

SMALL ARMS AND LOOSE NUKES

It was a delivery run gone bad that lifted the lid on the shadow world of the underground nuclear trade. One day in October 2003, German and Italian warships accosted a suspect cargo vessel in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The ship, the *BBC China*, was steaming toward Libya, having loaded at the port of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Months of investigation by numerous intelligence agencies suggested that its hold contained something different from the "industrial equipment" that the bill of goods laconically cited. And indeed, when the Italians escorted the *BBC China* to the port of Taranto and inspected its cargo, they found just what they expected: specialized parts for building a centrifuge, specifically a nuclear centrifuge designed to enrich uranium to the isotope 235—the raw material of atom bombs.

The voyage of the *BBC China* (which despite its name was registered in Germany, to a shipping company in the port of Leer) was, the investigators knew, just one of a series of customer deliveries by an underground sales network centered in Islamabad, Pakistan, in the person of Abdul Qadeer Khan. Virtually unknown to the rest of the world, "Dr. A. Q." was a household name in his own country, nothing short of a folk hero. The dapper sixty-eight-year-old metallurgist was the revered architect of the country's indigenous nuclear weapons program, "father of the Islamic bomb," living symbol of national pride. But unbeknownst to the Pakistani public and com-

pletely outside the international subject of interest for export control, mass destruction. To the analysts and spies, Khan was resting on his patriotic laurels, something else, something import-export business.

Between Khan and the international commercial network, for instance, involved firms in European and Asian countries, Scomi had produced the Swiss engineer who maintained a tight grip on the way to Dubai in the countries, which belonged to the center and Paul Griffin. A partner of B.S.A. Tahir, divided between Dubai, he operated the company, SMB Computers in Malaysia, he was the fund that controlled the marriage, and both he sat on the fund's board. (Abdullah, was the minister.) It was Tahir's half of its ostensible

Ties to Khan produced centrifuges exactly in Pakistan. The elder Khan's business—years before the program. And the Swiss himself the son of an engineering specialty and, in the 1970s. All these e-

pletely outside the international limelight, Khan had long been a subject of interest for experts who monitor the spread of weapons of mass destruction. To this narrow professional community of analysts and spies, Khan was much more than a semiretired scientist resting on his patriotic laurels. Rather, it now appeared, he was something else, something more banal yet also more sinister: an import-export businessman with a highly exotic product line.

Between Khan and his clients stretched a complicated international commercial network. The centrifuge shipment to Libya, for instance, involved firms and individuals from at least a half dozen European and Asian countries. A Malaysian engineering firm called Scomi had produced the components, under the supervision of a Swiss engineer who monitored the manufacturing process while keeping a tight grip on the blueprints. The parts then found their way to Dubai in the custody of a firm called Gulf Technical Industries, which belonged in part to a British father-and-son tandem, Peter and Paul Griffin. A key intermediary, a Sri Lankan by the name of B.S.A. Tahir, divided his time between Dubai and Malaysia. In Dubai, he operated through a computer supplies and services company, SMB Computers, which he'd founded with his brother. In Malaysia, he was the close friend of two owners of the investment fund that controlled Scomi. He was even related to one of them by marriage, and both he and his Malaysian wife had recently belonged to the fund's board of directors. (The other fund owner, Kamaluddin Abdallah, was the son of Abdallah Badawi, Malaysia's new prime minister.) It was Tahir who had placed the centrifuge order on behalf of its ostensible buyer in Dubai.

Ties to Khan permeated the transaction. The designs for the centrifuges exactly matched one that Khan had produced in Pakistan. The elder Griffin had done business with Khan—official business—years before under the aegis of Pakistan's nuclear program. And the Swiss gentleman who carried the blueprints was himself the son of another engineer who shared with Khan a technical specialty and, it appeared, concurrent training in Europe in the 1970s. All these elements showed the signs of an intricate network,

built on both business interests and close personal ties. And at the center of it, intelligence services were convinced that Tahir and Khan were intimate collaborators: Tahir the key commercial agent of the network and Khan not just its technical heart but the source of much of the entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen driving the process.

The centrifuge deal was no isolated incident. Intelligence investigations, assisted by Libya's new effort to "come in from the cold" by cooperating with Western services, were revealing a multiyear, multistranded pattern of deliveries of nuclear equipment and know-how—all the way to designs and assembly instructions for a nuclear bomb. The client list was worrisome: beyond Libya, it included Iran, by that country's own admission, and apparently North Korea too, despite Pyongyang's vehement denials. It was left to speculation whom other clients might have been. Moreover, the origins of the goods were barely concealed. Among the materials Libya handed over were some documents written in Chinese, leaving little doubt as to their original provenance. Industrial equipment was tagged with stickers marked "KRL," for Khan Research Laboratories. And the Libyans produced a sheaf of bomb blueprints in their original wrapping: plastic clothing bags labeled "Good Looks Tailors" with an Islamabad address. According to one senior U.S. official, Khan's role in destabilizing the twenty-first century will "loom up there" with Hitler and Stalin's impact in the twentieth.

After its discovery, A. Q. Khan's network may have become the most visible, but it was certainly not the only one privately plying the nuclear trade. The profit potential stemming from the global appetite for nuclear knowledge and bomb-making equipment was too alluring. Humayun Khan, another Pakistani national with the same name, also detected the same opportunity as his namesake—even though apparently the two are not related. "Humayun Khan is a black marketeer involved in the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and once this is all spelled out we're going to see the same scale of network that A. Q. Khan was involved in," said a U.S. Commerce Department official when it was announced that U.S. federal pros-

ecutors were bringing down in 2005. Once again, the case was eerily similar to that of A. Q. Khan in Pakistan, South Africa, and the United States—led by a man whose name was Humayun Khan's Israeli partner. A common thread was common: they were all trying to pay illicit traders and

the name of the game was to pay Dr. Khan's atom bomb, but the nuclear case was an expanding, and a source of all kinds of overkill: overkill launchers, counterintelligence, not to mention human beings—human conflict to conflict borders, politics, proliferated as the market, which conflicts, insurgencies every kind. Of course not on its own can access to the large the imagination would have been found availability agents, guerrilla r they threatened. access to sophisticated victory.

But what about smuggling has always been. What has changed?

The short answer

ecutors were bringing charges against the second Mr. Khan in mid-2005. Once again, the pattern that emerged from the investigations was eerily similar: a global operation with multiple locations—Pakistan, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States—led by a multinational team which in this case included Mr. Khan's Israeli partner Asher Karni. These clients had two things in common: they wanted nuclear technology and they were willing to pay illicit traders a lot of money for it. Again, profits not politics was the name of the game.

