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Analysing the Online Arms Trade in Opposition-controlled Syria

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Remember, all arms and munitions are dangerous. Treat all firearms as if they are loaded, and all munitions as if they are live, until you have personally confirmed otherwise. If you do not have specialist knowledge, never assume that arms or munitions are safe to handle until they have been inspected by a subject matter specialist. You should not approach, handle, move, operate, or modify arms and munitions unless explicitly trained to do so. If you encounter any unexploded ordnance (UXO) or explosive remnants of war (ERW), always remember the 'ARMS' acronym:

AVOID the area

RECORD all relevant information

MARK the area from a safe location to warn others

SEED assistance from the relevant authorities

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Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Syria has permitted a large-scale trade in arms and munitions to flourish. The sustained fighting and insecurity drives significant demand for weapons and ammunition by the various parties to the conflict, with trades conducted through a variety of traditional and non-traditional methods. Many of these trades are advertised via online platforms and secure messaging applications, allowing for the remote analysis of a diverse range of weapons. The best data related to online trades originates from users in the North and North-western regions of the country. This short research note will be supplemented by a regular series of digital updates from ARES which aim to document ongoing sales within the Syrian online arms market with a greatly reduced reporting time. This initial report addresses the period from November 2020 through January 2021, cataloguing weapons offered for sale in opposition-controlled North and North-western Syria. The dataset comprises more than 800 trades—mostly offers to sell—made by participants in Syria's online arms trade. It is envisaged that a full report will be released toward the end of 2021, summarising a complete year of data gathering.

Key Findings

This research note presents a snapshot of the online arms market in opposition-controlled North and North-western Syria between 1 November 2020 and 31 January 2021. The report identifies several broad trends, and presents the following key findings:

- Small arms and light weapons manufactured in at least 22 foreign countries were documented in the dataset, in addition to craft-produced weapons made within Syria.
- The majority of trades were for small arms (66%) and munitions (17%); only 8 sales of light weapons were documented during the period of analysis.
- Turkish blank-firing pistols are abundant in the region, making Turkey the most common nation of origin for small arms and blank-firing pistols (including converted examples). Despite this, relatively few lethal-purpose small arms originating in Turkey were documented.
- Certain small arms can be considered 'prestige' items locally—including self-loading pistols, AKS-74U rifles, and Western-made AR-pattern rifles—and command a high price. These prestige items are often copied locally, with facsimiles converted from more widely available weapons, including blank-firing pistols.

Methodology & Sources

Data Collection

The original research informing this report is primarily based on raw data collected from online platforms and secure messaging applications used to facilitate the arms trade in opposition-controlled North and North-western Syria. The methodology employed with respect to collecting this information follows the proprietary *Open Source+* model established by prior ARES research.¹ The dataset comprises 817 documented trades in small arms, light weapons, and munitions, with items offered for sale online by participants primarily operating in opposition-controlled North and North-western Syria. The primary source of this data was ‘groups’ and ‘channels’ on Telegram, a secure messaging application.² The groups were of varying size, had differing levels of member activity, and were monitored for different periods of time. Additional information beyond imagery—including the asking price, time and date of posting, and the seller’s details—was collected and recorded wherever possible. Almost all of the images in the dataset represent an individual sale. In some cases, an image represents various items that were sold separately. In other cases, arms are shown with additional accessories which were made available on an optional basis, or were not offered for sale. The core dataset was supplemented by additional, targeted collection which focused on contextual images and information gathered from other sources, including confidential sources located in Syria and elsewhere.

Data Compilation & Verification

The data was recorded in the ARES Conflict Materiel (CONMAT) Database, before being assessed and graded following established ARES data verification procedures to ensure data quality, source reliability, and, where possible, to obtain information on suppliers.³ A variety of criteria informed the initial assessment of the data, including the amount and quality of the material; the nature and credentials of the material’s source; the quality of any imagery, including key signs of staging;⁴ and any available meta-information. Once data has been gathered, a review is undertaken, duplicates removed, and individual entries graded according to their perceived credibility and reliability. Entries that do not meet the given requirements are cut.

¹ For a recent example, see: Pérez, Ferguson & Jenzen-Jones, 2020.

² For information on the differences between groups and channels on Telegram, see:
<<https://telegram.org/faq#q-what-39s-the-difference-between-groups-and-channels>> &
<https://telegram.org/faq_channels>.

³ See, for example: Jenzen-Jones & McCollum, 2017; Pérez, Ferguson & Jenzen-Jones, 2020; Jenzen-Jones & Pérez, 2020.

