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AN IRANIAN FINGERPRINT?

Tracing Type 56-1 assault rifles
in Somalia

JAY BAHADUR

NOVEMBER 2021

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November 2021

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Cover: A stateless dhow is boarded by a search team from the USS *Winston Churchill* off the coast of Somalia, February 2021.
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Cartography: Liezel Bohdanowicz

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Yemeni men brandish their weapons as they gather in the capital, Sana'a, to show their support for the Houthi movement against the Saudi-led intervention, 13 December 2018.

© Mohammed Huwais/AFP via Getty Images



The Yemeni civil war erupted in late 2014 when the Houthi insurgent movement captured large swathes of the country, including the capital of Sana'a. By the following year, Yemen had become a key battleground in the Iran–Saudi proxy conflict. While Saudi Arabia and its allies waged war in support of Yemen's internationally recognized government based in Aden, evidence suggests that the Houthis, in turn, have received training and other material support from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A portion of this Iranian support has consisted of deliveries of small arms and light weapons (SALW) to Yemen,¹ carried out by sophisticated, transnational maritime trafficking networks. The existence of long-established commercial trade routes linking the Persian Gulf with the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden has facilitated the movement of illicit weapon shipments. Frequent rendezvous and trans-shipment between dhows of Iranian, Yemeni and Somali origin have served to disguise the provenance of weapon shipments and evade detection by authorities.

Despite the difficulties in tracking and detection, since September 2015 international naval forces have carried out 12 maritime interdictions of weapon shipments believed to have been destined for Houthi insurgents in Yemen. Most recently, two maritime interdictions of arms-smuggling dhows were carried out by the USS *Winston Churchill* (11–12 February 2021) and the USS *Monterey* (6–7 May 2021) off the coast of Somalia and in the Arabian Sea, respectively. In the case of the latter operation, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) obtained a complete itemized inventory of the seizure contents, which heavily informed the analysis in the present study.

Iran has repeatedly denied any involvement in the trafficking of arms to the Houthis. However, a preponderance of evidence points to Iranian state supply. The serial number proximity among captured weapons, the routine presence of Iranian-manufactured materiel in seizures, the use of similar packaging, GPS tracks of seized arms-trafficking dhows and human intelligence gathered from within smuggling gangs all indicate with high likelihood that maritime shipments of arms to the Houthis originate from Iranian state stores.

As the GI-TOC has previously reported,² at least one Somalia-based trafficking network is intricately involved in the maritime transfer of SALW from Iran to the

Houthis. However, over the course of the current study the GI-TOC has established for the first time that weapons originating in the Iran–Yemen arms trade are being trafficked onward into Somalia itself.³ Over the course of eight months, GI-TOC researchers documented over 400 illicit weapons in 13 locations across Somalia. The documented materiel included 38 Type 56-1 assault rifles – Chinese-manufactured AK-pattern rifles – that had likely originated in Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis. The majority of Type 56-1 rifles documented in this study were found in Puntland, a semi-autonomous region in northern Somalia which has historically functioned as the gateway for illicit weapons into the country. However, the GI-TOC documented Type 56-1 rifles as far south in Somalia as Dolow, a town bordering Ethiopia.

This study cross-references the serial numbers of the Type 56-1s documented in Somalia against those of almost 5 200 similar rifles recovered in six locations between August 2018 and May 2021. The latter rifles were seized during four separate naval interdictions, captured by anti-Houthi coalition forces, and – in one instance – found in the possession of an arms dealer in Sana’a. The serial number

proximity observed among the documented Type 56-1s, as well as their years of manufacture and identical factory stamps, strongly suggest that they originated from state stockpiles, rather than the random distribution that would be expected of rifles assembled from the black market. Arms dealers and other actors in Somalia found in possession of Type 56-1 rifles routinely identified Yemen as the weapons’ point of origin. The presence of Type 56-1 rifles therefore serves as a kind of fingerprint of the spillover of SALW from the Yemen conflict into Somalia.

While the current study focuses on the proliferation of Iranian-supplied arms, it must be stressed that Iran is only one party fuelling the conflict in Yemen. Both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have participated militarily in the conflict. Moreover, arms and ammunition supplied to Yemeni actors by the Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even the United States have previously been diverted into illicit markets.⁴ Indeed, the present study has documented one instance of a Heckler & Koch G3 rifle of probable Saudi Arabian origin that found its way into the black market in Somalia.

Why does it matter?

The proliferation of arms related to the Yemen conflict in Somalia has potentially serious security implications for Puntland and for the country as a whole, as well as for neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya. The militant groups al-Shabaab and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) faction operating in Puntland routinely source small arms and ammunition from Yemen.⁵ While the GI-TOC did not have the opportunity to document SALW captured from either militant group, it is probable that both groups would have easy access to materiel diverted into Puntland from the Iran–Yemen supply chain.

According to GI-TOC sources, the import of arms into Puntland has correlated with heightened clan tensions, particularly in areas disputed between Puntland and the neighbouring self-declared republic of Somaliland to the west. Furthermore, the ongoing

political crisis in southern Somalia, the result of a long-delayed presidential electoral process, may also have fuelled the domestic demand for arms.

Moreover, Type 56-1 rifles derived from the Iran–Yemen supply chain were documented in several towns bordering eastern Ethiopia and Kenya. The possible cross-border flow of arms has destabilizing implications, particularly for Ethiopia, which is embroiled in a burgeoning civil war stemming from the crisis in the Tigray region. In addition, al-Shabaab has recently stepped up its operations along Ethiopia’s border in the central Somali region of Galmudug. In July 2021, al-Shabaab militants in Galmudug went so far as to attack a special forces military camp inside Ethiopia itself.⁶ Al-Shabaab controls large swathes of coastal territory in Galmudug, where the group is believed to routinely import

weapons and other supplies via maritime routes. Only tenuous evidence exists to date of al-Shabaab links to the trafficking networks facilitating arms transfers to Yemen. Nonetheless, the danger exists that the Iran–Yemen supply chain may offer al-Shabaab militants in central Somalia an easily accessible and plentiful arms pipeline.

Finally, while the diversion of SALW intended for the Yemen conflict has so far been confined to small arms, the potential import of heavier weapons into Somalia – such as rocket-propelled grenades

or anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) – could conceivably enhance the capacity of al-Shabaab and ISIL to challenge government forces, particularly in Puntland. In this light, there is much room for additional research into the diversion of Iranian-supplied arms into and beyond Somalia, including through tracking the fluctuation of SALW prices over time in response to the relative import volumes. Such research may better inform our understanding of the security impact of the Yemen conflict on Somalia and the broader East Africa region.

Methodology

Between December 2020 and August 2021, GI-TOC field researchers documented a total of 417 small arms across Somalia. The bulk of the materiel was documented in the possession of illicit arms dealers and in illicit arms markets, but weapons were also found in the hands of ordinary civilians, security guards and soldiers.

GI-TOC field researchers documented materiel in 13 locations across Somalia (Figure 1): Badhan, Baidoa, Bardera, Belet Hawo, Beletweyne, Buhodle, El Wak, Dolow, Galkayo, Garowe, Galdogob, Hudud and Las Anod/Tukaraq. The documentation locations included three border points with Ethiopia (Buhodle, Dolow, and Galdogob) and two with Kenya (Belet Hawo and El Wak).

The largest single quantity of illicit arms was in Galkayo, a city in central Somalia, where 97 weapons (23.3 per cent of the total) were documented. Galkayo hosts a substantial black market for SALW and functions as a distribution hub for arms originating in the north onward to southern Somalia and westward to the Ethiopian border. In the border town of Galdogob, Puntland, the GI-TOC was also able to document a small number of weapons located within neighbouring Ethiopia. One documentation location, near the town of Tukaraq, is situated on the front line of a long-running territorial conflict between Puntland and the self-declared republic of Somaliland to its west.

For several reasons, the GI-TOC elected not to conduct data collection in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu. First, the focus of the study, and the GI-TOC's work writ large, is on transnational illicit networks. While Mogadishu is the entry point for the largest quantities of SALW and ammunition into Somalia, almost the entirety of this materiel has been imported legally by the Federal Government of Somalia, following the partial lifting of the UN Security Council arms embargo on the country in 2013. Second, heightened insecurity stemming from the ongoing national electoral crisis presented an additional impediment to carrying out field research in Mogadishu. Despite the absence of data collection in Mogadishu itself, the current study highlights a few instances where government weapons imported legally through Mogadishu have been diverted into the black market economy at one location (Baidoa) surveyed by GI-TOC researchers.

As noted above, the current study focuses on the proliferation of Type 56-1 rifles in Somalia. Of the 417 weapons documented in the country, 38 (9.1 per cent) were Type 56-1 rifles that the GI-TOC determined had likely originated from provisions of arms from Iran to Yemen. These Type 56-1 rifles were found in eight of the total 13 locations in Somalia surveyed by GI-TOC field researchers.

In total, the GI-TOC was able to compile a data set of the serial numbers of 5 169 Type 56-1 rifles drawn from six distinct sources (Figure 2).

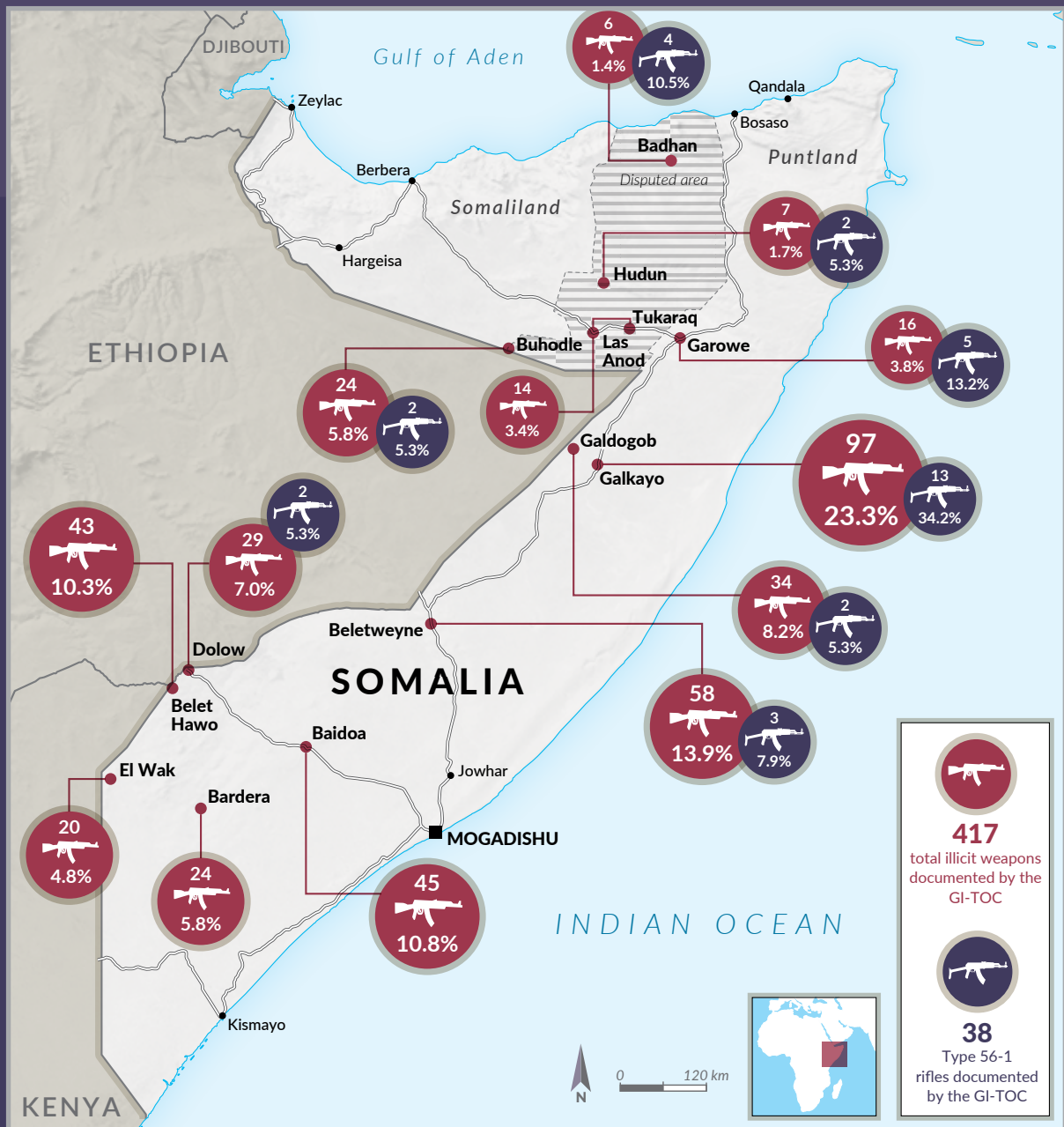


FIGURE 1 Illicit weapons documented by GI-TOC field researchers by location, December 2020 to August 2021.