Dr. Khan's atomic supermarket may have grabbed the headlines, but the nuclear components trade is only one specialty segment in an expanding, and lucrative, international market for illicit weapons of all kinds: overstock mines and grenades, secondhand missile launchers, counterfeit AK-47 assault rifles, recycled helicopter gunships, not to mention billions of cartridges of ammunition and even human beings—pilots and trainers and fighters who move from conflict to conflict without regard to international law, embargoes, borders, politics, or ethics. All of these goods and services have proliferated as the end of the cold war dumped surplus capacity into the market, which responded eagerly with an explosion in intrastate conflicts, insurgencies, civil wars, and armed criminal enterprises of every kind. Of course the sudden appearance of these stockpiles did not on its own cause these wars. But the relatively unencumbered access to the large supplies of weapons of all kinds certainly sparked the imagination and the ambitions of governments and groups that would have been less prone to go to war without them. The newfound availability of weapons opened new possibilities for insurgents, guerrilla movements, criminal bands, and the governments they threatened. War became a cheaper, more attractive option as access to sophisticated weapons increased the probabilities of victory.

But what about this is *truly* new? The arms trade is very old, and smuggling has always been part and parcel of the weapons market. What has changed?

The short answer: everything.

Start with the composition of the market: a trade once dominated by governments making massive purchases from other governments or their state-owned companies is now driven and defined by far larger and more diverse networks of middlemen and thousands of new and independent producers. The links that tie producers, financiers, brokers, and clients are fluid, global, and elusive. As always the brokers continue to be immensely creative, politically connected, and very wealthy. Now, however, they are no longer a small exclusive club of rogues but a large global community of traffickers. These myriad players produce, buy, trade, finance, and sell to and from companies and agencies that are no longer under the direct control of governments. Many of these new players don't even have a permanent nationality—or they have multiple ones to choose from. Most are, in effect, stateless.

As the illicit weapons business builds and recombines, it is melding with other illegal trades, sustaining the ambitions of common criminals and terrorists alike. And as the death toll rises and more and more ominous threats become very real possibilities, governments are left playing catch-up in a game loaded against them.

STRICTLY BUSINESS

Why did he do it? What could possibly motivate A. Q. Khan—a national hero, his country's most decorated citizen—to jeopardize his reputation and court international opprobrium by running a smugglers' ring in the deadliest goods of all? To be sure, it wasn't just ideology. Yes, building an "Islamic bomb" that could tip the regional or even global balance of power was one of Khan's motives. But making enormous amounts of money for himself, his accomplices, and his enablers at senior levels in the Pakistani and other governments was as powerful a motive as any of Khan's geopolitical or ideological justifications.

Indeed, Khan's client list—including the decidedly non-Islamic North Korea—and most of all his commercial methods suggested that Muslim pride was hardly his chief concern. A better clue to his

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motivation lay in his portfolio of properties built up over the years. He built villas across Pakistan and bought apartments in London. He owned an Islamabad restaurant, a bowling alley, and, no less incongruously, a luxury hotel in Timbuktu, Mali, which he named after his Dutch wife. (Ornate furnishings for the hotel were flown to Libya in a Pakistani air force jet and transported overland across the Sahara.) And Khan's habits were the signature behaviors of the successful corrupt businessman. He ran his state-sanctioned research facility, Khan Research Laboratories, with little distinction between the institution's and his own personal finances. He orchestrated preferential contracts for his relatives and friends. He set up a health and education charity. And he polished his image with donations, publicity events, a ubiquitous presence on the VIP social circuit, and even his personal motorcade.

In a word, Khan did it for the money. Real estate trumped ideology. Greed overrode geopolitics. Khan turned from engineer into entrepreneur by locating a niche. He took advantage of a rare, almost accidental opportunity—his role as gatekeeper to Pakistan's nuclear program—to develop a personal revenue stream. To do so, he deployed a businessman's assets and acumen, his relationships, drawing on ties forged decades earlier as a young engineer in Europe and connections in high places, easily mustered for a man of his public stature. He identified a rich source of demand: "rogue states," and maybe other groups as well, that were shut off from nuclear techniques by the rules of nonproliferation. He found willing partners for each crucial role: manufacture, transportation, finance. And, brilliantly, he submerged his transactions into the ordinary workings of global commerce, sourced from legal factories, piggybacking on ordinary cargo shipments, and delivered through a dizzying maze of intermediaries.

Nimbleness, opportunism: the Khan network made full use of the conveniences of the era, from the ease of establishing front companies in pliant jurisdictions to the flexibility of communications and travel and—crucially—the swiftness and anonymity of international financial transfers. (Old-fashioned craft came into play

as well: investigators marveled at the skill of some Khan middlemen in covering up the trace.) And this consummate use of the marketplace distinguished the network's activities from those of a state—even a state like Pakistan, where Khan clearly had protectors, business partners, accomplices, and a measure of safe haven. His home country's government was simply a part of Khan's commercial environment: he knew, as any savvy businessman would, both the importance and the art of purchasing government approval by cutting deals with the key individuals within the system: judges, generals, ministers. Hampered by international law, by borders, and by its own bureaucracy, Pakistan was in no position to proliferate nuclear weapons as state policy. But free to operate in the global marketplace, a Pakistani scientist turned businessman could easily enlist official protectors in his network for a share of the proceeds. All it took, really, was an entrepreneur and an opportunity. Naturally, couching these activities in the language of geopolitics, ideology, national sovereignty, and Islam was the perfect "marketing platform" to justify the activities to those that wanted to know—or needed a cover.

And this combination of private and public roles—forged by the profit motive, not public policy—was a reality infinitely subtler than the rough lexicon of "allies in the war on terror" versus "rogue states" could ever describe. Pakistan, it turned out, was simultaneously both of these, or perhaps neither. Khan and his associates were neither a state nor a regime but a commercial network with far-flung offshoots that enmeshed more than any one country. And as for the infamous weapons of mass destruction, whether or not they were lurking in the vaults of an ill-intended state, one thing was certain: they were at large, hiding in plain sight, out there in the tumult of the global marketplace.

