

Comment: The Kalashnikov and I

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Iraq's gun culture has been around for decades and is still going strong.

"This is an automatic, gas powered, spring loaded, standard 7.62mm Kalashnikov rifle." How many times have I heard those words? Enough over the past 30 years that I have come to know them almost better than my own name.

For 35 years or so, Saddam Hussein subjected Iraq to endless wars, and the gun became the cornerstone of Iraq's culture of violence during that time. Almost every Iraqi household owns a gun, and – more often than not – the family gun plays a larger role for social functions than for security.

People commonly shoot into the air to celebrate anything from a wedding to the victory of their favourite football team. People even fire guns in the air to emphasise a point when they argue.

I still remember the first time I saw a gun. I was just six-years-old when my uncle was called up to fight in the Iran-Iraq War. After 45 days of training, they sent him to the frontline. As months passed and we heard nothing from him, my family became increasingly concerned.

One day, there was a knock at the door. We opened the door to find my uncle in uniform and carrying his rifle. He'd received several weeks leave, and he decided to surprise us with a visit. While my family celebrated his return, I was intrigued by his rifle. I'd never seen anything like it.

Several months later, I started school and before long, I saw other guns like my uncle's. First, a colour picture of one appeared in a textbook of mine, and it mesmerised me. Then, several days later, I even saw our headmaster brandishing his own gun – a Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle.

Every Thursday, for the flag raising ceremony, the headmaster marched around school with his AK-47. As the flag rose and students sang the national anthem, the headmaster couldn't resist firing into the air. I hated the sound of his gun, and I always tried to skip school every Thursday.

When I was 17, Saddam invaded Kuwait and the US threatened to intervene. I enrolled in a civil defence course to prepare for the impending conflict. I thought the course would focus on topics like fire safety and first aid. So, I was surprised when a corporal from the military academy appeared to give a lecture. He held up a Kalashnikov and began by saying, "This is an automatic, gas powered, spring loaded, standard 7.62mm Kalashnikov rifle."

As the second Gulf War ended, our badly supplied and impoverished troops began to flee the battlefield. Some soldiers sold their guns for civilian clothing and food. But even though they sold their rifles, they refused to surrender the culture of violence that Saddam had ingrained in them.

After finishing college, I went to a military training camp to complete my compulsory military service. Almost daily, we were lectured about our "automatic, gas powered, spring loaded, standard 7.62mm Kalashnikov rifle". The drill instructors always emphasised that the rifle symbolised our honour.

During the 72-day training course, though, we only fired our weapons once despite the fact that discussion

of the Kalashnikov occupied a substantial portion of our training time. We were supposed to fire three bullets each. But we only fired two each since our officers had sold some of our ammunition on the black market.

On completion of my training, I was stationed with the "14 July" tank detachment in Saddam's hometown of Tikrit. Although my official position was tank gunner, I received just one day of training on how to fire the tank's 100mm cannon. Most of my time was spent learning about the tank's smaller gun, coincidentally the same calibre as the Kalashnikov.

Perhaps as a matter of convenience they explained this gun to us in familiar terms. The instructor began, "This is an automatic, gas powered, spring loaded, standard 7.62mm Kalashnikov rifle."

When all men born in 1957 recently were summoned for re-training to form a reservist army, I came to watch. I knew these men were old enough to have seen combat in most of Saddam's wars. An officer began the standard lecture on the Kalashnikov, when one of the trainees interrupted. He lifted his shirt, revealing a body scared by multiple gun shot wounds.

"Sir," he said pointing to one of his scars. "Do you see this scar? It is from 'an automatic, gas powered, spring loaded, standard 7.62mm Kalashnikov rifle.' We know this rifle." The lieutenant explained he was only following orders, and his standard lecture continued.

The Iraqi people have long suffered from this rifle and everything that it represents. Yet even after the latest war, when soldiers threw down their rifles only to save their lives, it seems Iraqis still may be clutching onto their culture of violence.

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