Each Type 56-1 rifle in the data set possesses an eight-digit serial number and was manufactured between 2015 and 2018, as most likely indicated by the respective markings of 15 CN, 16 CN, 17 CN and 18 CN.⁷ Each rifle was manufactured at Factory 26, also known as the Jianshe Machine Tool Factory, located in Chongjing, China.

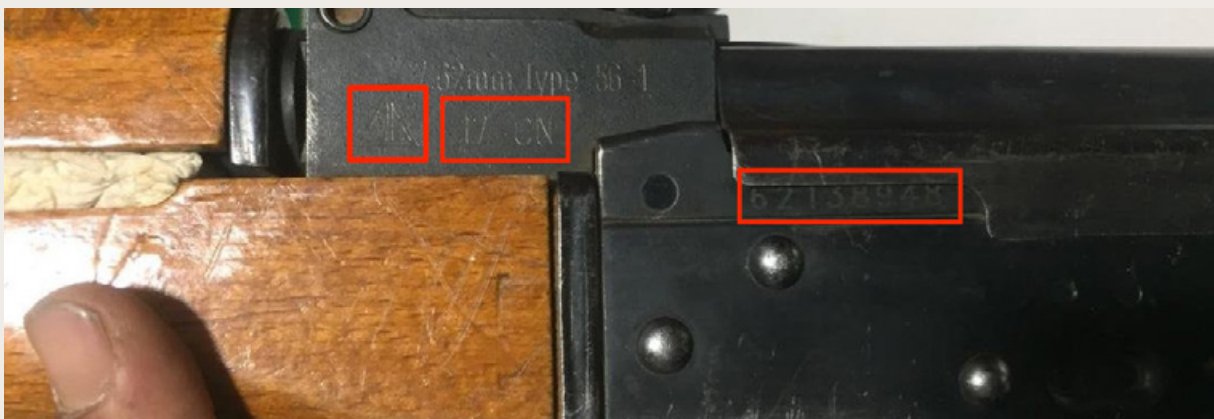
The lowest Type 56-1 serial number in the GI-TOC's data set was 60000111 (produced in 2015), while the highest was 63048118 (produced in 2018). If it is assumed that the rifles are manufactured sequentially, without any gaps in numbering, it follows that a total of at least 3 048 007 rifles were produced by Factory 26 over this approximately three-year period.

Seizure or documentation source	Quantity of Type 56-1 rifle serial numbers documented	Seizure or documentation date	Seizure or documentation location	Documenting party(-ies)
Illicit arms dealers, soldiers, security guards and civilians in Somalia	38	December 2020 to July 2021	Eight locations across Somalia	GI-TOC field researchers
USS <i>Monterey</i> maritime seizure	2 555	6-7 May 2021	Northern Arabian Sea	US Navy
USS <i>Jason Dunham</i> maritime seizure	2 515	28 August 2018	Gulf of Aden	US Navy/UN Panel of Experts on Yemen
Saudi naval seizures of the dhows <i>Al-Shimasi</i> and <i>Al Bari 2</i>	55	17 April 2020 (<i>Al-Shimasi</i>) 24 June 2020 (<i>Al Bari 2</i>)	Gulf of Aden	UN Panel of Experts on Yemen/GI-TOC
Anti-Houthi coalition forces seizure	5	10 December 2018	Aden, Yemen	UN Panel of Experts on Yemen
Storehouse of a Yemeni arms dealer	1	July 2020	Sana'a, Yemen	GI-TOC
TOTAL:	5 169			

FIGURE 2 Data set of Type 56-1 rifle serial numbers compiled by the GI-TOC.



A sample Type 56-1 rifle manufactured in 2017 ('17-CN'), photographed in the storehouse of a Yemeni arms dealer in Sana'a, July 2020.



Marking for Factory 26, located in Chongjing, People's Republic of China (left); '17 CN' marking, indicating a manufacture date of 2017 (middle); eight-digit serial number (right).

The GI-TOC subsequently sequenced the 5 169 total serial numbers in its data set from smallest to largest and analyzed the relative proximity to one another. The more clustered the serial numbers, the higher the likelihood they originated from a common source, such as a state arsenal. The GI-TOC’s analysis of the serial number proximity led to the conclusion that the majority of the rifles in the data set had indeed likely originated in state stockpiles. In 289 of 5 169 instances (5.6 per cent), rifle serial numbers were one digit apart; in other words, the weapons had presumably been manufactured in sequential order (Figure 3). In 4 676 cases (90.5 per cent), adjacent rifle serial numbers were within 100 digits of separation from the next closest serial number in the data set. Nearly all (5 093, or 98.5 per cent) of rifle serial numbers fell within 500 digits of the next closest number. It is implausible that such

large quantities of recently manufactured weapons, with serial numbers in such relative proximity, had originated from anywhere other than a state arsenal. The GI-TOC submitted its data and working assumptions for review by a statistician versed in illicit arms research. On the basis of these assumptions, the statistician reached a similar conclusion regarding the significance of the proximity of serial numbers. They also identified other, implicit assumptions in the GI-TOC’s working methodology, which helped clarify and refine the analysis.

The GI-TOC proceeded to cross-reference the serial numbers of the 38 Type 56-1 rifles documented by its field researchers in Somalia against the broader data set. In concert with additional corroborating evidence, this paper concludes that most, if not all, of these rifles had likely formed part of state-sanctioned arms transfers from the

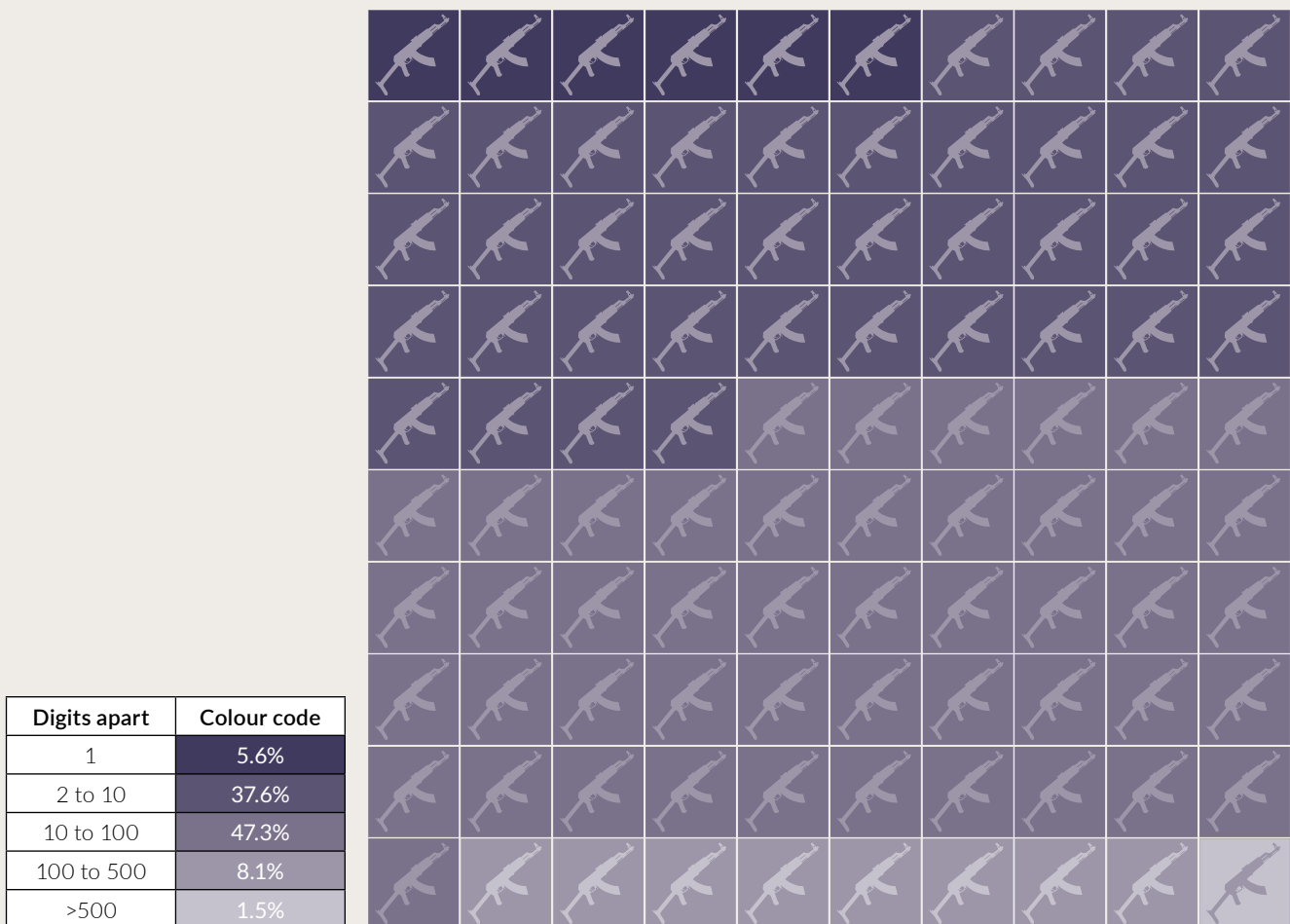


FIGURE 3 Serial number proximity among the 5 169 Type 56-1 rifles contained in the data set.

Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen, before at some point being diverted to Somalia.

Assumptions and limitations in the methodology

There remain many unknown aspects of where and how this spillover into Somalia takes place, which have necessitated a set of assumptions in this study's methodology. The specifics of how these Type 56-1 rifles would have been inventoried in Iranian arsenals and then distributed onwards are unknown. Moreover, the opacity surrounding arms manufacturing and export practices in the People's Republic of China also limits our understanding of how the rifles may have reached Iran in the first instance. The Chinese government has stated that it does not supply weapons directly to Yemen, but has declined to provide substantive information on its export of Type 56-1 rifles to UN sanctions monitors.⁸ The GI-TOC's own tracing requests to both Chinese and Iranian authorities did not receive any response. Consequently, the present study was forced to make several assumptions about the production and export of Chinese rifles informed by an understanding of standard practices employed by other arms-producing nations:

- Serial numbers for Type 56-1 rifles are sequential and uninterrupted;
- The initial transactions consisted of licit exports from the People's Republic of China;
- Export consignments are typically composed of a single sequence of serial numbers. Crates of successively produced weapons are shipped together;
- Type 56-1 rifles, when they arrive in the stockpiles of the purchasing party, are inventoried in such a way as to preserve a degree of serial number proximity;
- Consignments are not split or dispersed legally to various regions/countries upon receipt by the importer.