But A. Q. Khan's story is not simply one of commerce. It is also a tale of politics, in which the national interest of a sovereign state becomes inextricably intertwined with the criminal motives of a clique that captures and redirects important parts of the government to support a long-term illicit enterprise. It also illustrates how

stealthy and resourceful. The mission told me: "The information about the government decided the Musharraf regime support first to help in Osama bin Laden. The operation or the jailing of

Khan and his associates. This. Hussain Haqqani prime minister they could be Pakistani the morning and report and that no one could know and could do

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Call it the fear factor. It defines the concept of rogue scientists. The underground bunker vendor, was special secrecy and, once an alarm. In fact, Khan arms dealers of a talented, operating made use of all the of the cold war era ties that earned the military-industrial Bofors, or Northrup on the edges of the transfer a shipment

stealthy and resourceful criminal organizations can play larger geopolitical interests to their advantage. One member of the 9/11 Commission told me: "The U.S. government had for a long time a lot of information about A. Q. Khan." But, the commissioner said, "The government decided that clamping down on Khan would destabilize the Musharraf regime in Pakistan. The U.S. needed Pakistan's support first to help in the invasion of Afghanistan and then to capture Osama bin Laden. It was hard for the U.S. to ask for the deportation or the jailing of a popular national hero."

Khan and his accomplices in the Pakistani government knew this. Hussain Haqqani, who served as senior advisor to several Pakistani prime ministers, told me that Khan and his partners "felt that they could be Pakistani nationalists embedded within the state in the morning and rogue international businessmen in the afternoon—and that no one could touch them. They knew that the Americans knew and could do nothing about it."

UP FOR ANYTHING

Call it the fear factor: that special, sinister resonance that accompanies the concept of "weapons of mass destruction," with its images of rogue scientists in lab coats concocting fiendish formulas deep in underground bunkers. But the case of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, arms vendor, was special only because his product line called for extra secrecy and, once exposed, attracted for good reasons the greatest alarm. In fact, Khan was only one of a fraternity of international arms dealers of a new kind: individual entrepreneurs, ruthless but talented, operating through complex and nimble networks that made use of all the possibilities of the day. In the rigid world order of the cold war era, it was massive corporations with power-state ties that earned the unflattering sobriquet "merchants of death": military-industrial behemoths with names like Lockheed, Dassault, Bofors, or Northrop Grunman. The brokers and middlemen existed on the edges of the picture, helping to grease a palm, smooth a deal, transfer a shipment to an obscure destination. But today's arms mar-

ket looks nothing like this. The specialty plays—moving guns to rebels and renegades, across embargos and out of the law's reach—have multiplied. And with them, the opportunities for a new class of kingpins, deal makers who've renounced the heavy structures of states and corporations for the freedom and flexibility of the new global marketplace.

The lifestyle, of course, is not for everyone, though it has its vivid moments. When Leonid Minin, for example, was finally arrested in August 2000 in a suburb of Milan, it was in the private company of four young ladies, tucking into fifty-eight grams of cocaine. He also carried diamonds and large sums of currency from as far away as Mauritius. His passports, established under various names, included Israel, Russia, Germany, and Bolivia. And his criminal record, which included current investigations in five countries, stretched across Europe and back three decades, including racketeering, identity theft, drugs, money laundering, and even fraudulent arms deals.

But the fifty-two-year-old Minin's recent, lucrative trade of choice had been weapons—specifically two shipments of missiles, M93 grenade launchers and rockets and at least five million rounds of ammunition, destined for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the vicious rebel army in Sierra Leone, best known for systematically chopping off the arms of civilians with machetes. As a report by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) detailed, Minin placed orders with a firm called Aviatrend that belonged to a certain Valery Cherny; Cherny, in turn, purchased the weapons from manufacturers in Ukraine and shipped them from Bulgaria, once on a Ukrainian Antonov 124 chartered by a British transport company and once on Minin's own BAC-111. The official certificates that identify the final destination of an arms cargo—and without which manufacturers are not allowed to sell—listed Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. But the cargos actually shipped to Liberia, which the RUF used as a rear base and through which it circumvented with the greatest of ease a UN embargo.

Minin organized the operation and concealed its finances by

masking it as the purchase of raw materials. It was so easy enough, as he learned in Liberia, where he'd worked for the Taylor regime, including bankrolling RUF; Minin made a simple wire order for \$1 million in Cyprus. As financial transactions were relatively straightforward, credit, no secret, was completely different from the one he'd crossed enough to make it difficult to unravel. Minin down but not out days before the search of a Milan hotel by intelligence agencies.

Minin's capture was a victory of the law enforcement kingpins. It also revealed the nature of their trade, even when a major deal in the 1990s, the Belgrade deal in 2002, he too learned and counterparting without doubt elsewhere. Iran purchase of weapons paralyzed his access to Iranian weapons, including the Lissoune, with the occupation of state-owned arms. Minin's intel for Lissoune from Iran and the purchase of forty Russian

masking it as the purchase of equipment for the timber industry—easy enough, as he conveniently owned a tropical logging firm in Liberia, where he'd grown close to the right people in the Charles Taylor regime, including the president's son. The Liberians were bankrolling RUF; Minin in turn moved the payment to Aviatrend via a simple wire order from his bank in Switzerland to Cherny's bank in Cyprus. As financial montages for illicit arms deals went, this one was relatively straightforward; it required no long trail of letters of credit, no secret "inner" and "outer" contracts outlining two completely different structures for the same deal. But it was typical enough in that it piggybacked on legal companies and transactions, crossed enough borders, and involved enough jurisdictions to make it difficult to unravel. Indeed, it wasn't these arms deals that brought Minin down but rather, more prosaically, his taste for a party. It took days before the sleazy businessman hauled in for drugs in a suburban Milan hotel and the international brigand pursued by numerous intelligence agencies were identified as being one and the same.

Minin's capture illustrated the hit-and-miss, uncoordinated quality of the law enforcement response to the rise of the new weapons kingpins. It also showed how the networked, decentralized structure of their transactions leaves any number of key players at large even when a major arrest is made. When another major dealer of the 1990s, the Belgian Jacques Monsieur, was arrested in Istanbul in 2002, he too left at large a range of accomplices, correspondents, and counterparts in France, Belgium, Iran, and both Congos, and no doubt elsewhere. Some were protected: Monsieur, who had helped Iran purchase weapons since not long after the 1979 revolution, had parlayed his strong Tehran ties into a lucrative business recycling Iranian weapons into embargoed conflicts in Africa. And in supplying the Lissouba regime in the Congo in 1997, Monsieur had dealt with the occult central African financing structures of the French state-owned oil company Elf. Elf arranged the financial back channel for Lissouba to purchase \$61.3 million worth of light weapons from Iran and helicopters from Russia, accompanied by the services of forty Russian technicians. (Lissouba lost the civil war anyway,

leaving Monsieur with a delicate accounts receivable problem that got him in hot water with his suppliers.) But other pieces of the puzzle remained a complete mystery—not least the identity of a certain “CH,” listed as main beneficiary of client payments to Monsieur’s network.

