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“Finders Keepers”: Weapons Leakage from US Military Foreign Security Assistance

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...the Taliban have been seen parading through the streets of Afghanistan in U.S. armored vehicles that were first provided to the Afghan army (Detsch & Gramer 2022).¹

‘Most of my weapons in the last few months have come from former government forces, and American weapons are very lucrative and best-selling,’ he said...Many of these weapons...are finding their way to militant groups across the region (Kumar 2022).²

These quotes reflect a larger phenomenon than the aftereffects of the 2021 downfall of the democratic government in Afghanistan, withdrawal of the United States (US), and the Taliban’s return to control. They depict the phenomenon of weapons leakage to violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) from military foreign security assistance (mFSA). Foreign security assistance (FSA) is a form of foreign aid given by the US to states and actors around the world. FSA can be either military or non-military based and is prioritized through an assessment of “...levels and risks of fragility, violent conflict and associated national resilience, political will and capacity for partnerships, opportunity for United States impact; other international commitments and resources, and United States national security and economic interests.”³ FSA is given with the goal of advancing specific “U.S. national security aims, including strengthening military and law enforcement capacities of U.S. partners, countering the flows of illicit products such as nuclear materials and narcotics, and supporting peacekeeping operations in fragile states.”⁴ I define weapons leakage as the loss of military weapons which were intended for use as part of mFSA, but then go missing, are stolen, or otherwise end up in the hands of VNSAs. Weapons leakage can occur with any weaponry and theoretically benefit any actor, but it is especially dangerous when it leads to VNSAs, be they warlords, paramilitaries, or terrorist organizations, gaining and

¹Jack Detsch, and Robbie Gramer, “The U.S. Left Billions Worth of Weapons in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/28/the-u-s-left-billions-worth-of-weapons-in-afghanistan/>.

²Ruchi Kumar, “Afghan Guns Are Arming Regional Insurgents,” *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/afghanistan-weapons-smuggling-black-market-taliban-regional-insurgency/>.

³“ForeignAssistance.gov.” FA.gov. U.S. Department of State; USAID, December 9, 2022. <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/>.

⁴Emily M. Morgenstern and Nick M. Brown, “Foreign Assistance: An Introduction to U.S. Programs and Policy.” CRS Reports, Congressional Research Service, January 10, 2022. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R40213>. 9.

retaining military-grade weapons and their associated materials.⁵ Despite the obvious danger of weapons leakage, and evidence of its occurrence, this particular phenomenon has gone unstudied. Whether this is due to the difficulty of tracking weapons once they have hit the black market and reached the hands of VNSAs or due to an unwillingness of mFSA-providing states to recognize weapons leakage as an issue and adjust their aid programs accordingly, is undetermined. The lack of research on weapons leakage and the lack of knowledge of the elements that allow it to occur makes it crucial that weapons leakage, especially in relation to mFSA be studied, and that policy changes be made. This will allow the end goals of mFSA, protecting international partners, countering illicit trading, and conflict abatement, to be met without benefitting VNSAs.

The lack of research on this phenomenon leads to the question I approach in this paper: *under what conditions and through which mechanisms does United States military FSA during active conflicts lead to weapons leakage to insurgent and terrorist groups?* I address weapons leakage from US mFSA solely during active conflicts⁶, meaning situations of armed conflict between two or more parties, to narrow the scope of this project and make the conclusions drawn from it more detailed. I focus on weapons leakage to terrorists and insurgent groups both as an additional way to narrow the scope, and because in my initial research these VNSAs had the most evidence of benefiting from weapons leakage during active conflicts. For the purposes of this paper, an insurgent group can be understood as a group that is involved in “a protracted political-military activity directed towards completely or partially controlling the resources of a

⁵Phil Williams, “Violent Non-state Actors and National and International Security,” *International Relations and Security Network (ISN)*, (2008): 4-21.

<https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/93880>.

⁶As opposed to situations where weapons leakage may occur as a result of black-market sales, corruption, or crimes of opportunity.

country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations.”⁷ While “there is sometimes a very thin line between terrorism and insurgency...,” terrorist and insurgent groups will be treated as separate entities here, as terrorist groups often have far more expansive political goals than insurgents, can be created for a wide array of purposes, and are more likely to have a transnational presence.⁸ Warlords, paramilitaries, militias, and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) are all other examples of VNSAs that may benefit from weapons leakage, but it is not clear that this is a result of mFSA during active conflicts, rather than a result of normal criminal activity and black market deals. Additionally, these other types of VNSAs are generally less visible than terrorist and insurgent groups in active conflicts where mFSA is being provided, which makes tracking weapons leakage to them difficult.

In this paper, I argue that while there are many conditions under which US mFSA could lead to weapons leakage, during active conflicts there is one condition where weapons leakage is likely: fragmented US proxy wars. I further argue that this condition contains unique mechanisms that facilitate weapons leakage. These mechanisms include: lack of intelligence on the actors receiving mFSA, lack of direct control over mFSA weapons provided, lack of reliable weapons-tracking post FSA, reliance on unstable foreign governments, poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking systems, and corruption resulting from counterinsurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorism (CT) efforts. To study my research question, I will present previous literature on the topic, explain the theory I am forming in more detail, and give evidence for this theory by completing a comparative case study of US mFSA to Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion (1979-1989), Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror (GWOt, War on Terror; in

⁷Bruce R. Pirnie, and Edward O’Connell, “Armed Groups in Iraq,” in *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006): RAND Counterinsurgency Study--Volume 2*, 21–34. RAND Corporation, 2008.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg595-3osd.10>. 25.

⁸Williams, “Violent Non-state Actors...,” 15.

Afghanistan: 2001-2021), and to Iraq since 2003. Following this, I will discuss the potential utility of my theory in predicting weapons leakage in ongoing conflicts, using the case of the war in Ukraine (2022-...).

Weapons Leakage and mFSA in Extant Literature

Most extant literature on VNSAs and FSA does not approach my research question. This literature is often focused on either VNSAs or FSA rather than looking at these actors and aid programs together. For example, the article “Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security” goes in depth about the types of VNSAs and how they interact with states but does not mention how states may inadvertently help VNSAs through mFSA.⁹ Despite the lack of research on weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups from mFSA, my research question is still embedded in broader foreign aid and policy, political violence, military, and civil war literature. These broad categories of literature do not approach my research question directly, but they do offer evidence of a connection between FSA and VNSAs, form a picture of what weapons leakage and its consequences look like, and offer insight that supports my argument that fragmented US proxy wars are a condition under which weapons leakage from US mFSA to terrorist and insurgent groups occurs.

Evidence of a connection between FSA and VNSAs is shown in extant literature in many ways and often shows VNSAs benefitting from FSA programs and plans. This is seen in FSA-related arms and money transfers, and in US policy decisions. For example, the US’ unwillingness to commit to an international norm against arms transfers with nonstate actors allows VNSAs to benefit from mFSA and contributes to the weapons leakage phenomenon. The article, “Arms Transfers beyond the State-to-State Realm,” highlights this, stating, “The United States argued that...banning the transfer of arms to nonstate actors would hamper activities such

⁹Williams, “Violent Non-state Actors...,” 4-21.

as giving military assistance to freedom fighters... .”¹⁰ Many of these “freedom fighters” are seen by other states as insurgent groups, or terrorists, depending on the case, meaning that the US is providing weapons directly to VNSAs through mFSA. This is demonstrated in the US’ support for the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) in Syria, which has been, “an enduring problem for the U.S. relationship with Turkey... [because] Turkey has been waging a war on the PKK, a Marxist-separatist guerrilla group designated by both the U.S. and Turkey as a terrorist organization. Since the PKK has deep ties with the YPG, the latter and its political representative the Democratic Union Party (PYD) have also become targets.”¹¹ Despite the tensions this causes between Turkey and the US, “The [US]...has supported the YPG because it has been the most effective force on the ground in combating ISIS. Thus far, the U.S. has resisted calls by Turkey to halt its financial and military support for the YPG.”¹²

Existing connections between FSA and VNSAs are further demonstrated in historical cases. “Arms Transfers...,” “The Unintended Consequences of Afghanistan,” and “America’s Jihad: A History of Origins,” each use cases that demonstrate US FSA being used by VNSAs, rather than being used by the actors who received the FSA to resolve a conflict, prevent illegal activity, such as drug or arms trafficking, or to help another state gain or regain stability.¹³ This connection between VNSAs and FSA can be seen in open-source information, like government and think tank reports, and news media.¹⁴ For example, a CATO Institute report describes how,

¹⁰Denise Garcia, “Arms Transfers beyond the State-to-State Realm,” *International Studies Perspectives* 10, no. 2 (2009): 151–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44218590>. 156.

¹¹Gürçay, Esra. “The U.S.-YPG Relationship: U.S. Foreign Policy & the Future of the Kurds in Syria and Turkey.” Middle East Policy Council. Accessed March 4, 2023.

<https://mepc.org/commentary/us-ypg-relationship-us-foreign-policy-future-kurds-syria-and-turkey>.

¹²Gürçay, “The U.S.-YPG Relationship... .”

¹³Carpenter 1994; Parenti 2001; Garcia, 2009; Chivers 2016.

¹⁴For example: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reports, the New York Times, Cato Institute and RAND Corporation reports, etc.

“A study of military aid to Colombia found that “...international military assistance can strengthen armed nonstate actors, who rival the government over the use of violence.”¹⁵

In addition to establishing connections between VNSAs and FSA, both military and non-military, extant literature also forms a picture of what weapons leakage looks like and its consequences. “Risky Business: The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy,” describes the existence of the weapons leakage phenomenon, stating, “The United States uses a number of procedures to try to ensure that the weapons it sells actually go to authorized customers and to monitor the end use of the weapon...The Department of State even compiles a list of banned countries, brokers, and customers. But most of these tools have proved ineffectual.”¹⁶ This same article goes on to describe how, “...weapons are sold or stolen from the government that bought them and wind up on the battlefield in the hands of the adversary.”¹⁷ As suggested by this quote, the mere loss of weapons is not the sole concern that comes with weapons leakage. The consequences of weapons leakage can be as, if not more, severe than weapons leakage itself.

Weapons leakage leads to negative consequences, not just in the form of negative reactions towards US foreign policy and policymakers, but also for US military personnel stationed overseas, local communities in states receiving mFSA, and third-party states. The impact on US military personnel can be especially severe, as,

The United States...has little or no control over what happens to the weapons it sells...weapons of all kinds end up falling into the hands of unreliable, risky, or just plain bad actors, at which point they're used in ways neither the United States nor its customers intended. American weapons have frequently wound up being used against Americans in combat... [and] local and regional actors, including criminal gangs, have employed them in their own conflicts. In civil wars, regime collapse, or other extreme cases, factions

¹⁵A. Trevor Thrall and Caroline Dorminey, “Risky Business: The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy,” Cato Institute, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23043>. 19.

¹⁶Ibid., 18.

¹⁷Ibid., 16.

steal weapons and use them for their own purposes, as ISIS did in Iraq (Thrall & Dorminey 2018, 18-19).¹⁸

In addition to negatively impacting US military members and local communities, weapons leakage can also be used as a tool of terrorists and insurgents. For example, a RAND Corporation report links weapons leakage and VNSAs' ability to expand their territory, stating, "To reduce VNSA capacity to adapt...efforts should focus on limiting VNSAs' access to military, technological, and warfighting materiel and on VNSAs' ability to seize and hold terrain."¹⁹ "Risky Business..." highlights weapons leakage being used as a tool of terrorists, describing how, "...the Islamic State managed to capture from the Iraqi government a stunning number of Humvees and tanks the United States had sold to Iraq to rebuild its military capabilities after the 2003 invasion, as well as enough small arms and ammunition to supply three divisions of a conventional army."²⁰

Finally, a consequence of weapons leakage are human rights and security violations.

Denise Garcia describes this consequence in "Arms Transfers..." saying,

Another ethical dilemma of transferring arms [to nonstate actors] is the deleterious consequences to human security...States transfer arms...knowing that these groups are likely to misuse these weapons...In certain conflicts, they control...territory and fill in where the government is absent. Thus, their actions impinge upon the security of parts of the population (Garcia 2009, 159).²¹

This negative effect on security can mean that weapons leakage is impacting not only militaries, or other VNSAs, but also civilians caught in the middle of conflicts. These negative consequences of weapons leakage highlight the significance of my research question, as unchecked weapons leakage could have disastrous consequences.

¹⁸Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁹Michael Vasseur, Chad C. Serena, Colin P. Clarke, Irina A. Chindea, Erik E. Mueller, and Nathan Vest, "Understanding and Reducing the Ability of Violent Nonstate Actors to Adapt to Change," RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA (2022): https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA324-1.html. 1.

²⁰Thrall and Dorminey, "Risky Business..." 16.

²¹Garcia, "Arms Transfers beyond the State-to-State Realm," 159.