⁴ While in other intelligence contexts ‘staging’ may denote a more nefarious or intentionally misleading intent, the main consideration for this report was the inclusion of imagery showing weapons that were clearly not in the possession of the poster. These were carefully removed from the dataset.

Blank-firing Weapons

The dataset contained a large number of blank-firing handguns (mostly of a type functionally similar to self-loading pistols), some of which had been converted to fire lethal-purpose ammunition.⁵

Blank-firing handguns are abundant in the region, and their conversion is often effected to provide an affordable alternative to commercially available lethal-purpose handguns, which are limited in supply and command high prices.⁶ Due to the quality and availability of the data collected, it is often impossible to positively identify whether or not a given blank-firing weapon in the dataset has been converted to fire lethal-purpose ammunition. To ensure that dataset analysis remains consistent with the principles of ARCS and does not over-represent the issue of converted firearms in Syria, blank-firing weapons have sometimes been separated from small arms within the data, and analysed independently of lethal-purpose handguns.⁷ Where they have been considered collectively with small arms, that fact is noted in the text.

Data Analysis

Following compilation and verification, formal identification (positive identification; PID) was made based upon physical features and any visible markings, in accordance with the ARES Arms & Munitions Classification System (ARCS) (Jenzen-Jones, 2020)s. Any necessary caveats or limitations in the PID were noted. Items were then catalogued, to include an assessment of country of origin, manufacturer, model, and calibre. This complete dataset was then analysed (see below) and cross-referenced with open-source material, as well as further confidential material previously held by ARES. Entries were again cross-checked by ARES personnel for duplication and errors. Finally, each entry was reviewed for accuracy by the authors and the technical reviewer in the course of preparing this article. Functions of the database program were utilised to produce summaries of national origins and composition by type (e.g., manually operated rifles, self-loading pistols, etc.). These were then tabulated and ordered to provide a general snapshot of the broad trends present in the dataset, which was again vetted for duplicate and erroneous entries. With the vetting process completed, the refined counts were used to calculate ratios and percentages relevant to the study. This information was compiled into tables and graphic outputs that visualise the prominence of items by country of origin. All ratios were calculated as percentages to one decimal place. Finally, items of unknown national origin were reassessed to determine if they could be incorporated into the more general grouping of states by geopolitical bloc. For instance, some AK-pattern rifles of unknown national provenance are nevertheless easily attributable to a broader 'Eastern Bloc' group. This analysis diminishes the margin of error brought about by items of unknown national origin.

⁵ Note that, if not modified to fire lethal-purpose ammunition, blank-firing handguns are not considered firearms (or small arms) and are not classified under ARCS (Jenzen-Jones & Ferguson, 2020). The legal restrictions they may be subject to vary considerably around the world.

⁶ This is true in many conflict and post-conflict zones. See, for example: Jenzen-Jones & McCollum, 2017.

⁷ This is a core principle of ARCS and separates blank-firing pistols from converted blank-firing pistols by a key metric of capability (lethality) (Jenzen-Jones & Ferguson, 2020).

Describing the Dataset

Trades by Class

The 817 trades documented in the dataset were broken down by Class, according to ARCS (see *Figure 1.1*). Of the trades, 66% were for small arms (541 examples). This is in-line with ARES expectations from other conflict zones around the world, and previous research examining online sales in Syria (ARES, n.d.). Munitions—including hand grenades, fuzes, and (primarily) small arms ammunition—were the second most common Class documented in the dataset, representing nearly 17% of the offers (136 examples). As noted, the large proportion of small arms within the data does not include blank-firing pistols. Blank-firing pistols make up 16% of the documented offers (132 examples)—a significant proportion of the data, higher than observed by ARES in most other conflict and post-conflict zones (ARES, n.d.). Light weapons were rarely documented. Only 8 examples were documented during the three months of data collection (accounting for 0.9% of the dataset).

