

The room was packed for the first meeting in the new Sudan/South Sudan Seminar Series, which took place on the 16th of November 2015. The series is organised jointly by the Centre of African Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies and the Society for the Study of the Sudans UK, and it brings together academics and practitioners concerned with Sudan and South Sudan.

'Arms and the men: who sells weapons, who uses them and who is killed by them' was the topic and addressing it was Mike Lewis, lead investigator for the non-governmental organisation Conflict Armament Research, who has worked in the region for many years. A gripping talk and lively discussion were chaired by the journalist Gill Lusk, the SSSUK Chairperson.

Armed with a vivid array of photographs and maps, Mike Lewis talked about the place of Sudan and South Sudan in the flow of arms and ordinance in Africa and particularly Eastern Africa, offering a long-term view of their changing roles. It was beginning to appear that Sudan had become the most significant forces behind arms flows in African and perhaps Middle Eastern conflicts, he suggested, although the region was not necessarily the largest source of armaments. Many arms there had commercial origins, he pointed out, and not all arms originating in Sudan and which were in the hands of non-state groups in the region, were distributed with the complicity of the government. He discussed evidence for the widely-held belief that proxy forces in South Sudan's recent conflict (2013-15) were supported and armed by the Sudan government: while this is fairly clear, deliveries of Sudanese weapons to the Sudan People's Liberation Organisation-in-Opposition have not been on the same scale and sophistication as previous South Sudanese proxies.

Mike gave us a fascinating insight into his work by using photos of guns and munitions found at conflict sites to demonstrate how physically examining them could be used as a diagnostic tool not only to give political scientists insights into the 'what and where' of weapons supplies but could also be used as a form of complicated political signalling to tell us about Sudanese and South Sudanese links in the region.

One illustration of weapons analysis concerned guns and ammunition captured by the Juba government army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, in Bentiu in May 2014, and ammunition remaining at the site of a devastating attack on a mosque by forces from the breakaway SPLM-IO the month before. An analysis of cartridge cases showed that a diverse range of munitions had been used in the attack, most of which were SPLA issue but some very new and post-dating the

December 2013 split in the SPLA. This new ammunition was manufactured in Sudan between January and April 2014 and according to SPLA-IO sources was distributed from three places in Unity State, South Sudan, and West Kordofan in Sudan.

Mike argued that the small amount of arms supplied from Sudan, was a ‘political signal’ that indicated the Sudan government’s ambivalence about arming rebel forces in South Sudan enough to tip the military balance in the conflict. He suggested that generally speaking, the presence of lots of new Sudanese-manufactured arms in, for example, the Central African Republic or Darfur, indicated the likelihood of direct supply and government complicity – evidence backed by combatants’ testimonies and evidence of arms flights – but that where arms found were older, e.g. in the Democratic Republic of Congo, they were more likely to have multiple origins.

The speaker provided an historical analysis of arms flows in the region, arguing that the importance of the Sudanese region as a hub for arms flows and supply predates 1989, stretching back to fighting in the Congo in the 1960’s. The contemporary situation, in which large supplies of arms are manufactured in Sudan, relied on two factors. The first was the development of the Sudan’s government aircraft fleet in the 1990’s which facilitated the supply of weapons to Sudan government forces in Southern Sudan and later Darfur. This led to the development of integrated logistics, facilitating ‘just-in-time’ arms supplies across the region by both commercial and political actors.

The other major change was of course the development of a large weapons manufacturing industry in Sudan, drawing on expertise from Iran and China. More recently, Sudan’s weapons industry has drawn on technology and components originating in a larger range of countries including South Korea, Russia and Oman, suggesting the importance of more conventional commercial links in Sudan’s weapons industry.

The questions from the floor were many and various indicating both the importance of the subject and the controversial nature of any discussion about arms and weapon flows in the conflict-ridden region of Sudan and South Sudan. On the Sudanese regime’s arming of South Sudanese militias, one important point made was that the Sudan government did not need to try to overthrow the government of South Sudan: it was still doing enough to destabilise the country and supplying arms helped to build momentum for the conflict.