

## SITUATION UPDATE

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**Afghan Peace Watch**  
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# Selective Approval: Taliban Weapons Controls in Afghanistan's Balkh Province

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Fieldwork in Balkh province, Afghanistan, between October and December 2023 reveals the availability of Soviet- and NATO-pattern weapons in district-level markets, even as the Taliban have attempted to exert greater control over civilian-owned firearms.
- Taking inflation and currency fluctuations into account, overall arms prices in Balkh were slightly higher than those documented in markets in other provinces in October and November 2022. Notably, prices for NATO-calibre 5.56 × 45 mm ammunition had doubled, while AK-pattern 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition prices remained stable.
- By the end of December 2023 the Taliban claimed to have issued some 163 weapons permits to businesses, factories, commercial markets, and hospitals in Balkh. While there is currently no official process for civilians to hold or register their weapons without a business licence, in practice individuals with connections to the Taliban may receive informal permission to own weapons.
- A large number of weapons that former major power brokers and political elites had previously stockpiled remain hidden. The business interests of some major political elites who have not acted against the Taliban remain intact, while those of other elites have been seized.
- According to Taliban-released figures, US-manufactured weapons reportedly account for less than 10 per cent of the weapons seized in Balkh, the majority being AK-pattern assault rifles and pistols, which have been widely in circulation in Afghanistan for decades.
- Researchers found no evidence of arms smuggling to Uzbekistan, but Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, remain concerned about the risks associated with weapons trafficking, terrorist group activity, and instability under Taliban rule in northern Afghanistan.

## Overview

Mazar-i-Sharif city in Afghanistan's Balkh province is the fourth largest city in the country and the centre of political and economic life in northern Afghanistan. On 14 August 2021 Mazar fell to the Taliban and its political elites fled across the border with Uzbekistan (Reuters, 2021). In the absence of strong political leadership, the Afghan National Army (ANA) 209<sup>th</sup> Corps surrendered after only sporadic resistance (Al Jazeera, 2021), and the Taliban gained access to ANA weapons depots located on the outskirts of the city. One day later, on 15 August 2021, Kabul fell to the Taliban.

Balkh province is ethnically diverse and shares borders with Uzbekistan (with the main border crossing spanning the Amu Darya River in Kaldar district), Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The province hosts ethnically diverse Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek communities, while both Dari and Pashto are widely spoken.

Historically, power in the northern regions, especially Balkh province, has rested with non-Pashtun communities, particularly Tajiks and Uzbeks, who are led by Uzbek and Tajik warlords and militia that possess significant weapons and ammunition stocks.

The inability of the Taliban to locate and seize these stocks stems from the profound distrust of the group exhibited by the local non-Pashtun population, who view the Taliban as a foreign entity. Unlike their Pashtun counterparts, who reside in Pashtun districts and tend to cooperate with the Taliban, the non-Pashtun populace in Balkh remains deeply mistrustful of the Taliban government. This mistrust dates back to 1997 when, during the Taliban's initial period in power, General Abdul Malik, a prominent anti-Taliban commander, briefly allied with the Taliban before being betrayed. Malik then orchestrated a violent uprising in Mazar-i-Sharif that resulted in the massacre of Taliban fighters.

The Taliban are currently constructing the 285 km Qosh Tepa canal on the Amu Darya River, based on a feasibility study launched in December 2018 during the era of the Western-supported government.

The canal is designed to irrigate parts of northern Afghanistan that have been devastated by climate change and persistent drought. Once completed, it will be the Taliban's first major infrastructure project; however, it currently faces some technical challenges in the absence of international assistance and has raised concerns among some regional states that also depend on the Amu Darya River for irrigation.

Over the past two years the Taliban have developed more robust weapons management practices, but these rules appear to be unevenly applied across provinces and particular communities (Fleischner, 2023; Jackson, Maiwand, and Weigand, 2023). In Balkh the Taliban have been able to secure weapons stockpiles left by the ANA 209<sup>th</sup> Corps. Based on interviews conducted for this Situation Update, however, privately held stockpiles of major power brokers and political elites remain largely unaccounted for.