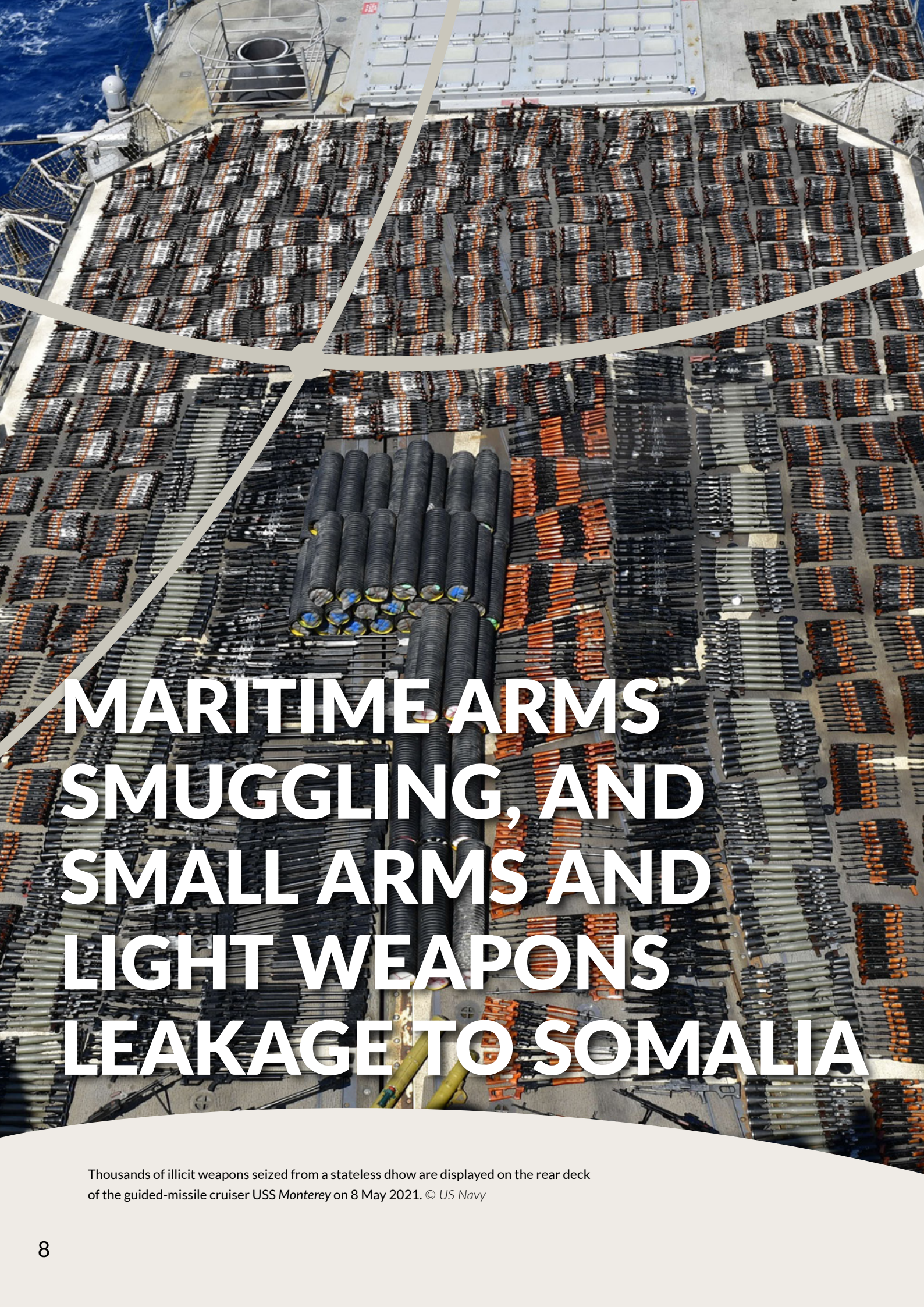
It is furthermore important to note that this study presents only a snapshot of the proliferation in Somalia of arms supplied in the context of the Yemen conflict. Access and security limitations

inherent in a conflict environment like Somalia restricted the GI-TOC's data collection to a select number of mostly urban settings. The militant group al-Shabaab still maintains control or influence over large swathes of the country – particularly the southern Juba valley region – precluding GI-TOC data collection in many areas.

Second, the data set is limited, with the 5 169 serial numbers analyzed in this study representing only a small sample size of the total number of such rifles that have likely reached Yemen. Moreover, the sample is heavily weighted towards two maritime seizures, namely the 28 August 2018 and 6–7 May 2021 interdictions of arms-trafficking dhows by the USS *Jason Dunham* and USS *Monterey*, respectively: 5 070 of the 5 169 (98.1 per cent) Type 56-1 serial numbers referenced in this study came from these two seizures.


Third, almost all the Type 56-1 serial numbers examined in this study from weapons that were intercepted before reaching their intended end users. Conversely, due to the clandestine nature of arms smuggling it is impossible to know how many arms shipments originating in Iran may have successfully reached Yemen and/or Somalia. This study nonetheless embraces the assumption that the arms seized in transit to Yemen are representative of those that successfully reach the two countries.

Given the above assumptions and limitations, any conclusions regarding the provenance and journey of these Somali rifles cannot be definitive, but instead are best understood as the most likely interpretations of the data. Nevertheless, the data points collated by the GI-TOC are sufficient to draw the conclusion that there is an underlying and centralized principle of organization that largely preserves the serial number proximity of Type 56-1 rifles as they pass from their point of manufacture in China to dhows off the coast of Somalia and in the Arabian Sea. As in a pointillist painting, these serial numbers mean little in isolation, but taken together they begin to evoke a larger picture, albeit much of which is still shrouded in obscurity. Further research and analysis of Type 56-1 rifles supplied in the context of the Yemen conflict would fill in some of the existing gaps in serial number clusters, bolstering the case for Iranian state supply.



MARITIME ARMS SMUGGLING, AND SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS LEAKAGE TO SOMALIA

Thousands of illicit weapons seized from a stateless dhow are displayed on the rear deck of the guided-missile cruiser USS *Monterey* on 8 May 2021. © US Navy

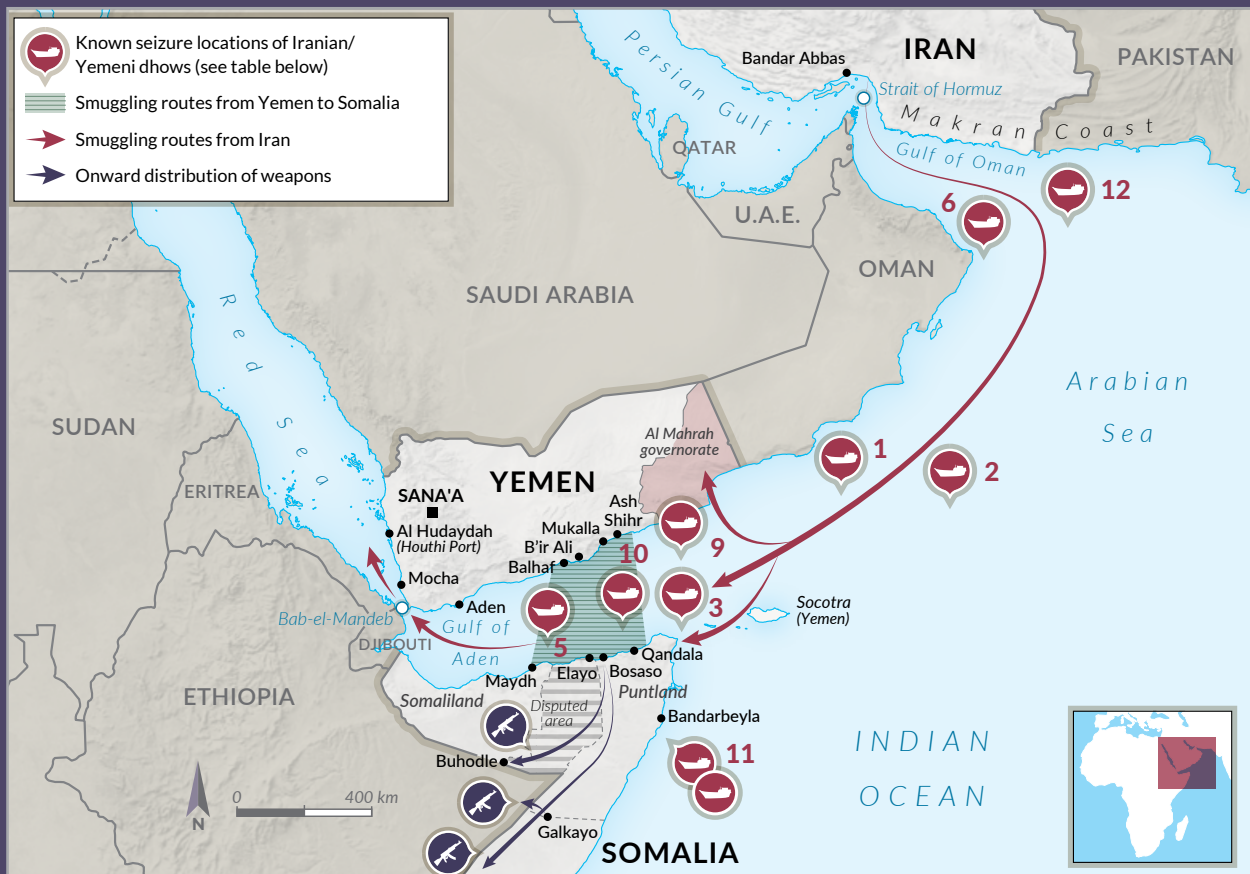


Long before the outbreak of the current civil war, the wide availability and relative low cost of arms and ammunition in Yemen incentivized a prolific illicit trade with Somalia. The northern coast of Puntland, a semi-autonomous region situated in the north-east of Somalia, remains the primary entry point for illicit SALW and ammunition.

In late 2014, civil war erupted in Yemen, and the country swiftly became a battleground for Saudi Arabia and its allies on one side, and Iran and the Houthi movement on the other. Since late 2015, international naval forces – namely the US, French, Australian and Saudi navies – have conducted 12 maritime seizures of arms reportedly destined for Houthi forces. The seized shipments have most frequently included AK-pattern assault rifles (particularly Type 56-1 models; see box), light and heavy machine guns, sniper and anti-materiel rifles and ATGMs.

Arms transfers to the Houthis are facilitated by sophisticated criminal trafficking networks that are transnationally integrated across Yemen, Somalia, the UAE, Oman and Iran. These networks often employ multinational crews and conduct complex trans-shipment operations between dhows of Iranian, Yemeni and Somali origin in order to evade detection and conceal the origin of their cargoes. The *Al Bari 2*, a dhow interdicted by the Saudi Navy in June 2020, is an illustrative case that was first presented in a November 2020 GI-TOC policy brief. The smuggling network was based in the port of Bosaso, Puntland's largest city and commercial capital, and was operating a dhow that was intercepted while en route from the Persian Gulf to trans-ship its cargo of arms to a smaller Yemeni vessel.⁹

In a January 2021 report, UN sanctions monitors cited testimony from an arrested Yemeni arms trafficker who claimed to have received maritime training in Iran and to have subsequently participated in several trafficking operations, during which weapons originating in Iran were trans-shipped off the coasts of Oman, Djibouti and Somalia.¹⁰ The alleged trafficker further stated that the cargo would then be transported either to ports in Al Mahrah Governorate, where another network would smuggle them overland to Houthi-controlled areas, or directly through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait to ports on the Red Sea.¹¹



	DATE	INTERDICTION AUTHORITY	LOCATION	MATERIAL SEIZED
1	24 Sep 2015	HMAS <i>Melbourne</i>	Arabian Sea, off the coast of Oman*	75 anti-tank guided missiles (Toophan/ M113 Konkurs/ 9M133 Kornet variants).
2	27 Feb 2016	HMAS <i>Darwin</i>	Arabian Sea, off the coast of Oman*	1 989 AK-pattern assault rifles; 49 PKM light machine guns; 100 RPG launchers; 20 60-mm mortars tubes.
3	20 Mar 2016	FS <i>La Provence</i>	Gulf of Aden*	1 998 AK-pattern assault rifles; six PKM light machine guns; 64 Hoshdar-M sniper rifles; 100 PRG launchers; 20 60-mm mortars; nine 9M113 Konkurs or 9M133 Kornet variant anti-tank guided missiles.
4	28 Mar 2016	USS <i>Sirocco</i>	Persian Gulf or Arabian Sea	1 500 AK-pattern assault rifles; 21 DShK-pattern heavy machine guns; 200 RPG launchers.
5	28 Aug 2018	USS <i>Jason Dunham</i>	Gulf of Aden*	Over 2 522 AK-pattern (Type 56-1) assault rifles.
6	25 Jun 2019	HMAS <i>Ballarat</i>	Gulf of Oman*	697 bags ammonium nitrate fertilizer; 475 000 rounds small calibre ammunition.
7	25 Nov 2019	USS <i>Forrest Sherman</i>	Arabian Sea	21 "Dehlavieh" anti-tank guided missiles; components for the Quds-1 land attack cruise missile, for a C802 anti-ship cruise missile and for a third, unidentified cruise missile; two previously unknown surface-to-air missiles.
8	9 Feb 2020	USS <i>Normandy</i>	Arabian Sea	150 'Dehlavieh' anti-tank guided missiles; three 358 surface-to-air missile; various optical sights.
9	17 Apr 2020	Saudi-led coalition forces	Gulf of Aden*	3 002 Type 56-1 rifles, other unknown materiel.
10	24 Jun 2020	Saudi-led coalition forces	Gulf of Aden*	1 298 AK-pattern rifles (mostly Type 56-1s); RPG-29 variants; 'Dehlavieh' anti-tank guided missiles; PKM-pattern light machine guns; DShK-pattern heavy machine guns, optical sights; AM-50 Sayyad anti-material rifles; Walther air rifles.
11	11-12 February 2021	USS <i>Winston Churchill</i>	Indian Ocean*	~3 700 AK-pattern assault rifles, 100 PKM-pattern light machine guns, 200 PKM spare barrels, 80 DShK-pattern heavy machine guns with spare barrels, 25 DShK-pattern heavy machine guns mounts, 50 12.7 mm sniper rifles with optics, 90 RPG launchers.
12	6-7 May 2021	USS <i>Monterey</i>	Arabian Sea*	2 555 Type 56-1 rifles, 35 AKS-74U rifles, 194 RPG launchers, 192 PKM light machine guns, 100 SVD-pattern sniper rifles (plus optics), 52 AM-50 Sayyad anti-material rifles, 51 AM-50 Sayyad POSP optics, 48 anti-tank guided missiles.

