

**Forum:** International Criminal Police Organization

**Issue:** Combating the Global Trafficking of Firearms

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## **Disclaimer**

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## **Introduction:**

High levels of violence, crime, and terrorism are magnified globally by the smuggling of illegal firearms, with over 1 billion small arms currently in circulation worldwide, and approximately 85% of them in civilian hands (UNODC, 2020). The ease with which guns move across borders is encouraged by shortcomings in policing as well as regulation systems. According to estimates, around 1 million firearms are trafficked across borders annually, with most originating from countries with weak regulatory frameworks (UNODC, 2020). Currently, for purposes of criminals and militants in general, firearms have become symbols of fear, tools for pressurizing others, or instruments of inter-gang rivalry, bringing about deep consequences to societies at large.

In places with a lack of regulation or nations in a state of constant conflict, these effects are evident; the trafficking of firearms increases the vulnerability of people living in such areas. For example, in regions such as Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, the influx of illegal firearms has been linked to heightened homicide rates, with firearm-related deaths accounting for 250,000 deaths annually worldwide (Kiener-Manu, 2019). Illegal firearms being widespread in society results in citizens who live under substantially higher levels of insecurity and criminal activities. Such proliferation has fostered inequalities in service provision and the prevention of poverty because money is redirected from programs aimed at uplifting living standards into managing violent conflicts. In regions like Central America,

governments spend roughly 5-10% of their GDP on security and violence prevention efforts.

The widespread extent of the issue at hand illustrates how firearm trafficking is a factor that has continually been obstructing progress and leading to instability. This issue mandates strong international relations and the development of new laws to eradicate the illegal transportation of weapons and diminish their adverse influence on global development efforts.

### **Definition of Key Terms:**

1. **Armed Violence:** Violence committed using a weapon, particularly *firearms*, that results in injury, death, or psychological harm, affecting individuals and communities.
2. **Conflict Zones:** Areas experiencing *armed violence*, civil war, or significant instability where the presence and use of *firearms* are prevalent, often leading to a breakdown of law and order.
3. **Firearms:** Any portable weapon that uses a controlled explosion to propel a projectile, including handguns, rifles, shotguns, and other guns.
4. **Gang Violence:** Violent acts committed by organized groups or gangs, often involving *firearms*, aimed at asserting control, settling disputes, or engaging in criminal activities.
5. **Illicit Trafficking:** The illegal trade or movement of goods, in this context, referring specifically to *firearms*, across borders without legal authorization or oversight.
6. **Proliferation:** The rapid increase or spread of *firearms*, particularly in areas where regulation and enforcement are weak.
7. **Regulatory Framework:** In this context, the set of laws, regulations, and policies established by governments or international bodies to control the manufacture, distribution, possession, and use of *firearms*.
8. **Social Services:** Public services provided by governments or organisations aimed at supporting the well-being of communities, such as healthcare, education, and welfare, often impacted by *armed violence*.

9. **Proxy war:** a war started by a major power that does not itself become involved.
10. **Small Arms and Light Weapons:** SALW programming is the effort to limit and control the spread of small arms and ammunition.
11. **Counter-trafficking measures:** actions that are taken to combat the trafficking of people, drugs, or illegal weapons. This can include: public awareness, providing legal documents, protecting individuals and/or communities...
12. **ATF:** Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. A bureau found in America specifically within the Department of Justice, and is responsible for enforcing federal laws related to firearms, explosives, and alcohol production.

## Background Information

### How the Problem Arose:

Illicit firearm trafficking has been an international issue since modern types of firearms were invented; however, it gained further momentum in the 20th century through crime, insurgencies, and global conflicts. The problem was created by mass production of weapons, the liberalisation of arms markets, and the collapse of state controls in some regions, especially after dramatic geopolitical events like the end of the Cold War. Being countries involved in proxy wars, mainly during the years of the Cold War, large amounts of weapons were shipped to different areas of the world. Most of these arms were not properly accounted for after the wars were over, thereby stockpiling huge numbers of weapons that could fall into unauthorised hands. Secondly, globalisation and improvements in transport made traffickers' jobs easier to move firearms across borders, further enhancing the issue.