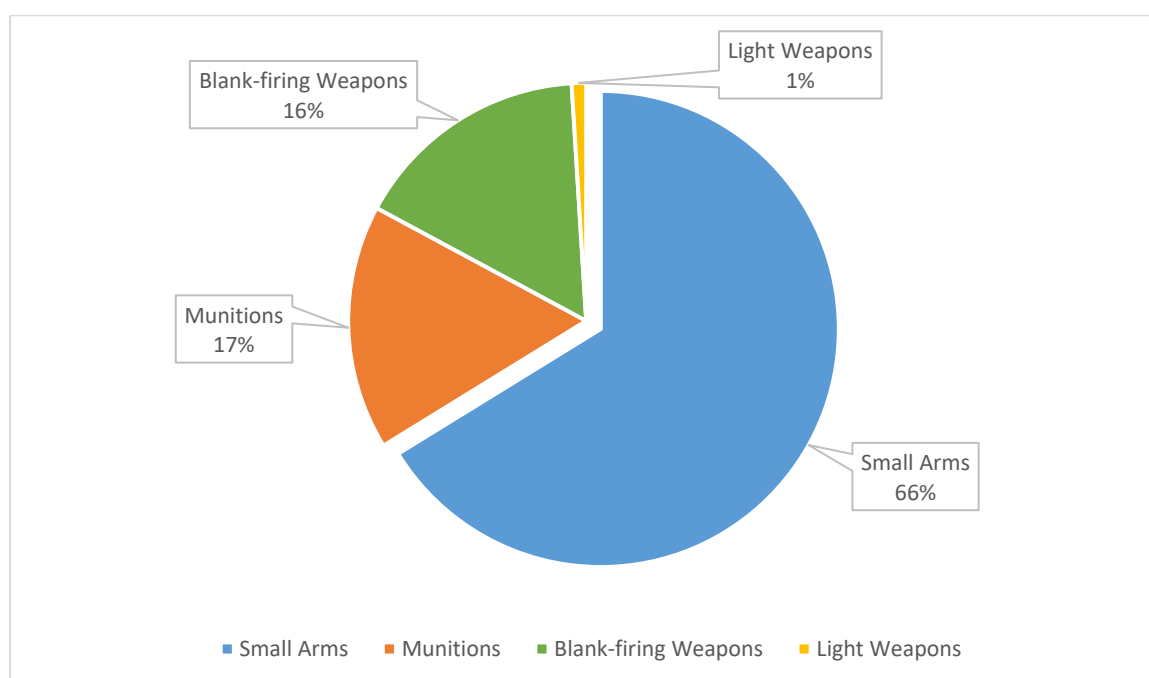


Figure 1.1 Dataset trades by ARCS Class, November 2020–January 2021 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Small Arms by Type and Sub-type

Of the 541 small arms in the dataset, 536 could be identified to the Type level (see *Figure 1.2*). Of these, 55% were rifles (296 examples). The majority of these were self-loading rifles—in fact, only 12% of the documented rifles were identified as other Sub-types. All of the manually-operated rifles documented were bolt-action designs. These were predominantly M91/30 Mosin-Nagant patterns and MAS-36 models. Self-loading pistols were the next-most common Type, accounting for nearly 34% of documented small arms (182 examples). The remaining Types included 30 sub-machine guns, 15 shotguns, 10 hand-held machine guns, and 4 revolvers.

