

Disarmament and International Security – Research Report I

Combatting the illicit trade and trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW)

Introduction to the topic:

Illicit trafficking and diversion of small arms and light weapons (SALW) across the world has grown significantly in the past decade, resulting in an increased number of fatalities. According to the UN, small arms and light weapons (SALW) are any man-portable lethal weapon that is designed to expel or launch. These arms are widely used in conflicts, organized crime, and acts of terrorism. Due to their ease of transport and concealment, these weapons often end up in the hands of non-state actors, criminal organizations, and insurgent groups.

In the last decade 85148 of terrorist attacks involved SALW, being responsible for 193172 fatalities worldwide. According to Izumi Nakamitsu, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, “This is more than 700 people a day, or one person dying from small arms every two minutes”. The flow of illicit SALW can increase the intensity and duration of conflicts and has deteriorated the security situation, for example in Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo and also South Sudan.

Background Information:

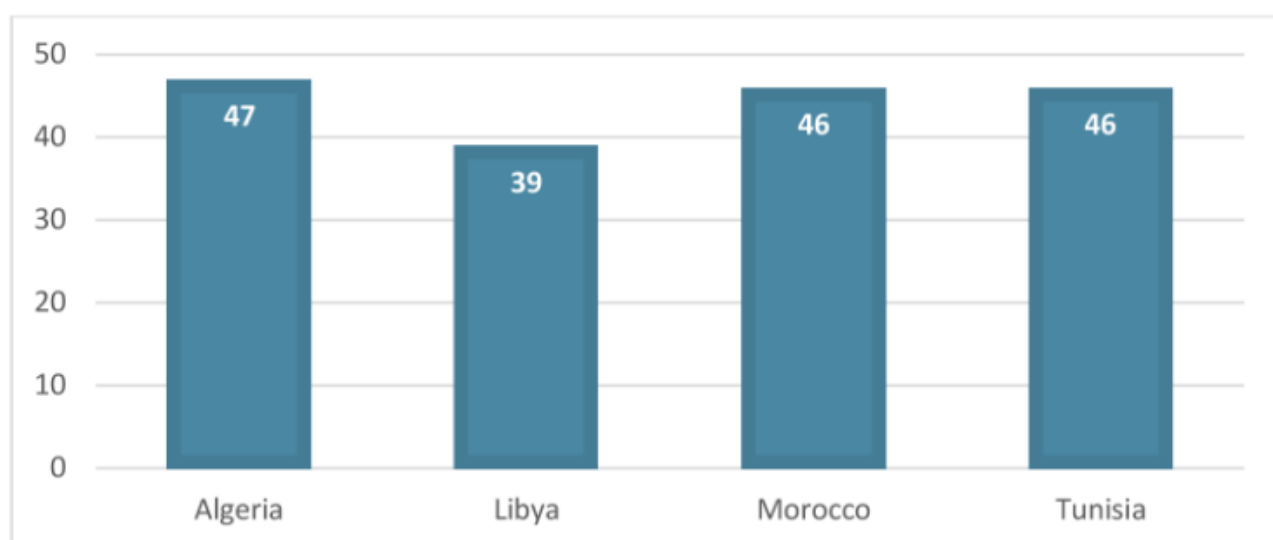


Figure 1.1- Number of actions involving countries in North Africa against SALW illicit trafficking in 2012-22

<https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2022/arms-transfer-and-salw-control-related-assistance-middle-east-and-north-africa-identifying-needs-and>