FIGURE 4 Known maritime seizures of arms-trafficking dhows, 2015–2021.

* indicates seizures shown on the accompanying map.

SOURCE: UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, US Central Command, Australian Navy, the GI-TOC.

NOTE: The figure was updated on 15 November 2021 to correct an inaccurate seizure location.

The Type 56-1 rifle

The Type 56 rifle is a Chinese copy of the Soviet-manufactured AKMS assault rifle, first produced in 1956. The Type 56 was first widely used in combat by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. Additionally, Iran first began purchasing large quantities of Type 56-1 rifles from China for use in the war against Iraq between 1980 and 1988.

The primary feature distinguishing the Type 56-1 model from other Type 56 rifles is its under-folding stock, similar in design to the Soviet AK-47S model.

SPECIFICATIONS

Calibre: 7.62 × 39 mm

Production: 1956–present

Manufacturer: The China Ordnance Industries Group Corporation Limited (NORINCO)

Mass: 3.7 kilograms

Length: 874 mm

Rate of fire: 650 rounds per minute



While the entirety of the heavier weapon component of maritime shipments appears intended for use by Houthi forces, assault rifles are routinely diverted into the illicit sphere in both Yemen and Somalia. Preliminary information provided to the GI-TOC by sources close to smuggling gangs suggests that small arms diversion may constitute a sort of in-kind compensation for the trafficking networks. In other words, traffickers may be paid by being permitted to sell a small portion of each consignment they transport.

The government of Iran has repeatedly denied any role in the provision of arms to the Houthis. Ascertaining Iranian involvement in these trafficking operations is difficult, but three seizures carried out by the USS *Monterey* (2021), the USS *Jason Dunham* (2018) and the USS *Winston Churchill* (2021) all provide strong circumstantial evidence.

The USS *Monterey* seizure

Between 6 and 7 May 2021, the guided-missile cruiser USS *Monterey* conducted an operation that led to the interdiction of a stateless dhow in the northern Arabian Sea. Discovered onboard were thousands of weapons, consistent in composition to similar seizures of SALW believed to have originated in Iran. The Iranian government denied any involvement in the shipment.¹²

The GI-TOC obtained a complete inventory of the seizure (Figure 6), which included the serial numbers and other markings of each weapon. The relative proximity of the Type 56-1



Thousands of illicit weapons were interdicted by the guided-missile cruiser USS *Monterey* from a stateless dhow in international waters of the North Arabian Sea, 8 May 2021.
© US Navy

serial numbers strongly suggested that the weapons derived from a state stockpile, as it would be extremely unlikely for such proximity to obtain in a group of weapons assembled from the black market.

In addition, based on photographs obtained by the GI-TOC, some weapons in the shipment, namely AM-50 Sayyad anti-materiel rifles and RPG-7 launchers, appeared to be of Iranian manufacture, suggesting that Iran was the originator of the shipment.

Digits apart	Colour code
1	3.8%
2 to 10	21.3%
10 to 100	58.8%
100 to 500	14.4%
>500	1.7%

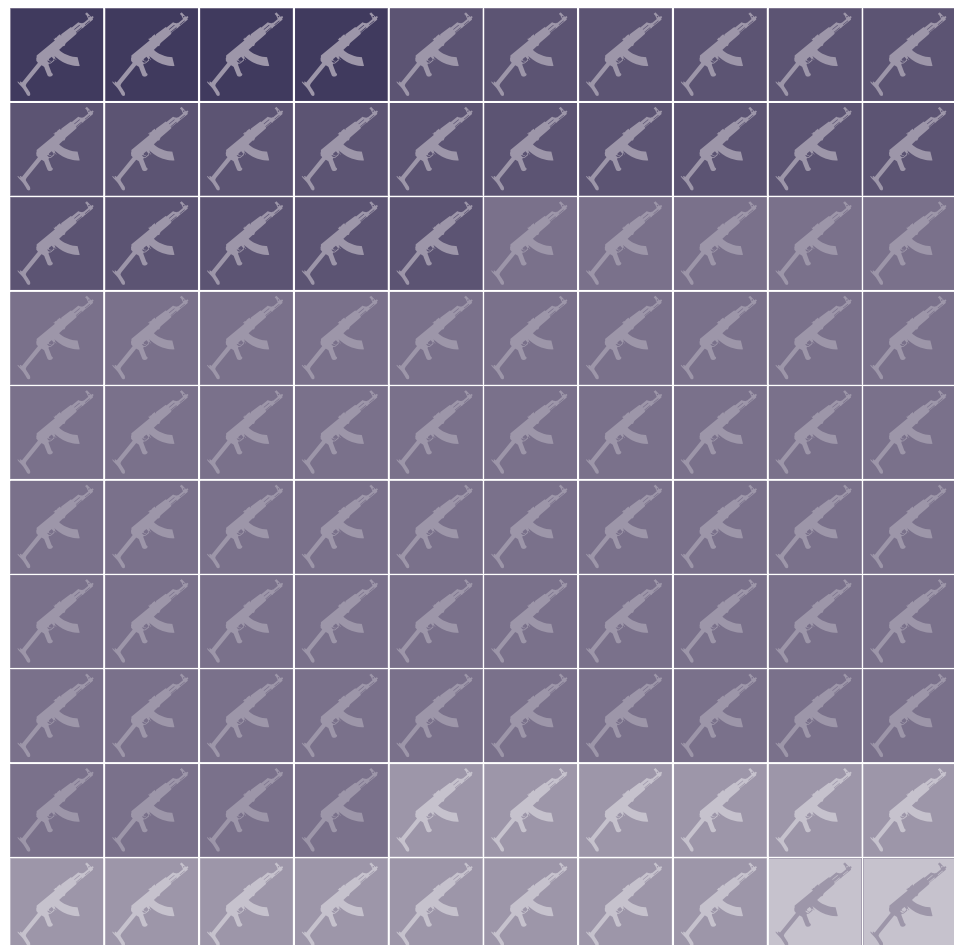


FIGURE 5 Serial number proximity among Type 56-1 rifles seized by the USS *Monterey*.

Description	Quantity
Chinese Type 56-1 (7.62 × 39 mm) AK-pattern assault rifles	2 555
AKS-74U (7.62 × 39 mm) assault rifles	35
RPG-7 launchers*	194
Chinese Type 80 (7.62 × 54 mm) or suspected Type 80 PKM-pattern light machine guns	183
Bulgarian-manufactured PKM-pattern (7.62 × 54 mm) light machine guns	6
Russian-manufactured PKM-pattern (7.62 × 54 mm) light machine guns	3
SVD-pattern sniper rifles (plus SVD optics)	100
AM-50 Sayyad (12.7 × 99 mm) anti-materiel rifles*	52
AM-50 Sayyad 12 × 50 m POSP optics*	51
Anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs)	48

FIGURE 6 Contents of the USS *Monterey* seizure.

NOTE: * denotes materiel believed to have been manufactured in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

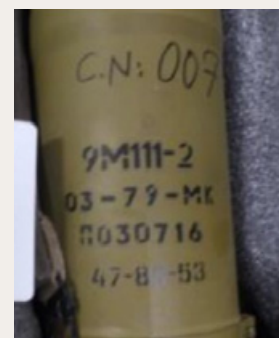
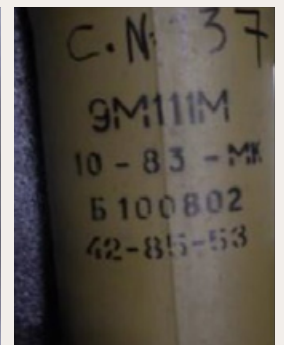
SOURCE: US Government.



From top to bottom: Type 56-1 assault rifles, PK-pattern light machine guns. Source: US Government



From top to bottom: An AM-50 Sayyad sniper rifle with corresponding POSP optics believed to have been manufactured by Iran, RPG-7s and anti-tank guided missiles. Source: US Government





The green packaging found aboard the dhow interdicted by the USS *Monterey* (top left and right) was similar in appearance to that containing rifles seized by the USS *Jason Dunham* on 28 August 2018 (bottom). © Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jonathan Clay/US Navy.

The USS *Jason Dunham* seizure

On 28 August 2018, the USS *Jason Dunham* interdicted a stateless dhow (*Al Shibouti*) in the Gulf of Aden, between Somalia and Yemen. While the dhow itself was largely devoid of cargo, it had been observed trans-shipping goods to a skiff on the previous day.¹³ A helicopter from the USS *Jason Dunham* subsequently located the skiff proximate to Yemeni territorial waters, and it was boarded.¹⁴ Retrieved from the skiff, which was taking on water due to overloading, were 2 515 Type 56-1 rifles.¹⁵ The skiff was subsequently scuttled with a small quantity of rifles still onboard.¹⁶ The *Jason Dunham* seizure represented the first instance in which a significant quantity of Type 56-1 rifles were interdicted en route to Yemen.

Once again, the relative proximity of the serial numbers of the rifles strongly suggested a single state source (Figure 7). The Type 56-1 rifles were wrapped in foam sheets and packaged in green plastic bags and tied with zip ties, with each bag containing four rifles.¹⁷ The consistent use of similar packaging between the seizures of the USS *Monterey*, the USS *Jason Dunham* and the USS *Winston Churchill* (described below) lends further corroboration to the supposition that these arms consignments had a common point of origin.

Digits apart	Colour code
1	7.6%
2 to 10	54.8%
10 to 100	35.6%
100 to 500	1.6%
>500	0.5%

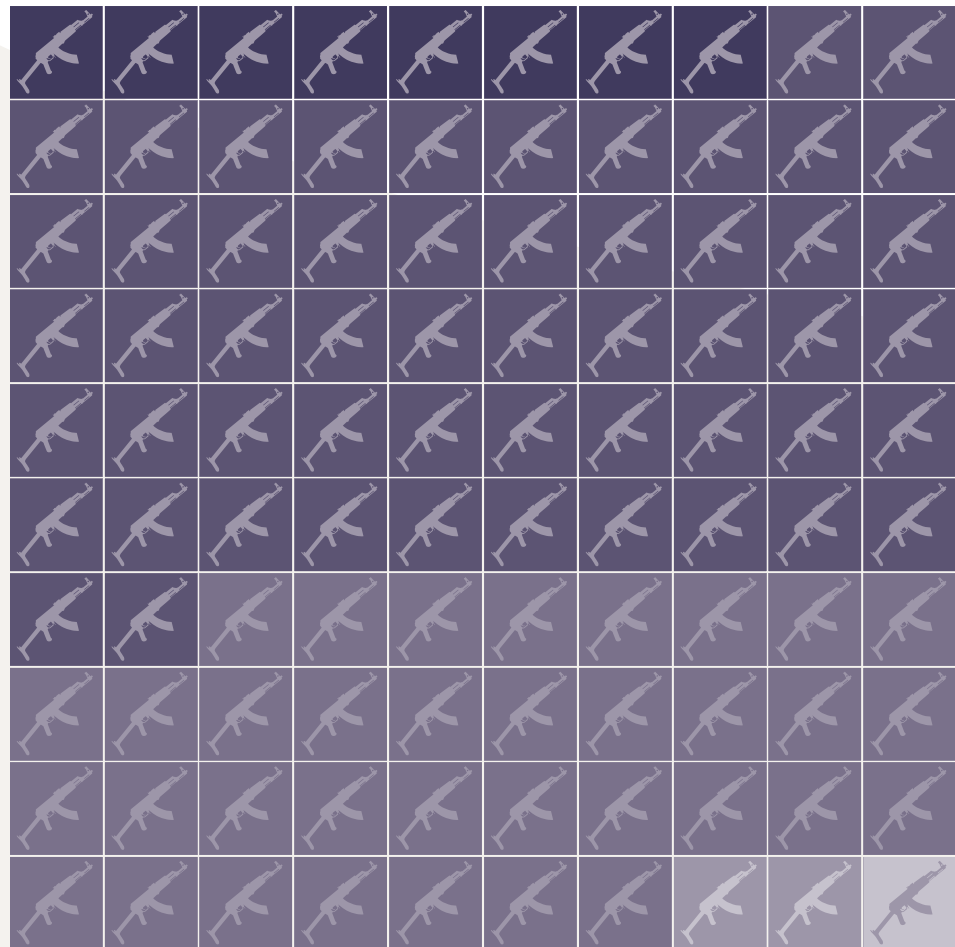


FIGURE 7 Serial number proximity among Type 56-1 rifles seized by the USS *Jason Dunham*.