But if there is one iconic figure of the new illicit arms trade, that title goes by acclamation to Victor Bout, a man who has succeeded by himself in redefining what we call a “merchant of death.” Born in 1967, Bout is a grizzled veteran of the new arms trade, having almost invented it himself at the fall of the Soviet Union, when as a young demobilized military pilot he saw novel, lucrative opportunities in private life. While in his early twenties, Bout began to buy up ancient Soviet cargo aircraft—Ilyushins and Antonovs, loud and rugged and adapted to rough conditions. And as his fleet grew to about sixty aircraft registered in a variety of permissive jurisdictions—Ukraine, Liberia, Swaziland, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea—Bout built around it a network of front companies, shells, and subsidiaries of almost delicious cleverness and complexity.

These entities provided the cover for an extraordinary sequence of assignments. Flying from second-tier airports like Ostend in Belgium, Burgas in Bulgaria, and Pietersburg in South Africa, Bout’s operation shipped mortar bombs, assault rifles, rocket launchers, anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, and millions of rounds of ammunition to the UNITA rebel movement in Angola. He supplied the RUF and the Rwandan Hutu militias based in eastern Congo. Bout’s Antonovs were spotted on airfields in such places as Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, being loaded with “green boxes”—the signature container for small arms—freshly disembarked from other airplanes, to continue to unknown destinations. On the return legs, Bout helped move diamonds from civil war zones—the infamous “conflict diamonds.” He also transported more anodyne cargos, including fresh vegetables and frozen fish from Africa, and even ferried French soldiers in the Congo and United Nations peacekeepers into East Timor. As an air transporter, Bout was up for anything.

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By early 2002 due to the growing and accentuated by 11, 2001, terrorist jivan Ruprah, an African dealings, w gians issued a war Interpol alert. But this time, he was Moscow, where au that Russian police Bout turned up im innocence live on tracked him down der cloak-and-dagger with a flat denial. E ald Trump of mode

Trailed by the law in various places, Bout managed to keep a step ahead, folding and reopening his front companies, reregistering his aircraft, and moving his personal base of operations in ever-changing country combinations. By 1993, his planes were flying out of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. It was a convenient base from which to serve a particularly sensitive client, the Taliban. Bout's first encounter with the Afghan militia had not been a pleasant one: a plane he chartered delivering Israeli arms from Albania to the then Afghan government of Burhannudin Rabbani was intercepted and detained by the Taliban for an entire year in 1995–96. Negotiating with Mullah Omar for the release of the plane and crew, Bout discovered that there was value in keeping in touch; after the Taliban took power in 1998, Bout was put in charge of maintenance of the Afghan air fleet, and he helped run multiple weekly flights to Kandahar, the Taliban base, from his own base in the United Arab Emirates—conveniently one of the few countries to recognize the Taliban regime. The weapons he ferried—for an estimated \$50 million profit—were destined in part for al-Qaeda.

By early 2002, Bout's network was finally under some stress, due to the growing mountain of investigations in different countries and accentuated by the new sense of urgency after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In February 2002, Bout's associate Sanjivan Ruprah, an Asian-Kenyan who represented him in many of his African dealings, was arrested in Belgium. Soon thereafter, the Belgians issued a warrant for Bout himself and launched a worldwide Interpol alert. But Bout, it turned out, was not to be perturbed. By this time, he was no longer in the Emirates but back at home in Moscow, where authorities declined to arrest him. On the same day that Russian police stated he was unlikely to be on national territory, Bout turned up impromptu at a Moscow radio station to claim his innocence live on the airwaves. A few Western journalists have tracked him down for interviews since then, always in Moscow under cloak-and-dagger conditions. He replies to every accusation with a flat denial. Bout, who has been called the Bill Gates or Donald Trump of modern gun running, prefers to describe himself as a

simple airfreight operator, just another legitimate businessman looking for opportunity.

So far, the shrewd Bout has proven adept at finding ways to fit the reality to his self-description. By 2004, his companies and others with suspiciously close ties to him were turning up on Iraqi airfields, pressed into service as subcontractors and subsubcontractors to U.S. companies supplying logistics to the American military and the occupation authorities. The enormous transportation needs of the Iraq operation and its reliance on private contractors gave Bout an opportunity to profit off the military budget of the country that had blacklisted him. The head of a Bout-related firm recounted to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter how he had been awarded a card for free fuel refills out of U.S. military supplies. Complex times beget complex partnerships: "If you want it bad, you get it bad," one officer told reporters. If so, Bout may have found yet another way to come in from the cold.

A MIDDLEMAN'S DREAM

By combining the roles of broker and transporter, Victor Bout holds the catbird seat, the best position for making money in an arms market that has been drastically reconfigured since 1990. Sources of weapons have decentralized, even scattered. And so has the demand, as "rogue states" and rebel movements have destabilized whole regions, setting in motion local arms races and embargoes that do nothing to stop the trade, only raise prices and profits. In sum, a middleman's dream.

It's not that arms production has grown that much, at least in gross volume. The massive defense budgets of the cold war era shrunk in the 1990s and with them the landmark deals for fighter jets, missiles, and tanks. And despite their much more common everyday use—in law enforcement, security, recreation, or conflict—smaller weapons are produced in no greater numbers than ten years ago. By the best estimates (and it's a highly inexact science), production of small arms and light weapons—those designed for use by

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an individual or crew, from rifles and machine guns to grenades and shoulder-held missile launchers—is steady at about 8 million units per year. Seven-eighths of these are commercial firearms, the bulk of which are made and sold in the United States. The remaining million are military grade; at least 10 billion units of military-caliber ammunition are produced each year as well.

But aggregates are often misleading; these especially so. Weapons production may be stable, but it is far from stagnant. In fact, the industry is recomposing, with both consolidation and decentralization taking place at the same time. In 2003, Russia formed a state holding company called CAST to absorb all its small-arms producers. In 1998, Scandinavia's ammunition companies merged into Nammo AS. In 2002, Switzerland's RUAG and Germany's Dynamit Nobel became RUAG Ammotec. These newer names complete the list of major producers—Sturm Ruger, Remington, Smith & Wesson, Colt, Beretta, China's Norinco, and the Israeli IMI. Yet while there may be fewer large producers, there are now many more small producers than before. Officially, in 2004 small arms were manufactured by 1,249 formal corporations based in ninety countries. The most intense growth of activity has come in eastern Europe and in Asia, but the trend is global.

