CHAPTER 2

Understanding the Trade in Small Arms: Key Concepts

Introduction

The trade in small arms, light weapons, and their parts, accessories, and ammunition involves every country in the world.[16] It includes transfers that are authorized by states and illicit flows of arms that violate national or international law. This chapter provides readers with the background knowledge and key concepts required to understand both aspects of the trade, and the linkages between them.

The authorized trade

The authorized trade in small arms is diverse and dynamic. It includes both new and surplus arms, and affects every geographical region, and every level of society. Military and law-enforcement agencies worldwide buy millions of imported weapons each year. In addition, hunters, recreational shooters, and other individuals privately buy millions of firearms and hundreds of millions of rounds of ammunition. In 2012, the Small Arms Survey estimated the annual value of international small arms transfers at more than USD 8.5 billion (Grzybowski, Marsh, and Schroeder, 2012, p. 241). More recent data suggests that the value of this trade has increased significantly since then (Pavesi, 2016, p. 14).

Despite its size, the authorized international trade in small arms and light weapons remains to a large extent opaque. Only a fraction of the trade is represented in publicly available data, and much of that data is incomplete or vague. Every year, thousands of small arms and light weapons transfers are therefore either inadequately documented or not documented at all, making it difficult to monitor arms transfers to problematic recipients or to identify the accumulation of excessively large weapons stockpiles (Grzybowski, Marsh, and Schroeder, 2012, p. 241).

Types of transfers

Authorized small arms transfers take many forms. From shipments of thousands of weapons purchased by foreign governments to individual rifles packed in the checked luggage of participants in international shooting competitions, these

16 The term 'small arms' is used in this chapter to refer to small arms, light weapons, and their ammunition (as in 'the small arms industry') unless the context indicates otherwise, whereas the terms 'light weapons' and 'ammunition' refer specifically to those items.

transfers are much more diverse than commonly assumed. The Small Arms Survey has identified the following types of transfers, which can be grouped into three main categories:

- **Sales** are the most common type of transfer and consist of exchanges of weapons for money or other commodities.[17] Sales can be further divided into commercial exports and government-to-government exports.[18]
- **Exports of weapons to governments** as part of foreign aid programmes or for use in military training exercises are a second important category of transfers. Arms and ammunition exported as part of foreign aid programmes are often provided at little or no charge. Weapons used in foreign military training exercises are sometimes given to the host country after the exercise.
- **Other categories** of authorized transfers include:
  - shipping weapons from troop-contributing countries to their peacekeeping forces deployed abroad;
  - sending weapons abroad for repair, demilitarization, or at the end of a lease;
  - transporting surplus or obsolete weapons to a foreign country for disposal;
  - temporarily exporting firearms for sporting and hunting purposes.

The transfer chain

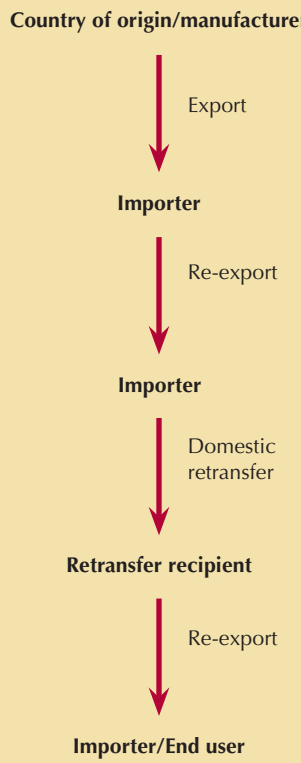
Common to all categories of imports and exports is the transfer chain, a series of transfers and retransfers of small arms that starts with the manufacturer and concludes with the delivery of the transferred item to its new owner or operator, often referred to as an 'end user'. The first link in this chain is the transfer of a newly-produced weapon from the manufacturer to the original recipient. This transfer can be private, commercial, or governmental, and can be foreign or domestic. Any subsequent change of ownership is referred to as a retransfer. Retransfers to international recipients are often referred to as re-exports (if there is a change in ownership), while retransfers to entities in the same country are 'domestic retransfers'.