The story behind the serials: the USS Monterey and USS Jason Dunham rifles

The serial numbers of the 2 515 Type 56-1 rifles seized by the USS *Jason Dunham* ranged from 63000005 to 63098435. Almost the entirety of the rifles in the shipment were marked '18 CN,' indicating a manufacture year of 2018. The *Jason Dunham* seizure took place in August 2018, and given the short intervening period between the manufacture of the rifles and the maritime seizure, there would likely have been insufficient time for a third party to have purchased the rifles from China prior to delivering them to Iran. In other words, it is almost certain that the rifles seized by the USS *Jason Dunham* had formed part of a direct state-to-state transfer between China and Iran. Although Iran was under a UN arms embargo until October 2020, restrictions on exports to the country did not extend to SALW.¹⁸ Therefore, no legal barriers existed to prevent China from supplying Type 56-1 rifles to Iran.

As can be seen in Figure 8, the serial numbers in the *Jason Dunham* seizure are highly clustered and display a considerable degree of contiguity. By contrast, the rifles seized by the USS *Monterey* display a much more sharply delineated break in the serial number sequence (which ranges between 60231326 and 62135532). At the point where the serial number sequence reaches 61132171, it jumps almost 870 000 digits over the next two rifles, to 62000076. The significant gap between the two clusters is apparent in Figure 8. It appears, therefore, that the rifles may have originated from two distinct stockpiles composed of different serial number sequences.

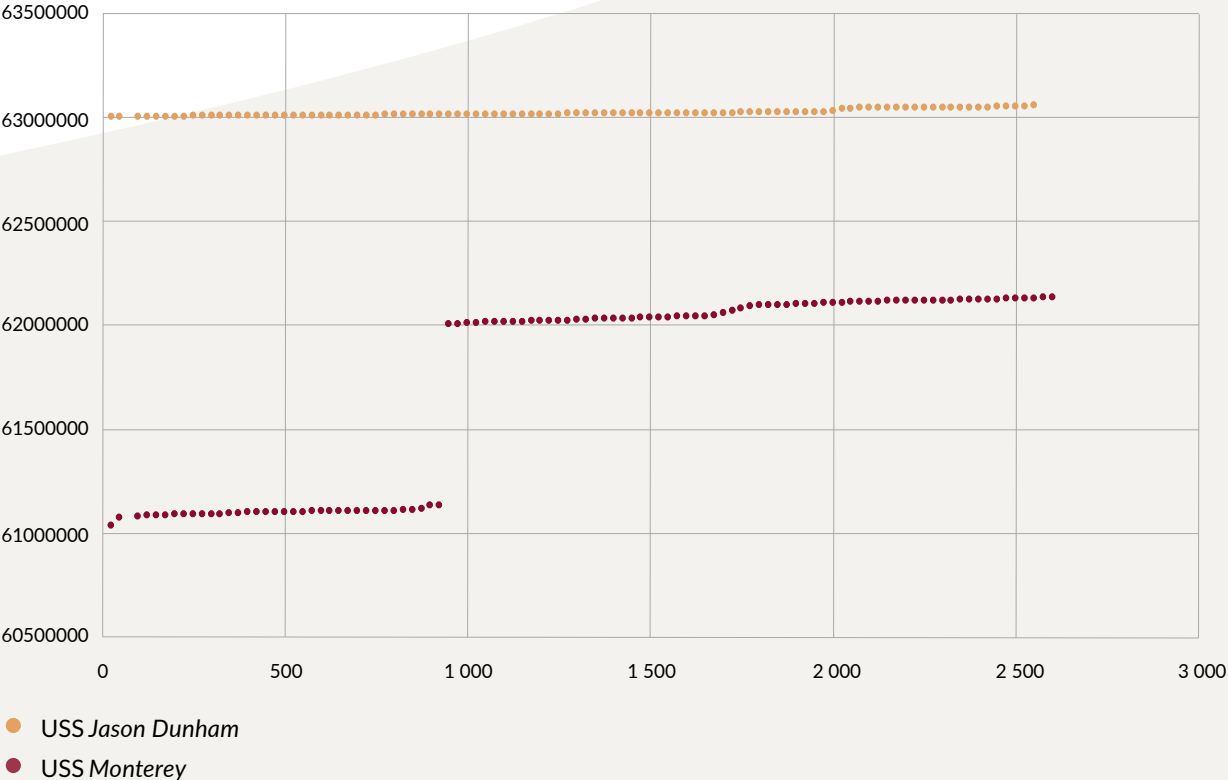


FIGURE 8 Proximity of the serial numbers of rifles seized by the USS *Jason Dunham* and USS *Monterey*.

NOTE: To facilitate graphical presentation, each data point represents the averaged value of a group of 25 serial numbers.

It is interesting to note that although the *Monterey* consignment was intercepted at the later date, the rifles all bore 16 CN and 17 CN markings, indicating that they had been manufactured in 2016 and 2017. This raises a few possibilities in respect of the source of the firearms seized. Was the *Monterey* consignment sourced from an earlier Iranian weapon order that was only delivered years later? Were the rifles purchased from a third party (state or non-state) that had held custody of them in the intervening period? Did rifles manufactured in 2018, 2017 and 2016 all arrive as one shipment, but were inventoried in reverse chronological order, such that the 2018 rifles were dispersed first?

Furthermore, the serial numbers of the rifles in the USS *Jason Dunham* seizure are significantly less clustered than those found in the USS *Monterey* consignment. When extreme outliers are removed, serial numbers in the *Jason Dunham* seizure are on average 15 digits apart. In the case of the *Monterey* seizure, the respective figure is 83 digits. The stark differences in serial number distribution patterns between the two seizures may have several explanations. If (as suggested above) the *Jason Dunham* rifles were indeed dispersed first upon receipt – with the remaining consignment relegated to inventory – it would follow that the inventoried materiel might be moved, reassigned or recategorized over time. Additional (undetected) illicit dhow shipments to Yemen in the more than two years between the *Jason Dunham* and *Monterey* consignments may have drained stockpiles and consequently reduced the serial number proximity of the remaining rifles. Moreover, additional imports of sequential batches of Type 56-1 rifles from China in the intervening period would have led to further serial number variation in existing stockpiles. The composition of illicit shipments originating from these stockpiles would consequently also have been more variable.

Finally, it is possible that past seizures may have imparted lessons on those responsible for organizing the shipments. By varying the serial numbers in each consignment, the state origin of the rifles might be somewhat better obfuscated. The above theorizing might explain why the seized *Monterey* consignment appeared to originate from two distinct stockpiles, and displayed a lesser degree of serial number clustering than the *Jason Dunham* seizure. However, without more information on Chinese arms export practices or Iranian weapon management procedures, these questions will likely remain a matter for conjecture.

The USS *Winston Churchill* seizure: a GPS track to Iran

During a two-day maritime operation spanning 11 and 12 February 2021, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Winston Churchill* interdicted and boarded two stateless dhows off the coast of Somalia.¹⁹ The first, and larger, of the two dhows was of a *jelbut* style typically seen in Iran. The second was a *shu'ai* dhow more commonly seen in Yemen, named *Umm-al-Mada'in*. Boarding teams discovered thousands of AK-pattern assault rifles, machine guns, sniper rifles and other weaponry.²⁰ The origin and destination of the seized materiel were not immediately disclosed. However, both the composition of the weaponry

discovered onboard as well as the GPS track of one of the dhows, obtained by the GI-TOC, strongly point to an Iranian origin. Furthermore, documents recovered from the smaller dhow, also obtained by the GI-TOC, indicate that the smuggling network responsible for the shipment had ties to both Yemen and Oman, and perhaps Somalia.

The captured weapons were reportedly disposed of overboard following the seizure, precluding the possibility of serial number documentation. However, the GI-TOC was able to obtain a rough inventory of the seizure contents (Figure 9). The consignment included approximately 3 700 AK-pattern assault rifles; while the rifles appeared consistent with Type 56-1 variants, it was not possible to confirm this with certainty based on the photographs publicly available. Notably, however, the green packaging used to wrap the rifles was similar in appearance to that found onboard the arms trafficking dhow intercepted by the *USS Monterey* two months later (see above).



Iranian soldiers take aim during naval exercises near the Iranian port of Jask, 30 December 2011.

© Ali Mohammadi/AFP via Getty Images



The larger of the two interdicted vessels was a jelbut-style dhow typically seen in Iran. © Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Louis Thompson Staats IV/US Navy

Description	Quantity
AK-pattern (7.62 x 39 mm) assault rifles	~3 700
PKM-pattern (7.62 x 54 mm) light machine guns	100
PKM spare barrels	200
DShK-pattern (12.7 x 107 mm) heavy machine guns with spare barrels	80
DShK-pattern (12.7 x 107 mm) heavy machine guns mounts	25
12.7 mm sniper rifles with optics	50
RPG launchers	90

FIGURE 9 Approximate contents of the USS *Winston Churchill* seizure.
SOURCE: US Government.

AK-pattern rifles seized by the USS *Winston Churchill*. While the rifles appear consistent with Type 56-1 variants, no definitive conclusions are possible based on the photographic evidence available. The green packaging containing the rifles was similar to that observed during at least two other maritime arms seizures. © Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Louis Thompson Staats IV/US Navy





PK-pattern light machine guns (left) and RPG launchers (right) captured during the USS *Winston Churchill* interdiction.

© Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Louis Thompson Staats IV/US Navy

GPS track of the larger dhow

During the seizure a GPS device was recovered from the larger, *jelbut*-style dhow. Exploitation of this device revealed the dhow's possible movements in the weeks before the seizure. Most notably, data recovered from the device indicates that the dhow was located in the Gulf of Oman, at the gateway to the Persian Gulf, between 20 and 24 January 2021. Coordinates (25.685417, 57.866100) contained in the device with a date stamp of 21 January 2021 correspond to a small anchorage lying roughly 10 kilometres east of Jask, a strategically important port near the Strait of Hormuz that is host to an Iranian naval base.

Significantly, the GPS track of the *Al Bari 2*, an arms smuggling dhow interdicted by the Saudi Navy in June 2020, indicated that the *Al Bari 2* may have visited locations off the coast of Iran almost contiguous to those stored in the GPS device onboard the dhow seized by the USS *Winston Churchill*.²¹ It should be qualified, however, that coordinates stored within the GPS device recovered from either dhow do not constitute definitive evidence that the vessels themselves were ever physically present at any of the indicated locations.

The GPS device indicated that by 29 January 2021 the dhow was sailing southwards in the Indian Ocean, approximately 1 000 kilometres north-east of the eventual seizure location. The next GPS waypoint stored in the device was dated 4 February 2021, and placed the dhow in the vicinity of the Somali coastline, approximately 70 kilometres north-east of Bandarbeyla. Over the following eight days, between 4 and 12 February 2021, the dhow appeared to remain relatively stationary off the eastern coast of Somalia. One might hypothesize that during this window the dhow was either engaged in trans-shipping a portion of its cargo or was maintaining a holding pattern in anticipation of an eventual rendezvous with the *Umm-al-Mada'in*, which was later seized during the same operation. While the trans-shipping of arms to smaller dhows and skiffs off the coast of Somalia is a