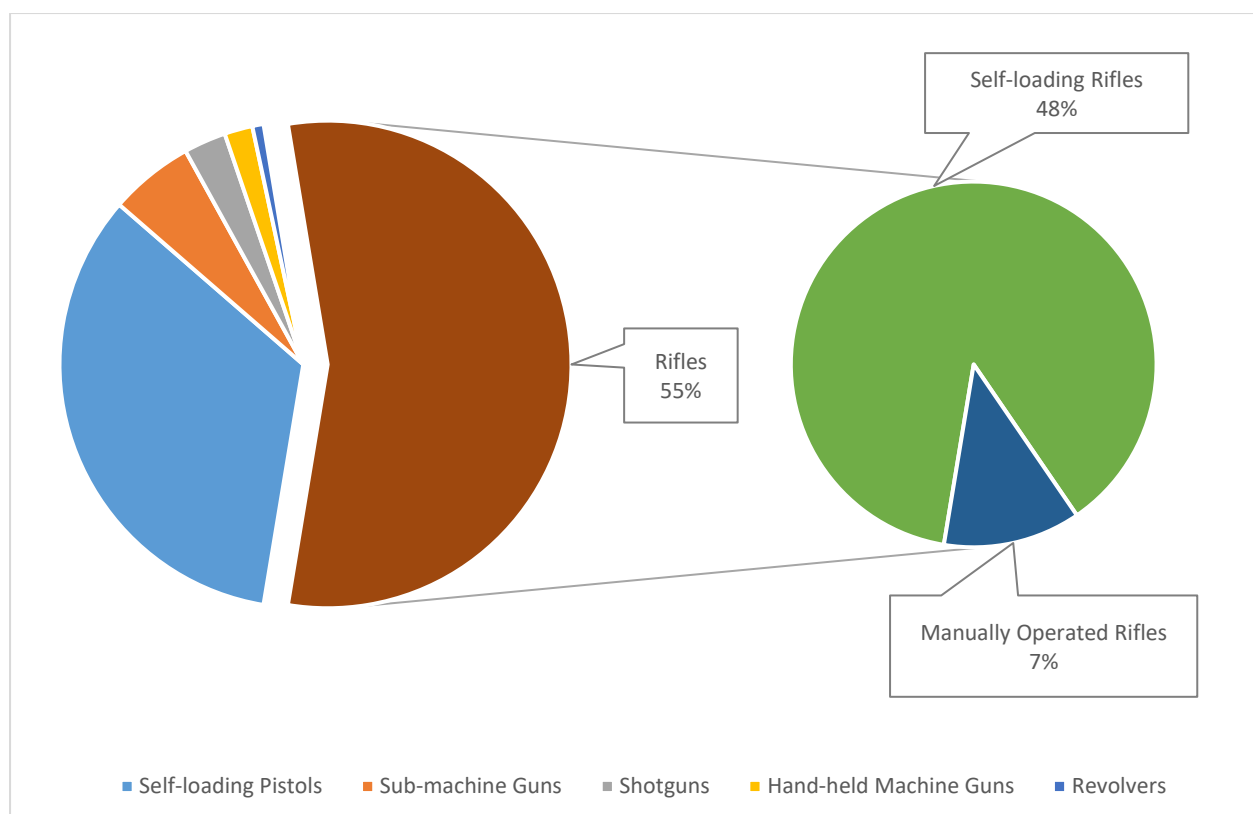


Figure 1.2: Documented small arms by ARCS Type, November 2020–January 2021 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Small Arms by Country of Origin

When blank-firing pistols are included,⁸ Turkey is the most represented nation of origin for small arms, accounting for nearly 27% of the 457 documented sales with identifiable nations of origin (123 examples).⁹ This is almost exclusively due to blank-firing pistols. After Turkey—and leading in terms of lethal-purpose small arms—Russian/Soviet weapons were the most common, representing 18% of the dataset (84 examples). Czech¹⁰ and Chinese small arms were both relatively common, with 62 (14%) and 53 (12%) documented examples, respectively. Weapons were also identified from a range of other countries across the world, including Argentina, Brazil, Iran, and North Korea.

⁸ Blank-firing pistols were included here in order to better demonstrate the broader national distribution of small arms and *potential* small arms as documented in the dataset.

⁹ The country of origin for 216 small arms (including many AK-pattern rifles) could not be conclusively identified from the available imagery and contextual information.

¹⁰ Czech weapons included 20 examples of the vz. 58 self-loading rifle, as well as other firearms such as the vz. 50 self-loading pistols and vz. 25 sub-machine guns.

Self-loading Rifles by Family

Unsurprisingly, AK-pattern weapons are the dominant ‘family’ of self-loading rifles documented, representing some 81% of all self-loading rifles recorded. Partially as a result of this, the majority of self-loading rifles in the dataset are chambered for 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition. AKM-pattern weapons are the most common models (46 examples), representing nearly 18% of all self-loading rifles. Chinese Type 56 models were also very common (29 examples), accounting for some 11% of the documented self-loading rifle trades. After AK-pattern weapons, the Czech Sa vz. 58 rifle was the next most common pattern, with 20 recorded examples (nearly 8% of all self-loading rifles). There is a sharp increase in price between older, more-common rifles chambered for 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition—including AKM- and AKMS-pattern weapons—and more modern 7.62 × 39 mm rifles, such as the AK-103. Additionally, rifles chambered for calibres other than 7.62 × 39 mm command relatively high prices compared to standard AKM- and Type 56-pattern weapons. Russian rifles—mostly AK-74M, AK-103, and AK-103-2 models—have entered Syria since the start of the war, sometimes as Russian Government-supplied aid to the Syrian government.¹¹

Self-loading Pistols by Model

Of the 182 self-loading pistols in the dataset, 119 could be positively identified. These are expressed by model (grouped together ‘pattern’ or ‘family’, as necessary) in *Figure 1.3*. PM- and TT-pattern¹² weapons are the most common self-loading pistols, each representing nearly 14% of the dataset (25 examples each). FN Herstal Browning Hi-Power and Star Model B pistols are also common, with 12 examples of each recorded. Pricing data for those models, families, or patterns of self-loading pistol with three or more recorded trades is also presented in *Figure 1.3*. Pistols are in high demand locally¹³ and command high prices. Hi-Power pattern pistols are extremely expensive, costing on average 1425 USD. While equally common, PM-pattern guns are significantly more expensive than TT-pattern pistols. Many other models are documented in the data, from a range of nations and time periods.