The transfer chain is often long and circuitous, with exported weapons being transferred and retransferred to several end users over the course of years or decades. Figure 2.1 shows a hypothetical transfer chain.

17 Manufacturers also often ship small quantities of sample weapons to potential buyers as part of marketing efforts. See Dreyfus, Marsh, and Schroeder (2009, p. 9).

18 For more information, see Dreyfus, Marsh, and Schroeder (2009, p. 9, Box 1.1).

Figure 2.1 Example of an arms transfer chain



Authorized but illicit

Most authorized transfers are made in accordance with national and international laws. Yet some transfers may be permitted by the government of the exporting country, but viewed as a violation of international law by other countries and actors. The UN Panel of Experts on Libya and *The New York Times*, for instance, documented transfers of arms from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to forces in Libya between 2013 and 2015, which the UAE government organized without notifying the UN Sanctions Committee, and which therefore violated the arms embargo. The items shipped included pistols that later resurfaced in Libyan black markets (Kirkpatrick, 2015; UNSC, 2015, paras. 125–31). Such examples illustrate the grey areas that exist between the authorized and illicit trade in small arms.

The illicit trade in small arms

The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons occurs in all parts of the globe but tends to be concentrated in areas afflicted by armed conflict, violence, and organized crime, where the demand for illicit weapons is often highest. Illicit arms fuel civil wars and regional conflicts; stock the arsenals of designated terrorist organizations, drug cartels, and other armed groups; and contribute to violent crime and the proliferation of sensitive technology.

The Small Arms Survey defines illicit small arms as 'weapons that are produced, transferred, held, or used in violation of national or international law' (Schroeder, 2013a, p. 284). This definition acknowledges the many different forms

illicit arms flows can take (de Tessières, 2017, pp. 4–5). Three broad categories are reviewed here: the diversion of legal holdings of small arms, the illicit production of firearms, and the recirculation of existing stocks of illicit weapons.

Box 2.1 International efforts to curb illicit arms flows

The problem of illicit arms flows gained increased international attention following UN member states' adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda stresses the connection between sustainable development and 'peaceful and inclusive societies' in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, and calls for a significant reduction in illicit arms flows by 2030 in SDG Target 16.4 (UNGA, 2015). How to achieve such a reduction? Above all, by implementing the arms control instruments adopted since the late 1990s at the subregional, regional, and global levels, and given practical effect in the national laws and regulations of participating governments (McDonald, Alvazzi del Frate, and Ben Hamo Yeger, 2017).

To varying degrees, these instruments cover the small arms and light weapons life cycle from manufacture to final disposal or destruction. They aim, first and foremost, to strengthen control over legal weapons throughout their life cycle to prevent them from being diverted into the illicit market; such diversion is the primary source of illicit weapons worldwide. Instruments such as the UN Firearms Protocol (UNGA, 2001a), the UN Small Arms Programme of Action (UNGA, 2001b), and the Arms Trade Treaty (UNGA, 2013a) thus require governments to assess and reduce diversion risks before authorizing an international arms transfer, employing measures such as end-user certification and brokering controls. At the same time, instruments such as the Programme of Action address the potential diversion of weapons and ammunition from state security force stockpiles, another major source of illicit material, through stockpile management and security measures.

As this chapter notes, a small but still significant portion of the illicit weapons market derives from illicit production. For this reason, the UN Firearms Protocol and Programme of Action require states to regulate arms manufacture and criminalize unauthorized weapons production. A related type of illicit arms flow mentioned in this chapter, the recirculation within illicit markets of weapons that were already illicit, is addressed through counter-trafficking measures that include the identification and interception of illicit arms shipments at border crossings.

The multilateral arms control instruments typically recommend that seized illicit weapons be destroyed in order to prevent them being diverted back into the illicit market, as sometimes occurs. Whatever form of disposal is selected, however, seized weapons need to be uniquely marked—if they do not already possess such markings—and recorded to reduce diversion risks and detect cases of diversion when they occur.

