

# A Detective Story

I found all these numerals printed on the side of a spent missile casing lying in the basement of a bombed-out Islamist base in



Eastern Aleppo (Syria) last year.

At the top were the words “Hughes Aircraft Co”, founded in California back in the 1930s by the infamous Howard Hughes and sold in 1997 to Raytheon, the massive US defense contractor whose profits last year came to \$23.35 billion. Shareholders include the Bank of America and Deutsche Bank. Raytheon’s Middle East offices can be found in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Kuwait.

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

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

Even if I can find it, however, I can promise readers one certain conclusion. This missile will have been manufactured and sold by Hughes/Raytheon absolutely legally to a NATO, pro-NATO or “friendly” (i.e. pro-American) power (government, defense ministry, you name it), and there will exist for it an End User Certificate (EUC), a document of impeccable provenance which will be signed by the buyers – in this

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case by the chaps who purchased the TOW missiles in very large numbers – stating that they are the final recipients of the weapons.

There is no guarantee this promise will be kept, but – as the arms manufacturers I’ve been talking to in the Balkans over the past weeks yet again confirm – there is neither an obligation nor an investigative mechanism on the part of the arms manufacturers to ensure that their infinitely expensive products are not handed over by “the buyers” to ISIS, al-Nusra/al-Qaeda – which was clearly the case in Aleppo – or some other anti-Assad Islamist group in Syria branded by the US State Department itself as a “terrorist organization”.

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

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

It is a fact, I’m sorry to recall, that of all the weapons I saw used in the 15-year Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), not one was in the hands of those to whom those same weapons were originally sold. Russian and Bulgarian Kalashnikovs sold to Syria were used by Palestinian guerrillas, old American tanks employed by the Lebanese Christian Phalange/Lebanese forces were gifts from the Israelis who received them from the US.

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

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

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

But what did this mean? Government statements in response to detailed reports of arms shipments should not be the last word – and there is an important question that remained unanswered in the Saudi statement. The Saudis themselves had asked for copies of the shipment documents – yet they did not specifically say whether they did or did not receive this shipment of mortars, nor comment upon the actual papers which *The Independent* sent them.

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

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

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

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

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## UNITED ARAB EMIRATES - OUR ALLY AT WORK

In July of 2018, an Amnesty International report entitled “God Only Knows If He’s Alive,” documented the plight of dozens of families in southern Yemen whose loved ones have been tortured, killed, or forcibly disappeared by Yemeni security forces reporting to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Amnesty report implicates UAE-backed local forces in Yemen, as well as the UAE military, in the crimes of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees. Of seven former or current detainees interviewed by Amnesty, five said they were subjected to these abuses. “All seven witnessed other detainees being tortured,” the report adds, “including one who said he saw a detainee held in a cell next to him being carried away in a body bag after he had been repeatedly tortured.”

In June 2017, Human Rights Watch and the Associated Press exposed a network of clandestine prisons operated by the UAE in Yemen. Their reports described ghastly torture inflicted on prisoners and noted that senior US military leaders knew about torture allegations. Yet, a year later, there has been no investigation of these allegations by the Yemeni government, by the UAE, or by the UAE’s most powerful ally in the Yemen war, the United States.

**“It is shocking, to say the least,”**

the Amnesty report states, “that one year after a network of secret prisons operated by the UAE and the Yemeni forces it backs was exposed, these facilities continue to operate and that there has not been a serious investigation undertaken into credibly documented violations, including systemic torture in

custody.” The Amnesty report calls on the US to “facilitate independent oversight, including by the US Congress, over US military or intelligence cooperation with Yemeni and UAE forces involved in detention activities in Yemen.” It further calls for investigating any involvement of US military or intelligence personnel in detention-related abuses in Yemen.

The report describes bureaucratic farces in which families beg for information about their loved ones’ whereabouts from Yemeni prosecutors and prison officials, but the families’ pleas for information are routinely met with silence or intimidation. The families are appealing to an unelected Yemeni exile government. The president, **Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi**, (when “elected” president in 2012, he was the only candidate) generally resides in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Hadi’s government officials have told Amnesty International that **the government of Yemen has no control over operations “spearheaded by the UAE and implemented by the Yemeni forces it backs.”**

Since March of 2015, a coalition of nine countries led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and relying on crucial U.S. logistical aid, has bombarded Yemen while blockading its major port, despite Yemen’s status as one of the poorest countries in the world. Targeting transportation, electrical plants, sewage and sanitation facilities, schools, mosques, weddings and funerals, the vicious bombing has led to starvation, displacement, and the spread of disease including cholera.

Along with three countries in North Africa’s “Sahel” desert region, Yemen has been cited as part of the worst famine crisis in the 70-year history of the UN. In the past three years of aerial and naval attacks, Yemen’s key port of Hodeidah has remained partially or fully closed despite the country’s vital need for relief supplies. And, while Yemenis suffer the chaos and despair characteristic of war, the Saudis and UAE refer to the war as “Operation Restoring Hope.”

On the same day that the Amnesty report was released, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman pardoned “all military men, who have taken part in the Operation Restoring Hope of their respective military and disciplinary penalties, in regard of some rules and disciplines.” It seems likely that the Amnesty report precipitated this royal decree.

To date, the US continues selling weapons to the UAE and to its coalition partner, Saudi Arabia, despite several Congressional debates and a few increasingly close votes demanding a full or partial end to US weapons sales considering the terrible practices being carried out as part of the Yemen war.

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