

New assault rifles at Boston PD another step toward militarization of US police

By Ekaterina Shubnaya

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Boston PD is distributing AR-15 assault rifles to patrol cars for reinforcement of the police and giving it more power against the street criminals, or so it says. This new development has undoubtedly caused a lot of concern which fact is being dwelled upon in the article titled "Boston PD's new assault rifles raise concerns over militarization of police" by Al Jazeera America's Daniel Lovering.

Though there has already been a lot of talk as to how the United States have recently got all gunned up with their [drone-flying classes](#) and bomb-disarming robots in small towns. This military recycling program has already left many wondering: isn't it a little too much put "to serve and protect"?

Boston police department has surprised the citizens purchasing about 30 military-style semiautomatic rifles and training nearly 100 patrol officers to use them. This looks all the more surprising as, according to a local cited by Mr Lovering, Tariq Nazyat, 39, "Gun violence in the neighborhood has declined sharply since his teenage years."

As always, such situation immediately sparked a debate in Boston. While some – mostly residents of the minority-dominated districts – argued that the gradual militarization of the police force is more of a problem than a solution, others, who supported police, had their reasoning just as justified saying the police needed tools to combat heavily armed criminals and prevent terrorism, that is, to not let the Marathon tragedy become a history repeated.

Mr Lovering quotes Boston Police superintendent Kenneth Fong as saying police "'routinely' seize semiautomatic assault rifles from the streets."

"The city and the world we live in now is different than in years past," Mr Lovering quotes Kenneth Fong as saying. "And we need to have equipment to meet the threat that we're facing now."

The Boston Marathon tragedy and its aftermath has only speeded up the process of buying the rifles, as it had already been in process by that time. The actual idea was introduced in 2007 by Edward Davis, a former city's police commissioner.

Two years later, as part of the federal surplus program, Boston police ordered about 200 semiautomatic M16s, but Mayor Thomas Menino put the plan on hold. Menino's spokesman John Guilfoil said in an email to Al Jazeera, "The mayor made clear that he doesn't expect these types of weapons to be used regularly but rather stored securely in police vehicles and used only during necessary emergency situations." However, 82 police departments with little-to-no crime still purchased over a 1,000 weapons.

The plan provides that two officers per district (and there's 11) is to be equipped with the long-range AR-15 rifles, Fong said. This is to reinforce the existing groups of four to eight officers patrolling the city in so-called tactical vehicles, each equipped with an M4 rifle and a shotgun.

Mr Lovering quotes Ladd Everitt, director of communications for the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., as saying that "police need the guns because they were facing similarly armed suspects on the streets." In other words, the general level of violence in the society has been escalating.

Obviously, there are fears that, although initially intended to "fight evil," all these weapons might one day become a routinely used tool.

"The most disturbing repercussion that we see happening is when officers are dressing up in military garb, camouflage uniforms, military boots and helmets, and now you put M16s in their hands, there's just a subtle change in their whole mentality when it comes to policing," he said. "They begin to view the people in the community as adversaries, as the enemy, instead of people who have constitutional rights," said Tim Lynch, criminal-justice project director at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Lynch labeled this decision a "recipe for unnecessary violence and unnecessary injuries and sometimes the loss of life."

Though recently, shootings have increased in Boston, the rate is still by far below the early 1990s numbers. Also, the state can boast one of the lowest rates of gun-related deaths in the country and some of the nation's toughest gun laws, and that's according to the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Kade Crockford, director of the Technology for Liberty Project at the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, was quoted by Mr Lovering as saying "the move reflects a trend nationwide that includes the 'paramilitarization of the police' and the federalization of local and state police departments." However, the question she posed still has no answer regardless of its acuteness.

"Do we want police officers who are sent out into our streets to be trained as if — and equipped as if — the people they encounter on their patrols are enemy hostile targets, as if in a war?" she said. "Or do we want them to see people in our communities as allies and people they are meant to protect and serve?"
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