



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME RESEARCH REPORT II

Tackling Arms Trafficking and Illicit Weapons Flows into conflict zones

Introduction to the Topic:

Illicit arms trafficking and the uncontrolled flow of weapons into conflict zones are some of, if not the most, persistent threats to international peace and security. While any weapon contributes to the scale of the problem, small arms and light weapons are the most significant, since they are the more commonly trafficked weapons due to their low cost, durability, ease of transport, and availability. Once introduced into conflict zones, these weapons can circulate for decades, outlasting the conflicts that initially motivated their import, and perpetuating violence, organized crime, and human rights violations.

Weapons enter conflict zones through many ways. Some, originally legal, are diverted through corruption or unauthorized re-transfers, which means that they are no longer under the control of regulation. Others are smuggled directly through illegal routes organized by criminal networks, brokers, or armed groups. In many cases, weapons captured during combat or taken from poorly secured government stockpiles further contribute to the rapid increase of arms within and across borders. This creates a recurring cycle of supply and demand that is difficult to disrupt once established.

The impact of illegal weapon flows goes far beyond the battlefield. Easy access to firearms endangers civilians, undermines state authority, prolongs armed conflicts, and makes the recovery and development post-conflict difficult. Armed groups equipped with illicit weapons can challenge governments, intimidate populations, and destabilize entire regions. Furthermore, illicit arms trafficking is often interconnected with other forms of organized crime, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and terrorism financing, which only further promotes the instability of a country.

Efforts to solve the pressing issue of illicit arms flows therefore require international responses that combine regulation, enforcement, and prevention. While global frameworks such as the United Nations Programme of Action and the Arms Trade Treaty serve as important foundations, their effectiveness depends on national implementation. Further solutions that can be implemented worldwide need to be put in place in order to fully address the current issue and mitigate future implications.



Background information

Illicit arms trafficking has become a problematic part of modern armed conflict and a threat to international security. Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) are a particularly big part of this because they are responsible for the majority of direct conflict-related deaths worldwide. According to the Small Arms Survey, there are over 875 million small arms in circulation globally, making them the most prominent category of weapons in the issue. Unlike heavy weapons systems, SALW are durable, easy to conceal, and don't require training to use, which makes them easy to spread rapidly across borders and among both governmental and non-governmental parties.

According to the Small Arms Survey, approximately 85% of all small arms are held by civilians, while state military forces control about 13%, law enforcement agencies around 1%, and non-state armed groups roughly 1% (Check infographic for specific countries <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Infographics-global-firearms-holdings.pdf>). Although non-state armed groups own a relatively small percentage of global weapons, their access to illicit arms has a huge impact on conflict zones. These weapons prolong wars and significantly increase civilian vulnerability, especially in regions where state authority is weak.

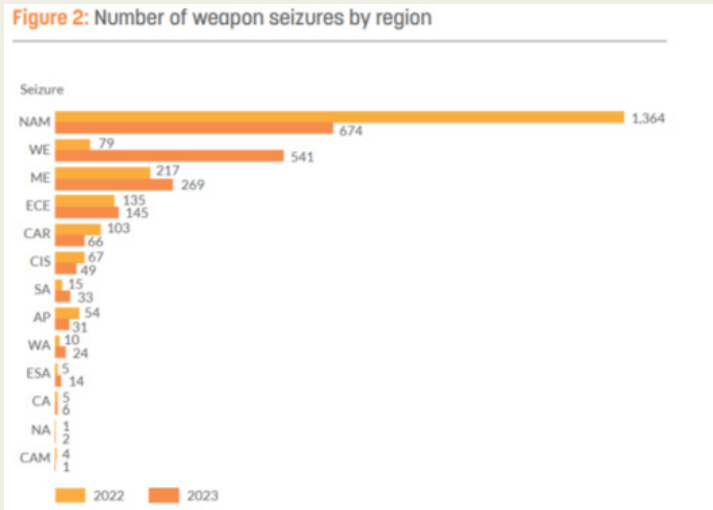
The ways through which weapons enter conflict zones are complex and interconnected. A large portion of arms were initially produced and transferred legally, and were later redirected to unauthorized individuals. This happens through corruption, falsified certificates, battlefield capture, theft from low security governmental stockpiles, or unauthorized export. In post-conflict or weak states, unsecure government stockpiles often become sources of illicit weapons, especially during political instability or regime collapse. Once part of the illicit flow, weapons frequently cross borders through trafficking routes maintained by criminal networks and arms brokers.

According to the UN, 45% of all violent deaths are due to small arms and light weapons. Over 700 deaths a day, or one every two minutes. This shows the role of SALW in everyday violence within conflict zones. Small arms are also commonly used in non-conflict settings, leading to high homicide rates and insecurity long after conflicts have ended.

Illicit arms trafficking is closely related to other forms of organized crime. Trafficking networks often overlap with drug smuggling, human trafficking, and terrorist operations. Profits from arms sales are reinvested into sustaining criminal networks and armed groups, undermining the governmental powers and hindering economic development. In many regions, such as the Sahel, Central America, and parts of the Middle East, illicit weapons flows have allowed armed groups to challenge governmental authority and destabilize entire regions.