The final way my research question is situated in extant literature is in the insight historical and political literature on US proxy wars gives as to how weapons leakage may occur under the condition of this type of conflict. While, as explained below, I chose to classify proxy wars as either “fragmented,” or “conventional,” this literature helped me form my theory of weapons leakage. Reports such as “Risky Business...” support US proxy wars in general as a potential condition of weapons leakage during active conflicts, using examples such as how US mFSA provided Stinger missiles to the *mujahideen* who then “...sold them off...to Iran and North Korea, among others.”²² “Arms Transfers...” also emphasizes the possible relationship between proxy wars and weapons leakage, by referencing several instances of mFSA from states to nonstate proxies, including terrorist organizations and insurgent groups.²³ US COIN and CT efforts described in literature show how US proxy wars can become fragmented, facilitating weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups from US mFSA. This fragmentation and resulting weapons leakage is described in a number of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reports, media and think tank reports on Iraq, news reporting, government documents, and scholarly articles. In summary, this literature gives background information and support for my explanatory theory.²⁴

A Theory of Weapons Leakage

While my research question is embedded in a wider literature, which provides evidence of a connection between VNSAs and FSA, the existence and consequences of weapons leakage and the beginnings of my predicted condition and mechanisms, there is still no theory explaining why weapons leakage occurs under certain conditions. Therefore, I will be offering an explanatory theory for why weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups occurs as a result

²²Thrall and Dorminey, “Risky Business...,” 16.

²³Garcia, “Arms Transfers beyond the State-to-State Realm,” 152.

²⁴Carpenter 1994; Parenti 2001; Garcia 2009; Sopko 2017, 2022; “Eight “Hot Wars”...”, 2023; Arosoaie 2015; etc.

of US mFSA during active conflicts. As stated earlier, my theory suggests that during active conflicts, US mFSA is likely to lead to weapons leakage under the condition of fragmented US proxy wars. A proxy war is one in which the US goes to “war” with another state or foreign actor, but without ever officially fighting a war against them. Instead, the US uses proxies, which can range from a third state to nonstate actors, both with and without direct US troop involvement. The US acts through and with these proxies to carry out a “war” and achieve US foreign policy and national security goals.

In a fragmented US proxy war, the US gives mFSA to foreign actors to achieve US national security and foreign policy goals, which often coincide with undermining or opposing the actions of a third-party state (i.e., a proxy war). In that process, the US supports inherently fragmented movements that exist within the context the foreign state or actor receiving mFSA is in. These fragmented movements are formed when an active conflict involves multiple actors with differing goals, weak state apparatus, and foreign actors influencing the conflict. This fragmentation creates an inherently chaotic environment, in which weapons tracking, intelligence gathering, and oversight falter, while corruption and unstable governments become more deeply rooted.

This unique type of proxy war differs from what I define as a “conventional” proxy war. Conventional proxy wars entail the use of US mFSA and sometimes US troops, for similar goals, but do not involve aiding fragmented movements. For example, the Vietnam War would be a conventional proxy war, because there were two defined sides fighting: the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the communist Viet Cong and each side's allies. The US and the USSR, respectively, backed each side in order to fight the larger ideological conflict between the Soviet bloc and the Western world using proxies, rather than going to war against each other, or turning

towards potential nuclear options. While conventional proxy wars have clear actors, and defined movements, such as communism versus liberalism, fragmented proxy wars are far more complicated. For example, a fragmented proxy war could contain a multitude of actors and movements, including the recognized state, terrorist organizations, insurgencies, the US, and other global influences, each with their own goals. Due to this increased complexity, US mFSA given during fragmented proxy wars is more likely to lead to weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups.

While one could theorize that all mFSA is supporting a US proxy war in one form or another, due to the inherent implication of US national interests in giving mFSA, this is not the case. While my theory proposes fragmented US proxy wars as a condition for weapons leakage, this condition is within the parameters of an active conflict, and specifically to terrorist and insurgent groups. US mFSA, like FSA generally, is also given in non-proxy wars and non-active conflict situations. For example, some mFSA is given to states to help prevent drug cartels from trafficking drugs within that state and across borders. While this certainly falls under the scope of US national interests, like mFSA during fragmented US proxy wars, the mFSA in this case is not meant to undermine or fight another state through proxies. Instead, mFSA is being given to another state, in the form of weapons, financing, and training, in order to fight against the cartel in question.²⁵

Due to the differing types of mFSA, and the fact that mFSA can be given outside the fragmented proxy war or active conflict context, I argue that weapons leakage is less likely to occur from mFSA during non-active conflict situations. While it is possible that weapons leak to VNSAs such as cartels, mFSA during non-active conflicts does not occur in the same chaotic

²⁵See “International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE)”:
“Security Assistance,” DASADDEC (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Defense Exports and Cooperation), accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.dasadec.army.mil/Security-Assistance/>.

environment as that introduced by an active conflict, such as a fragmented proxy war. Having recognized the difference an active conflict makes in the likelihood of weapons leakage, and that the complexity of a fragmented US proxy war makes weapons leakage more likely, it is time to discuss the mechanisms that make weapons leakage happen.

I theorize that the increased likelihood of weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups during active conflicts and under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war is due to specific mechanisms. These mechanisms include: lack of intelligence on the actors receiving mFSA, lack of direct control over the provided mFSA weapons, a lack of reliable weapons-tracking systems following a foreign actor receiving mFSA, reliance on unstable foreign governments, poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking systems, and corruption resulting from COIN and CT efforts. As demonstrated in “Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 1,”²⁶ while the overarching condition of a fragmented US proxy war is necessary for these mechanisms to occur, weapons leakage happens because of these mechanisms. These mechanisms work both individually and together to facilitate weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups.

While I have listed six mechanisms, not every mechanism is necessary to facilitate weapons leakage under the condition of fragmented US proxy wars. Due to the chaotic environment introduced by fragmented movements, only a few mechanisms may be present in cases of weapons leakage to terrorist or insurgent groups. In “Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 2: More on Mechanisms,”²⁷ I argue that, while potentially any of the six mechanisms could work together to lead to weapons leakage, certain mechanisms are more likely to occur together based on the case studies and research I have completed. Out of the six mechanisms, the

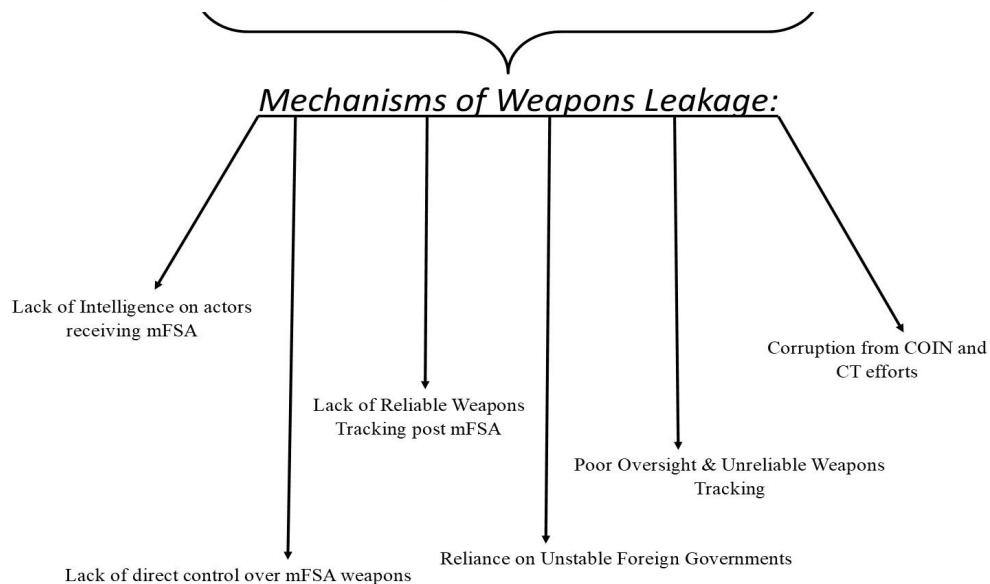
²⁶See the end of this section.

²⁷Ibid.

ones that are most likely to work together to facilitate weapons leakage are: reliance on an unstable foreign government with corruption from COIN/CT efforts; lack of intelligence on actors receiving mFSA with lack of direct control over mFSA weapons provided; and poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking with lack of direct control over mFSA weapons provided. As explained further in “Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 2: More on Mechanisms,” these mechanisms are both linked in my case studies, and logically fit together as mechanisms that could work simultaneously to facilitate weapons leakage. These predicted mechanism pairings may not always occur, depending on the specifics of a case, but can be applied to a variety of cases that involve weapons leakage from US mFSA to terrorist and insurgent groups during a fragmented US proxy war.

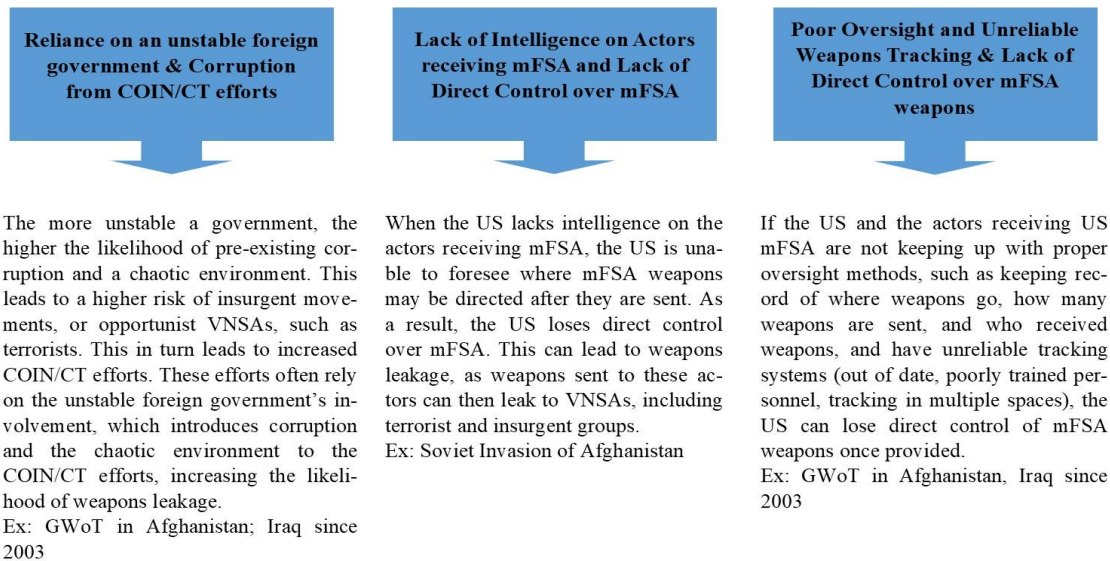
Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 1

Condition: Fragmented US Proxy Wars



Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 2: More on Mechanisms

Under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war, six possible mechanisms could lead to weapons leakage. Not every mechanism will occur in the environment created by the condition of a fragmented proxy war. Below are mechanisms that are more likely to occur together, based on the case studies and research I have completed, with the caveat that the appearance of these mechanisms, individually or together, is largely dependent on the specific active conflict at hand.



Research Design

To give evidence for my theory, I will explore three cases of fragmented US proxy wars, in which US mFSA was given to foreign actors and, through the mechanisms listed above, weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups occurred. The first two cases I will examine are the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the GWoT in Afghanistan. The third case I will examine is US mFSA to Iraq since 2003. Finally, I will briefly demonstrate how my theory could be useful in studying ongoing conflicts using the current war in Ukraine.

As this is the first explanatory theory of weapons leakage, my three case studies will act as a plausibility probe, testing the plausibility of my condition and mechanisms in relation to weapons leakage from US mFSA. I decided to take this approach, rather than running an experiment to test my theory directly, for reasons of practicality. Weapons leakage, as

demonstrated by the lack of research into the topic, is hard to track, and often is not noticed until well after the fact. By doing a plausibility probe using cases that have already happened, I can see if my explanatory theory matches the reality of weapons leakage.

To approach my three cases of US mFSA leading to weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups, I will ask the following questions. First, did weapons leakage occur? Second, if weapons leakage occurred, how did it occur? Answering this second question will contain a discussion of my proposed condition and its mechanisms. If my theory is supported, the cases of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the GWoT in Afghanistan, and US mFSA to Iraq since 2003 should demonstrate the US giving mFSA as part of an active, fragmented proxy war effort, weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups occurring, and the mechanisms described above evident in the weapons leakage process. “Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 3: Case Results,” summarizes the mechanisms I found to occur in the three cases described below.

Theory of Weapons Leakage Figure 3: Case Results

	Mechanisms Observed	Lack of Intelligence	Lack of direct control	Lack of Reliable Weapons Tracking	Reliance on Unstable Foreign Governments	Poor Oversight and Unreliable Weapons Tracking	Corruption from COIN and CT
Cases							
Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 1979-1989							
GWoT in Afghanistan 2001-2021							
US mFSA in Iraq since 2003							

Case 1: US mFSA During the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

...Afghanistan where initially the arming of the Mujahideen seemed a good idea (Garcia 2009, 152).²⁸

²⁸Garcia, “Arms Transfers beyond the State-to-State Realm,” 152.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began on December 25, 1979, when, “Soviet troops entered...the socialist republic of Afghanistan at the invitation of the present government. Its leader, Hafizullah Amin...was...executed by Babrak Karmal, a new Soviet-installed leader flown in directly from the Soviet Union.”²⁹ This decision was initially framed by Soviet leadership as the USSR’s own form of mFSA, with a directive stating that due to the

“...military-political situation in the Middle East, the latest appeal of the government of Afghanistan has been favorably considered. The decision has been made to introduce... Soviet troops...to the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan...to give international aid to the friendly Afghan people and...create favorable conditions to interdict possible anti-Afghan actions from neighboring countries...” (Lyakhovskiy 1999).³⁰

Despite the framing of the Soviet actions in this directive, this “international aid,” led to a decade-long conflict between the Afghan *mujahideen* and Soviet troops, in which hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Soviet soldiers died.³¹ During this conflict, the US, at the time embroiled in the Cold War with the USSR, decided to, “[channel] aid to the rebels,³²” with the hope of, “...keeping the Afghan insurgency going, [and] sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire.”³³ This US-provided aid took the form of mFSA, providing the *mujahideen* with both weapons and financial backing, funneling, “\$20 billion into resistance groups,” and famously providing these groups with the, “US-built Stinger missile,” which was used by the *mujahideen* to take down Russian helicopters.³⁴ US mFSA to the *mujahideen* during the Soviet invasion of

²⁹James von Geldern, “Invasion of Afghanistan,” Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, June 18, 2017, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1980-2/invasion-of-afghanistan/>.