As previously reported, a portion of weapons seized by individual Taliban commanders and fighters during the collapse of the previous government were privately held and sold prior to the establishment of strict Taliban weapons management practices (Fleischner, 2023). While the Taliban have sought to formalize the process for obtaining weapons permits under the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), limited formal procedures are in place for individuals to obtain weapons permits in the provinces. Interviews suggest that individual Taliban commanders may continue to issue unofficial (previously handwritten but increasingly letter-based) weapons permits signed by local Taliban officials, based on individual affiliations with the Taliban. Despite the Taliban's official ban on informal permits, they remain valid in the province.

Groups designated as terrorists with diverse agendas continue to operate in northern Afghanistan, including the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which seeks to undermine Taliban authority. On 9 March 2023 the Taliban's governor in Balkh was killed during a suicide attack inside his office that ISKP later claimed responsibility for (Al Jazeera, 2023). Other armed opposition groups with a foothold in northern Afghanistan include the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement and the Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (CRS, 2024; ICG, 2022). Although researchers did not find evidence of any activity linked to either of these groups in Balkh, armed groups like the IMU have strong cross-border links to Central Asian states, especially among Tajik and Uighur majority communities. This connection has led to violent incidents, particularly in Tajikistan. Meanwhile, the ‘largest of the northern insurgent factions’ (ICG, 2022, p. i), the National Resistance Front (NRF), has failed to gain traction among majority Tajik communities in Balkh due to internal ethnically based politics that limit its support (pp. 12–13). So far, former governor Atta Mohammad Noor and former national vice president and warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum (an Uzbek) have neither taken any significant action against the Taliban nor leveraged their powerbases in the north.

## Weapons markets, prices, and permits in Balkh

### Research methodology

The Small Arms Survey commissioned Afghan Peace Watch (APW) to conduct the field research described in this Situation Update. APW maintains an extensive network of journalists and civil society activists on the ground in Afghanistan, including professional journalists and reporters. For this study researchers were provided with information about benchmark NATO- and Soviet-pattern small arms and light weapons, ammunition, and associated materiel (for example, scopes and night-vision equipment) that was used to identify weapons in illicit markets between October and December 2023. Weapons markets were investigated and data collection was undertaken in three of the province’s districts (Balkh, Chamtal, and Kaldar) and in Mazar-i-Sharif city. Researchers also provided digital documentation of recently issued weapons permits, which are on file with the Small Arms Survey, and pricing information for weapons and ammunition found in various markets and summarized in this document. As part of this research, more than a dozen interviews were conducted with Taliban officials, weapons dealers, and officials in the previous national government.

### Weapons markets

Between October and December 2023 APW researchers documented weapons markets in Balkh, Chamtal, and Kaldar districts. Two weapons markets in Balkh district are concealed inside local homes. These markets operate out of sight, but are easy to access. All operate unofficially, but with the knowledge of local Taliban officials, who may also benefit financially from sales. Access to these markets is restricted mainly to those with ties to the Taliban.

The largest weapons market documented was in the Noshar area of Chamtal district. Districts such as Chamtal have historically been strongholds for factions like Hizb-e-Islami and, later, the Taliban, with major jihadi commanders aligning with Hizb-e-Islami leader Gulbadin Hekmatyar. Although Chamtal is a Pashtun-dominated district, the militant stronghold was fuelled by the external support given by Europe, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United States to anti-Soviet guerrillas during the Soviet–Afghan war. The radicalization among these guerrilla forces laid the groundwork for prolonged instability and conflict in districts such as this.

Over the past two decades leaders such as Atta Noor, representing Jamiat-e-Islami, have been implicated in the destabilization of the district, often with the aim of influencing national and provincial election outcomes. More recently, a tribal leader noted that he now sees young men who are not very important or highly ranked in the Taliban openly carrying weapons, whereas in general only Taliban fighters with proper permission are allowed to carry weapons in public.

