

CNN Crashes and Burns with ‘Exclusive’ Report on Russia Arming the Taliban

By [Veterans Info Source](#)

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On July 25, CNN published an [alarming report](#): Two videos obtained exclusively by the cable news network appear to suggest that the Russian government is covertly arming the Taliban fighters that have slowly returned to Afghanistan since the end of NATO combat operations there in 2014.

The report, [authored](#) by **Nick Paton Walsh** and **Masoud Popalzai**, states that two separate groups of Taliban fighters have received “improved weaponry ... that appears to have been supplied by the Russian government,” including heavy machine guns, sniper rifles, and the ubiquitous Kalashnikov assault rifles that are a staple of black markets across the planet. If authenticated, these “exclusive videos” of unknown origin obtained by CNN would confirm [growing accusations](#) from U.S. and Afghan military officials that Moscow is arming the very enemy it spent a decade fighting during the Soviet-Afghan War.

The news ricocheted across the media ecosystem, shared indiscriminately and uncritically by many [highly influential journalists](#) and [researchers](#); veterans organization VoteVets even [shared](#) the story with the sober assessment that “Trump’s good buddy Putin appears to be arming the Taliban in Afghanistan with upgraded weapons.”

There’s only one problem: CNN’s report falls apart after the headline. While many of the weapons flaunted by militants certainly appear Russian in origin, the videos provide little evidence of a direct evidence of a recent arms transfer from the Russian government to Taliban forces, according to weapons experts from U.S. Special Operations Command and several non-governmental conflict arms organizations interviewed by Task & Purpose.

CNN exclusive: Videos suggest Russia may be arming Taliban
<https://t.co/XHG2d37kzH>

— New Day (@NewDay) [July 25, 2017](#)

“I’ve watched the video and frankly can’t see anything that is particularly unusual,” **James Bevan**, a weapons specialist and director of Conflict Armament Research Ltd, told Task & Purpose in an email.

“There are Russian weapons, and derivatives of those weapons manufactured

in other states, circulating among state and non-state groups in every country in that region.”

The weapons experts consulted by Task & Purpose identified the weapons as Kalashnikov variants that have become pervasive among irregular forces; several U.S.-made M249 Squad Automatic Weapons that fire belt-fed 5.56×45mm NATO rounds, including a mid-90s variant with a long barrel and fixed rifle stock and the lightweight MK-49 paratrooper variant with a stub barrel; the TT-30 Tokarev pistol that’s been a staple of the Russian military since the 1930s, and the Soviet-made 7.62 mm general-purpose PK machine gun that’s been in service since 1961.

None of these weapons touted by the Taliban in the CNN video appear particularly modern, and all but the M249 are [regular fixtures](#) of the illicit small arms markets that [accounted](#) for 60 percent of the weapons flowing into and out of Afghanistan in the decades leading up to the U.S.-led invasion in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“I suspect after years in Afghanistan, these are easy to get,” **Capt. Jason Salata**, a spokesman for U.S. Special Operations Command, told Task & Purpose.

What’s more, there is no clear chain of custody between Russia and the two Taliban groups featured in the CNN report; one group pillaged the equipment from a rival Taliban faction, while the other received a shipment of arms from across the Tajikistan border. CNN admits that the videos presented as “suggesting” a link between the Taliban and Moscow “don’t provide incontrovertible proof of the trade.”

“There is nothing immediately visible to suggest the weapons are new or any indication (from the footage) that they are all of the same type and origin,” Bevan told Task & Purpose. “Governments that supply rebel and insurgent forces rarely supply new weapons and frequently refrain from supplying their own weapons stocks. This makes any connection between the manufacturing country and the supplier country problematic.”

CNN also notes that the weaponry appears “stripped of any means of identifying their origin,” the Russian connection appears dependent on the little more than the less-than-reliable claims of various Taliban goons.

“Unfortunately, CNN did not fully profile erased markings and other efforts to sanitize the weapons,” Bevan added. “This would be a clear indication of organized, state involvement, but also would be unlikely to incriminate any party without further evidence.”

A screenshot from CNN’s report suggesting the Russian government is providing arms to the Taliban

Indeed, the only arms expert quoted in the CNN story who isn’t a Pentagon or Afghan government official was Benjamin King from the Small Arms Survey independent research group, who [explicitly told](#) CNN that videos and photos provided to him for analysis contain

little evidence of a recent arms transfer, let alone from Russia.

“[CNN] made some jumps that you certainly can’t make from the weapons themselves,” King told Task & Purpose. “I certainly wouldn’t have made the claim that they were new imports. The generic Tokarev pistols and PK machine guns are old and could have been there for a long time. One of the rifles was an AK-74, so it could have been there for the last 40 years or so.”

If any of the gear appeared new, according to King, it’s the shiny new accessories haphazardly mounted on the Taliban’s new arsenal, like polymer buttstocks and modern telescopic sights such as the Chinese-made JGBG M7 rifle scope that’s the only equipment featured in the CNN video that’s also cited by name in the accompanying [report](#). But even the presence of modern gear doesn’t necessarily signal recent arms transfers between the Russian government and Taliban forces.

“You can purchase one of those things for like \$50 on the internet, so it doesn’t seem like a very high-quality military-grade add-on,” King said. “Most of these parts could have just come in the mail.”

If U.S. and Afghan military officials want to fret the flow of foreign arms into the country, they should look in the mirror. A declassified 2016 Pentagon [audit](#) revealed that nearly half of the 1.5 million firearms provided to Iraqi and Afghan security forces, including nearly 978,000 M4 and M16s, since 2002 have gone missing due to poor regulations and recordkeeping. In 2014, a [report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction](#) found that some 43% of weapons provided to the Afghan National Security Forces likely ended up in the hands of ISIS or the Taliban.

In recent weeks, American and Afghan military personnel have gone face-to-face with modern weaponry and equipment in enemy hands. According to a July 25 Military Times [report](#), Afghan security forces are increasingly facing off against Taliban fighters armed with M4 carbines outfitted with night vision, infrared laser sights and Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight scopes. A recent Taliban propaganda video appeared to [show](#) a fighter rocking FN SCAR (Special Operations Forces Combat Assault Rifle) 7.62mm rifle decked out with a AN/PEQ 5 visible laser likely liberated during an ambush or raid on a weapons depot.

Like the M249, these are all weapons usually deployed by Western militaries — and, like everything else in Afghanistan, they end up in Taliban hands sooner rather than later.

“Afghanistan is swimming in guns,” King told Task & Purpose. “These things are expected to show up everywhere.”

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