³⁰A. A. Lyakhovskiy, “Directive N° 312/12/001 of 24 December 1979 Signed by Ustinov and Ogarkov,” in “Plamya Afgana” (“Flame of the Afghanistan veteran”) | Wilson Center Digital Archive, accessed February 21, 2023, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/directive-no-31212001-24-december-1979-signed-ustinov-and-ogarkov>.

³¹Ibid.; “Afghanistan: Soviet Invasion and Civil War,” Mass Atrocity Endings (World Peace Foundation, August 7, 2015), <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/afghanistan-soviet-invasion-civil-war/#Ending>.

³²*mujahideen* and associated groups

³³Christian Parenti, “America’s Jihad: A History of Origins,” *Social Justice* 28, no. 3 (85) (2001): 31–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768089>. 31.

³⁴“Eight ‘Hot Wars’ during the Cold War.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://world101.cfr.org/how-world-works-and-sometimes-doesnt/conflict/eight-hot-wars-during-cold-war>.

Afghanistan is representative of the larger condition of a fragmented US proxy war that I predict leads to weapons leakage. By funding and arming the *mujahideen* and affiliated groups, the US was fighting the USSR's control in Afghanistan as well as their larger influence as a communist power in the Middle East. This method allowed a "war" between the US and the USSR to take place without the involvement of American troops, for a "relatively modest" cost, and rewarded the US with an, "...inexpensive yet significant strategic and moral triumph."³⁵ The *mujahideen*, as I will explain below, were a fragmented force of multiple rebel groups that included a variety of foreign actors. This multitude that made up the *mujahideen*, as well as the weak state apparatus and foreign influence, evident in the Soviet replacement of the Afghan president, made this conflict a fragmented proxy war. To fight this proxy war, the US gave mFSA to all the differing *mujahideen* groups, whose infighting and differences would eventually lead to the formation of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other modern-day terrorist and insurgent groups. Knowing the background of the conflict in question, and recognizing it as falling under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war, leads to the first question that needs to be asked: did weapons leakage occur?

The simple answer to this question in the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is yes, weapons leakage did occur. This is documented in several news and government reports as well as academic articles. For example, as referenced earlier, the *mujahideen*, following the end of the Soviet occupation, "sold [Stinger missiles]...to Iran and North Korea, among others."³⁶ Weapons leakage to insurgent and terrorist groups is especially present in this case, as following the end of the Soviet occupation, the various factions of *mujahideen* began to fight each other, leading to a "civil war...(1992-1996) [that] resulted in popular support for the Taliban," who

³⁵Ted Galen Carpenter, "The Unintended Consequences of Afghanistan," *World Policy Journal* 11, no. 1 (1994): 76-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209351>. 76.

³⁶Thrall and Dorminey, "Risky Business...", 16.

emerged from “former anti-Soviet fighters³⁷...who had become disillusioned with the civil war [and] formed the backbone of the Taliban.”³⁸ This infighting led to the Taliban, a group that has led the modern-day Afghan insurgency since 1996 and is known for their terrorist activities and connections to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, gaining weapons that were originally given to the *mujahideen* as US mFSA.³⁹ From the *mujahideen* and the Taliban, these weapons have traveled to a variety of other VNSAs, as well as other states, with, “Stingers...reportedly [being] acquired by Kashmiri militants, Indian Sikhs, the Iranian drug mafia, Iraq, Qatar, Zambia..., North Korea, Libya, and militant Palestinian groups.”⁴⁰ This evidence of weapons leakage leads to my second question: how did weapons leakage occur?⁴¹

As stated in my theory section, not every mechanism that falls under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war needs to be present for weapons leakage to occur. In this case, the mechanisms that I found leading to weapons leakage include the following: lack of intelligence on the actors receiving mFSA, lack of direct control over mFSA weapons provided, and a lack of reliable weapons-tracking systems following a foreign actor receiving mFSA. By examining open-source information, I found that these mechanisms are present in the case of weapons leakage to insurgent and terrorist groups from US mFSA during and following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The first mechanism I found to be at play in this case is a lack of adequate intelligence on the actors receiving mFSA. This lack of intelligence is partially due to the nature of proxy wars.

³⁷ *mujahideen*

³⁸ Clayton Thomas, “Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress,” crsreports.congress.gov. Congressional Research Service, November 2, 2021. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46955>. 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Summary, 1.

⁴⁰ Alan J. Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (1999): 219–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657738>. 253-254.

⁴¹ For the purposes of this paper, I am looking more specifically at the question: how did weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups occur?

While some proxy wars do involve US troop presence in the foreign state, in the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, there was a distinct lack of American “boots on the ground.” Because of this, American intelligence about the different *mujahideen* factions who were receiving US weapons and funding was limited to what intelligence agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had collected. Even this information was limited following the actual transfer of weapons, as the CIA wanted to avoid, “directly traceable U.S. involvement [that] raised the danger of public exposure and political scandal that could damage the agency.”⁴² This desire to keep mFSA to the *mujahideen* as covert and untraceable as possible created the odd situation where, “Even though the Mujahedin effort was by far the CIA’s largest overseas operation, eventually coming to consume the vast majority of its covert action budget, only a handful of U.S. intelligence officers ever were permitted into the field to observe its implementation.”⁴³ This limited direct observation meant that little was known about the groups receiving the mFSA. In addition to this lack of intelligence on the groups, there were also large numbers of foreign volunteers who joined factions of the *mujahideen* that the US government did not have adequate intelligence on.⁴⁴ These volunteers came from a wide range of states, with many sent from Muslim states in the Middle East who saw the conflict in Afghanistan as a, “convenient political dumping ground for frustrated clerical activists of the middle classes... .”⁴⁵ In addition to these individuals joining the *mujahideen*, the CIA also supported the Pakistani intelligence in, “...recruiting mercenaries and religiously motivated volunteers from around the world.”⁴⁶ These international members of the *mujahideen* included people like Osama bin Laden, whose, “...tasks included building infrastructure, coordinating logistics for the mujahedeen, dishing out funds, and...fighting. As

⁴²Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile...,” 222.

⁴³Ibid., 223.

⁴⁴Carpenter, “The Unintended Consequences of Afghanistan,” 76. ; Parenti, “America’s Jihad...,” 32-33.

⁴⁵Parenti, “America’s Jihad...,” 32.

⁴⁶Ibid., 33.

one of the leaders of the international volunteers, bin Laden kept track of the other recruits, registering their identities and contact information. From this roster, it is said, emerged al Qaeda.”⁴⁷ This involvement of bin Laden and “...some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 40 Islamic countries [who] joined Afghanistan's fight between 1982 and 1992...” led to the foundations for the insurgency in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban and associated terrorist organizations.⁴⁸ Due to the general lack of intelligence on these individuals, and the lack of intelligence on the infighting that occurred between *mujahideen* units throughout the Soviet occupation, and after the Soviet withdrawal, the US failed to perceive the unintended consequence of weapons leakage to forming insurgent and terrorist organizations. As a result, when organizations like the Taliban formed, the US was not able to stop these groups from having US provided weapons and using them in unintended ways. This is highlighted in, “The Unintended Consequences...,” written only a few years after the end of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The article describes how by 1994, international observers could see, “Afghan forces using their U.S.-supplied weapons to wage an enthusiastic internecine slaughter.”⁴⁹ By 1996, the Taliban had continued to build upon the weapons and resources originally intended for the *mujahideen* and were able to, “[capture] the Afghan capital, Kabul, overthrowing the regime of President Burhanuddin Rabbani - one of the founding fathers of the Afghan mujahideen...By 1998, the Taliban were in control of almost 90% of Afghanistan.”⁵⁰ The lack of intelligence on the actors receiving US mFSA is not the only mechanism that I found leading to weapons leakage in this case. The next mechanism that can be seen during and following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US’s fragmented proxy war there, is a lack of direct control over the mFSA weapons provided.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Carpenter, “The Unintended Consequences of Afghanistan,” 77.

⁵⁰“Who Are the Taliban?” BBC News. BBC, August 12, 2022.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11451718>.

Due to the lack of direct US involvement in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, meaning that there were no US military members fighting the Soviets alongside the *mujahideen*, the US lost the ability to directly control the weapons they sent as part of mFSA packages. Instead, the US relied on the CIA's Pakistani counterpart, the Interservices Intelligence Directorate. The US used, "...Pakistan as a conduit for money and arms to the Afghan *mujahidin*," which was agreed to by the Pakistani government so that Pakistan could "...pursue its own ambitious political agenda in Afghanistan."⁵¹ The result of this set up for the transfer of US mFSA was that the US lost control of the weapons they sent to Afghanistan, and the proxy war fragmented further than it already had. While Pakistan was transferring mFSA, "...Islamabad⁵² [skewed] the political composition of the mujahidin..." directing, "...the bulk of American money and military hardware to the most extreme Peshawar factions...[with]...At least 75 percent of the U.S. aid...[going]...to the four fundamentalist groups - with some 50 percent of the total going to [Gulbuddin] Hekmatyar's Afghan Islamic Party."⁵³ This skewing of the political composition of the *mujahideen* led to extremist individuals gaining access to mFSA weapons and splitting into their own factions, increasing fragmentation. This in turn aided the following formation of insurgent and terrorist groups, including the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Pakistani Taliban: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.⁵⁴ This series of events relating to US mFSA during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan demonstrates how, during fragmented US proxy wars, lack of direct control over mFSA weapons acts as a mechanism that leads to weapons leakage, because it

⁵¹Carpenter, "The Unintended Consequences..." 77.

⁵²Capital of Pakistan

⁵³Carpenter, "The Unintended Consequences..." 77-78.

⁵⁴Munir Ahmed, "What's behind the Pakistani Taliban's Insurgency?," AP NEWS. *Associated Press*, January 31, 2023.

<https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-organized-crime-taliban-pakistan-peshawar-2e8847a3735fb910b7a3cca53da721f4>.

becomes easier for intermediate states and VNSAs to choose who receives these weapons, despite the US' initial plans.

Finally, the third mechanism that I found leads to weapons leakage in this case is a lack of reliable weapons-tracking systems following a foreign actor receiving mFSA. As described in the discussion on the lack of direct control the US had over weapons given to the *mujahideen*, once weapons had been sent to the Pakistani intelligence service, the US had no way to track them. As a result, the US had to rely on Pakistan to give accurate information about who had received weapons, and where the weapons went afterwards. Tracking was made especially difficult not only due to historical technological limitations, but also for weapons that were not immediately recognizable, like the US-built Stinger missiles, because, “Traditionally, the [CIA] purchased foreign, usually Soviet-styled, weaponry in order to “plausibly deny” U.S. involvement if the need arose.”⁵⁵ The result of the lack of reliable weapons tracking in Afghanistan is highlighted by the, “CIA, Pakistani intelligence services and Western military attaches...[collaborating] in Operation MIAS (Missing-in-Action Stingers), trying to pry the missiles from Afghan hands and stop them from being sold to terrorist and separatist groups.”⁵⁶ This operation’s success rate was described as, “‘not good’,” and led to “Black market prices [soaring]...,” due to the CIA’s willingness at the time to, “pay as much as 3 1/2 times the original \$20,000 cost of a Stinger.”⁵⁷ The inability to successfully track weapons that were given to the *mujahideen* as part of US mFSA, along with the desperate attempts to buy back US-built weapons afterwards, demonstrates how easy it was, under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war, for both existing and forming terrorist and insurgent groups to benefit from weapons

⁵⁵Steve Galster, “Afghanistan: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990,” *Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War*. The National Security Archive, George Washington University, October 9, 2001. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/essay.html>.

⁵⁶Uli Schmetzer, and Chicago Tribune. “CIA Trying to Buy Back Missiles Given to Afghans.” Chicago Tribune, December 6, 1992. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-12-06-9204210095-story.html>.

⁵⁷Ibid.

leakage. This was because the US had no definite idea of where weapons were, or who had them, outside of militia leaders and black marketeers, for whom Stingers became, “military toys of choice,” and a, “significant source of black market funds if local militia chiefs need[ed] to finance their private wars.”⁵⁸ This lack of tracking and resulting scramble to find and buy back weapons that were part of US mFSA during the Soviet invasion gives evidence of the third mechanism I found to support my argument and highlights how the condition of fragmented proxy wars contains mechanisms that increase the likelihood of weapons leakage.

