Guns don’t kill dictatorships, people do

By Joshua Keating, Foreign Policy, 9 Jan 2013.

As he's wont to do, Matt Drudge has kicked up a fuss today by plastering photos of Hitler and Stalin above the headline "White House Threatens 'Executive Orders' on Guns." FP contributor Michael Moynihan has a good piece at Tablet looking into what's accurate and inaccurate in the commonly cited narrative that Nazi laws curtailing Jewish gun ownership were a prelude to the Holocaust.

But Godwin's law violations aside, I was curious about whether there's any evidence in the modern world for the old notion that a well-armed populace is the best defense against tyranny. Do countries with high gun-ownership rights tend to be more democratic? Or more likely to overthrow dictatorships?

I haven't been able to find any published academic studies to this effect (if readers know of any, please post in the comments), but from a look at the Small Arms Survey's international rankings from 2007, it's hard to detect a pattern. (I wrote about this data in greater depth here.)

The top 10 gun-owning countries in the world (after the United States) include both democracies like Switzerland and Finland, as well as authoritarian countries like Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

With 34.2 guns per 100 people, Iraq is ranked eighth on the survey. More to the point, the country already had a well-established gun culture and a high rate of gun ownership before the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. We can't know for sure if a well-armed population could have stopped Hitler's genocide, but it certainly didn't stop Saddam's.
Given the advanced deadly weaponry available to governments these days -- as opposed to the late 18th century -- most tyrants aren't all that threatened by citizens with conventional weapons. Like the Iraqis, Libyans were fairly well armed under Muammar al-Qaddafi -- 15.5 guns per 100 people as of 2007 -- but it still took an assist from NATO air power to finally bring him down.

On the other extreme, the country ranked last on the survey -- with only 0.1 guns per 100 people -- is Tunisia, which as you'll recall was still able to overthrow a longtime dictator in 2011. With only 3.5 guns per 100 people, the Egyptian population that overthrew Hosni Mubarak was hardly well armed either. On the other hand, Bahrain, where a popular revolution failed to unseat the country's monarchy, has 24.8 guns per 100 people, putting it in the top 20 worldwide. A relatively high rate of 10.7 guns per 100 people in Venezuela hasn't stopped the deterioration of democracy under Hugo Chávez.

I don't mean to suggest there's a negative correlation between dictatorship and gun ownership. The countries where there are virtually no guns in private hands include places like North Korea and Eritrea along with places like Japan and Lithuania. I'd love to see a more sophisticated analysis on this, but from looking at the data, it's hard to see a trend either way.