The International Tracing Instrument (UNGA, 2005), another global arms control instrument, establishes common international rules for weapons marking, record-keeping, and international cooperation. These aim to allow law enforcement officials to follow a recovered weapon's history from the time of its manufacture (or of its last legal importation) to the point at which it was diverted into the illicit market. Law enforcement agencies can then identify and disrupt sources of illicit arms supply. A critical diagnostic tool, weapons tracing rounds out the international arms control arsenal outlined in this box, which, if effectively implemented, will allow governments to reduce illicit arms flows over time.

Author: Glenn McDonald

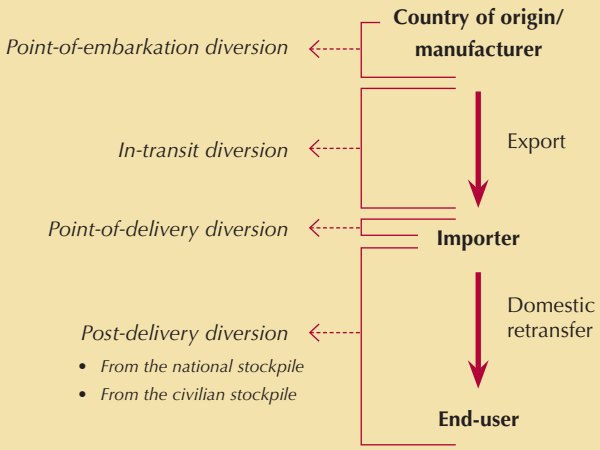
Diversion of legal holdings

Most illicit small arms are legally-produced weapons that are diverted to armed groups, criminals, and other unauthorized users at some point during their (often lengthy) life span. Yet the term 'diversion' is not clearly defined in international legal instruments. Experts generally refer to diversion not simply as the movement of arms from the legal to the illicit sphere, but rather as the unauthorized change in possession or use of these weapons (Parker, 2016, p. 118). Three main patterns of diversion are presented below.

Transfer diversion

A transfer diversion occurs when weapons are lost, stolen, or deliberately retransferred to a recipient who is not officially authorized to receive the weapons, or when the recipient violates end use agreements. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, transfer diversion can take place at most points along the transfer chain: in the country of origin (point of embarkation); en route to the intended end user (in transit); at the time of or shortly after delivery to the declared recipient (point of delivery); or some time after importation (post-delivery) (Schroeder, Close, and Stevenson, 2008, p. 115).

Figure 2.2 Points of potential diversion in a typical transfer chain



Some transfer diversions are planned and executed across several stages of the transfer chain. This is particularly true of diversions that occur in-transit or at the point of delivery. The measures necessary to divert weapons while they are in transit are often taken long before the ship or aircraft carrying the weapons leaves the port or airport of origin. Most in-transit and point-of-delivery diversions involve transportation by air or sea. Aircraft and ships that are used in major in-transit and point-of-delivery diversions are typically registered under flags of convenience, meaning they are registered in a state other than that of their owner, often in order to reduce operating costs or avoid regulations in the owner's own state. Such vessels tend to be owned by offshore shell companies that frequently change their names and shift their locations and assets from country to country (Schroeder, Close, and Stevenson, 2008, p. 115).

Another key feature of transfer diversion is the use—or misuse—of documentation. Traffickers may forge transfer documents, such as end-user certificates, bills of lading, and flight plans, to include false information about the shipment or the parties involved. Alternatively, diversion may involve corrupt government officials who sign authentic transfer documents (Schroeder, Close, and Stevenson, 2008, p. 118).

Other transfer diversion techniques that are commonly used by arms traffickers in some parts of the world include:

- falsifying shipping documents, including commodity descriptions and personal information about the shipper and recipient;
- undervaluing illicit shipments of small arms to minimize scrutiny by customs officials;
- using circuitous routing and multiple transhipment points to conceal the destination of illicit shipments bound for countries of concern;
- scratching off, or painting over, serial numbers and other identifying markings on weapons and ammunition;
- disassembling weapons, mislabelling storage containers, and concealing illicit items within or behind household goods, building materials, and machinery; and
- using shell companies and straw purchasers to hide the identities of traffickers and their links to the illicit shipment.