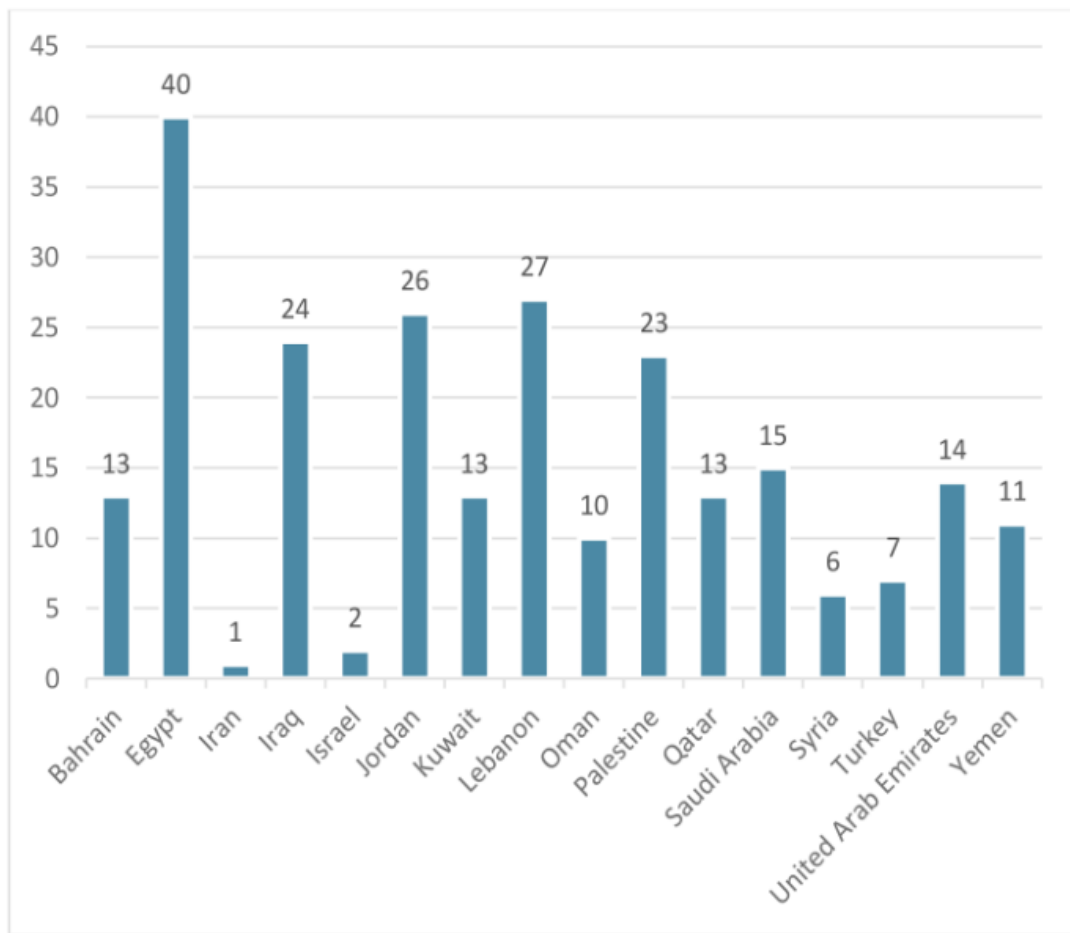


Figure 1.2- Number of actions involving countries in the Middle East against SALW illicit trafficking in 2012-22

<https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2022/arms-transfer-and-salw-control-related-assistance-middle-east-and-north-africa-identifying-needs-and>

The representative of Nigeria in the UN stated “We have witnessed cities and communities destroyed”. Moreover, on behalf of the African Group, he said Africa was at the forefront of regions that suffered the most from the effects of the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons. Those weapons were mainly produced outside the continent, yet they were acquired and used by unauthorized recipients and illegally armed groups within Africa.

According to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the representative of Belize said that illegal firearms were responsible for 70 per cent of homicides, being the main drivers of crime in the region. He emphasized that while the Caribbean does not produce small arms, light weapons, or ammunition and imports them only on a limited scale, its citizens continue to suffer disproportionately from their devastating effects.

An example of the many consequences of the illicit trade of SALW was a terrorist attack that occurred in the Garissa University College in Kenya, on April 2, 2015. In this attack, members of the terrorist group Al-Shabaab killed 148 people, mostly students, and injured

many others. The attackers were heavily armed with assault rifles and other SALW, which were smuggled into Kenya through porous borders. This event is a consequence of the illicit trafficking of arms, that threatens global security.

Efforts to combat the illegal trade in SALW have been complicated by various factors. According to Control Arms, a coalition of NGOs, one of the primary challenges is the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, particularly in conflict-prone regions where state authority is weak. Furthermore, the involvement of organized criminal groups and corrupt government officials facilitates the illicit trafficking of arms. In many conflict zones, political instability and corruption allows traffickers to operate with impunity. For example, in South Sudan, one of the world's most conflict-affected countries, corruption and poor governance have allowed arms to flow freely into the hands of rebel groups and criminal networks. Arms are often trafficked across porous borders from neighbouring countries like Sudan and Ethiopia, that have similar governments.