Having explored the first case that supports my explanatory theory, it is now necessary to study the GWoT in Afghanistan, and the other mechanisms found under the proposed condition, fragmented US proxy wars.

Case 2: US mFSA to Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror, 2001-2021

The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war...A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a *war against those governments that support or shelter them*. (Bush 2001).⁵⁹

We saw a mission of *counterterrorism* in Afghanistan — getting the terrorists and stopping attacks — *morph into a counterinsurgency*, nation building — trying to create a democratic, cohesive, and unified Afghanistan (Biden 2021).⁶⁰

The assumption was that more than 300,000 Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF]⁶¹ that *we had trained* over the past two decades *and equipped* would be a strong adversary in their civil wars with the Taliban. That assumption — that the Afghan government would be able to hold on...turned out not to be accurate (Biden 2021).⁶²

These quotes, despite the two decades of separation between the presidencies of George W. Bush and Joe Biden, are both given within the larger context of the US’ Global War on Terror, and its extended stay in Afghanistan. This twenty-year period of American military

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹George W. Bush, “Global War on Terror,” George W. Bush Library, accessed March 11, 2023, <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror>. Emphasis added.

⁶⁰Joseph Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” The White House (The United States Government, August 31, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>. Emphasis added.

⁶¹Afghan military, interior security, and police forces. AKA ANSF.

⁶²Biden, “Remarks by President Biden... ” Emphasis added.

presence and US mFSA in Afghanistan demonstrates weapons leakage happening through the other three mechanisms I propose occur under the condition of fragmented US proxy wars.

Before analyzing the mechanisms seen within this case, it is important to consider the background of this conflict, and how it can be seen as a fragmented proxy war.

The GWoT in Afghanistan began October 7, 2001 and lasted until August 30, 2021. In the beginning, the war, under the name Operation Enduring Freedom, was a series of US and British airstrikes on Taliban and Al Qaeda forces, assisted on the ground by, “a partnership of about one thousand U.S. special forces, the Northern Alliance, and ethnic Pashtun anti-Taliban forces.”⁶³ However, most of the fighting on the ground was “between the Taliban and its Afghan opponents.”⁶⁴ By November of 2001, the Taliban forces were rapidly losing power, and by November 14th, the United Nations Security Council passed, “Resolution 1378, calling for a “central role” for the United Nations in establishing a transitional administration and inviting member states to send peacekeeping forces to promote stability and aid delivery.”⁶⁵ Fighting between Afghan forces and Al Qaeda continued on the ground, with bin Laden escaping in December of 2001. Meanwhile, an interim government was set up in Afghanistan on December 5, 2001, and later that month the Taliban officially collapsed, with its leader fleeing the country. By 2002, despite large-scale operations, such as Operation Anaconda against, “an estimated eight hundred Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters...,” Afghanistan began to fade to the background of the GWoT as American focus shifted to Iraq.⁶⁶ This resulted in a movement within US foreign policy for increased mFSA and FSA from the US for the purposes of the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

⁶³“Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid. Chivers, C. J. “How Many Guns Did the U.S. Lose Track of in Iraq and Afghanistan? Hundreds of Thousands.” The New York Times, August 24, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/magazine/how-many-guns-did-the-us-lose-track-of-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-hundreds-of-thousands.html>.

⁶⁶Ibid.

By May 1, 2003, a transitional government was named and, “The U.S. military create[d] a civil affairs framework to coordinate redevelopment with the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations and to expand the authority of the Kabul government.”⁶⁷ These “provincial reconstruction teams” entered Afghanistan, and “major combat” was declared over by the US government, leaving only “eight thousand U.S. soldiers stationed in Afghanistan.”⁶⁸

In the next two years, the Afghan government continued to try and reach stability, with the democratic election of President Hamid Karzai, and the aid of NATO and international security forces. Despite positive governmental changes, Al Qaeda continued to be a focus of US and Afghan attention, with bin Laden reappearing in 2004. This focus led to the 2005 joint declaration from the US and Afghanistan, in which the two countries recognized each other as strategic partners, and President Bush committed US mFSA to Afghanistan. The declaration gave,

...U.S. forces access to Afghan military facilities to prosecute “the war against international terror and the struggle against violent extremism.” The alliance’s goal...is to “strengthen U.S.-Afghan ties and help ensure Afghanistan’s long-term security, democracy, and prosperity.”...the agreement calls for Washington to “help *organize, train, equip, and sustain Afghan security forces*⁶⁹ as Afghanistan develops the capacity to undertake this responsibility,” and to continue to rebuild the country’s economy and political democracy (“Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan”).⁷⁰

This declaration outlines how the US would give mFSA to Afghanistan for the next sixteen years. Following this declaration, the US continued to be involved in Afghanistan through both military operations and mFSA. Resurgent Taliban violence in 2006 led to a renewed COIN movement from the Afghan government, supported by US mFSA, and coinciding with the GwoT and its larger CT goals. In 2009, President Obama recommitted to Afghanistan, but with a new,

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Emphasis added.

⁷⁰“Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations.

Pakistan-focused strategy, with the goal being, “...‘to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.’”⁷¹ As discussed in the previous case, Pakistan played an important role in weapons leakage, and providing foreign fighters to the *mujahideen* in the 1980s, hinting at an important continuity of actors discussed below. With this new strategy came a more focused COIN effort from the US and US mFSA against the Taliban. President Obama then increased US troop involvement in Afghanistan, adding, “thirty thousand forces...on top of the sixty-eight thousand in place. These forces... [were meant to] ‘...increase our⁷² ability to train competent Afghan Security Forces, and to partner with them so that more Afghans can get into the fight...[helping]...create the conditions for the United States to transfer responsibility to the Afghans.’”⁷³ Despite a series of events including the aforementioned attempts to train Afghan forces to takeover fighting the Taliban, bin Laden’s death, and the beginning of US troop withdrawal in 2011, tensions began increasing again in 2012, and continued to increase and decrease in waves for the next decade, until August 15, 2021, when the Afghan government collapsed, Afghan President Ghani fled, and the Taliban took Kabul. This occurred in the midst of the US’s plans to withdraw, which continued, but at the cost of 13 US service members, and “Thousands of Afghans who assisted the United States and its allies, as well as up to two hundred Americans, remain[ing] in Afghanistan.”⁷⁴

This brief overview of the history of US involvement in Afghanistan from 2001-2021 may lead one to ask, how is this an example of a fragmented US proxy war? The fragmentation in this case comes from the layered aspects of this conflict, in which multiple different conflicts

⁷¹“Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations.

⁷²The United States’

⁷³“Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations.

⁷⁴Ibid.

created the larger US war in Afghanistan: the US's GWoT, the Afghan COIN effort against the Taliban (supported by US mFSA), the Taliban's renewed insurgent movement, and Afghan and US forces' fight and CT efforts against both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Each of these sub conflicts contained a multitude of different actors, each with their own goals and reasons for continuing to fight. This fragmentation also had a detrimental effect on already weak state apparatus. The proxy war aspect comes into play with the GWoT. While even further from a conventional proxy war than the first case, due to the widespread nature of the GWoT and the US military presence in Afghanistan, the GWoT still acted as a way for the US to exert national security and foreign policy objectives, mostly CT-based, in the Middle East, without directly going to war against every adversarial state or foreign actor in the region. By relying on local actors, such as the Afghan state, and as will be discussed later, various Iraqi actors, the US was able to push US CT and COIN objectives to fruition without needing to be directly involved. For example, using ANSF to fight the Taliban achieved the goal mentioned in President Bush's quote of, "A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them."⁷⁵ In addition to the historical background and discussion of how the GWoT in Afghanistan acts as a fragmented proxy war, it is important to discuss differences and similarities between this case and the previous case, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. While they seem incredibly different at face value, there are important continuities that add to the complex picture of weapons leakage from US mFSA to terrorist and insurgent groups.

The most obvious difference in these cases is the extent of the conflict. Unlike the previous case, the GWoT was not a scaled down version of a fragmented proxy war, with limited direct American involvement, and no US troops on the ground. Instead, this war was a reaction to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US by Al Qaeda. As referenced in President

⁷⁵George W. Bush, "Global War on Terror," George W. Bush Library.

Bush's quote above, the GWoT was not solely against Al Qaeda, but all terrorist groups, and any group that supported, financed, or otherwise helped Al Qaeda. This is especially important, because the GWoT was not simply furthering US interests, it was a direct way to enforce US CT methods and programming around the world. A second key difference is who received the US mFSA. In the first case, the *mujahideen*, a collection of factionalized groups of Afghans and foreign fighters, received mFSA covertly from the US. In this case, US mFSA went directly to the Afghan state and the ANSF, and consisted of, as stated by President Biden, not only weapons and financing, but also military training. This, along with the GWoT's status as a war of "self-defense," leads to the third major difference, US troops were on the ground in Afghanistan, playing the role of both soldiers fighting an American war and a form of COIN and CT mFSA to Afghanistan against the Taliban and terrorist groups present in the country.⁷⁶

Despite the differences between these cases, important similarities exist that make comparing them relevant to my explanatory theory of weapons leakage. First, both cases serve as examples of a fragmented US proxy war. Second, the cases' shared location means that there are not extreme differences in the people, culture, and territory that is being discussed. Third, several actors in the GWoT in Afghanistan carry over from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the following years of conflict that led to the Taliban's first regime in Afghanistan.⁷⁷ As discussed earlier, a faction of the *mujahideen* who received US mFSA went on to form the Taliban, an Afghan insurgency movement that took power in 1996. In addition to the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, the man responsible for the 9/11 attacks, acted as a foreign fighter in the *mujahideen*, and then went on to help form Al Qaeda. These continuous actors are important to the story of

⁷⁶Lloyd J. Austin III, "Message to the Force - One Year Since the Conclusion of the Afghanistan War," U.S. Department of Defense, August 30, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3144082/message-to-the-force-one-year-since-the-conclusion-of-the-afghanistan-war/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20went%20to,them%20safe%20haven%20in%20Afghanistan.>

⁷⁷Taliban's Regime: 1996-2001, 2021... .

weapons leakage, because of how they directed US policy decisions within the GWoT. The US “went to Afghanistan in 2001 to wage a necessary war of self-defense...Al Qaeda...were able to plan and execute such a horrific attack [9/11] because their Taliban hosts had given them safe haven in Afghanistan.”⁷⁸ The connection between the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and between both groups and the *mujahideen* meant that similar actors were in play in the GWoT in Afghanistan as in the previous case, and that the Taliban and Al Qaeda already had some weapons the US had sent to Afghanistan as part of previous mFSA packages. By sending military forces and selling weapons to the Afghan government during the GWoT, without accounting for the chaos and corruption that existed due to the fragmented nature of the GWoT and Afghanistan during this time period, weapons leakage to these same VNSAs continued. This continuous weapons leakage was exacerbated by the GWoT, especially following the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in 2021. With so many facets to this conflict, it is easy to see how fragmented the movements that made up this US proxy war were, and to imagine that weapons given through US mFSA over the two decade-long conflict could have leaked out of official pathways and into the hands of terrorist and insurgent groups.

While the GWoT in Afghanistan had the initial purpose of hunting down Al Qaeda and its leadership (a CT effort), who were being given safe-haven by the Taliban, this purpose had to merge with a COIN effort, because in order to find Al Qaeda, US forces and mFSA to the Afghan government had to defeat the Taliban as well. As stated in my argument and theory explanation, there are six total mechanisms that I argue act under the condition of fragmented US proxy wars. In this case, the following mechanisms facilitated weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups: reliance on unstable foreign governments, poor oversight, and unreliable weapons tracking systems, and corruption resulting from COIN and CT efforts. Like in the first

⁷⁸Austin III, “Message to the Force...,” 2022.

case, I will approach two overarching questions. First, did weapons leakage occur? Second, how did weapons leakage occur?

The first question is answered by the quotes that began this thesis. Weapons leakage during the GWOt in Afghanistan is referenced, explicitly described, and otherwise mentioned in a variety of open-source literature. Weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups is described as especially rampant in the midst of the US's 2021 withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. One article describes how,

Since 2003 the United States has provided Afghan forces with at least 600,000 infantry weapons...162,000 pieces of communication equipment, and 16,000 night-vision goggle devices...small arms seized by the insurgents such as machine guns, mortars, as well as artillery pieces...could give the Taliban an advantage against any resistance that could surface in historic anti-Taliban strongholds... (Ali et al., 2021).⁷⁹

In addition to reports of weapons leakage following the US's withdrawal, there are also earlier reports of weapons leakage during the GWOt in Afghanistan. A CNN report describes how, "The U.S. military failed to "maintain complete inventory records for an estimated 87,000 weapons -- or about 36 percent -- of the 242,000 weapons that the United States procured and shipped to Afghanistan from December 2004 through June 2008"" ⁸⁰ The significance of this weapons leakage is highlighted by Rep. John Tierney, at the time chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, saying, "What if we had to tell families [of U.S. soldiers] not only why we are in Afghanistan but why their son or daughter died at the hands of an insurgent using a weapon purchased by the United States taxpayers?...that's what we risk if we were to have tens of thousands of weapons we provided washing around Afghanistan, off the

⁷⁹Idrees Ali, Patricia Zengerle, and Jonathan Landay, "Planes, Guns, Night-Vision Goggles: The Taliban's New U.S.-Made War Chest," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, August 19, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/planes-guns-night-vision-goggles-talibans-new-us-made-war-cest-2021-08-19/>.