The constant flow of illicit arms has significant humanitarian and developmental consequences. Access to weapons increases civilian casualties, challenges state authority, obstructs humanitarian access, and discourages foreign efforts for investment and reconstruction. This explains why the international community increasingly views arms trafficking not only as a security issue but also as a major obstacle to sustainable development and peacebuilding.





Past UN Actions

- **UN Programme of Action (PoA, 2001):** Voluntary measures national for regulation, stockpile management, marking and tracing, and international cooperation, with periodic reviews of the implementation.
- **Arms Trade Treaty (ATT, 2013):** Treaty that requires export assessments to prevent exportations that could facilitate human trafficking, terrorism or illegal traffic of weaponry. Not all arms exporters are parties, which limits monitoring.
- **UN Security Council arms embargoes and Panels of Experts:** The Security Council imposes targeted and monitored bans on imports/exports in certain conflicts (e.g., Somalia, Libya, CAR, South Sudan). Panels of Experts investigate violations and trace supply chains, recommending possible measures of intervention.
- **International Tracing Instrument (2005):** A UN instrument that traces illicit small arms and light weapons. Its goal is to help states identify the origin, transfer history, and diversion points of illicit weapons recovered in crime or conflict situations.



Focus of Debate

Delegates promote international cooperation to address the illicit flows of weapons, by enforcing international monitoring laws, sharing important data that could help localize the source of trafficking, and by finding effective methods of destruction and confiscation of these weapons from unauthorized users.

Significant Parties

United States: The United States plays a central role in combating arms trafficking given that it is the world's largest arms producer and exporter. Strict export control systems such as the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), regulate the transfer of weapons and reduce the risk of flows into illicit markets. The United States also supports international initiatives countering illicit arms flows by providing technical assistance, training, and funding. In addition, U.S. law enforcement agencies cooperate with other countries to track illicit weapons networks linked to organized crime and armed groups.

Russia: Russia is a major global arms supplier and so plays a large part in international arms flows. Russian-manufactured weapons have been identified in several conflict zones, sometimes as a result of old Cold War stockpiles or diversion from legal transfers. Russia participates in some international arms control programs but has not signed onto the Arms Trade Treaty, which limits its help in global regulation efforts.

China: China is both a major arms producer and an influential exporter, especially to developing countries. Chinese small arms and light weapons have been found in various conflict and post-conflict zones. While China restates sovereignty and non-interference, it has supported combating illicit arms trafficking through the United Nations and regional cooperation mechanisms. However, transparency around Chinese arms exports remains limited, defaulting any efforts to trace weapons and prevent diversion.

France: France plays an important role in addressing illicit arms flows, especially in Africa and the Middle East. France is obligated to assess the risk that its arms exports could contribute to conflict or human rights violations, since it is both a major arms exporter and part of the Arms Trade Treaty. France also supports initiatives such as training security forces and improving stockpile management to reduce weapons diversion.

Germany: Germany is a large arms producer with restrictive export policies. The German government stands for transparency, parliamentary oversight, and adherence to international arms control standards. Germany supports international efforts to combat illicit arms trafficking through funding disarmament programs and implementing the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

United Kingdom: The United Kingdom is a major arms exporter and an advocate for international arms control. The UK was one of the main developers of the Arms Trade Treaty and promotes its globalization and implementation. British authorities work with other countries to track illicit arms trafficking networks and provide assistance to strengthen border controls.

Libya: Libya is an example of a conflict-affected state that has become a major source of illicit weapon trafficking. Following the collapse of the government after 2011, large stockpiles of weapons were trafficked across North Africa and the Sahel. These weapons have resulted in conflict and criminal violence in neighbouring countries, showing how instability can bring illicit arms flows.



Somalia: Somalia has been affected by illicit arms trafficking due to prolonged conflict, weak governmental forces, and unstable borders. Despite being subject to international arms control, weapons continue to enter the country through criminal networks and illegal maritime routes. Illicit arms flow in Somalia have resulted in the persistence of armed groups and ineffective peacebuilding efforts.

Glossary and Key Terms:

Illicit Arms Trafficking: The illegal manufacture, transfer, sale, or movement of weapons and ammunition, in violation of national or international laws.

Illicit Weapon Flows: The movement of weapons through unauthorized or illegal channels, often across borders, into conflict zones or criminal markets.

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW): Portable weapons including pistols, rifles, assault rifles, machine guns, and light weapons such as rocket launchers and portable anti-aircraft systems.

Conflict Zones: Geographical areas experiencing armed conflict, civil war, or prolonged violence, where state authority is weak and weapons are used by both state and non-state groups.

Diversion: The redirection of weapons from authorized to unauthorized user or market. Diversion can occur through corruption, falsified documents, theft, or unauthorized re-export.

Arms Brokers: Individuals or groups that arrange, negotiate arms transactions, including financing and transportation. Brokers can operate legally under regulation or illegally in illicit markets.

Stockpiles: Stored collections of weapons and ammunition held by governments, military forces, or law enforcement agencies. Poorly secured stockpiles are a major source of illicit weapons.

Non-State Armed Groups: Organizations that use armed force but are not part of a recognized national military, such as rebel groups, terrorist organizations, or criminal gangs.

Panels of Experts: UN-appointed investigative bodies that monitor sanctions and export bans, trace illicit arms flows, and report violations to the Security Council.

Peacebuilding: Long-term efforts to reduce the risk of conflict by promoting security, and addressing causes of violence, including the destruction of weapons.

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