¹¹ See, for example: Kozlov, Petr & Nikolskiy, Aleksey. 2015. ‘Россия активизировала поставки в Сирию оружия и боеприпасов’. *Vedomosti*. Digital edition: 9 September. <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2015/09/09/608073-rossiya-aktivizirovala-postavki-siriyu-oruzhiya-boepripasov>>.

¹² *Pistolet Makarova* (PM) and *Tula-Tokarev* (TT).

¹³ ARES interviews with confidential sources.

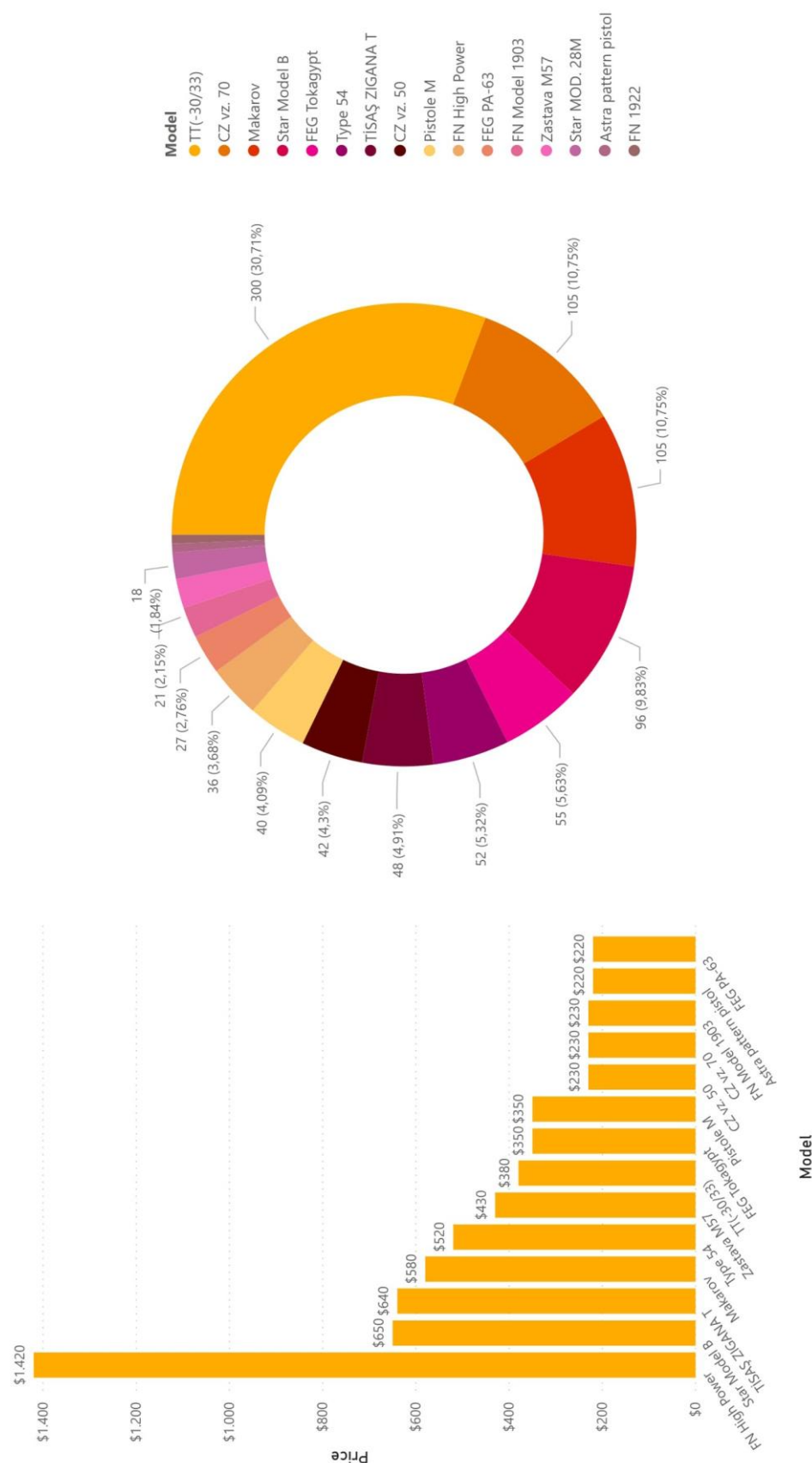


Figure 1.3: Self-loading pistols by model (with pricing data), November 2020–January 2021 (source: ARES CONMAT Database). Note: models of pistol with fewer than three recorded trades were not included in the pricing data.