Kaldar district has been less affected by armed conflict and is predominantly a desert. Communities live mainly along the river that divides the province from Uzbekistan, which has put strong border-protection systems in place. The construction of the Qosh Tepa canal has not had any noticeable impact on conflict dynamics or demand for weapons in Kaldar district, and this may be expected to remain the case as long as water is fairly distributed and the authorities deal with any cross-border clashes.

## Weapons types and prices

Researchers gathered price data from weapons markets in Balkh, Chamtal, and Kaldar districts and obtained two sets of price data from self-described weapons smugglers in Mazar-i-Sharif city in October and December 2023. Price data was provided in Afghan afghanis and US dollars to account for currency fluctuations over the past two years. In late 2022, when previous fieldwork was conducted in other provinces, the afghani was valued at roughly 90 to one US dollar; by late 2023 the exchange rate was roughly 70 to one.

Russian AK-pattern assault rifles varied in price from AFN 60,000 (USD 857) in Chamtal in November 2023 to AFN 100,000 (USD 1,428) in Mazar-i-Sharif in December 2023. Comparable US-made rifles were three to five times as expensive. M4 rifles, for example, were on sale for between AFN 350,000 (USD 5,000) in Chamtal and AFN 380,000 (USD 5,429) in Mazar-i-Sharif in October and December 2023 (two data points). By comparison, Pakistani-made AK-pattern rifles were on offer for AFN 20,000–30,000 (USD 286–428), which was slightly lower than the prices for Chinese-made AK-pattern (Type 56-1) assault rifles.

Overall, these prices are slightly higher than those that researchers had previously documented in Nangarhar province in November 2022, even taking currency fluctuations into consideration. This may indicate tighter Taliban controls in Balkh, or lower supplies of US-manufactured weapons being available in Balkh markets, or a combination of these factors. In any case, US-made materiel did not appear to be in high demand in markets.

Ammunition prices also varied significantly according to the weapon system, whether Soviet- or NATO-pattern. At AFN 12–15 (USD 0.17–0.21) per round, the price for AK-pattern 7.62 × 39 mm rounds in Balkh was generally consistent with data previously gathered in Nangarhar in November 2022; however, at AFN 20–50 (USD 0.29–0.71) for NATO-calibre 5.56 × 45 mm ammunition, prices were nearly double those previously recorded.

Importantly, the price data obtained offers single data points for individual weapons offered for sale.

Prices may fluctuate for a variety of reasons, including negotiations between buyer and seller, as well as the condition and quality of the item. Some weapons—especially US-made ones—have also been sold for much lower prices by those fearing house-to-house searches and Taliban reprisals against those caught in possession of such weapons.

Night vision and other high-value types of equipment were noticeably hard to find in the markets, suggesting tighter Taliban restrictions on the circulation of these items. Some price data for rifle scopes and night vision was obtained, but the make, model, and manufacturer of these items were not specified.

## Taliban permits and weapons seizures

Prior to the collapse of the Western-supported government, weapons markets were present in areas under Taliban control and the Taliban had issued weapons permits in these areas. These included handwritten notes permitting individuals to hold and transport weapons. Since coming to power, the Taliban's management practices have continued to evolve to deal with areas experiencing armed opposition and diverse ethnic communities.

Researchers noted three kinds of weapons permits being issued under the Taliban: official weapons permits to Taliban members, including the army and police; official weapons permits issued under the Chamber of Commerce and Mol to businesspeople; and unofficial weapons permits issued to those with direct ties to the Taliban. Unofficial permits are usually only valid in the province where they are issued and are only given to individuals with direct or indirect connections to the Taliban.

In April 2023 the Taliban's Mol issued a statement requiring all mujahideen and civil service employees to obtain weapons permits from the relevant Mol authorities. This statement set a one-month deadline for compliance.