Technology and commercial concerns both help explain this proliferation. With small arms manufacturing techniques little changed in recent decades, it is relatively simple to establish production facilities where labor is cheaper and to transfer the necessary know-how. Commercial licensing is widespread and counterfeiting even more so, with a roster of the more industrialized developing countries taking part. The Turkish firm MKEK and the Pakistan Ordnance Factory (POF), for instance, manufacture assault rifles and submachine guns under license from Germany's Heckler & Koch. Among other win-win benefits, these Heckler-licensed guns can this way be sold to countries to which German law prevents direct exports. Illegal technology transfer is rife as well. A 2002 police raid in Sao Paulo, Brazil, shut down a technically advanced workshop that produced about fifty counterfeit submachine guns a month. Rebel and crimi-

nal organizations frequently manufacture at least part of their own arsenal. And although the term “craft production” evokes crude and unreliable equipment, sometimes imaginatively assembled, that image is increasingly obsolete. From the infamous and much-reported gun bazaar of Darra Adam Khel in northwest Pakistan to more surprising venues like Ghana—which despite its peaceful image has become a significant, if unofficial, gun supplier across volatile West Africa—artisanal production is fast catching up with the real thing. In Ghana there are now 2,500 small and medium manufacturers that offer perfectly functional copies of modern assault weapons, or cheap pistols for six dollars a piece.

Perhaps the single most important factor in galvanizing illicit weapons supply since the end of the cold war was the transformation of the former Soviet Bloc and its effect on arms producers there. Virtually every country in central and eastern Europe has a small-arms industry, with most firms established in the cold war heyday of the military industrial complex but others, like the Czech Republic’s Ceska Zbrojovka and Sellier & Bellot, boasting a prestigious pre-Communist history. As with other industries, the 1990s found these companies oversized and often inefficient, and facing the drastic decline of defense budgets in their traditional customer base. Other classic problems—large employee rosters, important social welfare obligations in “company towns,” and the like—further bedeviled the prospects for privatization or shutdown. As a result, these companies have turned to export markets, sometimes with official government policy support and sometimes of their own initiative. In 2001, 8 percent of handguns and 20 percent of rifles imported into the United States came from this region, including more than 40,000 firearms from the Czech Republic and Romania each. The same year saw the first firearms imports to the United States from Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine. But the drive to export also means that some eastern European firms are none too regarding when it comes to supplying more dubious customers—countries or movements under embargoes, or whomever else a broker might represent.

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The same forces that drive exports from the former Soviet Bloc help fuel a vibrant secondhand market as well, for discarded and overstock equipment from the armies and air forces of the Communist era, now scattered across eastern Europe, as well as among the Soviet Union's onetime satellite states. In 2002 UN investigators documented that a series of six cargo flights into then embargoed Liberia carried 210 tons of Yugoslav army overstock, including 350 missile launchers, 4,500 automatic rifles, 6,500 grenades, and millions of rounds of ammunition. The Yugoslav army sold the equipment through a Belgrade company called TEMEX, and a series of brokers relayed it, all under the cover of a false certificate listing Nigeria as the final client.

Another important and more recent outpouring of small arms from a government arsenal into the marketplace took place in Iraq. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime it is estimated that seven to eight *million* small arms were scattered throughout Iraq and probably to neighboring countries. These include sophisticated weapons such as the ominous MANPADs, "man-portable air defense systems," which are missile-launching weapons that can be fired by one or two persons and can shoot down a low-flying airplane. The U.S. government estimates that four thousand such surface-to-air missiles once in Saddam Hussein's arsenal went missing in the chaos that followed the American invasion.

The global proliferation of MANPADs precedes the war in Iraq and is likely to continue well beyond it. In 2002 two MANPADs were fired at an Israeli passenger airliner taking off from Mombasa, Kenya. A tragedy was averted when the pilots were able to detect the missile and evade it. The U.S. State Department reckons that about forty aircraft have been struck by portable missiles since the 1970s. While 500,000 to 750,000 of these weapons were estimated to exist in the world's inventory in 2004 according to the authoritative *Small Arms Survey*, 100,000 fully operational units of this weapon are unaccounted for.

The *Survey* also claims that at least thirteen nonstate groups, including some terrorist organizations, are known to possess MAN-

PADs, and fourteen additional groups are reported to have them. Moreover, the report argues that the demand for this product is so strong that many new producers are now supplying it—and these are no longer the usual suspects in the high-tech arms industry. Companies in Egypt, North Korea, Pakistan, and Vietnam are now selling MANPADs. Together with the ample supply available in the secondhand market, the obstacles for a well-funded customer to get access to a shoulder-fired antiaircraft missile, or in fact any other such lethal weapon, have become far from insurmountable.

THE WEAPONS WAL-MART

The secondhand equipment market, of course, assists brokers in getting their operations going at low expense, as witnessed by Victor Bout's start-up investment in grounded Soviet air force planes. Around the world, workhorses like the Antonov An-12 and the Ilyushin Il-76 have been put to lucrative second careers in illegal and legal shipping alike. Personnel competent in operating these aircraft or training soldiers in the use of secondhand equipment are also in oversupply and have deployed around the world accordingly, swelling the ranks of the "private military contractors" once known by a simpler term: *mercenaries*. Indeed, one feature of the new illicit weapons supply is the blurring of lines—between vendors and combatants, brokers and suppliers, producers and subcontractors, and, sometimes, companies and states.

The blurring extends from the production and sales apparatus all the way to the client side, where government employees, military factions, rebel groups, legal companies, and criminal organizations can take part in arms procurement, often in interlinked ways. When the Taylor regime in Liberia, supplier to the embargoed RUF, itself came under a UN embargo, it turned to Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast as intermediate supply points. Togo served for many years as a transit point for shipments to Angola's UNITA movement. But most often it is corrupt individuals or groups within governments, not the state itself, that lend their services to the trade for profit,

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not policy. As discussed in Chapter 2, a Peruvian network led by Vladimiro Montesinos, the notorious security chief of then president Alberto Fujimori, organized the shipment of ten thousand AK-47 assault rifles from Jordan to the FARC rebels in Colombia. The most common case is the ordinary civil servant who is willing to issue, for a small consideration, an end-user certificate, that makes a false claim about the destination of a weapons shipment. Bearing the seal of Nigeria, Central African Republic, Chad, Venezuela, or any number of other countries, these certificates—still the only document universally required to authorize an arms sale—appear frequently in the market and underscore the ease with which illicit cargos transit from point to point.

