

Thieves Rip Off US Weapons as Shadow War in Syria Escalates

Groups from ISIS to the Taliban have armed themselves — and even killed Americans and their foreign partners — at U.S. taxpayer expense.

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Thieves have made off with hundreds of thousands of dollars in artillery equipment, unspecified "weapons systems," and specialized ammunition meant for U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq, according to exclusive documents obtained by The Intercept.

The thefts, which occurred on, or in transit to, far-flung U.S. outposts in the region, remain unsolved. They are just the latest evidence of a persistent problem that has allowed enemy forces from ISIS in Iraq to the Taliban in Afghanistan to arm themselves — and even kill Americans and their foreign partners — at U.S. taxpayer expense.

The previously unreported thefts illuminate America's shadow wars in the region, where a U.S. contractor was killed and six other Americans were wounded last week in a suicide drone assault on a U.S. base in northeast Syria. The kamikaze airstrike on the outpost [known as RLZ](#) was one of [roughly 80 attacks](#) on American bases in [Iraq and Syria](#) since January 2021 that the U.S. has blamed on Iranian proxy groups. President Joe Biden [ordered](#) retaliatory airstrikes in response to the latest attack "in order to protect and defend the safety of our personnel."

The thefts and losses uncovered by The Intercept are just the latest weapons accountability woes to afflict the U.S. military in Iraq and Syria. A [2020 audit](#) by the Pentagon's inspector general found that Special Operations Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, the main unit that works with America's Syrian allies, did not properly account for \$715.8 million of equipment purchased for those local surrogates.

Losses of weapons and ammunition are exceptionally significant — and the military has

taken pains to prevent them. When the U.S. withdrew forces from an outpost near Kobani, Syria, in 2019, it [conducted airstrikes on ammunition that was left behind](#). The military also destroyed [equipment](#) and [ammunition](#) during the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Nevertheless, groups like [Amnesty International](#) and [Conflict Armament Research](#) have found, for example, that a substantial portion of the [Islamic State](#) group's [arsenal](#) was composed of U.S.-made or U.S.-[purchased weapons and ammunition](#) captured, stolen, or otherwise obtained from the Iraqi Army and Syrian fighters.

The criminal investigations files, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, reveal evidence of at least four significant thefts and one loss of U.S. equipment — roughly \$200,000 worth — in Iraq and Syria between 2020 and 2022, including 40mm high-explosive grenades stolen from U.S. Special Forces.

“This is shocking and tragic,” said Stephanie Savell, the co-director of the Costs of War Project at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. “These stolen weapons will circulate and intensify political and illicit violence and make it more lethal, as we’ve seen happen in other wars and conflicts.”

Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, which oversees America’s war in Iraq and Syria, does not even know the extent of the problem. The task force has no record of any thefts from U.S. forces, said a spokesperson. “[W]e do not have the requested information,” Capt. Kevin T. Livingston, CJTF-OIR’s director of public affairs told The Intercept when asked if any weapons, ammunition, or equipment were stolen in the last five years.

US troops are ostensibly deployed to Iraq and Syria — alongside [Iraqi Security Forces](#), [Kurdish troops](#), and [Syrian surrogates](#) — to defeat ISIS, but they also increasingly fight [Iran-backed militia groups](#) in a [legally murky](#) sideshow [war](#). Americans operate on bases where [anonymity is sometimes the norm](#) and local partners such as the Syrian Democratic Forces, a U.S.-backed Kurdish-led group, are not always trusted. With little outside oversight or unembedded coverage of American operations, information about these conflicts is largely limited to [dubious statements by U.S. commanders](#), military [press releases](#), and [officially sanctioned reporting](#). The criminal investigation files obtained by The Intercept offer a rare, unvarnished glimpse at how the U.S. wars in Iraq and Syria are actually fought.

Sometime in late 2020 or early 2021, according to the files, “multiple specialized field artillery tools and equipment” were stolen from a military vehicle while being transported to Erbil Air Base in northern Iraq. When the truck arrived at the outpost in that country’s Kurdistan region, U.S. personnel found it was missing gear valued at \$87,335.35. “All probative leads were exhausted,” according to the investigation file. No suspects were identified.