Researchers noted that the process for issuing weapons permits to businesspeople has been formalized under the Chamber of Commerce and

Mol. The process can take between two and three months, and individual Taliban commanders can no longer issue official weapons permits under their personal authority. As of December 2023 the Taliban claimed to have issued some 163 weapons permits to businesses, factories, commercial markets, and hospitals in Balkh.<sup>1</sup> Despite the official ban on informal permits, the Taliban continue in practice to issue handwritten weapons permits to individuals having connections with them, which remain valid only in the province. In terms of format, only the Mol in Kabul can print official permit cards, which are recorded in a database, while other weapons permits issued at the provincial level may be typed. APW researchers obtained examples of both official permit cards and typed permissions, which are on file with the Small Arms Survey.

These regulatory efforts have not prevented the activities of weapons markets. Weapons seized by Taliban commanders and fighters during the collapse of the previous government likely account for a significant source of supply to these markets. These items were initially considered as ‘war booty’ and became the personal property of the individuals who had seized them. It may be that, as economic conditions have worsened, owners of seized materiel have sought to convert their stocks into cash.

In one instance that occurred during the government collapse a Taliban fighter described seizing a vehicle with 48 ‘Kalashnikov’ rifles on board. The fighter kept one for himself and sold it in Balkh two months later for AFN 65,000 (USD 720). As a field researcher reported, ‘this pattern of seizing and selling weapons became a means for Taliban fighters to address economic challenges within their families. Thus, they were motivated to capture more weapons.’ Similarly, during house-to-house searches immediately following the collapse, individual Taliban fighters kept some of the weapons they had seized and later sold them, while the remainder were turned over to

Taliban commanders. One Talib noted that everyone in his group tasked with house-to-house searches was entitled to commandeer the same number of weapons as the number of houses that had been searched.

The Taliban’s High Commission for Security and Clearance Affairs, led by Deputy Defence Minister Fazil Mazloom, has taken primary responsibility for house-to-house searches for weapons across the country (ICG, 2022, p. 22). The Taliban routinely conduct search and seizure operations in Balkh province. For instance, the Taliban captured 33 rifles and seven pistols during a raid on the Tajik village of Samar Qandian in Balkh district in early December 2023.<sup>2</sup> The raid may have been prompted by specific intelligence regarding the presence of weapons in this Tajik (non-Pashtun) area. Yet these operations have not been as intensive in Balkh province as in other areas, which is perhaps a reflection of lower armed group activity in the province.

According to data collected from Taliban sources for this Situation Update, the authorities seized some 17,000 weapons in Balkh province over the past two years, but this figure has not been independently corroborated.<sup>3</sup> US-manufactured weapons reportedly account for less than 10 per cent of the weapons seized. The majority are said to be AK-pattern assault rifles and pistols of the types that have been widely in circulation in Afghanistan for decades. Some of these weapons were likely also seized from the supporters of former elite government officials, including the houses and offices of business associates, relatives, and affiliated militias.

Under the previous government, predominantly non-Pashtun power brokers and political elites were able to establish their own militias and weapons stockpiles. Taliban sources interviewed by researchers noted that the Taliban feel they have not been successful in locating and seizing all these weapons stockpiles, and some likely remain hidden.

1 Taliban figures collected by APW, December 2023.

2 Author interview, Balkh province, December 2023.

3 The figure provided by the Taliban was 16,858 (data collected by APW, December 2023).

## Evidence of cross-border trafficking and armed group activity

There is currently no evidence of significant cross-border weapons flows between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan using the border crossing at Hairatan. This does not preclude the possibility of some small-scale weapons trafficking, but none of the Afghan stakeholders engaged considered it to be a significant issue. Recent Small Arms Survey engagement with Uzbek customs and border authorities confirms these reports. Researchers did note the trafficking of parts for armoured vehicles to Tajikistan as scrap metal at the Sher Khan border crossing in Afghanistan's Kunduz province. Because of this and other issues, the Tajik authorities have security concerns and have requested international assistance to strengthen the country's border controls.