It is a system symbiotically well adapted to the way modern conflict has evolved in the post-cold war world, where decentralized and sometimes stateless conflicts call for decentralized, sometimes stateless suppliers. In the rigid pre-1989 geopolitical order, the superpowers buttressed client states with enough basic efficiency to ward off much war between nations and, crucially, to keep the lid on domestic rebellion. Since 1990, however, separatist insurrections and small-to-medium-scale regional wars have become the norm. By and large, African conflicts lead the pack in number and duration. Consider the Congo conflict, which has lasted the better part of a decade and involves the armies of multiple neighboring states, along with their many rebel and criminal proxies; or the domino effect of civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast. But Colombia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Nepal, and Afghanistan—along with more obscure but no less debilitating wars in places like the Solomon Islands—remind us that no continent has a monopoly on modern conflict.

What has made addressing these conflicts difficult is that they tend not to involve states, at least in the structured, organized sense of the word. Instead, entities at war in the world since 1990 have included quasi states like the Republika Srpska; separatist armies like the Tamil Tigers and the KLA; territorially entrenched militias such as Hezbollah; diversified political and criminal operations such

as Colombia's FARC; paramilitary gangs that operate in government's shadow; and of course terrorist networks like al-Qaeda. Defying classification are numerous and varied others: Abu Sayaf, Lord's Resistance Army, Islamic Jihad, Interahamwe, and so on. When a government is involved, it may be through just one of its branches, beyond real executive control; or in loose, intermediary ways that fall short of officially sanctioned activities. And wars often occur in "failed states"—empty shells in which institutions no longer function at all or have been commandeered in the service of private, often illicit, interests.

All of these conditions make the principal method devised to restrict sales into these conflicts—the embargo—poorly adapted to its purpose and exceedingly easy to circumvent. But for an arms broker they simply describe a marketplace where customers are scattered and typically place small orders, require extra secrecy, and have bad credit or no credit. On the other hand, these customers are willing to pay premium prices and can afford to because they often control natural resources: coltan from Congo, used in cell phones; "conflict diamonds" from Sierra Leone or Angola, excluded from official marketing channels; concessions for mineral exploration; or marijuana, cocaine, or heroin. And the nontraditional destination and the need to violate an embargo, breaking the law in a supplier or transit country, and the doling out of bribes and side payments throughout the process serves to boost the price.

In his 1977 investigation *The Arms Bazaar*, the late British journalist Anthony Sampson concluded that "the ordinary citizen is right in thinking that the arms trade, like narcotics and slavery, is different from other trades." But in fact today's illicit weapons trade looks very much like an adaptation to the political conditions and commercial possibilities of globalization. When Sampson's book was published—subtitled *From Lebanon to Lockheed*—the vital center of the arms trade consisted of large government-sanctioned transactions tightly woven into geopolitics and diplomacy. Today, such deals are still important, but the dynamic segment of the arms business—if not the largest by volume—is the networked multinational supply

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system that Victor Bout and A. Q. Khan inhabit. In that respect, the bazaar, a place of ritualized commercial meeting, with its formalities, its ceremonies, and its underlying code of conduct, has given way to something much more like a Wal-Mart, or maybe even an eBay: a supermarket that knows no borders and in which virtually anything can be procured for virtually anyone, so long as the buyer is prepared to pay the price. Sadly, the evidence shows that too many clients are willing to pay the price and have the wherewithal to do so.

OWN YOUR OWN STATE

The new arms market still has hubs, but not in the way most people expect. States don't go into crime; criminals take over or even set up states. For instance, you may not have heard of the Transdniester Moldovan Republic. It's a rather obscure place. Yet weapons are to Transdniester what chocolate is to Switzerland or oil to Saudi Arabia. Some countries export oil and gas, others, cotton or computers. Transdniester exports weapons—illegally. What kinds of weapons? Vast quantities of Soviet shells and rockets. Newly manufactured machine guns, rocket launchers, RPGs, and more, produced in what are described as "at least six sprawling factories." Mines. Anti-aircraft missiles. And Alazans—rockets that according to Joby Warwick, the *Washington Post* reporter who broke the story, are known to have been outfitted with warheads with radiological payloads, or "dirty bombs."

None of this is legal, but that is not really a concern for the government of Transdniester. For Transdniester is not, in fact, a country. Rather, it is a breakaway region of Moldova that has established its own government, army, and other trappings of sovereignty even though not a single other country has recognized it. Soon after the Soviet Union dissolved, Transdniester split from Moldova, the former Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Transdniester is tiny, but it happened to contain the bulk of Moldova's industrial base. Because Moldova doesn't accept the secession, it refuses to patrol the

border with the breakaway region. Allowing mysterious cargos to pass unhindered is a way for Moldovan officials to boost their slim civil service pay. Cargos also leave by air from Tiraspol, Transdnester's capital, and by road and rail to the port of Odessa in neighboring Ukraine.

Another thing about Transdnester: it is not your typical breakaway region with deep grievances or a popular liberation movement. It's a family-owned and operated criminal smuggling enterprise. A company called Sheriff runs the bulk of Transdnester's trade. Its head, Vladimir Smirnov, is helpfully in charge of the customs service as well. Even more conveniently, he is the president's son. In Transdnester politics, trade and finance are elegantly integrated into one single criminal undertaking that boils down, as a Moldovan scholar told the *Washington Post*, to "Father, Son, and Sheriff."

Transdnester is the epitome of illicit. The state is the criminal enterprise, and vice versa. Because no one recognizes it, there's no clear way to deal with it. Moldova, to which it officially belongs, has neither the capacity nor the political will to regain control of the situation. It's also an isolated place, the sort of location we still think of as a remote backwater. But that isn't quite true either. Isolated or not, Transdnester has achieved considerable international influence. Its weapons have spread into its neighborhood—a set of Alazans with radiological warheads has vanished, but all the clues point toward the Caucasus—and so has its capacity to weaken neighboring governments by producing rich opportunities for corruption and crime. Transdnester is in fact a global player, as weapons traced to it have appeared, for instance, in regional and civil wars across Africa. It offers goods that are sought; and nowadays, those who seek, find.

