

Libya's Alarming Arms Proliferation

Author: [William Shaw](#)

Efforts to secure weapons continue but interim rulers face uphill struggle to disarm population.

Leaving behind his life as a student in Washington DC, Adam Ahmad was so determined to play a part in ousting Colonel Muammar Gaddafi that he spent more than 2,300 US dollars on a Kalashnikov assault rifle so he could join the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade.

Today, Gaddafi is dead, and Ahmad, a 22-year-old American of Libyan descent, works with children affected by the conflict. The gun is safely in storage along with his revolutionary uniform. But while Ahmad backs official efforts to collect weapons now that the war is over, he sees little reason to surrender his own properly-registered Kalashnikov.

"I bought my weapon for 3,000 dinars. To turn it in and not get anything back is not my plan right now," he said. "Other people who have bought weapons are saying the same thing."

Post-Gaddafi Libya is awash with arms, from assault rifles like Ahmad's to rocket-propelled grenade launchers, RPGs, and surface-to-air missiles, SAMs.

The transitional authorities say they want to address the problem, but sources claim political weakness and disorganisation are hampering efforts to retrieve weapons and thus guarantee the state's monopoly on power.

Out of a population of 6.4 million, some 125,000 are believed to be armed. Many are part of the numerous paramilitary groups that do not see themselves as serving central authority, according to a report this month by the International Crisis Group.

Ahmad said there was "a crazy, crazy amount of weapons" in people's hands.

"Every house has one or two Kalashnikovs in it...some people also have RPGs around," he added.

The New York-based advocacy Human Rights Watch has become increasingly concerned about the situation, especially about the looting of Gaddafi-era arsenals.

Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch, told IWPR that between a quarter and half the estimated stocks of 20,000 SAM missiles were missing. It was, he said, "by far the largest proliferation of SAMs ever".

Bouckaert said the ruling National Transitional Council, NTC, gave the West assurances that it would secure such weapons before it really had the capacity to do so. While the NTC has taken positive steps towards achieving this more recently, vast amounts are already missing, having presumably fallen into the hands of militias, arms smugglers and criminals.

The United States has hired dozens of private contractors to locate and destroy Libyan heat-seeking missiles as part of a 30 million US dollar programme to secure Libya's conventional weapons arsenal, The New York Times reported in October.

"We are very concerned about the threat that's posed," said Andrew Shapiro, US assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, told reporters that month. "In the wrong hands these systems could pose a potential threat to civil aviation."

According to Bouckaert, the US is proving much less interested in the myriad other weapons that could be used in conflict in Libya.

"The most dangerous weapon in the hands of a terrorist is often just a few tank shells reconfigured as a car bomb and driven into a busy market place," Bouckaert said.

"It is frankly disgusting to see the US spend millions on securing some of the surface-to-air missiles... and ignore completely the larger danger posed by massive unsecured stocks of explosive weapons. They made the same mistake in Iraq, where they ignored ordinary weapon stocks in their fruitless search for non-existent weapons of mass destruction, and you'd think they would have learned a lesson."

Shortly after the fall of Tripoli in August, Bouckaert witnessed a group of men removing anti-tank and anti-personnel mines from a weapons dump, loading them onto trucks and driving them away. Bouckaert estimates that they took 120,000 mines over a period of several days, and he believes these munitions

were subsequently sold on.

Hisham Krekshi, deputy chairman of Tripoli's city council, says dealing with armed men is the main priority for the authorities in the capital. But he said that despite the proliferation of arms, the city was relatively peaceful.

"Every day is better than the day before - let's be positive," he said. "It's safe. My wife drives to work by herself."

The neighbouring coastal city of Tajoura, a former anti-Gaddafi stronghold, is also comparatively stable, with the police on duty 24 hours per day, local businessman Aref Sola told IWPR. "I cannot tell you it's 100 per cent good, but it's 65 per cent," he said.

Krekshi said it would be a challenge to integrate members of paramilitary groups into the regular police and armed forces and pay them wages.

If these men opt not to join centralised security forces, convincing them to hand in their arms could be difficult. Militia members are often politically motivated, believe they deserve the credit for ousting Gaddafi, and may not trust the new regime.

"Once they're victorious, it's not easy to say, 'Thank you, well done - now can I have your gun?'" Mohammed Azuz, a Libyan engineer, said. "It's not easy to deal with these people."

Geoff Porter of North Africa Risk Consulting, who has testified on Libya to the US Congress, told IWPR that militia groups are generally doing a good job of controlling weapons. The armed "brigades" are reportedly confiscating and stockpiling arms at some checkpoints, and militias in Libya's third largest city, Misrata, are said to be keeping an accurate inventory of their weaponry.

Even if the militias are behaving in a fairly orderly manner, the NTC will be unable to compel them to cede their guns and thus their power to one centralised authority with a monopoly on force. It can only cajole or plead with them.

"We're in a transitional security context where there appears to be increasing security in Libyan cities, but this doesn't seem to be under the umbrella of a national structure," Porter said.

He added that if paramilitary forces were not disarmed, there was a risk they would evolve into mafia-like grouping, swapping political affiliations for organised crime.

Some observers believe the best way to get many weapons off the streets would be to launch an effective compensation scheme combined with an amnesty period, and a clear deadline beyond which possession of a weapon would become an offence.

Former fighter Ahmad said he would prefer to see the central authorities in Tripoli organising the collection of weapons, rather than just district officials.

William Shaw is an IWPR editor in London.

Location: [Libya](#)
Topic: [Protests](#)
Focus: [The Arab Spring](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/libyas-alarming-arms-proliferation>