The risk of armed violence by resistance groups appears muted in Balkh province. While the NRF is one of the main armed resistance groups operating in north-eastern Afghanistan and has strong support among Tajik and specifically Tajik Panjshiri communities,<sup>4</sup> it has failed to establish a strong support base or undertake operations against the Taliban in Balkh. This is in part due to longstanding political differences in the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e-Islami (Jamiat) political party. Atta Noor, previously dubbed 'Emperor of Balkh' by Afghan media, is the main power broker and a former governor of Balkh. Jamiat is the main political party of Tajiks in Afghanistan and was founded by Islamist students at Kabul University in the 1970s. Jamiat later became a Tajik-dominated Islamist party under the leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik from Badakhshan. The Pashtun-dominated Hizb-e-Islami was founded at the same time under the leadership of Gulbadin Hekmatyar.

In 2021 a split occurred in Jamiat that led to two factions being formed, both under the same name. Atta Noor leads one faction of Jamiat, while the other is led by the son of Burhanuddin Rabbani, Salahuddin Rabbani. Panjshiris are represented in both factions, but primarily in the faction that

Rabbani leads. To an extent, the NRF has now overshadowed Jamiat as a political party, and currently leads armed opposition against the Taliban. These political differences among Tajik leaders have never been fully resolved and will likely continue to undermine Tajik unity under the NRF or any other armed opposition group.

Interviews and press monitoring do not suggest significant evidence of armed groups being active in Balkh compared to other provinces in the country. Apart from the successful ISKP suicide attack against the Taliban governor in April 2023 (in response to which the Taliban raided the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, allegedly killing members of ISKP), there have been no major ISKP attacks. Other parts of the country may be more prone to terrorist group activity, including ISKP and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) cross-border activity in eastern Afghanistan and the border region with Pakistan.

## Conclusion

Researchers deployed to Balkh note that it is now easier to access weapons markets than it was previously under the Western-supported government, particularly in Pashtun-dominated districts where the Taliban have enjoyed longstanding support. While the Taliban may favour Pashtun communities, they have been careful not to upset Tajik communities in Balkh and have left the business interests of some former power brokers and Tajik political elites intact. House-to-house searches are likely to continue, but have not intensified in the absence of any significant armed group activity in Balkh to date. The absence of armed resistance and terrorist-designated group activity currently also reduces the risks associated with cross-border weapons trafficking.

Afghanistan's northern border areas may be less prone to conflict and instability, but Central Asian states may still require support to ensure adequate border-protection systems are in place should conflict dynamics change. Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan currently remains most at risk

<sup>4</sup> The Afghanistan Freedom Front has also been active in northern Afghanistan, but researchers recorded no major incidents in Balkh associated with it.

of weapons trafficking and cross-border terrorist group activity, given the threats posed by ISKP and TTP. Afghanistan's border with Iran, and particularly Iran's Balochistan region with access to the Makran coast, has so far not been studied and could potentially be the focus of future work to better understand regional security and trafficking dynamics, what risks are present, and what risks are not. ●

## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>AFN</b>	Afghan afghani
<b>ANA</b>	Afghan National Army
<b>APW</b>	Afghan Peace Watch
<b>IMU</b>	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
<b>ISKP</b>	Islamic State Khorasan Province
<b>Jamiat</b>	Jamiat-e-Islami
<b>Mol</b>	Ministry of the Interior
<b>NRF</b>	National Resistance Front
<b>TTP</b>	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan
<b>USD</b>	United States dollar

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## About Afghan Peace Watch

Afghan Peace Watch (APW) is a US-registered non-profit dedicated to independent reporting and analysis on peace and security in Afghanistan. The organization was previously registered under the Ministry of the Economy in Afghanistan in 2020. APW maintains an extensive network of journalists and civil society activists on the ground and monitors more than 200 social media accounts daily in all regional languages. Incidents are verified and added to APW's bespoke database to track trends on violence against civilians, human rights violations, arbitrary detentions, and arrests, as well as other security issues. APW draws on a wide range of expertise within Afghanistan and the diaspora to support public discourse on Afghanistan and empower those living under Taliban rule. For more information, please visit: [www.afghanpeacewatch.org](http://www.afghanpeacewatch.org).

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The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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