Blank-firing Pistols by Model

A total of 132 blank-firing pistols were recorded, comprising just over 16% of all trades in the dataset. These are illustrated in *Figure 1.4*. The Lord T822 was the most common model of blank-firing pistol observed (49 examples), representing 46% of all blank-firing pistols recorded. ASKA Arms AK14 and F99 models were also common, being 13 and 10 times, respectively. 12 examples of the Ekol Special 99 and 11 examples of the Carrera Arms BLOW TR 14 were also documented. All blank-firing pistols which were able to be positively identified originated in Turkey. Pricing data is also presented in *Figure 1.4* for those models of blank-firing pistol that were documented on three or more occasions. In contrast with lethal-purpose self-loading pistols, blank-firing pistols are inexpensive, and usually cost less than 100 USD (more once converted). They are an affordable alternative to the high local cost of self-loading pistols, and are often converted by the purchaser themselves, or by individuals specialising in such work.¹⁴

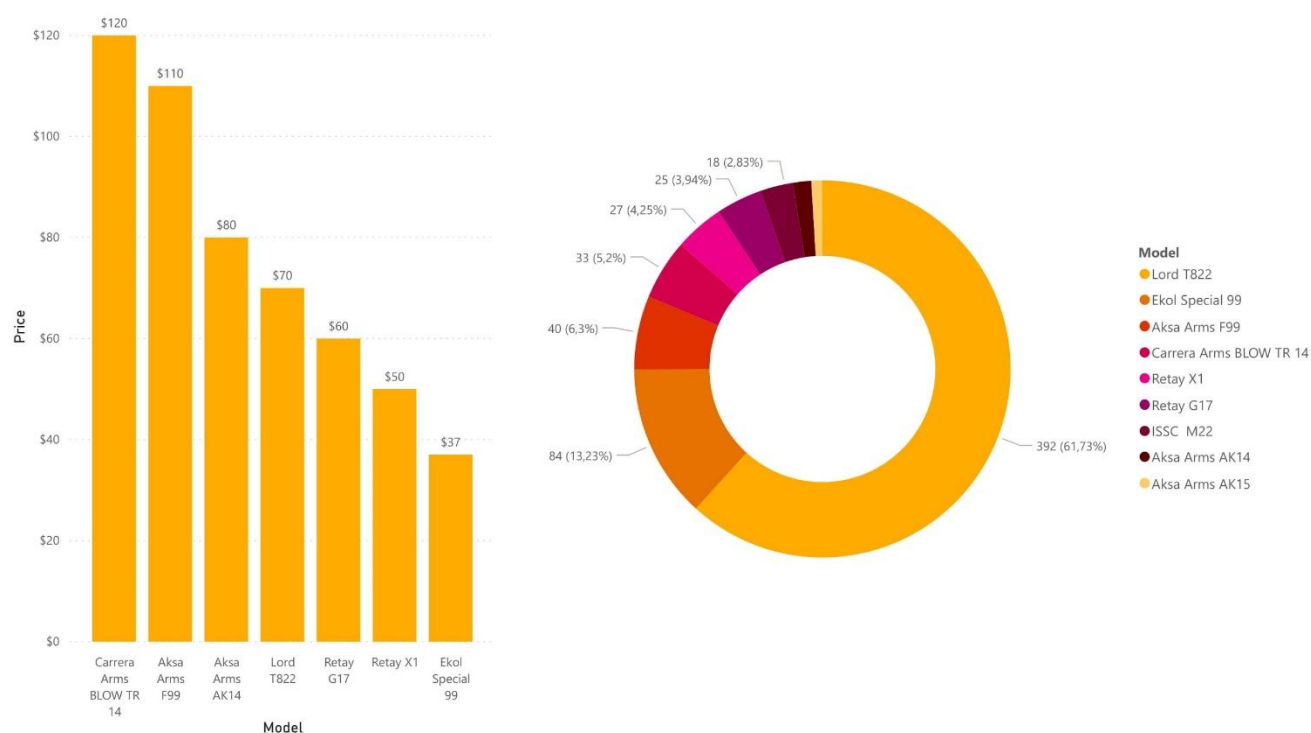


Figure 1.4: Blank-firing Pistols by model, November 2020–January 2021 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

¹⁴ ARES interviews with confidential sources.