Diversion from the national stockpile

Arms and ammunition can also be diverted from a stockpile under the control of a state's defence and security forces (called the 'national stockpile'). Weak oversight and poor physical security measures facilitate several forms of diversion of national stockpiles, including theft by personnel and by external actors as well as battlefield loss and capture.

National stockpiles are not usually held permanently in any one place. They are often relocated from one military base to another in response to patterns of deployment, changing demand, and the need for repairs or alterations (Parker, 2016, pp. 120–21). As a result, the possible points of diversion are numerous and include storage sites, convoys transporting equipment, and security personnel carrying the weapons on duty. Diversion affects all national and security forces, including those operating abroad in the context of peace operations (see Box 2.2).

Box 2.2 Diversion of arms and ammunition in peace operations

Around 110,000 police and military personnel are currently deployed as United Nations peacekeepers (known as Blue Helmets) in 14 UN peacekeeping operations (UNDPKO, 2018). Between 2004 and 2014 there were at least 35 notable incidents of diversion or loss of weapons and ammunition during peacekeeping operations in these countries. The Small Arms Survey estimates that losses during these incidents totalled more than 750 weapons and 1.2 million rounds of ammunition (Small Arms Survey, n.d.a). These incidents, each of which involved the loss of more than ten weapons or more than 500 rounds of ammunition, have occurred during patrols, during attacks on convoys, and on fixed sites.

In the notable incidents documented in South Sudan and Sudan alone, a total of more than 500 weapons and more than 750,000 rounds of ammunition were seized. These items include handguns, self-loading rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, and mortars, as well as the ammunition for these weapons. A single such incident resulted in the loss of more than 500,000 rounds of ammunition. Four others probably involved losses of at least 10,000 cartridges. Very little equipment lost during these attacks has been recovered.

Accurate information is difficult to obtain, as there is imperfect reporting and record-keeping, and a noticeable reluctance to share bad news. Additionally, when weapons are recovered by peacekeepers in cordon and search operations, engagements with hostile forces, or raids on arms caches, there is rarely any systematic record-keeping. Some items are returned to the armed group from which they were taken, some are redistributed to local authorities, and others are destroyed or retained for safekeeping. The diversion of such weapons often goes unreported. Future diversions could be prevented by improved record-keeping, reporting, and oversight.

Sources: Based on Berman and Racovita (2015) and Berman, Racovita, and Schroeder (2017), with updated data from Small Arms Survey Peace Operations Data Set (PODS) (Small Arms Survey, n.d.a) and UNDPKO (2018)

The volume of diverted equipment can vary greatly depending on the type of incident. At the lower end of the spectrum is the theft of relatively minor quantities of weapons and ammunition by individuals and small groups of people. It may occur at all levels of the national stockpile, but is generally characterized by its links to localized illicit trade rather than to regional or international transfers. The problem is largely a result of local demand factors combined with poor stockpile management. It is often facilitated by the concealability and portability of small arms (Bevan, 2008, p. 47).

National stockpile diversion can also involve the theft of larger volumes of arms and ammunition, sometimes consisting of many hundreds of tonnes of weaponry. It is often facilitated by poor stockpile management practices, but in many cases it results from factors that are much broader than the management of arms and ammunition *per se*. Weak state structures, a lack of accountability within political and military administrations, and associated loopholes in transfer regulations sometimes combine to provide some highly placed individuals with the opportunity to divert weapons (Bevan, 2008, p. 56). However, in many significant cases of loss, such as Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, it is primarily conflict and the ensuing collapse of state institutions that leads to mass looting of the national stockpile.

Diversion from the civilian stockpile

The 'civilian stockpile' comprises arms and ammunition acquired and held by a broad array of individuals and organizations, ranging from firearm manufacturers and wholesalers to gun shops and hunters. Diversion from any one of these locales has the potential to contribute to unlawful use, armed crime, and violence (Bevan, 2008, p. 62). In particular, the diversion of civilian-owned weapons and ammunition can be a significant source of weapons that are used in crime, including in the poaching of protected wildlife (see Box 2.3).