In February 2021, 400 armor-piercing rounds and 42 40mm “High-Explosive Dual Purpose” grenades, which are [“capable of penetrating three inches of steel,”](#) according to the Army, were stolen from a Special Forces ammunition supply at Mission Support Site Green Village in northeast Syria. A criminal investigation found “negligent ammunition handling and accountability practices” allowed “unknown person(s) to ... pilfer the ammunition,” which was valued at \$3,624.64.

Sometime in July or August 2021, “five weapons systems” valued at a total of \$48,115 were stolen while being transported via “ground convoy” from Mission Support Site Conoco — a

base not far from Green Village — to RLZ, Syria. The weapons were taken from a shipping container. No witnesses were found nor were any leads developed.

Last January, according to the documents, thieves broke into a shipping container en route to Erbil Air Base in Iraq and stole more than \$57,000 worth of unspecified military equipment and personal items. Four months later, approximately 2,100 full metal jacket rounds that can pierce body armor and three boxes of unspecified “repair parts” were loaded onto a Blackhawk helicopter at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq and flown to Erbil Air Base, where they were supposedly provided to personnel from a unit called Task Force Attack. That unit, however, claimed that they never received the ammunition, kicking off the investigation. About a month later, Task Force Attack personnel allegedly located a crate containing 1,680 rounds of the missing ammunition, but the records do not account for the remainder of the bullets and parts.

In all but the last case, Army criminal investigators determined that there was probable cause to charge those responsible with larceny of government property or government weapons — if they could only find the thieves.

The 2020 Pentagon inspector general report that detailed improper accounting for more than \$700 million in equipment bought for America’s Syrian partners found that Special Operations forces did not “maintain comprehensive lists of all equipment purchased and received.” Another unit, the 1st Theater Sustainment Command, improperly stored weapons such as machine guns and grenade launchers, according to the audit. Both units “left thousands of ... weapons and sensitive equipment items vulnerable to loss or theft.” Because of sloppy record keeping and security measures, 1st TSC could not even “determine whether items were lost or stolen.”

Losses of arms and ammunition have been a persistent problem for the Pentagon. By the mid-2010s, the U.S. had already lost track of hundreds of thousands of guns in Afghanistan and Iraq according to [research](#) led by Iain Overton of Action on Armed Violence, a London-based charity.

Even [before the U.S. defeat in Afghanistan](#), the Taliban had captured significant quantities of American weaponry. When U.S. troops withdrew in 2021, they left behind [\\$7 billion worth](#) of military equipment. The results have sometimes been disastrous. From Afghanistan to Iraq, these U.S.-supplied weapons were [turned on U.S. allies](#) and likely even on [American troops](#).

“Every single one of these weapons that will be provided to our partner forces will be accounted for and pointed at #ISIS,” CJTF-OIR pledged in a [2017 tweet](#). But CJTF-OIR does not seem to have any information about the thefts, let alone a certainty that American weapons and ammunition stolen between 2020 to 2022 have not been turned on U.S. forces or their partners.

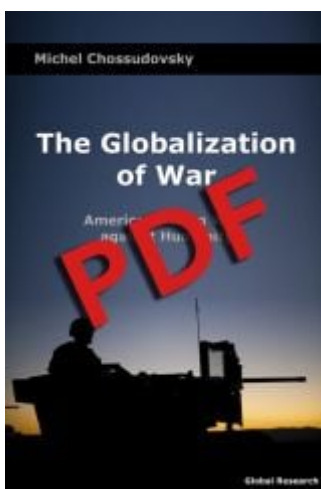
The U.S. military has a long history of cover-ups regarding weapons losses. A 2021 [Associated Press investigation found](#) that “at least 1,900 U.S. military firearms were lost or stolen during the 2010s, with some resurfacing in violent crimes” and that the “U.S. Army has hidden or downplayed the extent to which its firearms disappear, [significantly understating losses and thefts](#) ... [a] pattern of secrecy and suppression [that] dates back nearly a decade.”

CJTF-OIR's lack of records and transparency make it impossible to know how often U.S. weapons have been lost or stolen in Syria and Iraq and if those arms have been used against U.S. troops or their allies, but Savell of the Costs of War Project fears history will repeat itself. "More people will be injured and killed as a result," she said of the thefts documented in the criminal investigation files. "This is yet another reverberating consequence of having U.S. military operations in so many overseas locations."

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Michel Chossudovsky

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