	50
	Mortar Systems	37
	Ambulances	16
	Rapid Aerostat Initial Deployment Tower Computers and Components	16
	Helicopters	10
	Shotguns	10
	Light Tactical Vehicles	1

RISKS OF TALIBAN USE AND THE ILLICIT TRANSFERS OF WEAPONS

Though the exact quantities of U.S. arms, vehicles, aircraft, and military equipment that the Taliban have captured are unknown, their newly acquired arsenal poses varying degrees of risks locally as well as beyond Afghanistan's borders.

While the aircraft the Taliban have been pictured with have drawn the most attention, their utility to the Taliban is limited by their advanced logistical, sustainment, and maintenance requirements. The Taliban will likely be able to put a pilot in an aircraft to conduct a few flights, [as they did](#) in a celebratory parade after the final departure of U.S. troops, but they will almost certainly need outside support to keep both their fixed-wing and rotary aircraft flying. Moreover, they are likely to be cut out of the global supply chain needed to access replacement parts, and while they may be able to cannibalize a few aircraft to service others, that model remains unsustainable. In other words, without some outside help, the newly acquired aircraft are unlikely to translate into a new capability for the Taliban. Nevertheless, it is possible that some external partners – such as Pakistan, Qatar, or others – might be willing to provide that assistance.



Photo by Senior Airman Kaylee Dubois/Flickr

The most practical addition to the Taliban's stockpiles may be the variety of small arms left behind. Small arms are relatively easy to use and maintain and can be transported and fielded easily. Taliban fighters have already been pictured sporting U.S.-origin assault rifles and garbed in [quintessentially Western style](#) kit, certainly a propaganda coup.

However, the Taliban have long had access to small arms, so the acquisition of M4s, M16s, Kalashnikov origin weapons, or other heavy machine guns would not drastically enhance their capabilities, though it would expand their stockpiles. Where the weapons cache may prove most risky is its implications for [illicit trafficking](#). Small arms are easily transported and trafficked, and there is a long history of weapons from one conflict finding their way to distant battlefields years later. If the Taliban finds itself in particularly severe financial straits as it becomes isolated from international financial institutions, they may turn to small arms trafficking for quick cash.

Armored vehicles and artillery pieces are also valuable acquisitions for the Taliban. Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles or armored personnel carriers would present a new kind of combat support system for the Taliban that could be instrumental in fighting that may take place in the coming years. Unlike aircraft, given the number of vehicles left behind, and the lower level of technical support needed, cannibalizing some vehicles to keep others serviced is a more practical option. Likewise, howitzers, mortars, and other artillery pieces could give the Taliban a significant indirect fire capability.

Similarly, some of the more advanced technical items, including night vision devices or other specialty equipment, could be of particular value for the Taliban. Being able to fight at night is an enormous battlefield advantage, though keeping enough night vision devices functioning may be a challenge. Reports that the Taliban also captured [biometric devices](#), while troubling, may be mitigated in risk by the requisite network and technical support systems to field such items.

Finally, despite concerns that the items left behind by the ANDSF could be an intelligence coup for the agencies of U.S. competitors, including Russia or China, most items known to have been left behind are not especially advanced. Foreign intelligence services are already likely to be familiar with all of the most advanced systems sent to the ANDSF, including Blackhawks. In other words, smaller arms are more likely to pose a deeper and more immediate risk to security in Afghanistan than sensitive technologies.