### Key Points and Events:

Some key events and a few trends have characterised the landscape of illicit firearm trafficking. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, huge amounts of weapons began to flow uncontrollably from new former Soviet states into conflict zones all over the world. It saw a surge in black-market arms dealing, with sales to such groups as rebels, terrorists, and criminal organisations. Still, during the 1990s, the Balkan conflicts more than supported diffused illicit firearms in Europe through huge amounts of militarised weapons that were turned over into illegal markets.

Still another—the signing of the United Nations Firearms Protocol in 2001—marks the first really serious international initiative against illicit manufacturing and trafficking in firearms. This protocol was part of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in general and intended to define international standards and cooperation for combating such a threat. Still, due to the proliferation of global terrorism, especially after the 9/11 attacks, it became evident that the spread of firearms would remain a problem hard to combat. The illegal trade is thriving in regions with instability: part of Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, where weak governance coupled with continuing wars provides fertile ground for arms traffickers.

### **Consequences of the Issue:**

The illegal trade in firearms has been a major factor for insecurity, human rights violations, and breach of development globally. It sustains conflicts by providing the warring groups with means for protracted violence, hence increasing the death toll and destruction of war-torn areas. Apart from continuing to arm conflicts, illegal arms fuel armed crime and violence in developed and developing countries alike, thereby aggravating social instability and affecting past efforts at peacebuilding and development.

The human toll is enormous, with several thousands losing their lives yearly from the violence perpetrated with illegally trafficked firearms. Besides this already considerable loss of life, the availability of illicit firearms destabilises societies, undermines the rule of law, and inhibits economic development, placing an exactingly high burden on law enforcement and judicial systems that strains resources which could otherwise be dedicated to other public services. Illicit firearms trafficking remains an important spoiler of world peace and security and has consequently required continuous cooperation of the international community in delineating strategies for reducing its impacts.

### **Current Situation**

The phenomenon of arms smuggling worldwide stays on of the most challenging and, at the same time, a rather complicated issue that affects global security and further contributes to the prolongation of conflicts, the proliferation of organised crime, and terrorism. The fight against this unlawful trade is enormous, with such measures as the international treaties, the national laws of various countries, and the joint actions of elite law enforcing agencies being dominant. In spite of the real progress achieved, some barriers still limits the optimum functioning of these strategies.

### **International Frameworks and Agreements**

One of the fundamental international systems that have been developed to counteract the issue of arms trafficking is the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) that was put into action in December 2014. The ATT was formed with the policy of granting a global licence operating an import/export control register that meets the set standards of small arms, ammunition, and other related materials. As of 2023, 112 states are parties to the ATT, and 31 of them have been signed without ratification. However, the global effect of the treaty is limited to the non-ratification of the treaty by big arms producers, the United States, Russia, and China, among others. An additional comprehensive international effort is the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA), put in place in 2001. The PoA is trying to stop small arms and light weapons being bought on the black market. The PoA also calls on member states to establish programs related to various issues of gun control like reliable and quick tracing, marking, stockpile management, and surfeit weaponry wrack. Although the PoA has resulted in the adoption of national action plans and regional agreements, its effectiveness is undermined by the incomplete and non-legally obligatory requirements.

### **National regulations and law enforcement**

The role of national governments in prevention of arms smuggling is of prime importance through regulation and administration. Exemplary arms management systems, such as are present in Germany, Sweden, and the UK, have structures with iron-clad licensing protocol, end-user tracking, and penalties for violations. Conversely, non-uniform and loose laws in countries like Libya, Somalia, and Yemen give channel to the traffickers to dry up the lacunas of the system. One of the major countries in global arms exports, the United States, has put the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) and the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) as the fundamental parts of the system. These principles force the export companies to apply and get the necessary licences and order to be subject to specific reporting rules. Despite such implementations, discrepancies and omissions of control have, from time to time, made away those weapons to the non-state actors.

### **Regional efforts and cooperation**

Regional organisations also play a pivotal role in addressing arms trafficking. The European Union (EU) has implemented the Common Position on Arms Exports, which sets criteria for member states to evaluate arms export applications, emphasising human rights and conflict prevention. Additionally, the EU funds initiatives to strengthen border controls and improve stockpile management in neighbouring regions, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Sahel.

In Africa, the African Union (AU) adopted the Bamako Declaration in 2000, outlining measures to combat the illicit proliferation of SALW. The Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA) supports member states in implementing these measures, focusing on arms marking and tracing, legislative harmonisation, and public awareness campaigns. Similarly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established a convention on SALW in 2006, promoting regional cooperation and capacity-building.

