

The US is a virtual supermarket for terrorists and foreign governments seeking high-end military technology, including components that can be used to build nuclear weapons and equip militants fighting US and British troops, the American government has found.

Over the past year, government investigators posing as private buyers purchased military-grade body armour, technology to stabilise and steer guided missiles, a device that can be used to detonate nuclear weapons, and other munitions through legal means in the US. They evaded export controls and posted dummy versions of the gear to countries known as trans-shipment points for terrorist groups and foreign governments seeking arms and weapons components.

The investigation shows lax sales restrictions and export controls could allow terrorists and hostile foreign governments to buy equipment to use against US and British troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries, US officials say. Foreign governments and terrorist groups have sought to purchase military technology from the US, according to officials, and in 2008 more than 145 people were charged with violating export control laws, with 43% of those attempting illegally to ship gear to Iran and China.

The private US companies that provided the equipment – in some cases from government surplus – said they were not required to check buyers' backgrounds or obtain government licences for the sales. The US commerce department found that the companies selling the equipment had not violated any laws or regulations. The problem, investigators said, was that sensitive military equipment barred from export was often legal to sell within the US, with little restriction, and buyers need only establish a plausible front company.

Gregory Kutz of the Government Accountability Office told a congressional panel: "The lack of legal restrictions over domestic sales of these items, combined with the difficulties associated with inspecting packages and individuals leaving the United States, results in a weak control environment that does not effectively prevent terrorists and agents of foreign governments from obtaining these sensitive items."

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