Individual Trades of Interest

MP-446C Viking Self-loading Pistol

A single MP-446C—a sporting variant of the MP-446 Viking—was documented in the dataset. The MP-446 is the commercial version of the standard service pistol of the Russian military, the MP-443 Grach. It is manufactured by Kalashnikov Concern under its ‘Baikal’ brand (Moss, 2018). Visible markings indicate that this example is chambered for 9 × 19 mm (see Figure 2.2). The MP-446 self-loading pistol is very rare in Syria and does not appear to have been supplied to the Syrian military, however they have been recorded by ARES on the black market in neighbouring Iraq (ARES, n.d.). A source who is familiar with the black market in the region has posited that the proximate source may be Lebanon, which has supposedly imported the MP-446 directly from Russia for the past five years.¹⁵



Figure 2.1 An MP-446C self-loading pistol offered for sale in north-western Syria in late December 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



Figure 2.2 “9x19” markings on an MP-446C self-loading pistol offered for sale in north-western Syria in late December 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

¹⁵ ARES interview with confidential source.

Locally Modified AKM

Short-barrelled rifles—especially the AKS-74U—are prized within Syria, and are commensurately expensive.¹⁶ As a result, a cottage industry in modifying full-size rifles has sprung up. Donor weapons, most often AKM-pattern rifles, are shortened and modified to provide affordable alternatives to real AKS-74U rifles. Several rifles of this type were documented. The base rifle for the conversion pictured (see *Figure 2.3*) was a Soviet AKM, with its trunnion markings indicating it was made at Tula in 1977 (see *Figure 2.4*). The rifle was cut down, the gas block has been replaced with what appears to be a locally produced component, the front trunnion has been modified to accept an AKS-74U-style top cover, and the receiver has been modified to accept a distinctive, side-folding ‘triangle’ stock. This is a very extensive modification, which requires a degree of skill and access to a workshop.



Figure 2.3 An AKM converted to look like an AKS-74U, offered for sale for 400 USD in north-western Syria in early November 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



Figure 2.4 Trunnion markings on an AKM converted to look like an AKS-74U, indicating it was produced at Tula in the Soviet Union in 1977 (Source: ARES CONMAT Database).

¹⁶ ARES interviews with confidential sources; ARES, n.d.

Libyan Contract AK-103-2

In late 2003 or early 2004, the Gaddafi government ordered as many as 230,000 AK-103-2 rifles. These weapons were delivered to Libya in 2004, 2007, and possibly later (Jenzen-Jones, 2016). The dataset contained 15 AK-103 rifles, 11 of which were the AK-103-2 variant, which features a three-round burst fire mode in addition to the usual semi-automatic and automatic functions. Ten of these eleven rifles were offered for sale in December 2020, and several of these had visible serial numbers—all of which suggest they could have been sourced from Libya (see *Figure 2.5*).¹⁷ In 2013, Reuters reported that a Libyan arms dealer claimed to have sent weapons to the Syrian opposition (Donati, Shennib & Bosalum). AK-103-2 rifles and other weapons originating in Libya have previously been documented by ARES in Syria, including during field work in 2018 (ARES, n.d.).



Figure 2.5 An AK-103-2 offered for sale in north-western Syria in early December 2020. Markings indicate that it was most likely transferred from Russia to Libya under a 2007 contract (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Nazi German MP43 and MP44 self-loading rifles

It is believed that, alongside other military equipment, Maschinenpistole 43 (MP43), MP44, and Sturmgewehr 44 (StG 44) rifles were supplied to Syria by one or more Eastern Bloc countries during the mid-20th century. Early in the Syrian conflict, stocks of this type of rifle were captured by opposition forces. Although these stockpiles included ammunition, supplies of 7.92 × 33 mm cartridges had been substantially depleted several years later, rendering the weapons unusable for all practical purposes (ARES, n.d.; Johnson, 2016). Some ammunition remains, but in militarily insignificant quantities.¹⁸ Six StG family weapons were captured in the dataset, accounting for a little more than 2% of the total number of self-loading rifles.

¹⁷ See Jenzen-Jones, 2016 for details on the Libya order, including serial numbers and original documentation. Weapons from this order have since been documented by ARES in nearly a dozen countries in the Middle East and Africa (ARES, n.d.).

¹⁸



Figure 2.6 Two MP43 and two MP44 self-loading rifles offered for sale in Armanaz, Idlib in early November 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Locally Modified Bullpup AKM

Self-loading rifles converted to a 'bullpup' configuration¹⁹ appear to have first appeared in notable numbers in the north-western Syrian province of Idlib at some point prior to late 2018, and they have become increasingly commonplace since then (Vining, 2018). These conversions are mostly seen in service with foreign fighters from central Asia and the Caucasus fighting in Idlib (ARES, n.d.). Fighters from the Caucasus, especially, are said to favour rifles modified in this way.²⁰ The example pictured here (see *Figure 2.7*) was posted for sale by a Russian-speaking user. Standard rifles are modified by moving the trigger and pistol grip forward, with the trigger linkage concealed under a locally fabricated handguard. The stock is dramatically shortened, essentially becoming a simple 'cap' for the rear of the receiver. This rifle also features a locally made flash hider.