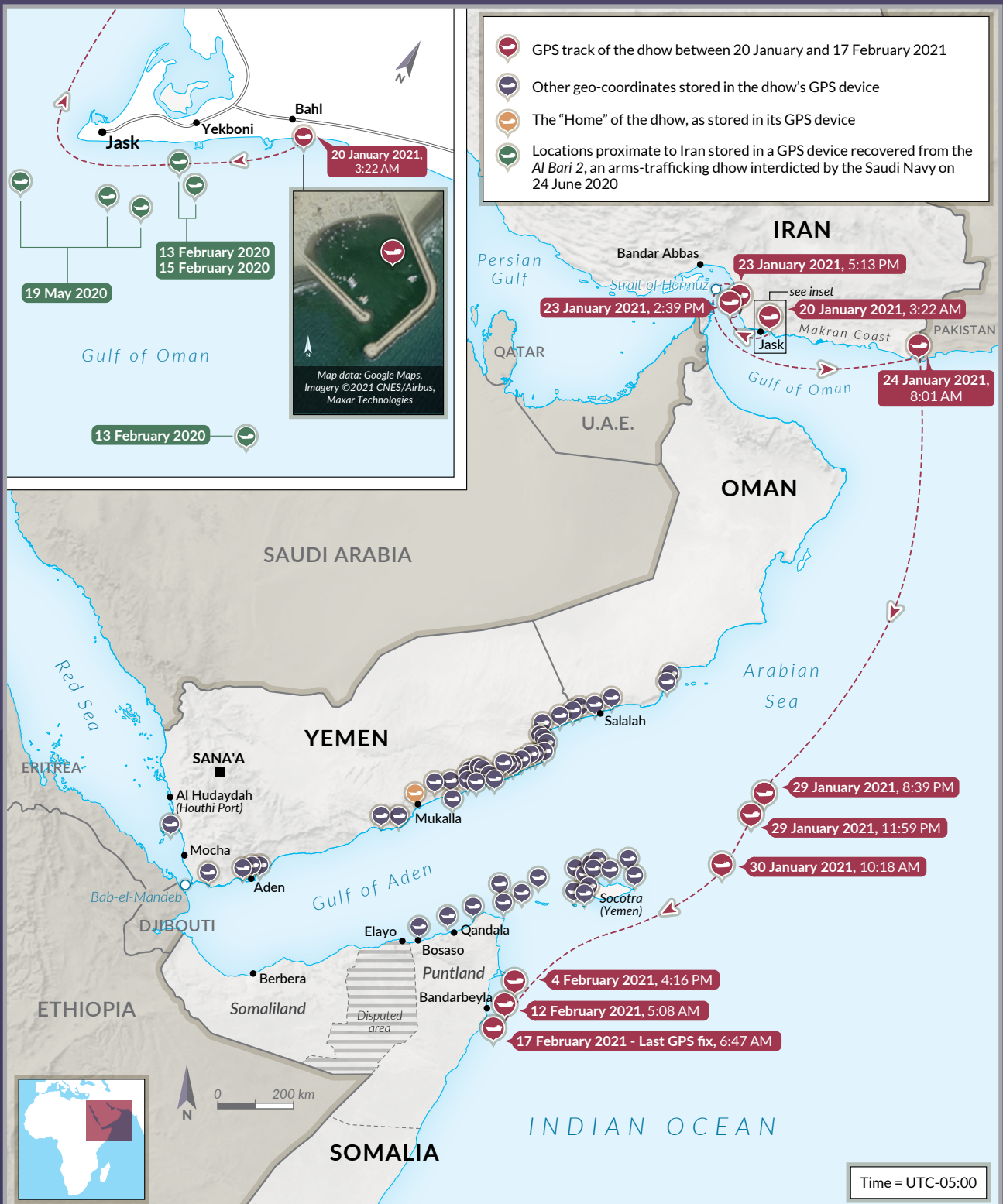


FIGURE 10 The GPS track of an arms-trafficking dhow interdicted by the *USS Winston Churchill*.

common tactic in the transfer of arms to Yemen, the GI-TOC has not yet been able to establish the nature of the relationship between the two dhows interdicted by the USS *Winston Churchill*.

The final GPS fix from the device was dated 17 February 2021, approximately 50 kilometres south of its 12 February location. Given that these geo-coordinates were registered six days after the start of the interdiction operation by the USS *Winston Churchill*, it may be assumed that the device continued to be active following the dhow's seizure. The seizure is therefore likely to have occurred somewhere between the 12 and 17 February 2021 GPS readings.

In addition to a record of its presumed movements before the seizure, also stored in the dhow's GPS device were coordinates for dozens of coastal locations off northern Somalia, southern Yemen and the Yemeni island of Socotra. However, there are no indications as to when, if ever, the dhow was physically present at any of these locations.

Finally, the dhow's 'Home', as saved in the GPS device, was the Yemeni port of Mukalla, a well-known arms smuggling hub. A receipt for coast guard registration plates purchased in Mukalla was also found aboard the smaller of the two seized dhows, *Umm-al-Mada'in*, further evidence that the smuggling network had ties to the city. (A source familiar with the seizure operation further confirmed that Mukalla was the home port of the *Umm-al-Mada'in*.)²²

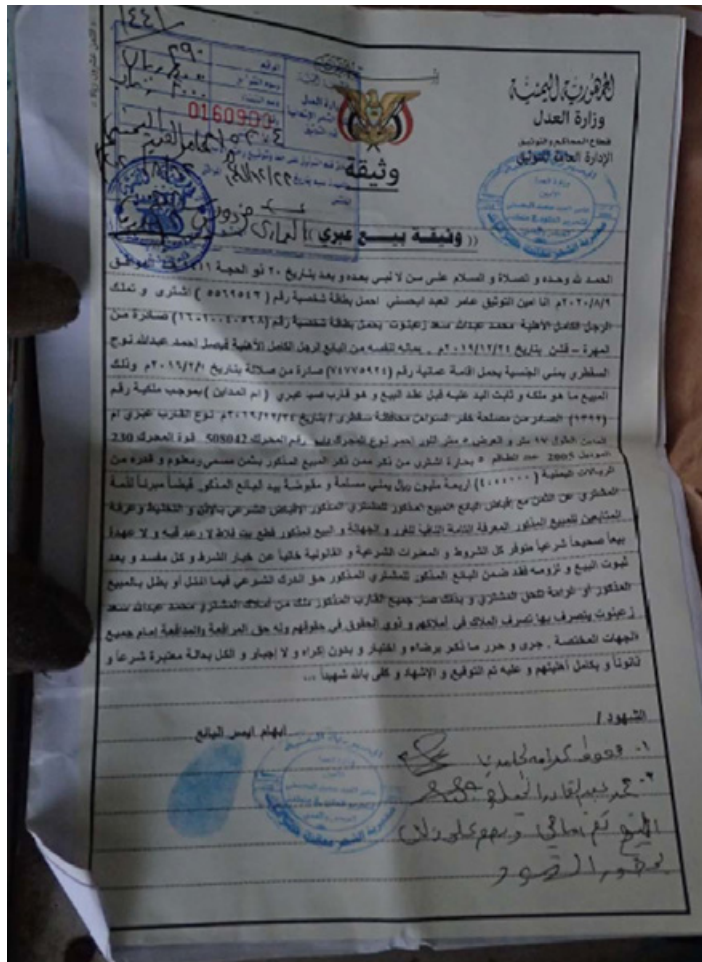


A receipt for coast guard registration plates dated 24 August 2020, issued by a shop located in Mukalla, a Yemeni arms smuggling hub. Source: US Government

Paper trail to Yemen, Oman and Somalia

Evidence obtained by the GI-TOC illustrates the transnational nature of the arms trafficking operation disrupted by the USS *Winston Churchill*, pointing to connections to Yemen, Oman and perhaps even Somalia. Several documents recovered from the *Umm-al-Mada'in* revealed financial and legal transactions conducted in Yemen and Oman, including documents relating to the sale of the dhow. It appears from this documentation that the dhow may have been purchased by a Yemeni national from an owner based in Oman.

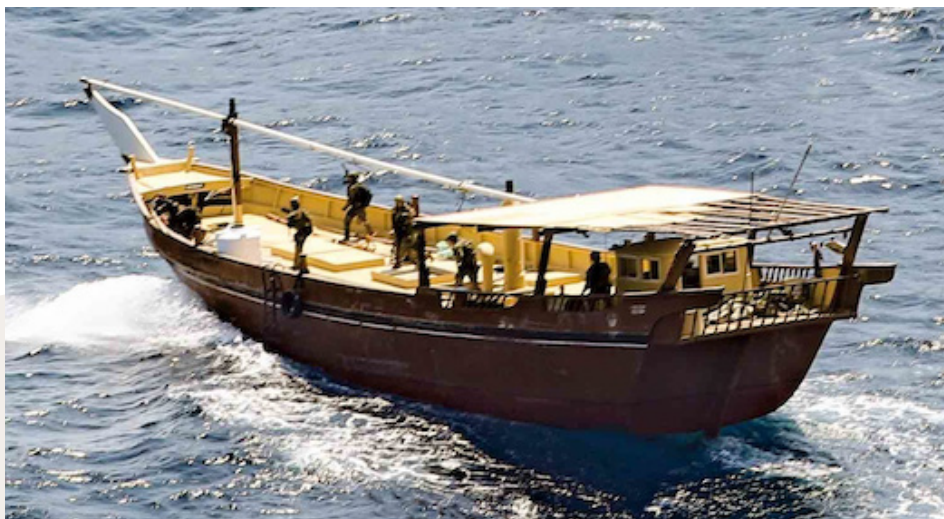
There are also preliminary indications that the smuggling network may have ties to Somalia. The GI-TOC also obtained photographs of the nine crewmembers of the *Umm-al-Mada'in*. A GI-TOC source familiar with maritime arms smuggling gangs in both Yemen and Somalia identified two of the crewmembers as individuals he had previously seen at the port of Bosaso, Puntland.²³ As the GI-TOC has previously reported, the Mohamed Omar Salim network, which was instrumental in the *Al Bari 2* arms smuggling operation, is also based out of Bosaso.²⁴



▲ Bill of sale, dated 22 August 2020, issued by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Yemen. The document authenticates the sale of the *Umm-al-Mada'in* for a sum of 4 000 000 Yemeni riyals (US\$16 000 at the official exchange rate). Source: US Government

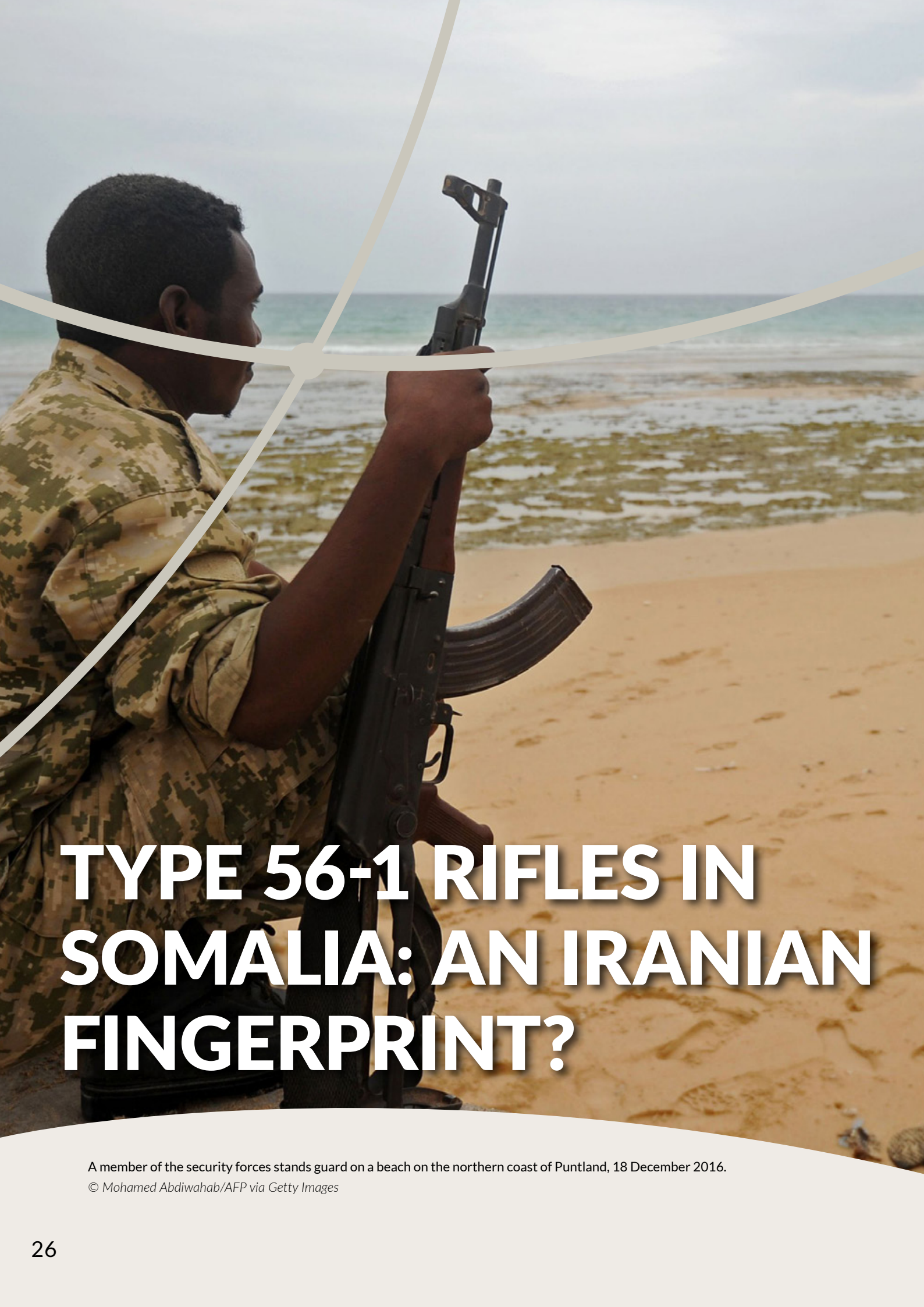
▶ A power of attorney dated 21 November 2019, issued by a notary of the Ministry of Justice of the Sultanate of Oman. The document authorizes a third party to sell a boat on the owner's behalf. Source: US Government

According to the same maritime source, the *Umm-al-Mada'in* was again intercepted, by the USS *Monterey*, a mere two months later while transporting an illicit arms shipment.²⁵ Inspection of available photographs of the two dhows does not preclude the possibility of them being the same vessel. If accurate, it would indicate the possibility that the same illicit network was involved in both trafficking operations. However, as the dhow is of a common *shu'ai* pattern, it was not possible to verify this assertion based on a superficial visual comparison alone.