⁸⁰"Thousands of Guns U.S. Sent to Afghanistan Are Missing," CNN (Cable News Network), accessed March 12, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/02/12/missing.afghan.weapons/index.html#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20military%20failed%20to,Government%20Accountability%20Office%20report%20states.>

books'... .⁸¹ These examples show weapons leakage occurring throughout the twenty-year period of US mFSA to Afghanistan. The next question to ask is how did this weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups happen?

The first mechanism I found acting in this case is the US' reliance on unstable foreign governments. The post-Taliban democracy in Afghanistan, which has been described as, "a weak and aid dependent government," formed unsteadily, even with multiple international forces working to stabilize it.⁸² Despite the efforts US mFSA put into training and providing Afghan forces with weapons and funding, these forces were at the mercy of their government's stability and capacity, which wavered throughout the GWoT in Afghanistan, as evidenced by the return of the Taliban's insurgent movement in 2006, and the government's downfall in 2021. Despite these stability issues, in order to achieve the goals of the GWoT, the US had to support the ANSF in waging a massive CT and COIN effort against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. This required relying on the Afghan government. This reliance on an unstable government while simultaneously attempting to run complicated COIN and CT operations in the context of a fragmented conflict facilitated weapons leakage. This was because the instability enhanced existing government corruption and lended itself to a general state of chaos that allowed weapons sent with mFSA packages to go missing, be stolen, or otherwise leak from official channels.

The enhancement of local corruption under an unstable foreign government is hinted at in various reports on Afghanistan in this period. For example, a SIGAR report describes how, "In the early years of the post-2001 U.S. reconstruction effort, some U.S. officials recognized corruption could undermine the Afghan state's legitimacy and drain resources from it. However, there was not sufficient appreciation for the threat corruption posed to the long-term U.S. goal of

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Lila Abu-Lughod, "Chapter 1: Do Muslim Women (Still) Need Saving?," in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 27-53. 51.

a peaceful, stable Afghanistan.”⁸³ Corruption in Afghanistan is further described by the United States Institute of Peace, which stated, “...the structural legitimacy of the Afghan government has suffered from a lack of capacity, particularly at the subnational level, where government authority is contested by local patronage networks.”⁸⁴ This increasing corruption under an unstable government allowed for increased chances of weapons leakage. This is referenced in the “SIGAR Oversight,” report, which describes how a policy change would supply Afghan forces with NATO standard weapons, but not require these forces to return or destroy “non-standard” weapons.⁸⁵ This led to concern from SIGAR that, “This issue [non-returned weapons] will be compounded as the number of ANSF personnel is planned to decrease... Without confidence in the Afghan government’s ability to account for or properly dispose of these weapons, SIGAR is concerned that they could be obtained by insurgents and pose additional risks to Afghan civilians and the ANSF.”⁸⁶ This open concern in SIGAR reports over corruption and weapons leakage demonstrates how reliance on an unstable government to support larger, fragmented US proxy war efforts can increase weapons leakage.

In addition to an unstable government leading to enhanced corruption, and therefore facilitating weapons leakage, unstable governments also, even if there was no evidence of corruption, add to the chaotic state of a fragmented proxy war. This in turn has negative impacts on mFSA. This chaotic environment meant that levels of governance around Afghanistan and the ability of US proxies (i.e., ANSF) to achieve US objectives varied. Parts of Afghanistan were not

⁸³“Part 1: 2001–2008,” Corruption in Conflict (SIGAR, 2016), <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/corruption-in-conflict/part1.html>.

⁸⁴Ali A. Jalali, “Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces,” USIP.org (United States Institute of Peace, May 2016), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW115-Afghanistan-National-Defense-and-Security-Forces-Mission-Challenges-and-Sustainability.pdf>. 11.

⁸⁵“SIGAR Oversight,” sigar.mil Quarterly Reports (SIGAR, July 30, 2014), <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>. 26.

⁸⁶Ibid.

receiving any form of aid, and security and police forces varied in abilities and capabilities. As a result, US attempts to train the ANSF were not as successful as they might have been. This chaos is described in “Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces,” which describes “lessons learned” such as, “Senior government and nongovernment leaders in post-conflict...countries are likely to scrimmage for control of security forces...missions should avoid empowering factions” and “Security force assessment methodologies are often unable to evaluate the impact of intangible factors such as leadership, corruption, malign influence, and dependency, which can lead to an underappreciation of how such factors can undermine readiness and battlefield performance.”⁸⁷ This chaotic environment that comes with an unstable government and fragmented proxy war facilitates weapons leakage. Between poorly trained security forces, corruption, and the US trying to achieve broad COIN and CT goals, the US found that, “ANSF units cannot fully safeguard and account for weapons. As a result, weapons...provided to ANSF are at serious risk of theft or loss.”⁸⁸ The combination of a chaotic environment and enhanced corruption that comes with an unstable government makes relying on that government to use mFSA to help achieve US goals problematic at best, and disastrous at worst. In the midst of this chaos, it is easier than ever for weapons leakage to occur.

The next mechanism that I found relevant in this case is poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking. While these could be seen as separate mechanisms, I chose to combine them into one because poor oversight of US mFSA often acted in tandem with unreliable weapons tracking⁸⁹ during the GWoT in Afghanistan. Since the US mFSA during the Soviet invasion of

⁸⁷John F. Sopko, “Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces,” sigar.mil (SIGAR, September 2017), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL-Executive-Summary.pdf>. 10.

⁸⁸“Afghanistan Security: Lack of Systematic Tracking Raises Accountability Concerns about Weapons Provided to Afghan National Security Forces,” gao.gov (US Government Accountability Office, January 2009), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-09-267.pdf>. 4.

⁸⁹ Unreliable weapons tracking differs from lack of reliable weapons tracking systems due to technological differences. In the first case, there are systems and technology in place to track weapons, but the tracking is

Afghanistan, weapons tracking had improved in general, and was made a priority by the US government. This is seen in “...the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010... [which] require[d the] DOD [Department of Defense] to implement a program to provide for the registration and monitoring of defense articles transferred to Afghanistan and Pakistan.”⁹⁰ This Act also made the “DOD... responsible for the oversight and accountability of these weapons after they are transferred to the ANSF.”⁹¹ Despite these changes since the 1980s and US troop presence in Afghanistan, unreliable weapons tracking meshed with poor mFSA oversight to lead to increased weapons leakage during the GWOt.

Poor oversight is shown working with unreliable weapons tracking systems the US and Afghanistan had in place for mFSA weapons to lead to weapons leakage in a variety of ways from 2001-2021. While this mechanism was a problem with US mFSA before the US entered Afghanistan in 2001⁹², the condition of a fragmented proxy war shifted focus even further from making sure mFSA was being delivered and tracked in an accountable manner. The GWOt’s new focus emphasized making sure the multitude of COIN and CT operations in Afghanistan, both those run directly by the US and ones run by the ANSF against the Taliban on behalf of the US, ran smoothly and achieved their goals. As a result, and working with the previous mechanism, reliance on an unstable foreign government, US mFSA to Afghanistan was sent without extensive oversight and without an adequate system in Afghanistan to track these weapons. This meant that weapons leakage went largely unnoticed until US government organizations, like

unreliable, due to either personnel or technology errors, while in the second case, the ability to track weapons is technologically limited (e.g., weapons tracking abilities in the 1980s) or unavailable.

⁹⁰“Afghan National Security Forces: Actions Needed to Improve Weapons Accountability,” SIGAR Audits (SIGAR: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, July 2014), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/Audits/SIGAR-14-84-AR.pdf?amp&&>. 1.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Frank C. Conahan, “Inventory Management: Handheld Missiles Are Vulnerable to Theft and Undetected Losses,” GAO Reports (Govinfo, September 16, 1994), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-94-100/html/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-94-100.htm>.

SIGAR, ran audits and investigations on operations in Afghanistan. The lack of an adequate weapons tracking system and poor mFSA oversight in Afghanistan is depicted in a large number of government reports. For example, multiple reports⁹³ point towards weapons leakage occurring as a result of the poor oversight and lack of reliable weapons tracking systems, while the focus on COIN and CT efforts took precedence. In these and other reports, the reasoning behind the poor oversight and weapons tracking bounces between the strategies employed by the US DOD and government, to the poorly trained Afghan forces, to simply poor recordkeeping. For example, in a congressional hearing report, “Training and Equipping Afghan Security Forces: Unaccounted Weapons and Strategic Challenges,” it was stated that,

The GAO concludes, ‘That accountability lapses occurred throughout the supply chain, including by the U.S. military, who didn't maintain complete records for about 87,000...of the 242,000 U.S.-procured weapons shipped to Afghanistan...not being able,’ ‘to provide serial numbers for about 46,000 of those weapons and...not maintaining reliable records for about 135,000 weapons that the U.S. military obtained for the [ANSF] from 21 other countries [sic]’ (Gimble et al., House of Representatives 2009).⁹⁴

This discussion of weapons leakage facilitated by poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking is echoed in many other reports. “Afghan National Security Forces: Actions Needed to Improve Weapons Accountability,” shows how weapons leakage occurred as a result of the US giving mFSA to the ANSF when these forces were known to not be adequately trained and were not prepared to keep the necessary records that would allow for weapons to be tracked. This SIGAR report describes this problem in 2014, thirteen years into the GWOt, stating that the “Afghan National Army (ANA) tracks weapons using an automated inventory management system called...(CoreIMS). However, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan...

⁹³ “Training and Equipping Afghan Security Forces: Unaccounted Weapons and Strategic Challenges,” “SIGAR Oversight,” “Afghan National Security Forces: Actions Needed to Improve Weapons Accountability,” and “U.S.-Provided Funds and Equipment to Afghanistan: An Assessment of Taliban Access to Assets Remaining in Country When the Afghan Government Collapsed.”

⁹⁴Thomas Gimble et al., “Training and Equipping Afghan Security Forces: Unaccounted Weapons and Strategic Challenges,” 2009.

officials stated that the information contained in CoreIMS is incomplete and cannot be relied upon for accurate information.”⁹⁵ This inability to rely on information, even from improved tracking systems, made weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups much harder to track and prevent. In addition to technological difficulties tracking weapons, the report also describes poor recordkeeping by ANSF, personnel not being trained in how to use the CoreIMS system, and the Afghan National Police, an important force in the COIN movements against the Taliban, having, “no standardized or automated system to account for weapons...instead rely[ing] on a combination of hard copy, handwritten records, and some Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to maintain inventory records.”⁹⁶ This combination of factors lend themselves to an overall poor system for mFSA weapons tracking, while the lack of intensive US investigations and reports on this issue until the late 2000s and early 2010s point towards poor oversight of mFSA. The consequences of poor oversight and weapons tracking are seen most dramatically in the fall of the Afghan government, withdrawal of the US and return of the Taliban regime. While weapons leakage has been shown to be an issue resulting from this mechanism throughout the GWoT in Afghanistan, it made it far easier for the Taliban to gain weapons when they took power in 2021. This is depicted in the SIGAR report, “U.S.-Provided Funds and Equipment to Afghanistan: An Assessment of Taliban Access to Assets Remaining in Country When the Afghan Government Collapsed.” This report states that the, “...DOD reported to Congress that approximately \$7.1 billion of transferred defense articles and equipment remained in Afghanistan...,” and that despite attempts to decommission and destroy equipment left behind, “an unclassified March 2022 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum stated that the Taliban claimed to have repaired seven former Afghan Air Force aircraft...[indicating]...that the Taliban may have

⁹⁵“Afghan National Security Forces...,” SIGAR Audits 2014, 1.

⁹⁶Ibid., 6.

obtained a degree of operation and maintenance capability.”⁹⁷ In addition to this, the report directly supports my argument that poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking contributes to weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups by stating,

...although DOD reported \$7.1 billion in equipment left in Afghanistan that was previously provided to the Afghanistan government and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the department has struggled for years with accurately accounting for the equipment it provided... Since at least 2009, SIGAR and the DOD... have published reports noting accountability shortfalls and issues with DOD’s processes for tracking equipment... For example... We... previously reported that DOD did not meet its own oversight requirements for sensitive equipment transferred to the Afghan government and ANDSF, and had not inventoried 60 percent of defense articles with enhanced monitoring requirements... between May 2019 and April 2020... (Sopko 2022, 2).⁹⁸

Overall, my second mechanism, poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking systems, is shown to work under the broader condition of fragmented US proxy wars in a variety of ways throughout the GWoT in Afghanistan. The lack of effort put into investigating problems with US mFSA, with reporting on oversight and tracking failures not starting until around 2009, allowed weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups, most obviously the Taliban, to occur, culminating in the Taliban’s 2021 takeover of Afghanistan.

The final mechanism that I found operating in this case is corruption resulting from COIN and CT efforts. This mechanism may seem unrelated to the condition of fragmented US proxy wars. How are operations that use US mFSA to fight terrorism and insurgencies leading to corruption that in turn facilitates weapons leakage? How is this related to the fragmented movements that impacted the US’ larger proxy war efforts? The answer to these questions can be found in the nonstate actors the US and Afghan forces used in COIN and CT efforts. In many cases, under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war that involves CT or COIN efforts, such

⁹⁷John F. Sopko, “U.S.-Provided Funds and Equipment to Afghanistan: An Assessment of Taliban Access to Assets Remaining in Country When the Afghan Government Collapsed,” SIGAR Evaluations (SIGAR, November 9, 2022), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-04-IP.pdf>. 2.