ARMED CIVIL SOCIETY

Easy shopping for weapons is a familiar concept in the United States, where a range of firearms are sold in actual Wal-Mart stores,

as well as in thousand-branched licit and illicit markets. It's unusual for its political culture to have a civilian gun possession rate of nearly a million small arms per million people, nearly as many small arms as the United States is also known for its gunners' lobby and its federal gun control legislation. The NRA's fierce opposition to gun ownership or regulation is a part of public life. But these are the days when the arms market is in high demand, and more

Yet if the United States is the most armed nation on earth, most of its weapons are out of the hands of ordinary civilians. In places like the West Bank or Iraq, where civilian celebratory shootings are common, an armed country is a far cry from tranquil Finland, behind the scenes of crime. A string of European pre-emptive strikes against individuals in schools and American special forces did not even begin until between 2000 and 2001, turning up heavier and more automatic

as well as in thousands of other legal outlets, helping to fuel a vibrant licit and illicit secondhand trade. The United States is unusual for its political tradition of condoning, even celebrating, civilian gun possession. American civilians own an estimated 234 million small arms. Adding police and military equipment, there are nearly as many small arms in the United States as there are people, and more than one-third of the global stockpile. As a result, the United States is also distinct by the political power of the gun owners' lobby and its flagship organization, the National Rifle Association. The NRA's frequent stands against new restrictions on gun ownership or regulations on trade are nothing new to American public life. But these positions carry greater consequences at a time when the arms market is growing ever nimbler, more responsive to demand, and more adept at evading existing rules.

Yet if the United States remains, by a wide margin, the world's most armed nation, other countries are catching up. Larger numbers of weapons with greater lethal potential are finding their way out of the hands of the military, law enforcement, and sportsmen and into those of security guards, vigilantes, militias, criminals, and ordinary civilians. TV images display the prevalence of arms in places like the West Bank, where they are fired at political funerals, or Iraq, where civilians marked the capture of Saddam Hussein with celebratory shooting in the streets. But if the world's second-most armed country is another "trouble spot," Yemen, third place goes to tranquil Finland, with Norway, Germany, and France not far behind. Little reported, as well, is Europe's spectacular rise in gun crime. A string of tragic events from Sweden to Italy has shattered the European presumption that random shootings by unbalanced individuals in schools, offices, restaurants, and public spaces are an American specialty. In England, where as recently as 2000 the police did not even carry firearms, gun crime rose by 34 percent between 2000 and 2003. Arms seizures by European authorities are turning up heavier weapons, as well—fewer revolvers and rifles and more automatic pistols and submachine guns. Germans, for exam-

ple, are buying almost as many firearms as are Americans. European citizens are far more heavily armed than is commonly acknowledged. The fifteen European Union countries together export more small arms than the United States; the pertinent detail, however, is that a significant percentage of these guns are sold inside Europe.

The toll is heavier elsewhere. A study in Uganda's capital, Kampala, found small arms accounting for a rising share of injury deaths, from 11 percent in 1998 to 23 percent in 2001. Another study, on the Philippine island of Mindanao, attributed 85 percent of external deaths to small arms, and more than three-quarters of deaths and injuries from criminal violence were caused by handguns and automatic weapons. Surveys in Latin America in 1996 placed gun crime at the top of the list of social and economic problems in the region. The *Small Arms Survey* calls the effects of the illicit trade and use of these weapons "development denied": not just the direct damage in injury and loss of life, but the destruction of roads and railways, diversion of investment, closure of schools and clinics under threat, induction of children into armies and gangs, and a host of other costs that drain public resources and the social potential of communities.

In the immediate, the steady seepage of overstock, low-cost, and secondhand weapons by means of a flexible, entrepreneurial global supply chain is exhausting the control capacity of states. And where states are losing grasp—which is in many places—rising to fill the void is a form of armed civil society made up of insurgent groups, private companies, bands of individuals, and even free agents, all with access to weapons and often accountable to none but themselves. Armed civil society runs not on ideals or on religion, but on fear and the illusion of protection created by having a gun handy. These instincts, fears, and illusions create a surging demand for weapons that the brokers of power, profit, and greed are happy to fuel and satisfy.

The mainstream industry most emblematic of the rise of armed civil society is private security, which is enjoying a boom of historic

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proportions. The global security business is estimated to be growing from \$100 billion in 2001 to \$400 billion by 2010. In many countries businesses and individuals spend more on private security than the government spends on police. From Mexico City to Manila and São Paulo to Moscow, security guards have flooded business districts and well-off neighborhoods, in some places easily identifiable in a signature uniform color but less organized elsewhere. Major beneficiaries of the turn to private services have been large international firms such as Wackenhut, Securicor, and ADT, some of which operate in up to a hundred countries.

But security is a local growth business too, and one with few barriers to entry and little oversight: Cameroon, for instance, counts over 180 private security firms. And a form of arms race leads those without professional protection to look to less established and shadier alternatives, creating a lucrative niche for vigilantes. A 2001 survey in Kaduna, Nigeria, found twenty security companies serving 295 customers—three times more customers than in 1997. At the same time, something called the “Vigilante Groups of Nigeria (Kaduna Chapter)” provided 4,300 households with protection for a fee.

Private security effectively fills in for the state and helps push it out at the same time, establishing a gray area of opportunity for large global corporations and unproven local freelancers alike—as well as a commercial destination pool for weapons that can leave the distinction between “legal” and “illegal” guns heavily blurred. By now a hallmark of globalization in its own right, the growth of private security reflects and reinforces the spread of weapons, underscoring not only the dynamism of the weapons market but its intimate connection to the failures of states and to the instability of those that, while not failed, are increasingly difficult to govern.

But these statistics also show a larger truth: the demand for weapons of all kinds is boundless and growing. And the attempts of governments to limit this demand or control the international trade

in weapons are not succeeding. No insurgent group, criminal organization, or rogue army anywhere in the world seems to have any trouble getting the weapons it needs.

GHOSTS AND BORDERS

The new weapons market leaves states in the position of endlessly playing catch-up, with less and less success. In a marketplace defined less by a few large suppliers and more by a constellation of smaller producers and intermediaries, the proliferation of brokers involved in some aspect of the trade—thousands in Europe alone by some estimates—makes regulation an immense challenge and effective crackdowns exceedingly rare. Licensing and reporting rules governing brokers vary from country to country. A European Union code of conduct for arms deals, approved in 1998, remains non-binding on the member states. From time to time, manufacturer countries impose restrictions on arms exports to certain destinations, but the diversity of supply and fluidity of the market mean that these have little effect.