### **Challenges and obstacles**

Yet today more than ever is the supply chain of weapons a source of the issue the world again has to face. Issues in cases such as bribery of officials by governments and the police as an example often arise and are one of the reasons why these legislations do not work. This is the case, for example, in fact, of countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, where the corrupt officials are implicated in the illegal the diversion of military equipment to the insurgent groups. The issue of arms trafficking is compounded by the large number of poorly regulated and inadequately protected stockpiles of arms, especially in post-war regions. As Libya, once the regime of Muammar Gaddafi fell, witnessed the illegal tampering of weapons stockpiles through the looting and exporting of the devastatingly deadly weapons to North Africa and the Middle East. The situation in Yemen is tense as well since the lack of the functioning of the governmental system has led to the rise of the arms smuggling thus giving rise to parallel struggles in the still present civil war. Numerous technological progressions additionally intensify the struggle. 3D printing technology is up in the air and anybody can manufacture weapons or guns making the regulatory process more complex. Moreover, shift to cryptocurrencies and darknet provides opportunities to criminals and terrorists for secretive sales and purchases of arms which adds additional difficulties in authorities tracking and stopping such illegal businesses.

### **Success Stories and Innovations**

In spite of such hurdles, there have been distinct triumphs in the fight against weapons trafficking. The sharing of intelligence and worldwide cooperation led to many large-scale seizures. Ecopsk essentials of strategies of the WCO), seized thousands of contraband guns and abolished several trafficking networks.

Technological progress also brings new possibilities for law implementation. The blockchain technology to track and verify arms deliveries is used to assure the legality of the products transferred from the logistics vendor to the consignee. Furthermore, the progress made in forensic ballistics, e.g. microstamping, enables the police to track down the guns used in a scientific manner.

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

### **United States of America (USA)**

The USA plays a dual role in the global context about firearm trafficking: it acts as the world's foremost legal manufacturer and exporter of firearms and as a country facing internal challenges in the sphere of illegal arms trafficking. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives is the primary federal agency enforcing federal laws relating to firearms, including tracking and prevention of their illegal sale and trafficking. Moreover, the export of firearms from the United States is regulated by the State Department, under the Directorate of Defense Trade Controls, in an attempt to prevent U.S.-made firearms from reaching illegal markets around the globe. However, the overwhelming demand for guns in both the domestic and international markets makes the U.S. a key battleground in the war against illegal arms dealers.

### **Interpol**

Interpol is the international policing organization that coordinates cooperation between police forces from different countries in dealing with the challenge of transnational crime, of which firearm trafficking is a part. Through its Illicit Arms Records and Tracing Management System, Interpol lets member countries trace the illegal firearms to establish routes used and networks involved in such traffics. Interpol also conducts operations and provides training to national law enforcement agencies in order to heighten their capacity for identifying and intercepting illegal arms shipments. Through the stimulation of international cooperation and intelligence sharing, Interpol has a very important role in breaking up the transnational networks through which firearm trafficking is facilitated.

### **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime**

The UNODC is highly involved in the international effort to combat firearms trafficking, essentially through the implementation of the United Nations Firearms Protocol, which is one of the supplementing instruments to the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The UNODC provides both legal and technical assistance to the member states to improve their national legislation and law enforcement capacities concerning firearms. It facilitates data collection and research for an in-depth understanding of global trends in firearms trafficking, thus allowing more focused and appropriate interventions. Its work is critical in harmonizing international standards and facilitating cooperation amongst countries towards addressing the problem at a global level.

### **The European Union (EU)**

The European Union has in place multidimensional policies and frameworks on combating firearm trafficking among its member states and beyond. The EU Action Plan on Firearms Trafficking sets out measures to improve cooperation between member states, traceability of firearms, and build capacities of law enforcement agencies in detection and prevention of trafficking. In such respect, central to coordination and best practice sharing between member states is the European Firearms Experts group. The involvement by the EU is hence critical in dealing with cross-border trafficking of firearms, where weapons often move from conflict zones into European countries.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

There are many NGOs worldwide that actively participate in campaigning against, researching into, and making contributions toward the issue of trafficking in firearms. Organizations such as the Small Arms Survey provide valuable data and analysis on the proliferation of small arms globally, thereby justifying policy decisions and international cooperation. Yet other NGOs, like the IANSA, are pressing for more effective international regulations while at the same time promoting grassroots actions designed to reduce the impact of firearm trafficking within affected communities. These are very key agents in raising awareness, influencing policy processes, and holding governments accountable for efforts to control illegal firearms.