⁹⁸Ibid.

as the GWoT, the US uses other VNSAs as proxies to achieve COIN and CT goals. For example, in order to make CT a focus of both the US's mFSA to Afghanistan and the ANSF, rather than the COIN movement against the Taliban, which would be more immediately relevant to Afghanistan, the US, "turned to the very warlords whose rapacious regime had enabled the Taliban to overthrow the prior Afghan government," to provide state forces with information and support.⁹⁹ While this aided the US and Afghanistan in defeating the Taliban in the early 2000s, the use of warlords, combined with the instability of the Afghan government and the US's willingness to ignore local corruption, allowed, "warlord-led networks [to use]... violence, patronage, and bribery to...morph the Afghan security sector into an arena for their own armed muscle. Even though corruption in the Afghan security forces was widely recognized...the [US] did not substantially ramp up its emphasis on building security institutions based on accountability and good governance until around 2015."¹⁰⁰ As a result, the security forces that were meant to be using US mFSA to achieve US objectives were inherently corrupted, with some having direct patronage ties to terrorist and insurgent groups. This added to the fragmentation of the GWoT in Afghanistan, as now new VNSAs were added into the mix, with their own goals and desires, which further weakened state apparatus. Existing patronage ties meant that the mFSA and FSA, the US sent to the Afghan government and its security forces, were not used for their intended goals. This corruption led to an unequal distribution of aid, which in turn fueled insecurity in Afghanistan, "provid[ing] recruits and resources to a resurgent Taliban (and later to the self-proclaimed Islamic State...)." ¹⁰¹ By the time the US withdrew in 2021, many of these same warlords and patronage ties were still active and willing to make deals

⁹⁹Jodi Vittori, "Corruption and Self-Dealing in Afghanistan and Other U.S.-Backed Security Sectors," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie Endowment, September 9, 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/09/corruption-and-self-dealing-in-afghanistan-and-other-u.s.-backed-security-sectors-pub-85303>.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

with the Taliban, making any attempt by non-corrupt members of the government and security forces to stop the Taliban's takeover futile.¹⁰² This corruption, formed by US COIN and CT efforts in tandem with the US's reliance on an unstable foreign government, made weapons leakage from US mFSA easy. This was especially true when the terrorist and insurgent groups in Afghanistan could count on people within the system to hand weapons over to them. Therefore, corruption fueled by US COIN and CT efforts that were part of fragmented US proxy war objectives is the third and final mechanism seen in this case.

Together, reliance on unstable foreign governments, poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking, and corruption resulting from CT and COIN efforts, are shown to have facilitated weapons leakage during the GWoT in Afghanistan. Now, I will turn to the US mFSA to Iraq since 2003.

Case 3: US mFSA to Iraq since 2003

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the United States has handed out a vast but persistently uncountable quantity of military firearms to its many battlefield partners in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today the Pentagon has only a partial idea of how many weapons it issued, much less where these weapons are. Meanwhile, the effectively bottomless abundance of black-market weapons from American sources is one reason Iraq will not recover from its post-invasion woes anytime soon (Chivers 2016).¹⁰³

After discussing weapons leakage in Afghanistan, it may seem odd to turn to Iraq. Besides being in the same region of the world, why is studying US mFSA to Iraq relevant to the explanatory theory of weapons leakage that I have proposed? While Iraq has differences from Afghanistan during both eras examined, there are also similarities that highlight the importance of expanding this study of weapons leakage beyond Afghanistan. To start with the differences, Iraq is in many ways more fragmented and therefore more complicated than Afghanistan in either of the above cases. Since 2003, Iraq has been influenced by a wide variety of actors and

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Chivers, C. J. "How Many Guns Did the U.S. Lose Track of in Iraq and Afghanistan? Hundreds of Thousands." The New York Times, August 24, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/magazine/how-many-guns-did-the-us-lose-track-of-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-hundreds-of-thousands.html>.

movements. At any given point actors alone included: Sunni insurgents, Shi'ite militias, US troops, Iraqi security forces, Kurdish insurgents and militias, Iran, and multiple terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda and ISIL/ISIS¹⁰⁴. Another difference from the Afghanistan cases is the level of US troop presence. After the war in Iraq officially ended in 2011, US troops were still present, unlike in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but not at the level of troops in Afghanistan during the GWoT.

Despite these differences, there are several similarities between Iraq since 2003 and the previous cases. First, the presence of foreign fighters and terrorist groups acted much in the same way in Iraq as it did in Afghanistan. These actors took advantage of fragmented movements following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and heavily influenced Iraqi actors both during the war with the US and afterwards. Second, Iraq also falls under the broader GWoT. While Iraq did not hide Al Qaeda like the Taliban did, there were still a significant number of CT operations the US ran against ISIS and other terrorist organizations in the state.¹⁰⁵ Finally, Iraq also acts as a fragmented US proxy war. Throughout the US's time in Iraq, starting with the US's backing of Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and continuing to the present day, the US and Iran have used both Iraqi state and nonstate actors as proxies.¹⁰⁶ This US-Iranian conflict has played a role in a series of events in the Middle East, with contention over, "Iran's oil reserves, US political interference in Tehran, Iran's desire for nuclear power and both countries' growing

¹⁰⁴Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/ Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Inspired by Al Qaeda but publicly expelled from it.: Ashley L. Rhoades and Ian Mitch, "The Islamic State (Terrorist Organization)," RAND Corporation, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/topics/the-islamic-state-terrorist-organization.html#:~:text=ISIS%20>.

¹⁰⁵“It [The Ba’athist regime under Hussein] did not harbor al Qaeda, as the Taliban regime had done in Afghanistan, or Palestinian and Lebanese terrorists, as Iran does. However, Saddam Hussein welcomed foreign help, especially from Ba’athist Syria, shortly before the invasion.”

Bruce R. Pirnie, and Edward O’Connell, “Armed Groups in Iraq,” in *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006): RAND Counterinsurgency Study--Volume 2*, 21–34. RAND Corporation, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg595-3osd.10>. 29.

¹⁰⁶Bruce Riedel, “Lessons from America's First War with Iran,” Brookings (Brookings, July 28, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-from-americas-first-war-with-iran/>.

influence in the Middle East.”¹⁰⁷ Additionally, since the early 2000s, the US has been working to prevent Iran from using Iraq and Syria as a pathway for weapons trafficking to terrorist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and militias such as Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq.¹⁰⁸ This proxy war is fragmented by the extreme number of movements happening alongside it, and by weak state apparatus, as will be described below. So, while Iraq is a different case from either of the Afghanistan cases, the comparison of weapons leakage from US mFSA is useful. This is because it shows that the weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups in Afghanistan was not a unique situation, dependent on specific historical contexts, such as those that linked the *mujahideen* to the Taliban and other events in the 21st century.

Before demonstrating how weapons leakage from US mFSA occurred in Iraq, I will give a brief overview of the history of the US in Iraq since 2003, highlighting the most active actors and movements at play that make the case so complicated. Then, I will show in more detail how this case is a fragmented proxy war. Finally, I will ask: Did weapons leakage occur? If so, how?

The US entered Iraq on March 20, 2003 in a “shock and awe bombing campaign,”

...vowing to destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and end the dictatorial rule of Saddam Hussein...WMD intelligence proved illusory and a violent insurgency arose...Saddam was captured, tried, and hanged and democratic elections were held. In the years since, there have been over 4,700 U.S. and allied troop deaths, and more than one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed (CFR Timeline: The Iraq War).¹⁰⁹

In a relatively short time afterwards the US’s initial invasion, US, British, and other coalition forces overwhelmed the Iraqi army, and by May 23, 2003 there was an, “...order disbanding the

¹⁰⁷Harmeet Kaur, Allen Kim, and Ivory Sherman, “The US-Iran Conflict: A Timeline of How We Got Here,” CNN (Cable News Network, January 11, 2020),

<https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/01/world/us-iran-conflict-timeline-trnd/>.

¹⁰⁸Andrew Hanna, “Iran’s Missiles: Transfer to Proxies,” The Iran Primer (United States Institute of Peace, February 17, 2017), <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/feb/03/irans-missiles-transfers-proxies>.

¹⁰⁹Lolita C. Baldor and Tara Copp, “Why U.S. Forces Remain in Iraq 20 Years after ‘Shock and Awe,’” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, March 15, 2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/why-u-s-forces-remain-in-iraq-20-years-after-shock-and-awe>.; “Timeline: The Iraq War,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

Iraqi army and intelligence services, sending hundreds of thousands of well-armed men into the streets.”¹¹⁰ This, in addition to, “...an earlier decision to purge Baathists from the government, ha[d] lasting repercussions,” which included the formation of the Sunni insurgency against the US invasion and the future Shi’ite majority government following the December 2005 elections.¹¹¹ December 14, 2003 Saddam Hussein was captured, and three years later on December 30, 2006 Hussein was executed, leading to celebration from Shi’ites and “...Sunni militants...vow[ing] revenge.”¹¹² In the midst of these early years of the US war in Iraq, terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda in Iraq¹¹³, took advantage of the chaos of the war and the increasingly large Sunni insurgent movement, with “AQI leader Zarqawi...[waging a]...bloody campaign of suicide bombings, kidnappings, and beheadings...,” and recruiting Sunni insurgents to AQI until his death in 2006.¹¹⁴ Despite the Sunni insurgency and terrorist organizations, by 2007, the war in Iraq had slowed down for the US, with a shift in focus to mFSA. From January to December of 2007, President Bush committed more troops to Baghdad to bring stability in Iraq, and “U.S. forces... [began] recruiting Sunni tribe members, many former insurgents, to take up arms against militants working with AQI. The so-called Awakening...is credited...with helping diminish insurgent violence in...2007.”¹¹⁵ By 2008 and 2009 violence in Iraq appeared to be slowing, despite the continued presence of VNSAs, and slow political progress. Following President Obama’s 2008 election, mFSA became more hands-off, leaving, “a transitional force of 35,000–50,000 soldiers and marines to train, equip, and advise Iraqi security forces until the end of 2011.”¹¹⁶ Despite concerns from US government and military officials about Iraqi forces’

¹¹⁰“Timeline: The Iraq War,” Council on Foreign Relations.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³ AQI

¹¹⁴“Timeline: The Iraq War,” Council on Foreign Relations.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

dependence on the US, and the “...uptick in violence and an ongoing political deadlock,” the final US troops left Iraq on December 18, 2011.¹¹⁷

Despite US FSA following the US’s departure from Iraq, the state continued to be plagued by VNSAs, as the Sunni insurgent movement continued fighting against the majority Shi’ite government, sectarian and ethnic violence continued, Shi’ite militias acted simultaneously as security forces where the state was weak and death squads, and terrorist groups continued to grow.¹¹⁸ These problems were magnified in 2014, when ISIS, which had been growing in Iraq since at least 2012, began taking territory in Syria and Iraq, and on June 10, 2014 seized Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city.¹¹⁹ The Iraqi government and army were too weak to prevent this, but were quickly aided by both Iran and the US. While this happened,

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s fatwa¹²⁰...called on all able-bodied Iraqis to defend their country...An umbrella militia organization known as the “Hashd al-Shaabi,” or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), was established...On the surface, the PMF constitutes a state sanctioned organization that reports to the federal government, but in practice, it is dominated by Iran-aligned, pre-existing militia groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and the Badr Brigade (Alaaldin 2017, 1).¹²¹

The existence of the PMF both added actors into an already complicated scene in the fight against ISIS and increased existing tensions between Iran and the US. The US did not see the PMF as valid military forces, due to their militia status and ties to Iran, and therefore did not send the PMF mFSA. Following ISIS’s declaration of an “Islamic State” in 2014, fighting continued until “2017 when “Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi declared victory over ISIS in Mosul.”¹²² While the war against ISIS slowed after this, tensions between the US and Iran have

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Pirnie and O’Connell 2008; Arosoaie 2015; Mazanec 2019; Biddle 2021.

¹¹⁹Lindsay Jodoin et al., “Iraq Timeline: Since the 2003 War,” United States Institute of Peace, May 2020, <https://www.usip.org/iraq-timeline-2003-war#textonly>.

¹²⁰ Formal ruling or legal opinion from Islamic legal or religious authority.

¹²¹Ranj Alaaldin, “Containing Shiite Militias: The Battle for Stability in Iraq,” Brookings (Brookings, December 2017), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/shiite_militias_iraq_english.pdf. 1.

¹²²Jodoin et al., “Iraq Timeline: Since the 2003 War.”

continued to ramp up since then, with the proxy war between the two countries continuing through their actions in Iraq. As this limited overview of the US's history in Iraq since 2003 suggests, this case is extremely complex, with many actors and movements acting and occurring simultaneously. This complexity helps categorize US mFSA to Iraq, and the weapons leakage that resulted, under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war.