The dhow *Umm-al-Mada'in* interdicted by the USS *Winston Churchill*, 11–12 February 2021 (top) was of similar appearance to the dhow interdicted by the USS *Monterey*, 6–7 May 2021 (above).


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TYPE 56-1 RIFLES IN SOMALIA: AN IRANIAN FINGERPRINT?

A member of the security forces stands guard on a beach on the northern coast of Puntland, 18 December 2016.

© Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP via Getty Images



As noted in the methodology section above, the rifles retrieved during the USS *Monterey* and USS *Jason Dunham* seizures account for 5 070 (98.1 per cent) of the total 5 169 Type 56-1 serial numbers contained in the data set compiled by the GI-TOC. Also as described above, the GI-TOC ordered the 5 169 total serial numbers in the data set from smallest to largest and analyzed the relative proximity. The more clustered the serial numbers, the higher the likelihood they originated from a common source, such as a state arsenal, rather than the random mix that would be characteristic of the black market.

The GI-TOC subsequently cross-referenced the serial number proximity of the 38 Type 56-1 rifles documented by its researchers in Somalia against other rifles in the data set. The analysis concluded that most, if not all, of the rifles, shared a common origin, most likely Iranian state stocks. Three sample serial number clusters help illustrate how the GI-TOC reached this conclusion.

Close relatives: three rifle serial clusters

Three sample serial number clusters extracted from the overall data set highlight the proximity of the 38 rifle serial numbers documented by GI-TOC researchers in Somalia to those linked to Iran in the maritime seizures.

The first cluster (Figure 11) includes serial numbers for ten Type 56-1 rifles documented by the GI-TOC at various locations in Somalia. The serial numbers displayed relatively close proximity both to one another and to the serial numbers of rifles retrieved by the USS *Monterey* from 6–7 May 2021. The serial number sequence strongly suggests that the rifles were issued from a common source, in this case Iranian government stocks. However, without more information on the distribution pattern of these rifles, it is difficult to determine when and by what means the rifles reached Somalia. In most cases, it is open to speculation whether they were transhipped from Iranian consignments en route to Yemen, or diverted into the illicit arms market only after reaching Yemen.

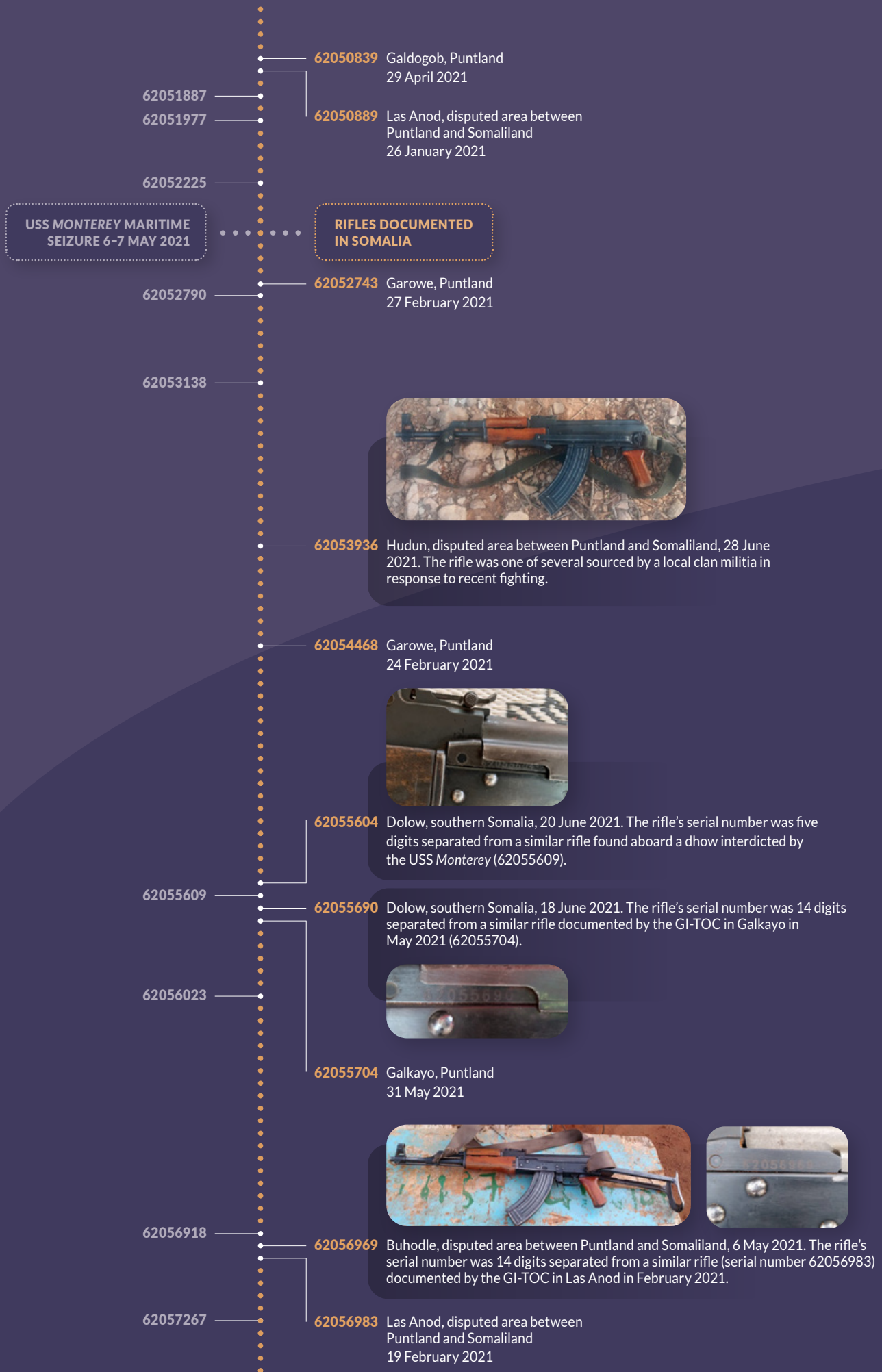


FIGURE 11 Serial number comparison of Type 56-1 rifles documented in Somalia.

The GI-TOC found the above Type 56-1 rifle, bearing serial number 62053936, in Hudun, Sool region, in June 2021. It was discovered together with another Type 56-1 as part of the GI-TOC's investigation into an arms from Yemen shipment, which arrived in Puntland on 15–16 May 2021 (see 'On the trail of a Puntland arms shipment' below). The dealer in custody of the two weapons told the GI-TOC's researcher that he had purchased them from dealers based in Badhan.²⁶ (Two Type 56-1 rifles originating in the 15–16 May shipment were also found in the possession of arms dealers in Badhan.)

The Hudun dealer had procured the two rifles, and other weapons, on behalf of a clan militia that was arming itself in response to fighting that had claimed dozens of lives two months before.²⁷ If this account is accurate, it is a poignant example of weaponry from the war in Yemen directly fuelling violence in Somalia.

A second sample serial number cluster (Figure 12) highlights the rifle documented in Somalia which displayed the closest serial number proximity to a weapon documented in a maritime seizure. The rifle's serial number was only three digits removed from

a similar rifle seized by the USS *Jason Dunham* in August 2018.

The Type 56-1 rifle bearing serial number 63017103 was documented in March 2021 in the possession of a civilian near the town of Tukaraq, which lies on the front line of an ongoing territorial dispute between Puntland and the neighbouring self-declared republic of Somaliland. Its serial number was separated by only three digits from that of a similar rifle (63017100) seized during the maritime interdiction of a dhow and skiff by the USS *Jason Dunham* on 28 August 2018.²⁸ A second rifle recovered by the USS *Jason Dunham* had a serial number only nine digits higher (63017112).

Notably, the rifle bore a '21 SEP' post-manufacturing marking, making it highly likely that it had once formed part of a Houthi arsenal. (The date 21 September has special significance to the Houthi movement, marking the date in 2014 when Houthi militants stormed and took control of the Yemeni capital of Sana'a.) The above rifle therefore probably reached its intended end users, namely the Houthis, before being trafficked onward to Somalia.



FIGURE 12 Closest serial number proximity of a Type 56-1 rifle documented in Somalia.



A Type 56-1 rifle bearing a '21 SEP' post-manufacturing marking. The rifle bore some similarities to several rifles that were seized as part of an alleged Iranian smuggling operation to Bahrain in 2015.

One other rifle bearing the '21 SEP' stamp was observed by GI-TOC field researchers. The weapon, a Type 56-1 rifle documented in the possession of a civilian resident of Galkayo in January 2021, does not appear to have originated from the same Iran–Yemen supply chain as other Type 56-1s referenced in this study. However, the serial number and factory marking on the weapon bore some similarities with rifles captured during the 2015 interdiction of a skiff within Iran's EEZ, operated by individuals who later claimed to have received training at an

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps base in Iran.²⁹ The materiel captured as a result of this interdiction was reportedly intended for anti-government forces in Bahrain.³⁰

A third, and final, sample serial number cluster (Figure 13) highlights the proximity of a rifle documented in Galkayo to those seized in three naval seizures, namely the USS *Monterey* seizure in May 2021 and the Saudi seizure of two dhows in the Gulf of Aden on 17 April and 24 June 2020.



FIGURE 13 Comparison of the serial number of a Type 56-1 rifle documented in Galkayo.



A warden addresses prisoners at a prison in Garowe, Puntland, 14 December 2016.

© Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP via Getty Images

Access to the Iran–Yemen arms pipeline by Islamist militants in Somalia

The region of Puntland is beset on its western and eastern flanks by two rival Islamist insurgent groups, al-Shabaab and ISIL's Somalia faction. Numerous ISIL media releases have featured militants wielding weaponry consistent with materiel diverted from the Iran–Yemen supply chain.³¹ These have included numerous rifles appearing to be Chinese-manufactured Type 56-1s, as well Type 80 PKM-pattern light machine guns. Rifles reportedly captured by ISIL following fighting with al-Shabaab forces in Puntland also appear consistent with Type 56-1s.

In the absence of an opportunity to examine serial numbers and other markings, it was not possible for the GI-TOC to definitively determine the provenance of any weapons deployed by ISIL or al-Shabaab militants in Somalia. Moreover, the ubiquity of Chinese-manufactured SALW in the region allows for many possible points of origin. However, both al-Shabaab and the ISIL faction routinely source their arms and ammunition from Yemen, through the same commercial arms trafficking channels as other armed actors.³² It is therefore plausible that the materiel diverted from the Iran–Yemen supply chain would be accessible to both militant groups.



جانِب من الغنائم التي من اللّٰه بها على المجاهدين

Still from an ISIL propaganda video depicting assault rifles captured from rival militant group al-Shabaab, several of which are consistent with Type 56-1s. The Arabic caption reads: 'This is the [war prize] from the attackers'. Source: ISIL




ISIL militants in Somalia wielding what appear to be a Type 56-1 assault rifle and a Type 80 light machine gun. Source: Al-Naba Magazine

A close-up photograph of a Type 56-1 rifle receiver. The receiver is dark metal with several brass pins. A wooden stock is visible at the bottom. The serial number '65011771' is stamped vertically on the receiver. The background is a wooden wall. A white curved line graphic is overlaid on the image.

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTED WEAPONS IN SOMALIA

A Type 56-1 rifle manufactured in 2020 ('20 CN'), documented in Dolow in June 2021.



A total of 11 additional Type 56-1 rifles were documented by GI-TOC field researchers in southern Somalia. However, subsequent analysis of the production dates and other markings led to the conclusion that the rifles were unlikely to have originated in transfers of arms from Iran to Yemen. Nonetheless, the additional materiel warrants a brief discussion.

GI-TOC researchers tracking an illicit arms shipment from Yemen to Puntland also documented several Heckler & Koch G3 rifles, including one manufactured in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, GI-TOC researchers noted two cases where rifles belonging to Federal Government of Somalia stocks had been diverted onto the black market.

Type 56-1 rifles manufactured in 2020

Between 10 and 22 June 2021, GI-TOC researchers documented nine Type 56-1 rifles in southern Somalia bearing the serial number format 650XXXXX and the marking '20 CN', indicating that they had been manufactured in 2020. Six of the rifles were documented in Belet Hawo and three in Dolow. The presence of such recently manufactured SALW in the black market is unusual and noteworthy.