At one end of the spectrum are arms and ammunition that are inadequately stored in homes and vehicles. Weapons diverted from these sources often enter the illicit market as a by-product of other illegal activity, such as residential burglaries and theft from automobiles. At the other end of the spectrum are the relatively large quantities of weapons held in gun shops and wholesale warehouses, which are often attractive targets for organized crime. These cases can in some instances be a source of arms and ammunition for insurgent groups (Bevan, 2008, pp. 62–63).

Box 2.3 Firearms used in elephant and rhino poaching in Africa

Military-style firearms and relatively powerful hunting rifles are commonly used to poach elephants and rhinos in Africa (Carlson, Wright, and Dönges, 2015), and the impact of poaching on wildlife populations is considerable. Findings from a 2016 continent-wide census indicate that African elephant populations are decreasing at a rate of eight per cent, roughly 27,000 per year (Steyn, 2016). In 2015, more than 1,330 rhinos were killed by poachers—about five per cent of Africa's total rhino population—marking the sixth consecutive increase in annual rhino poaching rates (IUCN, 2016).

An investigation of rhino poaching in Southern Africa highlights the potential benefits of tracing firearms to mitigate their illicit use. In South Africa, Kruger National Park (KNP) has the highest rhino poaching rate in the world; among the weapons seized from poachers in KNP are Mauser, Winchester, and Brno brand hunting rifles. Poaching groups in KNP typically operate in small teams of five or six people, and records of poaching arrests infer that roughly 80 per cent of poachers there are Mozambican nationals (Serino, 2015). Poaching rates in KNP increased from 50 incidents in 2009 to 827 recorded rhino kills in 2014 (Poaching Facts, 2018).

Strikingly, imports of hunting rifles to Mozambique increased at nearly an identical rate over the same four-year period. United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade) data reveals that the Czech Republic is among the major exporters of hunting rifles to Mozambique, and that it is also the place where the CZ Brno 550 rifle—increasingly popular with Mozambican poachers—is manufactured (UNSD, n.d.c). While the implications of a direct link between Mozambican hunting rifle imports and KNP rhino kill rates would be significant, more needs to be learned of possible correlations by matching seized weapons' serial numbers with registration records in Mozambique and, potentially, with import and export records.

In some poaching areas, it is more difficult to identify and trace weapons used to kill wildlife. In Central Africa, for example, where armed groups including militias, rebel groups, and state security forces have conducted large scale elephant poaching, weapons seizures are less frequent than in places such as KNP, where poaching teams are smaller. However, an analysis of the headstamps of cartridge cases found at elephant kill sites can provide clues to which armed groups are poaching, or where they are sourcing their ammunition. Past investigations into fired cartridge cases recovered from kill sites in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have uncovered links to Sudanese government stores (Vira and Ewing, 2014), suggesting the possibility of access to common ammunition supply channels by poachers operating across a broad geographic region.

Many anti-poaching units are ill-equipped to confront the increasingly advanced firepower wielded by poachers in their pursuit of ivory and rhino horn. Unfortunately, systems to trace ammunition found at elephant kill sites often do not exist or are underutilized. When data on seized firearms is collected, it often contains little more than the total number of seized weapons, missing useful information about the types of weapons or their markings. These data gaps hinder efforts to improve understanding of supply chains and emergent patterns of poachers' weapons and ammunition usage. More and better data—such as data collected by applying the principles outlined in this Handbook—would improve anti-poaching policies and assist governments to better equip and prepare wildlife rangers and other front-line defenders to fight the scourge of poaching.

Author: Khristopher Carlson, based on Carlson, Wright, and Dönges (2015)

Illicit production of small arms

While most small arms and light weapons are legally produced, there are notable exceptions to the rule. Weapons produced by individuals or small groups, typically operating outside of state control, as well as replica and deactivated firearms that are modified to function as real firearms, represent additional sources of illicit arms flows.

