

I Traced Missile Casings in Syria Back to Their Original Sellers

by Robert Fisk via gary - The Independent UK *Monday, Aug 6 2018, 9:49pm*

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Readers, a small detective story. Note down this number: MFG BGM-71E-1B. And this number: STOCK NO 1410-01-300-0254. And this code: DAA A01 C-0292. I found all these numerals printed on the side of a spent missile casing lying in the basement of a bombed-out Islamist base in eastern Aleppo last year. At the top were the words “Hughes Aircraft Co”, founded in California back in the 1930s by the infamous Howard Hughes and sold in 1997 to Raytheon, the massive US defence contractor whose profits last year came to \$23.35bn (£18bn). Shareholders include the Bank of America and Deutsche Bank. Raytheon’s Middle East offices can be found in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Kuwait.



There were dozens of other used-up identical missile casings in the same underground room in the ruins of eastern Aleppo, with sequential codings; in other words, these anti-armour missiles – known in the trade as Tows, “Tube-launched, optically tracked and wire-guided missiles” – were not individual items smuggled into Syria through the old and much reported CIA smugglers’ trail from Libya. These were shipments, whole batches of weapons that left their point of origin on military aircraft pallets.

Some time ago, in the United States, I met an old Hughes Aircraft executive who laughed when I told him my story of finding his missiles in eastern Aleppo. When the company was sold, Hughes had been split up into eight components, he said. But assuredly, this batch of rockets had left from a US government base. Amateur sleuths may have already tracked down the first set of numbers above. The “01” in the stock number is a Nato coding for the US, and the BGM-71E is a Raytheon Systems Company product. There are videos of Islamist fighters using the BGM-71E-1B variety in Idlib province two years before I found the casings of other anti-tank missiles in neighbouring Aleppo. As for the code: DAA A01 C-0292, I am still trying to trace this number.

Even if I can find it, however, I can promise readers one certain conclusion. This missile will have been manufactured and sold by Hughes/Raytheon absolutely legally to a Nato, pro-Nato or “friendly” (i.e. pro-American) power (government, defence ministry, you name it), and there will exist for it an End User Certificate (EUC), a document of impeccable provenance which will be signed by the buyers – in this case by the chaps who purchased the Tow missiles in very large numbers – stating that they are the final recipients of the weapons.

There is no guarantee this promise will be kept, but – as the arms manufacturers I’ve been talking to in the Balkans over the past weeks yet again confirm – there is neither an obligation nor an

investigative mechanism on the part of the arms manufacturers to ensure that their infinitely expensive products are not handed over by “the buyers” to Isis, al-Nusra/al-Qaeda – which was clearly the case in Aleppo – or some other anti-Assad Islamist group in Syria branded by the US State Department itself as a “terrorist organisation”.

Of course, the weapons might have been sent (illegally under the terms of the unenforceable EUC) to a nice, cuddly, “moderate” militia like the now largely non-existent “Free Syrian Army”, many of whose weapons – generously donated by the west – have fallen into the hands of the “Bad Guys”; i.e. the folk who want to overthrow the Syrian regime (which would please the west) but who would like to set up an Islamist cult-dictatorship in its place (which would not please the west).

Thus al-Nusra can be the recipients of missiles from our “friends” in the region – here, please forget the EUCs – or from those mythical “moderates” who in turn hand them over to Isis/al-Nusra, etc, for cash, favours, fear or fratricidal war and surrender.

It is a fact, I’m sorry to recall, that of all the weapons I saw used in the 15-year Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), not one was in the hands of those to whom those same weapons were originally sold.

These outrageous weapons shipments were constantly recorded at the time – but in such a way that you might imagine that the transfers were enshrined in law (“American-made, Israeli-supplied” used to be the mantra). The Phalange, in fact, also collected bunches of British, Soviet, French and Yugoslav armour – the Zastava arms factory in the Serbian city of Kragujevac, which I have just visited, featured among the latter – for their battles.

In eastern Aleppo, who knows what “gifts” to the city’s surviving citizens in the last months of the war acquired a new purpose? Smashed Mitsubishi pick-up trucks, some in camouflage paint, others in neutral colours, were lying in the streets I walked through. Were they stolen by al-Nusra? Or simply used by NGOs? Did they arrive, innocently enough, in the lot whose documents, also found in Aleppo, registered “Five Mitsubishi L200 Pick Up” sent by “Shipper: Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department (Chase), Whitehall SW1A SEG London”?

Of course they did – alongside the Glasgow ambulance I found next to a gas canister bomb dump on the Aleppo front line at Beni Zeid in 2016, whose computer codings I [reported](#) in The Independent at great length – five codings in all – and to which the Scottish Ambulance Authority responded by saying they could not trace the ambulance because they needed more details.

But back to guns and artillery. Why don’t Nato track all these weapons as they leave Europe and America? Why don’t they expose the real end-users of these deadly shipments? The arms manufacturers I spoke to in the Balkans attested that Nato and the US are fully aware of the buyers of all their machine guns and mortars. Why can’t the details of those glorious end user certificates be made public – as open and free for us to view as are the frightful weapons which the manufacturers are happy to boast in their catalogues.

It was instructive that when The Independent asked the Saudis last week to respond to [Bosnian weapons](#) shipment documents I found in eastern Aleppo last year (for 120mm mortars) – which the factory’s own weapons controller recalled were sent from Novi Travnik to Saudi Arabia – they replied that they (the Saudis) did not provide support of any kind “to any terrorist organisation”, that al-Nusra and Isis were designated “terrorist organisations” by Saudi Royal Decree and that the “allegations” (sic) were “vague and unfounded”.

But what did this mean? Government statements in response to detailed reports of arms shipments

should not be the last word – and there is an important question that remained unanswered in the Saudi statement. The Saudis themselves had asked for copies of the shipment documents – yet they did not specifically say whether they did or did not receive this shipment of mortars, nor comment upon the actual papers which The Independent sent them.

These papers were not “vague” – nor was the memory of the Bosnian arms controller who said they went with the mortars to Saudi Arabia and whose shipment papers I found in Syria. Indeed, Ifet Krnjic, the man whose signature I found in eastern Aleppo, has as much right to have his word respected as that of the Saudi authorities. So what did Saudi Arabia’s military personnel – who were surely shown the documents – make of them? What does “unfounded” mean? Were the Saudis claiming by the use of this word that the documents were forgeries?

These are questions, of course, which should be taken up by the international authorities in the Balkans. Nato’s and the EU’s writ still runs in the wreckage of Bosnia and both have copies of the documents I found in Aleppo. Are they making enquiries about this shipment, which Krnjic said went to Saudi Arabia, and the shipping documents which clearly ended up in the hands of al-Nusra – papers of which Nato and the EU had knowledge when the transfer was originally made?

I bet they’re not. For I don’t think either Nato or the EU has the slightest interest in chasing the provenance of weapons in the hands of Islamist fighters in Syria or anywhere else in the Middle East – certainly not in the case of Damascus, where the west has just given up its attempt to unseat Assad.

Indeed, in a political landscape where “regime change” has become a moral, ethical objective, there can be no moral, ethical investigation of just how the merchants of death (the makers) manage to supply the purveyors of death (the killers) with their guns and mortars and artillery. And if any end user says that “allegations” of third parties are “vague and unfounded” – always supposing that the persons saying this are themselves “end users” – this, I promise you, must be accepted as true and unanswerable and as solid as the steel of which mortars are made.

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