The underlying dilemma, of course, is that states are ill equipped to put the lid on a problem that has outpaced them to the point that even defining it—and producing reliable numbers for weapons in circulation, purchased, or sold—is a matter of constant controversy. In fact, states are disadvantaged by their very nature, requiring complicated interagency coordination within countries and, even worse, across borders just to keep track of the movements and doings of highly autonomous businessmen who hop constantly across frontiers. Borders benefit dealers: in a classic illicit arms deal, the buyer, seller, broker, banker, and transporter are all in different countries. In the run-up to the Rwanda genocide of 1994, a French dealer delivered Polish and Israeli weapons to Rwanda by means of a Turks and Caicos company with a Geneva address, an eastern African cargo airline, and an Afghan intermediary representing the Rwandans from his base in Italy. In 1997, a German broker supplied com-

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The dealers move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in an endless game of cat and mouse. Their preferred transport methods operate by the same principle, with aircraft registered under flags of convenience—just like ships—and chartered and crewed by various nationalities. A 707 freighter that ferried Slovakian weapons to Sudan in 1999 (courtesy of a Syrian trading company, with an end-user certificate from Chad) made up, on its own, the entire fleet of a Cyprus airline that belonged to a Swiss businessman. The plane itself was registered in Ghana—only the last of its many incarnations. An Antonov 12 that crashed in 2000 while on an arms delivery into Monrovia, Liberia, was registered and deregistered in Moldova on the same day, a “ghost” plane with no official home. Chartered by a fictitious Congolese company, it had two different sets of flight plans filed for it. A British businessman offered from his suburban London office a service to legally reregister an aircraft in a lenient country of convenience in a matter of minutes. The tricks of the trade go on—all of them based on the confusion created by dispersing the pieces of a transaction across as many jurisdictions as possible.

Efforts to curb the trade read like a litany of frustration. Deployed only twice before 1989 (against then-Rhodesia and South Africa), the United Nations Security Council embargo has become a common resort, used since 1990 against Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Libya, Rwanda and its neighbors, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Yugoslavia (twice) along with the Bosnian Serbs, and the UNITA movement in Angola—the first nonstate actor to be sanctioned this way, in 1993. Yet none of these targets lacked weapons as a result; the chief effect of the embargo was simply to drive prices up. In West Africa, the regional organization ECOWAS launched a supposedly binding small-arms moratorium to much fanfare in 1998. The first-of-its-kind experiment is by any measure an utter failure, with small arms delivered into the region, circulating within it, and even locally produced, all in complete disregard of the policy.

A similar fate befell the long-awaited (and splendidly titled) United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, held in July 2001. It aimed—as such grand gatherings do—to establish at least a minimal framework and guidelines for tackling the issue, which activist groups and concerned governments had spent many months helping to prepare. But instead, the conference was lethally sidetracked. The United States categorically rejected language concerning sales to nonstate actors, on the grounds that it violated the U.S. Constitution. The then undersecretary of state John Bolton, who would go on to become the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in the second Bush administration, announced that Washington would not accept a document contrary to the United States' "constitutional right to keep and bear arms." The president of the U.S. National Rifle Association, Wayne LaPierre, accused the conference of placing "a global standard ahead of an individual country's freedom." The United Nations had to clarify that the conference had no purview over the domestic laws of member countries—but to no avail. The recriminations hopelessly diluted the conference findings and in effect scuttled the event.

And yet. Even a successful conference would have meant no more than a baby step, a tentative agreement by states to take on, in some form or fashion, a problem that seems on the verge of forever eluding them. In contrast, the adaptive capacity of the market seems finely honed, and the spread of weapons continues unchecked. The fundamental market signal—price—suggests that the transformation of weapons from a sensitive specialty to a common commodity is well under way, if not complete. In 1986, in the rural Kenyan town of Kolowa, it took fifteen cows to buy an AK-47. Now it costs just five. Armed civil society, it seems, is here to stay.

Flying anything to anybody

The rise and fall of Viktor Bout, arms-dealer extraordinaire, shows a darker side of globalisation



VIKTOR BOUT knew, long before his plane lifted off from Moscow, that they meant to snatch him. For years he had hunkered down in the Russian capital, making only rare forays abroad. Western spies, the United Nations and do-gooder activists were after him. They said that he had smashed arms embargoes and struck deals with a remarkable axis of ne'er-do-wells: supplying weapons and air-transport to the Taliban, abetting despots and revolutionaries in Africa and South America, aiding Hizbullah in Lebanon and Islamists in Somalia. He also found time to supply American forces in Iraq, perhaps al-Qaeda too, and maybe even Chechen rebels.

He denied all wrongdoing and, no doubt, thought his accusers irritating and hypocritical. But until the fuss died away he knew that he was safe only in Russia, from where extradition was impossible.

Yet Mr Bout, a puzzling, amoral and intelligent man, made a poor choice in March, leaving behind his wife and daughter and flying to Bangkok. As a consequence he may end up in New York as the

star of a trial that would provoke echoes of cold-war spy games, further chilling relations between the West and Russia.

A shy and plump man, for years his only public image was a grainy, Soviet-era passport photo. That shows a dumpy, youngish face, with drooping eyes peering above a thick, triangular, moustache—the sort one might buy in a joke shop. He was probably born in what is now Tajikistan but, as with the picture, details of his life are fuzzy. American prosecutors say that he uses at least half a dozen passports and more aliases, including “Butt”, “Budd”, “Boris”, “Bulakin” and “Aminov”. A gifted linguist, he slips easily between as many languages as he has names.

He rose to the rank of major in the GRU, an arm of the Soviet armed services that combined intelligence agents and special forces—in British terms “a combination of MI6 and the SAS”, says an academic. Clandestine work in Africa prepared him for his future career. Mark Galeotti, of Keele University, believes that Mr Bout suggested to his military bosses in 1993 that he went into

“active reserve”, taking surplus aircraft to trade stuff in Africa and beyond.

Unofficially, he would have given payments to his old chiefs as planes and other stock were released. His goal was not nationalistic: it was to get rich quickly. “He enjoys the buzz of doing something well,” says Mr Galeotti. Those who studied at language school alongside Mr Bout recall him not as a thrill-seeker, but as a swot who relished success.

Mr Bout chose a useful time to come of age. As the Berlin Wall tumbled, supplies of surplus weaponry and fleets of military transport aircraft were up for grabs. Soldiers and air-force men, even senior ones, were poor and easily bribed; stocks of weapons, especially in remote corners such as Moldova, were barely monitored.

With supply assured, demand for his goods and services grew. As most outsiders abandoned interest in Africa and Central Asia, poorer governments lost their cold-war sponsors and many then collapsed, allowing wars to flourish. Where America and the Soviet Union had once vied to