Craft production[19]

The term 'craft production' refers mainly to weapons and ammunition that are fabricated primarily by hand, and in relatively small quantities. Improvised and craft-produced weapons are addressed in Chapter 6 of this Handbook. This type of production may sometimes be overseen and regulated by government authorities; an example of this is the production of high-end sporting firearms by skilled artisans. Most weaponry of this type, however, is made outside state control, or with limited oversight. These weapons may subsequently be used against government targets or in other criminal activity.

Improvised and craft-produced small arms and light weapons vary in quality from crude, improvised single-shot guns to semi-professionally manufactured copies of conventional firearms. Improvised and craft-produced weapons are made in sizeable quantities in states with significant authorized small arms manufacturing capabilities as well as in countries without significant domestic production capabilities.

The craft production of firearms has a long tradition in several parts of the world. In West Africa, for example, the practice is widespread, with blacksmiths producing a range of small arms. So-called 'Daneguns' (see Chapter 6), which are especially popular in Nigeria and Ghana, are based on 19th century European designs. In Pakistan, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is home to numerous workshops that craft produce small arms. In Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have produced copies of Italian semi-automatic pistols and US sub-machine guns.

Ammunition for small arms and light weapons is also improvised and craft produced (see Chapter 6). Reloading ammunition—that is, reusing cartridge cases to

19 This section is adapted from Berman (2011) and Hays and Jenzen-Jones (2018).

produce finished cartridges—is a popular pastime for hobbyists, who are sometimes known as handloaders. Reloading is usually practised on a small scale, with the ammunition intended for personal use. Evidence suggests that reloading ammunition is conducted on a much bigger scale in parts of Pakistan and elsewhere, however, where it is often intended for retail sale.

Several armed groups have developed the capacity to make light weapons. Mortars seem to be the most commonly produced type, as they are relatively easy to produce and store, and can often be fabricated from readily available materials. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), for example, manufactured numerous mortar designs, often featuring delay or remote-control mechanisms (Oppenheimer, 2008). More sophisticated light weapons are also craft produced, including grenade launchers and recoilless weapons. Various Palestinian armed groups, for example, produce large quantities of light weapons such as single-launch rockets, while in the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front has made copies of the Soviet RPG-2 recoilless weapon and the US M79 grenade launcher. In the Iraqi city of Mosul, non-state armed group Islamic State (IS) developed the production of mortars and rockets on an industrial scale (Conflict Armament Research, 2016, p. 7).

One of the most common craft-produced weapons is the improvised explosive device (IED). These are often made from commercially available and relatively inexpensive materials such as ammonium nitrate, acetone, hydrogen peroxide, and potassium chlorate. The charge and booster are often taken from artillery shells, mortar bombs, or other conventional ammunition. IEDs are not generally considered light weapons and are not covered in this Handbook.

Converted and 'reactivated' weapons[20]

Firearms conversion involves modifying an imitation or deactivated firearm to fire live ammunition.[21] Converted firearms may be based on blank-firing firearms (sometimes called 'alarm guns'), air guns, or even toy guns. Deactivated firearms—genuine firearms that have been rendered inoperable (that is, incapable of expelling a projectile)—may also be converted in a similar fashion.

The conversion changes the nature of the device so that it functions as—and meets the definition of—a real firearm. Converting a replica or deactivated firearm

20 Section authored by Benjamin King, based on King (2015) and Florquin and King (2018).

21 Converted and 'reactivated' firearms are addressed in Chapter 6 of this Handbook.

essentially involves removing the barriers to normal firearm functionality put in place by manufacturers or deactivating authorities.

Those who purchase converted firearms do so to use them for self-defence, but also for criminal purposes (Jenzen-Jones and McCollum, 2017, p. 29). Converted firearms are relatively easy to find and are affordable: even after their conversion, they can cost as little as ten per cent of the price of real pistols and revolvers (King, 2015, p. 8). Moreover, converted firearms carry the added value of being generally less traceable than real guns, as some countries do not subject readily convertible imitation and deactivated firearms to the same registration and licensing restrictions as real firearms. As a result, smugglers typically purchase readily convertible weapons legally in countries where they are sold with few restrictions, before smuggling and converting them for illicit use in locations where firearm laws are stricter.