As I stated earlier, a fragmented US proxy war is one in which the US is giving mFSA to foreign actors to achieve US national security and foreign policy goals, but in doing so, supports fragmented movements. In Iraq, US goals, such as finding and destroying WMDs, defeating ISIS, and acting as a counter force to Iran in the region, led to US mFSA going to an unstable Iraq. Within Iraq there were (and are) a variety of fragmented movements. To emphasize the fragmentation that helps this case fall under the condition of a fragmented proxy war, I will briefly review the VNSAs and movements at play in Iraq. In terms of movements, there were: separatism (mainly Kurds) and sectarianism, Sunni insurgency, violent extremism, Shi'ite militias, criminality, and religious and ethnic conflicts.¹²³ The most prevalent of these movements in regard to weapons leakage are the Sunni insurgency, violent extremism, and the Shi'ite militias. Each of these movements played an active role during the American war in Iraq and in the instability of the government and country as a whole. Actors were equally fragmented, with Sunni insurgents, formed from the remains of the Ba'athist government and the Iraqi army following its disbandment; Muqtada al-Sadr's Shi'ite movement, which was friendly to the Shi'ite clerical regime in Iran and included the Mahdi Army militia; other Shi'ite Arabs, such as the Badr organization; criminals, foreign fighters, and terrorists ranging from AQI to ISIS, who worked on and off with insurgents throughout the 2000s.¹²⁴ This extreme fragmentation in Iraq

¹²³Pirnie and O'Connell 2008.

¹²⁴Ibid.

meant that even when there was a democratically elected government, it often faced deadlock internally, and violence externally. Additionally, the Iraqi army and security forces were weak following the disbanding of the army in 2003 and defeat of the army by ISIS in the 2010s. This instability made Iraq an easy state to influence in the US and Iran's previously described proxy war, and a prime location for weapons leakage.

Open-source information shows that weapons leakage from US mFSA to terrorist and insurgent groups, as well as a range of other VNSAs, did occur in Iraq.¹²⁵ How did weapons leakage occur? Like in the previous cases, Iraq does not exhibit all six proposed mechanisms, but there is clear evidence of three mechanisms: lack of direct control over provided weapons, reliance on an unstable foreign government, and poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking. Lack of intelligence on the actors receiving weapons from mFSA is not clearly present in this case, beyond perhaps confusion as to who was on the side of the Iraqi state at any given time. Weapons leakage due to a lack of reliable weapons tracking is not applicable to this case as, similarly to the GWoT in Afghanistan, US weapons tracking systems had been improved since the late 20th century. Finally, while corruption from US COIN and CT efforts may have occurred, as the US gave weapons to various VNSAs¹²⁶ to achieve goals such as defeating ISIS, there is not the same direct evidence of patronage networks, or other forms of directly-linked corruption like in Afghanistan that would have led to weapons leakage.

Weapons leakage through a lack of direct control over provided weapons is most clearly seen in the leakage of US mFSA weapons to Sunni insurgents and Shi'ite militias. While American forces did legitimately give weapons to some Sunni insurgents, as part of programs to, “[arm]... Sunni Arab groups...to fight militants linked with Al Qaeda...,” US mFSA materials

¹²⁵Amnesty International UK 2018; Webb 2023; RFERL 2018; etc.

¹²⁶e.g., YPG in Syria, PKK in Syria, Peshmerga (Kurdish militia) in Iraq.

including, “arms, ammunition, cash, fuel and supplies...,” are reported to have been given to Sunni insurgents by, “Iraqi military units... .”¹²⁷ Some of these insurgents also worked with terrorist organizations, and were suspected of being involved in past attacks on American troops.¹²⁸ The lack of control that the US experienced with weapons given to Iraq highlights how the fragmented nature of the conflict made weapons leakage possible. Despite the physical US presence in Iraq, the US still lost control of mFSA weapons once they were in the hands of the unstable Iraqi military. While militias are not a focus of this paper, the Iranian-backed, Shi’ite PMF also received US weapons from the Iraqi government, despite the fact that the US did not intend for these militias, known for their violence and links to Shi’ite death squads, to have them.¹²⁹ These two examples highlight how a lack of direct control over mFSA weapons led to insurgent and terrorist groups, and other VNSAs, benefiting from weapons leakage.

Reliance on an unstable foreign government was also a mechanism of weapons leakage in this case. The US, since 2003, has spent billions¹³⁰ in training Iraqi forces, sending military technology and weapons, and working to improve Iraq’s stability.¹³¹ However, as evident in the history overview, Iraq’s government remains to this day unstable, often gridlocked due to sectarian and ethnic conflicts¹³², and heavily influenced by both the US and Iran, and Iraq’s

¹²⁷John F. Burns and Alissa J. Rubin, “U.S. Arming Sunnis in Iraq to Battle Old Qaeda Allies,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, June 11, 2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/11/world/middleeast/11iraq.html>.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹Alaaldin, “Containing Shiite Militias: The Battle for Stability in Iraq,” 1.

¹³⁰E.g., “Since 2016, the U.S. also authorized the permanent export of over \$689 million in defense articles to Iraq via the Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) process. The top categories of DCS to Iraq include: aircraft, military electronics, and fire control/night vision.”

“U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, July 16, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-iraq/>.

¹³¹“U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State.

¹³²“Indeed, after the departure of the U.S. forces in 2011, the Shia-dominated government under Nouri Al Maliki widened the sectarian divide, dispossessing and marginalising the Sunnis. ISIS exploited the sectarian divide, capitalising on the increasing tensions between the Sunnis and the Shias.”

Aida Arosoaie, “Iraq,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, no. 1 (2015): 62–66.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351318>. 64.

relationships with China and Russia.¹³³ As a result, the Iraqi government is overwhelmingly seen by its own population as weak. This is highlighted by the rise of Shi'ite militias acting as security and providing social services for Iraq's Shi'ite population, and the, "government's inability to combat crime...".¹³⁴ This view of the government by the general public in Iraq as unstable and weak went all the way up to the reformed Iraqi army. During ISIS's invasion in 2014, large portions of the Iraqi army in Mosul deserted or surrendered, leaving ISIS, "in possession of U.S.-supplied military equipment, including Humvees, tanks, and personnel carriers, captured from the Iraqi army."¹³⁵ In this way, the US's reliance on the unstable Iraqi government, and by extension, Iraqi army, to maintain and hold onto mFSA weapons, allowed weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups to occur.

Finally, weapons leakage in Iraq was facilitated by poor US oversight and unreliable weapons tracking. "Amnesty International UK" tracked this mechanism back to the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, which flooded both Iraq and Iran with US and other foreign weapons. In 2003, "The US-led invasion of Iraq...meant the country was flooded with...weapon imports once again – but most were never secured or audited by the coalition forces or the re-formed Iraqi army. Hundreds of thousands of those weapons went missing and are still unaccounted for."¹³⁶ These missing weapons have been tracked to ISIS and other terrorist organizations, and US mFSA weapons, as well as weapons that leaked from US troops, account for a large portion of the "...arms and ammunition..." that ISIS has been found to use.¹³⁷ This unreliable weapons tracking

¹³³Ashish Kumar Sen, "Fighting Corruption Harder than Fighting ISIS, Says Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister," United States Institute of Peace, February 14, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/fighting-corruption-harder-fighting-isis-says-iraqs-deputy-prime-minister>

¹³⁴Bruce R. Pirnie, and Edward O'Connell, "Armed Groups in Iraq," 23.

¹³⁵Arosoaie, "Iraq," 63.

¹³⁶"How Islamic State Got Its Weapons," Amnesty International UK (Amnesty International, January 12, 2018), <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/how-isis-islamic-state-isis-got-its-weapons-iraq-syria>.

¹³⁷Ibid.

can be attributed to poor US oversight, evident in the reliance on a clearly unstable Iraqi government, despite, “corruption, lack of capacity to handle logistics and an absence of realistic planning [that] threaten[ed] to undermine the security infrastructure and equipment introduced into Iraq by U.S.-led forces. . . .”¹³⁸ Additionally, poor oversight in Iraq is seen in the “Slack controls over Iraqi military stockpiles and endemic corruption by successive Iraqi governments [that] have added to the [weapons leakage] problem.”¹³⁹ In addition to “Amnesty International UK’s” tracking of this mechanism, poor US oversight and unreliable weapons tracking is blatantly described in a Government Accountability Office report from 2007, which states:

As of July 2007, DOD and MNF-I [Multi-National Force-Iraq] had not specified which DOD accountability procedures. . . apply to the train-and-equip program for Iraq. . . officials stated that, since the funding did not go through traditional security assistance programs, the DOD accountability requirements normally applicable. . . including registering small arms transferred to foreign governments—did not apply (Christoff 2007, 2).¹⁴⁰

This report goes on to describe unreliable weapons tracking in addition to the poor oversight described above, stating,

DOD and MNF-I cannot fully account for Iraqi. . . receipt of U.S.-provided equipment. Two factors led to this lapse in accountability. First, MNSTC-I did not maintain a centralized record of all equipment distributed to the Iraqi security forces from June 2004 until December 2005. . . Our analysis found a *discrepancy of at least 190,000 weapons*. . . Second. . . MNSTC-I has not consistently collected supporting documents that confirm when the equipment was received, the quantities of equipment delivered, or the Iraqi units receiving the equipment (Christoff 2007, 2-3).¹⁴¹

¹³⁸Walter Pincus, “Iraqi Security Forces Facing Serious Problems, U.S. Oversight Official Says,” The Washington Post (WP Company, January 30, 2011), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/iraqi-security-forces-facing-serious-problems-us-oversight-official-says/2011/01/29/AB67AME_story.html.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Joseph A Christoff, “DOD Cannot Ensure That U.S.-Funded Equipment Has Reached Iraqi Security Forces ,” DOD Cannot Ensure That U.S.-Funded Equipment Has Reached Iraqi Security Forces § (n.d.), pp. 1-20. 2.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 2-3. My emphasis.

This mix of poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking has facilitated weapons leakage since 2003, as is highlighted by the lack of infrastructure to track mFSA weapons, and the loss of weapons to insurgent and terrorist groups, as well as other VNSAs.

In conclusion, while Iraq is a different, more fragmented case than either Afghanistan case, it is still an example of how under the condition of a fragmented US proxy war, weapons leakage can occur through certain mechanisms to terrorist and insurgent groups. In Iraq since 2003, these mechanisms include lack of direct control over provided weapons, reliance on an unstable foreign government, and poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking. By studying this case alongside the Afghanistan cases, one can understand the weapons leakage phenomenon and how it happens with greater clarity.

Potential for the Proposed Weapons Leakage Theory in Ongoing Conflicts

The War in Ukraine, 2022-...

While the previous cases acted as a plausibility probe, Ukraine since 2022 will demonstrate how my theory could be applied to ongoing conflicts as a predictive tool. To do this, I will discuss the war in Ukraine and explain why, according to my theory, the conflict should not exhibit weapons leakage. Then, I will use open-source information to demonstrate that, as expected, Ukraine at this moment in time does not fit my proposed condition or mechanisms, and weapons leakage has not occurred.

On February 24, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to invade Ukraine. Since then, the war has continued, with the Ukrainians holding out longer than expected. A CNN article describes this, saying, “Many analysts expected Ukrainian resistance to crumble in days. But for a year, the Ukrainian military has faced down a much larger force,

rolling back the Russians' initial gains... ."¹⁴² While impressive, this success is partially due to global mFSA. As of January 2023, the US had spent the most in FSA to Ukraine, with over \$40 billion of this aid being military in nature,¹⁴³ and including a variety of weapons.¹⁴⁴ \$40 billion worth of mFSA seems like it should lead to weapons leakage on an equivalently high level to that of the weapons leakage discussed in the Afghanistan and Iraq cases. However, according to current reports, weapons leakage to VNSAs of any form does not appear to be occurring in Ukraine. As of February 28, 2023, "The Pentagon's inspector general said...his office has found no evidence yet that any of the...weapons and aid to Ukraine has been lost to corruption or diverted into the wrong hands... ."¹⁴⁵ This situation, an active conflict with high amounts of US mFSA, but without reported weapons leakage to terrorist or insurgent groups (or other VNSAs) acts as an ongoing case that my theory can be applied to tentatively now, and with more certainty in the future.

According to my theory, weapons leakage from US mFSA to terrorist and insurgent groups will occur under the condition of fragmented US proxy wars, which leads to mechanisms that facilitate weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups. The war in Ukraine, which is, if anything, a conventional proxy war, should therefore not have evidence of weapons leakage. While some may argue that this could be due to a lack of terrorist or insurgent groups in the

¹⁴²Tim Lister, "After Nearly One Year of War, How Ukraine Defied the Odds - and May Still Defeat Russia," CNN (Cable News Network, February 20, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/20/europe/russia-ukraine-war-predictions-intl/index.html>.

¹⁴³Paul Kirby, "Has Putin's War Failed and What Does Russia Want from Ukraine?," BBC News (BBC, February 24, 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56720589.amp>.

¹⁴⁴E.g. "High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems," "National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems," and "1,600+ Stinger anti-aircraft systems.": Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt, "U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine - Congress," CRS Reports (Congressional Research Service, February 27, 2023), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040>.