It is implausible that these rifles had originated from the same Iran–Yemen supply chain as other Type 56-1s highlighted in this paper. First, no Type 56-1 rifle bearing a 650XXXXX serial number sequence has been documented in seizures of arms shipments destined for Yemen. Nor have they been documented in illicit markets in northern Somalia, as would be expected had they been transported onwards to Dolow and Belet Hawo through the same north–south supply chain.³³ For this reason, these nine rifles were not included in the above analysis of the potential spillover of SALW from the Yemen conflict into Somalia.

However, the origin of these rifles is not yet apparent. Their recent manufacture date, as well as relative serial number proximity,³⁴ raises the possibility that they were diverted from state-owned stores. However, none of the rifles bore Somali or other government markings, suggesting that they were unlikely to have been imported through a legal process. The arms dealers found in custody of these weapons told GI-TOC researchers that they had imported them from Ethiopia, or, in one case, Uganda.³⁵ However, the GI-TOC is not aware of any recent import of Type 56-1 rifles by either government, nor has it found any other corroborating evidence to support the dealers' claims. Investigating the origins and proliferation of these 20 CN rifles in southern Somalia, therefore, would be a worthwhile avenue for future research.

On the trail of a Puntland arms shipment

Between February and May 2021, Puntland experienced an unusually high frequency of weapon shipments from Yemen, reportedly due to elevated demand fuelled by increased clan-based conflict in Puntland, as well as political instability over Somalia's stalled electoral process in the south.³⁶ From 15 to 16 May 2021, Puntland authorities conducted a seizure of a small shipment of arms between Bosaso and the littoral town of Elayo, 30 kilometres to the west, while they were being transported from Yemen.³⁷ The seized shipment was reportedly only one of four facilitated by the same smuggling network in close succession; the other three had successfully reached Somalia in the preceding days.³⁸

The Puntland presidential guard took possession of much of the captured materiel, including reportedly dozens of Heckler & Koch G3 battle rifles.³⁹ The G3 is a NATO-calibre battle rifle of German design that is currently manufactured by many countries around the world, including Saudi Arabia.

However, only a portion of the shipment was confiscated by Puntland authorities. In June 2021, GI-TOC

researchers were able to trace the onward transport of a remaining part of the consignment to two towns, Badhan and Hudun, where two Type 56-1s were found in each town (see 'Close relatives: three rifle serial clusters' above).

Also in Badhan, the GI-TOC recorded the sole instance during the current study where a weapon manufactured in Saudi Arabia – a G3 rifle – was found in the illicit market in Somalia. The arms dealer holding the weapon reported to the GI-TOC's researcher that he had purchased it from arms smugglers who source their weapons from Yemen.⁴⁰ The national emblem of Saudi Arabia was emblazoned next to the rifle's fire selector. It is probable that the weapon had been supplied by Saudi Arabia to anti-Houthi coalition forces in Yemen before being diverted into the illicit sphere. In a response to a GI-TOC inquiry, Saudi authorities stated that the rifle was not contained in a database of firearm carry permits and ownership for Saudi citizens.⁴¹ However, the response did not address whether the weapon had been exported for use in Yemen or elsewhere.

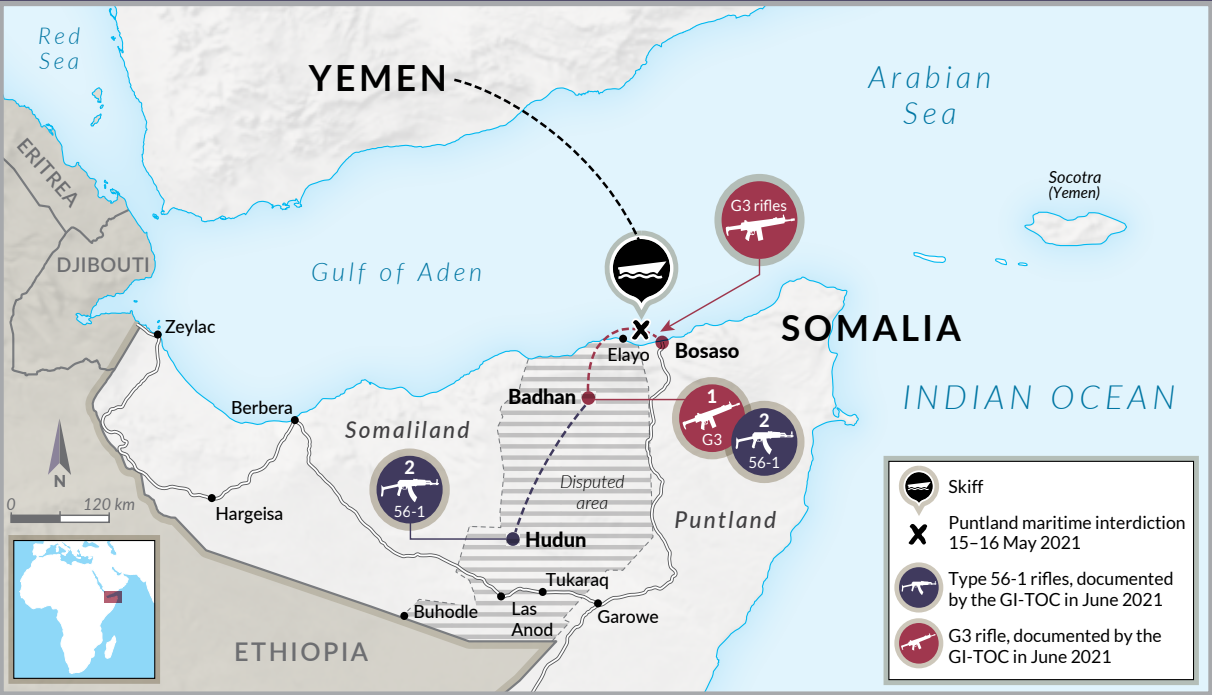


FIGURE 14 The route of a May 2021 illicit arms shipment originating in Yemen.



G3 rifle of Saudi origin documented in Badhan, Somalia, on 27 June 2021. The rifle bears the national emblem of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia near the fire selector.

The above rifle was not the only G3 documented by the GI-TOC in June 2021. A few days before the shipment that was partially seized by Puntland authorities, the smuggling network responsible had successfully imported dozens of G3 rifles into the same coastal strip west of Bosaso. A quantity of these rifles was subsequently transported onward to storehouses in Bosaso, which a GI-TOC field researcher was allowed to access. The researcher observed approximately 20 G3 rifles in the storehouse and was permitted to photograph several of the weapons. However, the documentation was not thorough enough to establish

whether these rifles had also been manufactured in Saudi Arabia.

Notably, at least one G3 rifle photographed in the Bosaso storehouse bore falsified US brandings that had perhaps been added by a Yemeni arms dealer or gunsmith, possibly in order to increase the perceived value of the rifle or to obscure its provenance.⁴² Previous research into the small arms trade in Somalia has revealed cases in which dealers have added fake Russian or Polish markings to Chinese and other AK-pattern rifles in order to increase value.⁴³



A G3 rifle freshly imported from Yemen, photographed by a GI-TOC researcher in Bosaso in June 2021. The rifle bears a fake 'U.S.A.' branding that was possibly added by an arms dealer in Yemen.

Type 56-1 rifles diverted from federal government stocks

Two additional Type 56-1 rifles documented by the GI-TOC in southern Somalia did not originate from the Iran–Yemen supply chain, but appear to have been diverted from materiel legally imported by the Federal Government of Somalia. Both rifles were documented in the possession of an arms dealer in the central city of Baidoa in May 2021.

The 'SO-XDS-2017' markings found on the rifles indicate that they had been added to Somali National Army (SNA) stocks in 2017. By cross-referencing their serial numbers with available documentation, the GI-TOC subsequently determined that both rifles had formed part of an arms consignment delivered by the government of Djibouti in June 2017. UN sanctions monitors had previously documented instances of materiel originating in the same consignment having been diverted into illicit markets in Baidoa.⁴⁴ Baidoa is the headquarters of Sector 60 of the SNA, and it is likely that the rifles had originally been assigned to soldiers stationed there.




A Type 56-1 rifle bearing serial number 60061006, documented in the possession of an arms dealer in Baidoa in May 2021. The 'SO XDS-2017' marking indicates that the weapon had belonged to the Somali National Army before being diverted into the illicit supply chain.



CONCLUSION AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Representatives of the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran attend the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna on 6 April 2021. © EU Delegation in Vienna via Getty Images



The present study has presented the first substantial evidence of the spillover into Somalia of rifles supplied by Iran in the context of the war in Yemen. It has further established that while Puntland is the primary entry point for these weapons, they are transported onward into southern Somalia as well as to the Ethiopian border.

Why does this matter? At the time of writing, Somalia remained locked in a political crisis over postponed elections that showed no signs of abating. In late April 2021, the capital of Mogadishu approached the brink of full-scale violence over the current government's efforts to cling to power. The threat of bloodshed only abated after a temporary political compromise was reached. Yet ongoing political tensions may drive a higher demand for arms in the south that will exert pressure up the supply chain into Puntland and beyond.

The militant group al-Shabaab may seek to leverage the political crisis by escalating its attacks on the Somali government or international military forces. The possibility that al-Shabaab may be able to access heavier weaponry available through the Iran–Yemen pipeline – including machine guns, sniper or anti-materiel rifles, or even anti-tank guided missiles – could potentially alter the balance of power in the group's confrontations with federal and regional armed forces.

Neighbouring Ethiopia is also in the midst of crisis, and is poised to descend further into civil war as the country increasingly balkanizes along ethnic lines. The Ethiopian border with Somalia, which has always been porous, threatens to become a major point of entry for illicit arms into the country. The role of illicit firearms in fuelling domestic conflict has also come under increasing scrutiny. In response to the threat, the Ethiopian government passed comprehensive firearms control legislation in early 2020, aimed at banning the private trade and transfer – and cracking down on illegal ownership – of arms. Much work in Ethiopia remains to be done with respect to data collection and analysis of arms proliferation in the context of the burgeoning civil war.

The war in Yemen shows no signs of concluding. While traditionally viewed through the lens of the Saudi–Iran rivalry, the effects of the conflict have already rippled out into the Horn of Africa. Additional robust research is required before the security

impact of the Yemen war on Somalia – and perhaps the broader East Africa region – may be fully understood. Towards this end, the navies that routinely conduct maritime arms interdictions might make efforts to improve the systematic documentation of serial numbers and other markings of seized materiel. More widespread and open sharing of this data would help researchers to ‘fill in the gaps’ in serial number sequences and reach a better understanding of the nature of illicit arms flows in the region. Such improved understanding would also assist national authorities in disrupting and prosecuting the transnational criminal networks that facilitate these flows.

The collateral harm caused by the Yemen conflict adds further impetus to reach a diplomatic accord with Iran. Iran’s leadership has recently expressed a desire to salvage the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also referred to as the ‘Iran nuclear deal’.⁴⁵ US President Joseph Biden has also signaled his willingness to resurrect the deal, which had been abandoned by his predecessor Donald Trump in May 2018.⁴⁶ The revival of the JCPOA, or a version thereof, might provide assurances to Iran that its national security is not dependent on projecting influence through the arming of allied regional forces, such as the Houthis. The de-escalation of geopolitical tensions surrounding Iran may well bring security benefits to the East Africa region and beyond.

NOTES

- 1 For an instructive summary of the nature of Iranian support to the Houthis, see Thomas Juneau, How Iran helped Houthis expand their reach, War On The Rocks, 23 August 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/how-iran-helped-houthis-expand-their-reach/>.
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- 9 Jay Bahadur, Snapping back against Iran: The case of the *Al Bari 2* and the UN arms embargo, GI-TOC, November 2020, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/iran-pb/>.
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- 12 Adam Taylor, U.S. Navy shares photos of enormous Arabian Sea weapons seizure, *Washington Post*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/10/navy-arabian-sea-weapons-seizure/>.
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- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Prohibited materiel under the embargo included 'battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, large calibre artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships,

- missiles or missile systems as defined for the purpose of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, or related materiel'. See UN Security Council resolution 1929 (2010), 9 June 2010, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1929%20\(2010\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1929%20(2010)).
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 - 38 Information received from a Puntland security source with knowledge of arms shipments from Yemen, 17 May 2021.
 - 39 Interview with a Puntland security source with knowledge of the arms shipments, 17 August 2021, by text message.
 - 40 Interview with an arms dealer based in Badhan district, Somalia, 27 June 2021.
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