These characteristics have contributed to the worldwide proliferation of converted firearms in recent years. European states were the first to report the problem in the late 1990s. The use of converted firearms in criminal incidents appears to be particularly high in countries that ban, or heavily restrict, civilian possession of real pistols and revolvers, such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (de Vries, 2011, p. 214; Hales, Lewis, and Silverstone, 2006, p. 7). Overall, at least 19 European states have reported confiscating converted blank-firing firearms. Reactivated firearms have also been used in some high-profile attacks, including the January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.

The proliferation of converted imitation firearms in particular is also significant in the Middle East and North Africa. Turkey is a major manufacturer of blank-firing firearms, including several popular brands: Atak Zoraki, Ekol/Voltran, Blow, and Target Technologies (King, 2015, p. 4). Over the past six years, authorities in several countries have seized multiple large shipments of Turkish-made replica firearms en route to Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Kenya, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (King, 2015, p. 8).

Recirculation of illicit weapons

In addition to diverted legal holdings and illicitly produced firearms, existing stockpiles of illicit weapons represent another source of illicit arms flows. In fact, in a number of conflict zones, weapons and ammunition designed, manufactured,

and distributed decades earlier—specifically in the context of cold war proxy arming—are still in use (Florquin, 2014, pp. 2–3).

A review of arms caches recovered in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2011, Iraq in 2008 and 2009, and Somalia from 2004 to 2011 revealed that the vast majority of seized small arms were AK-type rifles—the same patterns of rifles that have been used by governments and armed groups in these countries for decades (Schroeder and King, 2012, p. 314). These older models of firearms are also commonly available for sale at local open-air and undercover illicit markets, such as those documented by the Small Arms Survey in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Somalia (Florquin, 2013).

Perhaps more surprising, given its consumable nature, small-calibre ammunition produced during the cold war is still circulating widely in conflict areas. A review of 560 varieties of such ammunition documented since 2010 in seven conflict zones in Africa and Syria found that more than half of the identified types of ammunition had been produced before 1990 (Florquin and Leff, 2014, p. 189). Moreover, the age of small-calibre ammunition does not appear to greatly affect its price on the illicit markets of Lebanon, Pakistan, and Somalia (Florquin, 2013, p. 263).

While some ageing weapons and ammunition used in conflicts may have been diverted recently from legal, old surplus stockpiles, there is also evidence of the recirculation of illicit weapons between armed groups, sometimes spanning decades. This is the case in the conflict in the eastern DRC, where enduring armed groups such as the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) have acquired weapons from a variety of state and non-state armed forces, both forcibly and through alliances, since the 1990s (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, pp. 199–204).

Conclusion

While the arms shipments arranged by high-profile arms brokers generally capture the headlines, the arms trade is an immensely complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that is often far less sensational in nature. Authorized international transfers take many forms, ranging from temporary exports of a single firearm for use in shooting competitions to the permanent transfer of thousands of weapons to militaries and police forces. The legal domestic trade is equally diverse.

Government arms depots in countries with large and active armed forces often contain a broad array of small arms and light weapons, while armouries in smaller countries that only have constabulary forces may contain few if any light weapons. Civilian markets tend to be more limited since most governments ban (or severely limit) the possession of light weapons by civilians. The types of firearms that can be legally purchased for hunting, sport-shooting, and self-defence vary significantly from country to country, however.

The illicit arms trade mirrors the authorized trade: the vast majority of small arms and light weapons on the black market were legally produced and owned before they were diverted to unauthorized recipients. There are exceptions, of course, such as those weapons which are improvised, craft produced, or converted. But even most craft-produced small arms and light weapons are assembled from components that are acquired from legal markets. Like the authorized trade, illicit arms flows vary significantly over time and from region to region. The types and sources of illicit weapons in one country are often completely different from those in another country, and there are sometimes even differences from region to region. These differences are explained by numerous factors, including—but not limited to—the types of weapons and ammunition available from local and regional sources, and the resources and objectives of illicit end users. Accurately researching and reporting on arms and ammunition therefore requires a nuanced understanding of the weapons identification process and the sources of data on authorized and illicit arms flows.

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