Another factor that facilitated the illicit trafficking of SALW are porous borders, that make it difficult to prevent the movement of weapons across regions. In Central Africa, in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Angola, porous borders allow for the smuggling of arms from one conflict zone to another. In the DRC, armed groups use these illicit weapons to maintain power and violence in the region.

Although some countries have strong laws against illicit arms trafficking, it can still be difficult to enforce them due to the lack of resources, inadequate training of law enforcement agencies or weak political will. For example, in Nigeria, although there are several laws regulating the trading of arms, the illegal flow of weapons into the hands of militant groups like Boko Haram and bandits in the northern and central regions of the country continues to contribute to violence and insecurity.

Apart from this, there is also limited international cooperation. Although there were already frameworks like the PoA and the ITI (more information in the Past UN actions section) that encourage international cooperation, there is a very low rate of implementation. There are many countries that fail to share information on arms trafficking and do not fully implement the required procedures.

Focus of the debate:

Delegates are encouraged to work towards establishing an effective solution to reduce the illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons. The aim is to improve the control over the spread of weapons in order to diminish conflicts and to assure global security. Particular attention should be given to countries facing challenges such as porous borders, a corruptive government, political instability, or ongoing conflicts, as these factors significantly contribute to the issue.

Parties involved:

This is an issue that is happening worldwide; however, these are some examples of the countries where it occurs more frequently.

Middle East (ex. Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya): These countries are heavily affected by ongoing wars and the collapse of the state structure, that facilitates the smuggling of arms and their use by extremist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

Latin America (ex. Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia): The main users of illicit SALW are gangs and cartels, that utilize them for trafficking, extortion and violence. This has contributed to some of the highest homicide rates in the world, destabilizing entire communities.

Sub-Saharan Africa (ex. South Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Central African Republic (CAR), and Nigeria): There is weak border management that allows arms to flow freely between nations. Also, warlords and extremist groups, such as Boko Haram, rely heavily on illicit arms to sustain their activities. These causes communities to be destabilized, with high casualties and displacement rates.

Eastern Europe and the Balkans (ex: Ukraine, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova): As a result of the Balkan wars, weapons leftover continue to circulate in illegal markets. Also, the ongoing war in Ukraine has heightened the risk of arms smuggling across Europe. This availability of weapons contributes to terrorism and violence across Europe.

Past UN Actions:

The UN has been trying to solve this issue for a long time, coming up with several attempted solutions to tackle the problem.

- Under the **Programme of Action (PoA)**, Governments agreed to improve national small arms laws, import/export controls, and stockpile management – and to engage in cooperation and assistance.
- **International Tracing Instrument (ITI)**- Adopted in 2005, which requires states to ensure that weapons are properly marked and that records are kept. Moreover, the ITI encourages cooperation between countries to trace illegal weapons– fulfilling one of the commitments governments made in the Programme of Action.

Possible Solutions:

- Improving border security by using advanced technologies such as drones, scanners, and satellites, and by training border security forces to detect illegal weapons trafficking.

- Establishing a Global Task Force on SALW Trafficking under the United Nations to investigate and prosecute high-profile cases involving illicit arms trade, provide technical support and training to countries, and coordinate international operations against trafficking.
- Strengthening cybersecurity to prevent online arms trafficking by strengthening international laws and developing specialized cybercrime units to monitor online arms marketplaces.

Glossary and Key Terms:

Small arms and light weapons (SALW): weapons that are portable and lightweighted such as handguns, rifles, grenades, and light machine guns.

ITI: A global agreement aimed at preventing and eradicating the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons by ensuring weapons are properly marked and that records are kept.

Porous borders: borders that are poorly monitored or controlled, allowing the easy movement of people, goods (such as SALW), and illegal activities, such as trafficking, between countries.

Task Force: a temporary team created to solve a specific problem or achieve a focused goal.

Trafficking: Illegal trade of goods or people, often for exploitation or profit.

Terrorism: Use of violence or threats to achieve political, ideological, or religious goals.

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