

## **Anger at Arms Confiscations**

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Owners of licensed weapons say Coalition troops are seizing them and refusing to hand them back.

Muhannad al-Dulaimy stands at a United States military checkpoint leading into Site 100, a sprawling military base in west Baghdad. He's already been here twice, trying to reclaim the Kalashnikov rifle that he says he is entitled to carry.

In the unstable conditions that prevail in Iraq, many Iraqis have obtained official permission to own weapons to defend themselves. But many complain that they are being treated as though the guns were illegal, and they run up against a wall of bureaucracy when they try to retrieve their confiscated weapons.

In Dulaimy's case, he says an assault rifle is essential for his work as a bank guard, and the Coalition had issued him with a license for it.

According to Dulaimy, US soldiers seized the rifle from his car when they arrived at his brother's wedding to confiscate guns that were being fired into the air. He tried to make them understand that he was allowed to carry the weapon and that he had not fired any shots.

An American soldier told him not to worry, and assured him that he could go to Site 100 to reclaim both the rifle and his gun license, which was also confiscated.

"I hate waiting," grumbled Dulaimy, who had to wait up to two hours on each of his previous visits. On both of those occasions, he was told that the officer in charge could not be found, and he would need to come back another day.

But this time he was told that the Americans had no record of his gun or his license.

Shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Coalition moved to reduce the number of arms carried by Iraqi civilians. Troops went door to door confiscating weapons, and civilians were banned from carrying guns on the street.

However, after Iraqis complained that they needed weapons to defend themselves and their property in the postwar disorder, the Coalition allowed each household a small quota of guns, and issued licenses to guards and others who could demonstrate a need to carry arms outside their homes.

Now, Iraqis say, the Coalition seems to be undermining the very system it set up - and in the process taking away what many believe is their fundamental right to protect themselves.

"Why would they give us a license if the Americans don't respect it?" asked Haidar Adel al-Fattah, whose weapon was taken by US troops when they inspected the school where he is employed as a guard.

He too was referred to Site 100, but was unable to retrieve his rifle despite repeated visits. He finally bought another weapon on the black market so that he could continue in his job.

Many of the people interviewed by IWPR said they had been told that the US troops who took their weapons would return them a few days later after checking the license. But the guns never reappeared.

Others said they were misdirected to the wrong place to reclaim their guns.

"I know I will never get my gun back," said Aziz Kareem, a clothes merchant whose pistol was taken from him at a checkpoint on the Baghdad-Amman highway.

He says that he needs the weapon when he escorting convoys of trucks, carrying loads worth 150,000 US dollars, along the bandit-ridden highway from Baghdad to Amman.

Troops told Aziz to collect his weapon and his license at Abu Ghraib prison, he said, adding that he went there several times before he was referred to Site 100.

"No comment," said a US soldier working at the Coalition Press Information Centre when IWPR asked about the confiscations.

A US soldier manning a checkpoint in the west Baghdad district of al-Jamaa, who refused to give his name, indicated that confiscating legally-owned weapons is fairly common practice.

"We don't care whether the weapon is licensed or not," he said. "If we suspect the bearer of anything, we confiscate his weapon, and we're not giving it back even if he contacts us."

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