### **Yemen**

The civil war in Yemen began in 2014, turning the country into a significant transit point for illegal arms. This struggle pits Iran-backed Houthi rebels against an internationally recognized government, which is aided by a Saudi-led coalition. The fight between the Iran-backed Houthi rebels and an internationally recognized government, with the added backing of a Saudi-led coalition, has factored into this ideal weapons-trafficking environment. With a strategic location along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, besides porous borders, Yemen has been an easy mark for smuggling operations. The Government of Iran is accused of furnishing the Houthi rebels with arms, including sophisticated missiles and small arms, while those consigned for government forces mostly come from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These arms, combined with those from external actors, have breathed life into the conflict and heightened its brutality. Extremist groups such as AQAP and ISIS have also exploited the mayhem to capture and distribute firearms, seizing arms from government depots or buying them on the black market. Criminal networks took hold with the collapse of state institutions, smuggling firearms internally in Yemen and across the region, particularly to the Horn of Africa. Arms proliferation has fed an already catastrophic humanitarian crisis, intensifying the war and leading to massive displacement, famine, and civilian casualties.



This, however, remains an enormously complicated task on account of the fractured nature of this conflict, modern state governance or lack thereof, and involvement by external powers looking for easy ways to influence events on the ground.

### **Colombia**

The long history of internal conflict, sustained particularly by drug cartels, leftist guerrilla groups such as FARC, and right-wing paramilitaries, makes Colombia one of the key players in Latin America's illicit firearms trade. While most FARC fighters demobilized as a result of the 2016 peace agreement, numerous dissidents, as well as various other illegal armed groups, remain active; this keeps the demand for illegal arms high. In all of these groups, firearms are important for their very survival, as these enable them to maintain control over territory, protect lines of drug production and transport, and wage violent battle against rival factions or governmental forces. The geography of Colombia, which has dense jungles and mostly isolated borders with Venezuela, Brazil, and Panama, encourages arms smuggling. Venezuela has become one of the main sources of illegal firearms because of its continuing political and economic instability. Firearms also flow into Colombia from the United States and Eastern Europe, channeled through established smuggling networks closely linked to the drug trade. These arms are very often traded for drugs or used in the course of guarding shipments of narcotics, so it further entrenches the link between narcotics and arms smuggling in the region. While the government of Colombia has been trying to disarm the militant groups and disturb the smuggling operations, the large-scale trade of firearms, along with unabated internal violence and an extremely gainful drug trade keeps on setting this vicious cycle into motion.

### **Mexico**

Mexico is one of the largest markets for illegal guns, most of which come from the United States. The country hosts strong drug cartels, such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels that rely greatly on illegal firearms when fighting violent battles against their rival groups or law enforcement. The proximity of Mexico to the U.S. makes it the perfect target for arms trafficking since, unlike Mexico, the United States has relatively loose gun control laws. This makes acquisition and smuggling of firearms across borders much easier. Many of the guns seized in Mexico are military-type weapons, with some even being assault rifles purchased legally in the U.S. and then funneled into Mexico via smuggling networks. These have been the weapons at the heart of a brutal two-decade war over drugs, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives across Mexico. Demand is clearly driven by a need to enforce territorial control, guarantee security for drug trafficking routes, and ensure engagement in battles with other rival cartels and government forces. So far, most attempts

to staunch the flow of weapons into Mexico have been largely ineffective—from the spectacular failures within such initiatives as the U.S.-Mexico "Fast and Furious" gun-walking scandal, to other lesser-known programs. Corruption within Mexico's security forces often complicates matters further, given that some military and police personnel are in league with arms traders. This illegal transit of weapons into Mexico continues to be one of the major roots of the violence which plagued the nation, making it one of the most violent and heavily armed countries in the Western Hemisphere.

## UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Encourages countries to make optimal use of tools developed under Interpol's firearm programme: <https://www.interpol.int/en/content/download/6069/file/AG-2011-80-RES-11%20-%20Encouraging%20member%20countries%20to%20make%20optimal%20use%20of%20the%20tools%20developed%20under%20INTERPOL%27s%20firearms%20programme%20.pdf> Very effective
- The manufacture, use, and control of firearms: <https://www.interpol.int/en/content/download/6268/file/GA-1997-66-RES-6%20-%20The%20manufacture%20-%20use%20and%20control%20of%20firearms.pdf> effectiveness unknown
- The Arms Trade Treaty <https://thearmstradetreaty.org> limited effectiveness
- Protocol Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms <https://treaties.un.org> very effective

## Possible Solutions

The export and import of firearms around the globe is a problem that continuously leads to violence, crime, and conflict. This problem is best solved when it pursues a correct angle that includes international collaboration, strong legislation, and the use of advanced technologies.

## INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

It is quite important to emphasise the necessity of international cooperation in the process of preventing and fighting against the illicit trafficking of firearms. The UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons is one of the examples of multilateral treaties that offer countries a possibility to work together in decreasing of illicit supply of weapons. Through such treaties the

countries stand to benefit in a way where they can exchange information, practices, as well as funds in order to fight the problem more effectively. It is critical that there is better coordination between the different Police forces within different borders. One can set up common working groups that would coordinate operations connected with the identifying and interdiction of illicit arms transfers. Regional organisations such as INTERPOL prove useful in this regard as they offer a map where the member states can meet often and plan on how they can best fight immunity crime.

## **LEGAL MEASURES**

Countries need to develop and execute efficient legal measures to control the making, sale and use of firearms. This legislation should also correspond to the existing standards, for example Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) that controls the export and import of conventional arms and has the goal to counter and suppress illicit trafficking. Licensing and regulating those who manufacture, sell or intend to own firearms should also be strictly done. By effective background check requirements, record keeping methods, and conducting periodic check and balance, weapons will not leak into the black market. However, one can also opt to regulate the sale of the several parts of firearms as well the ammunition in a bid to reduce the incidences of the unlawful activities. Heavy fines or imprisonment and prohibition of individuals and organisations which engage in peddling of firearms can be effective in preventing the vice. To make sure that these penalties are seriously applied and complied with it is important for sustenance of credibility of the legal systems in place.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENTS**

Therefore it is evident that technological enhancements can greatly improve the trace and tracking of firearms. The implementation of unique identification markers, such as microstamping and RFID chips, can help authorities trace the origins of recovered weapons and identify points of diversion. An important prerequisite for such work is the creation and regular updating of extensive records of firearms and their trafficking. Purchasing state-of-the-art equipment at the entry and exit points such as borders, ports or airports will facilitate the detection of smugglers conveying the firearms. They include X-ray scanners, metal detectors, and chemical detectors used in detecting concealed weapons. It is equally crucial to train personnel to be able to use these technologies in a proper manner.

## **AWARENESS OF THE PUBLIC**

Last but not least, the awareness of the public should be raised regarding the risks associated with firearm trafficking as well as the proper use of firearms. Legal awareness

programs can enlighten the citizens on the legal consequences of possessing forbidden firearms and the need to report any suspicious movement. Many civil society organisations can be enlisted to participate in advocacy for better measures against the sale of guns. These organisations can help in the process of observation of the government actions, help communities affected by these actions, and promote changes in policies at the local, national, and international levels.

## **Bibliography**

### **Useful Links**

This page provides resources and guidelines on combating illicit firearms trafficking globally. (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/firearms-protocol/index.html>)

The ATF offers various resources and programs aimed at curbing firearms trafficking in the United States. (<https://www.atf.gov/firearms/firearms-trafficking>)

Interpol's page on combating illegal firearms includes tools and initiatives to tackle cross-border arms trafficking. (<https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Firearms-trafficking>)

This research group provides in-depth reports and data on small arms and light weapons, including issues related to trafficking. (<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/>)

The EU's strategy and resources aimed at fighting firearms trafficking across its member states. ([https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/firearms-trafficking\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/firearms-trafficking_en))

Practical tips and resources for community-based efforts to prevent illegal gun sales and trafficking.

(<https://www.ncpc.org/resources/gun-violence/firearm-trafficking-prevention/>)

A comprehensive guide on policy recommendations for reducing gun trafficking in the U.S. (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/stop-gun-trafficking/>)

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