¹⁴⁵Susie Blann, "Watch: Pentagon Reports No Evidence of Weapons Lost to Fraud in Ukraine," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, February 28, 2023), [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-pentagon-gives-news-briefing-as-russia-tightens-ukraine-border-over-drone-attacks#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Pentagon's,only%20in%20their%20early%20stages](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-pentagon-gives-news-briefing-as-russia-tightens-ukraine-border-over-drone-attacks#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Pentagon's,only%20in%20their%20early%20stages).

region, this view ignores the presence of Russian-allied groups like the Donetsk People's Republic militias who have been fighting against Ukrainian governance of the Donbas region since at least Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.¹⁴⁶ Despite the presence of insurgent groups, weapons leakage still does not seem to have occurred in Ukraine. Using this case, I can show how my explanatory theory can be used to study weapons leakage in ongoing conflicts.

It can be argued that the war in Ukraine is a conventional proxy war, with the US and other Western powers fighting against Russian imperialism by providing Ukraine with mFSA. It would not fit my definition of a fragmented US proxy war, as the actors receiving mFSA are clearly defined: the Ukrainian military, and the situation lacks the chaotic environment, multitude of nonstate actors (violent and otherwise), and weak state apparatus that one would expect to see in a fragmented proxy war. While there is still a lack of direct control over mFSA weapons, as the US is not officially a member in the conflict, there is also not the same middle-man approach to mFSA that occurred during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with Pakistan, as this war is not part of a CIA covert operation. Additionally, weapons tracking has continued to be improved upon since the US's time in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the Pentagon having a, “robust program’ to track the aid as it crosses the border into Ukraine and to keep tabs on it once it is there...” and “a small team of Americans in Ukraine working with Ukrainians to do physical...[and] virtual inspections...since those teams are not going to the front lines.”¹⁴⁷

My other proposed mechanisms also do not appear to apply to Ukraine. Reliance on an unstable foreign government does not appear to be accurate, as President Zelensky has remained a constant figure throughout the war, and his government and the Ukrainian banking system have

¹⁴⁶Stanislav Aseyev, “Who Makes Up the Ranks of The 'DPR' Militants, and What Are They Fighting For,” RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, October 5, 2018), <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/dpr-militants-who-are-they-and-what-are-they-fighting-for-aseyev/29528181.html>.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

continued to run, despite large-scale population migrations and attacks on Ukraine.¹⁴⁸ Poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking systems also appear to be irrelevant. As stated previously, weapons tracking has improved, and “Keeping...[mFSA] to Ukraine protected from waste or fraud has become a critical part of keeping support for Ukraine intact in Congress... .”¹⁴⁹ This means that oversight of mFSA to Ukraine has been held in a spotlight that was nonexistent until several years into the GWoT in Afghanistan and still seemed to be missing well into the US’s mFSA to Iraq. Finally, corruption from COIN and CT efforts is not seen in this case, as COIN and CT is not a goal of this mFSA, and therefore corruption resulting from these efforts is not an issue.

In conclusion, while the amount of mFSA being sent to Ukraine within the past year may seem like it would create a breeding ground for weapons leakage, weapons leakage does not appear to be happening, as my theory would predict, given that Ukraine is not a fragmented US proxy war and does not appear to be experiencing that condition’s mechanisms. While this case supports the potential utility of my theory in ongoing conflicts, it is important to highlight that because Ukraine is still ongoing, there may be weapons leakage happening that is currently unknown, to VNSAs that are not as visible as terrorist and insurgent groups.¹⁵⁰ So, while at the current moment, I would not expect weapons leakage from US mFSA in Ukraine, I highlight the necessity of reexamining this case following the conclusion of the conflict. Overall, the war in Ukraine acts as a demonstration that the proposed weapons leakage theory has potential as a useful predictive tool in ongoing conflicts, rather than an explanatory tool as it was in the previous cases.

¹⁴⁸“How Ukraine Is Managing a War Economy,” IMF, December 22, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/12/20/cf-how-ukraine-is-managing-a-war-economy>.

¹⁴⁹Blann, “Watch: Pentagon Reports No Evidence of Weapons Lost to Fraud in Ukraine,” 2023.

¹⁵⁰E.g., transnational criminal organizations.

Conclusion

The cases of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the GWoT in Afghanistan, and US mFSA to Iraq since 2003 support the plausibility of my explanatory theory for the condition and mechanisms that lead to weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups from US mFSA during active conflicts. As I have demonstrated, fragmented US proxy wars and their associated mechanisms, lack of intelligence on the actors receiving mFSA, lack of direct control over mFSA weapons provided, a lack of reliable weapons-tracking systems following a foreign actor receiving mFSA, reliance on unstable foreign governments, poor oversight and unreliable weapons tracking, and corruption resulting from US COIN and CT efforts all created the opportunity for terrorist and insurgent groups to gain weapons meant for the *mujahideen* forces, ANSF, and the Iraqi army and security forces. In all three cases, facilitated by the mechanisms listed above, weapons flowed from US mFSA to VNSAs who used these weapons against the US, other states, other VNSAs, and civilians. The weapons leakage depicted in these cases shines a light on why it is important for research to be conducted on the weapons leakage phenomenon. By understanding how weapons leakage occurs during active conflicts, mFSA can be provided in a safer, more accountable way. Changing how US mFSA is conducted could also prevent an acceleration of the growth and strength of terrorist organizations and insurgent groups, as well as other VNSAs around the world.

Going Further and Policy Recommendations

This theory and the cases above may lead one to wonder why weapons leakage seems to be such a significant issue for the US, and if this phenomenon occurs similarly in other countries that give mFSA. While my research has not led me to a definitive answer, I would posit that the

US both gives significantly more mFSA than other countries¹⁵¹, and has inconsistent and poorly formed oversight measures compared to other states. The extreme level of mFSA, as well as the poor oversight, seen in two out of the three cases above, likely work together to increase weapons leakage from US mFSA. Other states that give mFSA, such as the United Kingdom (UK), tend to give lower amounts. For example, in 2020, the US sent, “\$11.6 billion in military aid to 157 different countries,”¹⁵² while the UK sent, “478 million GBP,”¹⁵³ or approximately \$593 million. This extreme difference in the amount of mFSA seems likely to lead to different weapons leakage potentials, with US mFSA having a much higher potential. This likelihood is also seen in how weapons leakage is discussed at an international level. In UN discussions on arms trade, both Iran and Russia accused the US of trading arms to Ukraine, and elsewhere, at a rate that intensifies the risk of illicit and unregulated arms transfers.¹⁵⁴ While other western¹⁵⁵ states are mentioned alongside the US, the US is always the focus of these accusations. This demonstrates the higher level at which the US gives mFSA, and the suspected correlation of increased weapons leakage. While I do not have a definite answer, I would predict that the level at which the US gives mFSA, and the poor oversight of this mFSA makes weapons leakage a more common occurrence from the US, compared to other mFSA-providing states.

Knowing that it is possible that US mFSA has a higher likelihood of weapons leakage, I believe that future research should expand on the conditions that can lead to weapons leakage,

¹⁵¹ “Adjusted for inflation, the US government has given other nations nearly \$1 trillion in military aid since 1947.”: USAFacts, “How Much Does the US Give Other Countries in Military Aid?,” USAFacts (USAFacts, May 3, 2022), <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-much-does-the-us-give-other-countries-in-military-aid/>.

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³D. Clark, “UK Foreign Military Aid Spending 2022,” Statista, August 25, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/298882/united-kingdom-uk-public-sector-expenditure-foreign-military-aid/>.

¹⁵⁴ “Conseil De Sécurité: La Haute-Représentante Pour Les Affaires De Désarmement Avertit Des Risques D’escalade Liés Aux Transferts D’armes Illicites Et Non Réglementés | UN Press,” United Nations (United Nations, April 10, 2023), <https://press.un.org/fr/2023/cs15252.doc.htm>.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., “l’Occident”= the West, “...l’attention du transfert massif d’armes de haute technologie des États-Unis et de l’Occident vers l’Ukraine... .”

not only during active conflicts in the form of fragmented proxy wars, but also during other types of conflicts, and peacetime. Future research should also expand on how weapons leak to other VNSAs. While weapons leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups have many negative consequences, VNSAs that are not as easily recognizable can also benefit from weapons leakage. For example, TCOs, warlords, and paramilitary groups can all benefit from weapons leakage in ways that are not as obvious as the often very public wars declared by terrorists and insurgents. This, combined with the already difficult task of tracking and preventing weapons leakage, makes the larger weapons leakage phenomenon even more dangerous.

Another avenue for future research would be seeing if the proposed weapons leakage theory applies to indirect weaponry and technology, or other aspects of mFSA, such as cyber weapons, data, or intelligence sharing. Based on the research I have done, I would predict that there is a possibility of indirect weapons leakage, where cyber weapons and technology, or data and intelligence leaks, could help foreign states or VNSAs. This can be seen currently, with the leak of classified documents from the Pentagon on the war in Ukraine.¹⁵⁶ I think that the mechanisms of poor oversight and unreliable tracking systems, a lack of reliable tracking systems, and a lack of direct control could easily travel beyond direct weaponry. For example, it would theoretically be harder to control where a cyber weapon goes once it was sent to another actor than an arms cache, and as evident in the case studies, the US has struggled controlling even direct weapons in the past. I would also posit that reliance on unstable foreign governments and a lack of intelligence on actors receiving mFSA could transfer to indirect weaponry, as both of these mechanisms are related to the actors receiving mFSA, meaning they could have an

¹⁵⁶Tara Copp and Nomaan Merchant, “What We Know about the Leaked Classified Documents about the War in Ukraine,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, April 12, 2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-we-know-about-the-leaked-classified-documents-about-the-war-in-ukraine>.

impact regardless of the type of weapon. While I believe those five mechanisms would transfer outside of direct weaponry, it seems unlikely that corruption from COIN/CT efforts would apply, as it would be more difficult for VNSAs to access these indirect weapons, even through corrupt channels. I think that this would be an interesting and relevant channel for future research, but I believe that weapons leakage from US mFSA as described in this paper¹⁵⁷ is more likely to occur, as it requires fewer technical skills for VNSAs to operate, is easier to access (as witnessed in the case studies), and is less easy to track. For example, how can a VNSA know that there is a cyber weapon they could gain from mFSA? Especially since it is often unclear that there was a cyber-attack until it has some tangible impact—phishing, ransomware attacks, viruses, etc., could exist for years before being found.

While exploring the weapons leakage phenomenon in more depth, with a wider scope, and outside direct weaponry is necessary, there are some policy changes that can be made to start the process of consistently preventing weapons leakage from US mFSA to terrorist and insurgent groups. First, and perhaps the most obvious solution, weapons tracking needs to be improved, with consistent tracking methods and training for anyone who will be involved in a mFSA effort. In all three cases, unreliable tracking systems, whether due to a lack of technology, poor recordkeeping, or poor training, led to weapons leakage. Having a uniform method of both software tracking and training for individuals who will be tasked with recordkeeping and weapon-tracking, should decrease weapons leakage. This will also help prevent middlemen from being able to send weapons to actors who are not meant to receive them. A second policy change that can be made is having an unaffiliated party oversee mFSA efforts. This means an individual or group who is not a member of the foreign actors or state(s) receiving mFSA, and is not a

¹⁵⁷I.e. leakage of direct weaponry.

member of the US policymakers who decided to send mFSA.¹⁵⁸ This will help prevent the oversight issues witnessed in Afghanistan with the ANSF and after in the US, where individuals from the SIGAR office, “...encountered unreasonable delays and a lack of cooperation from DOD, State, and USAID... .”¹⁵⁹ The final policy change that should be made is promoting increased intelligence gathering before sending weapons or money as part of mFSA. This increased intelligence can give an idea to policymakers of how likely mFSA weapons are to leak to VNSAs, and how likely mFSA is to add to, or even introduce corruption to a foreign state. Additionally, intelligence gathering can give an idea of how fragmented a situation is on the ground, preventing weapons from reaching a wide array of VNSAs, as they did in Iraq. Similarly, if an emphasis had been placed on increased intelligence earlier, it seems unlikely that the US, even as part of a covert operation, would have supported Pakistan giving mFSA weapons to extremist elements of the *mujahideen*. Additionally, the corruption that came from the combined effect of an unstable government and Afghan warlords’ patronage networks in the 2000s could have been prevented, perhaps allowing for more success in the US’s COIN and CT efforts in Afghanistan. While mFSA is often given with good intentions, it is important to consider possible consequences that can result from giving mFSA to unstable regions, or to actors who may have ties with VNSAs, terrorist, insurgent, or otherwise.

This thesis encompasses the beginnings of what I believe can be a larger explanatory theory of weapons leakage. While this is not a topic that is often researched, or discussed outside of obvious examples of weapons leakage, it can have dramatically negative consequences when left to be treated merely as an ambiguous side-effect of mFSA, with no strong efforts to prevent it. By recognizing fragmented US proxy wars as a condition whose mechanisms lead to weapons

¹⁵⁸I.e., Not someone from the Department of Defense or State Department who may have motives or other information that influences them to not fully commit to oversight of mFSA operations.

¹⁵⁹John F. Sopko, “U.S.-Provided Funds and Equipment to Afghanistan...,” ii.

leakage to terrorist and insurgent groups, policy makers can be better informed about when weapons leakage may occur, and act accordingly. As the war in Ukraine has shown so far, mFSA is possible without drastic consequences to the benefit of VNSAs. The key is studying, and understanding, when these VNSAs are likely to benefit from weapons leakage, and using this understanding to prevent weapons leakage.

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