¹⁹ 'Bullpup' weapons are those in which the firing grip is located in front of the breech (Ferguson, 2020, p. 24).

²⁰ ARES interviews with confidential sources.



Figure 2.7 An AKM-pattern self-loading rifle converted to a bullpup configuration. This weapon was offered for sale for 450 USD in north-western Syria in early December 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Spuriously Marked ‘Noveske’ AR-pattern Rifle

Over the past few years, several AR-pattern rifles bearing spurious ‘Noveske’²¹ markings have been documented for sale in Syria, primarily in the northern province of Idlib (ARES, n.d.). All of the examples documented thus far appear to have a machined (‘billet’) lower receiver, marked with the Noveske logo, the word “Noveske”, or both. The upper receivers differ between the observed rifles, with the example pictured (see *Figure 2.8*) using what appears to be a modified M16A1 upper receiver. The rear sight and carrying handle have been removed and replaced with an accessory rail. The source of these spuriously marked rifles is unknown, but it is believed the lower receivers—complete with markings—entered Syria from an outside source, and were locally assembled.²²



Figure 2.8 An AR-pattern rifle bearing a Noveske logo, offered for sale for 3,500 USD in mid-January 2021 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Turkish MKE HAR-66 Rocket Launcher

The HAR-66, manufactured by Makina ve Kimya Endüstrisi (MKE) in Turkey, is a copy of the American M72 LAW single-use anti-tank rocket launcher. This example was the sole rocket launcher in the dataset, and may have been supplied by Turkey to opposition groups they support in Syria (Al-Khalidi, 2019; Doherty & Bakr, 2012). Markings on the launcher indicate that the unit was assembled in 1993 (see *Figure 2.9*). In the Syrian conflict, HAR-66 rocket launchers and similar weapons are frequently used as anti-structure weapons rather than in their originally intended role as anti-tank weapons (ARES, n.d.).

²¹ Noveske is a high-end firearms manufacturer based in Grants Pass, Oregon, in the United States, specialising in AR-pattern rifles and components. See: <<https://noveske.com/>>.

²² Other components may also have been imported, including ‘billet’ upper receivers.



Figure 2.9 A Turkish MKE HAR-66 (M72 LAW copy) made in 1993, and offered for sale in late December 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

RLV-TB 40 × 46SR mm Thermobaric Grenade Launcher Cartridge

The Bulgarian Arsenal RLV-TB 40 × 46SR mm thermobaric grenade launcher cartridges is intended to be used with 40 mm NATO-compatible grenade launchers (Arsenal, n.d.). The markings on the round (see Figure 2.10) indicate that it was manufactured in 2018—and hence entered Syria relatively recently. The proximate source of this munition is not known with certainty, but countries that have previously supplied Syrian opposition forces with weapons—including Saudi-Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey—have supplied Bulgarian arms and munitions to these forces before (Doherty & Bakr, 2012; Petkova, 2015; Angelovski, Petrucic & Marzouk, 2016).



Figure 2.10 A Bulgarian Arsenal RLV-TB 40 × 46SR mm thermobaric grenade launcher cartridge offered for sale for 13 USD in north-western Syria in early November 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Syrian Defense Industries Corporation 7.62 × 51 mm Cartridges

Small-calibre ammunition is an important constituent part of the broader online arms trade in North and North-western Syria. Whilst the majority of ammunition documented in Syria is produced outside of the country, a small quantity of Syria ammunition remains in circulation. This package of cartridges (see *Figure 2.11*) is marked is marked “مؤسسة معامل الدفاع” (“Defense Industries Corporation”)²³ and “الجمهورية العربية المتحدة” (“United Arab Republic”). This indicates that ammunition was produced between 1958 and 1961, when Syria was part of the union with Egypt known as the United Arab Republic. The cartridge headstamps (see *Figure 2.11*, inset) indicate that the cartridges were produced in 1960 and give the calibre, 7.62 × 51 mm, marked as “N7.62” in Arabic (for ‘7.62 mm NATO’).



Figure 2.11 Syrian Defense Industries Corporation 7.62 × 51 mm cartridges offered for sale in North-western Syria in mid-December 2020 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

²³ Sometimes known as the Industrial Establishment of Defense (EID), as translated from its earlier French name, Établissement Industriel de la Défense.

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