Living With Weapons:
SMALL ARMS IN YEMEN

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Yemen has a public, rather than private, weapons culture.

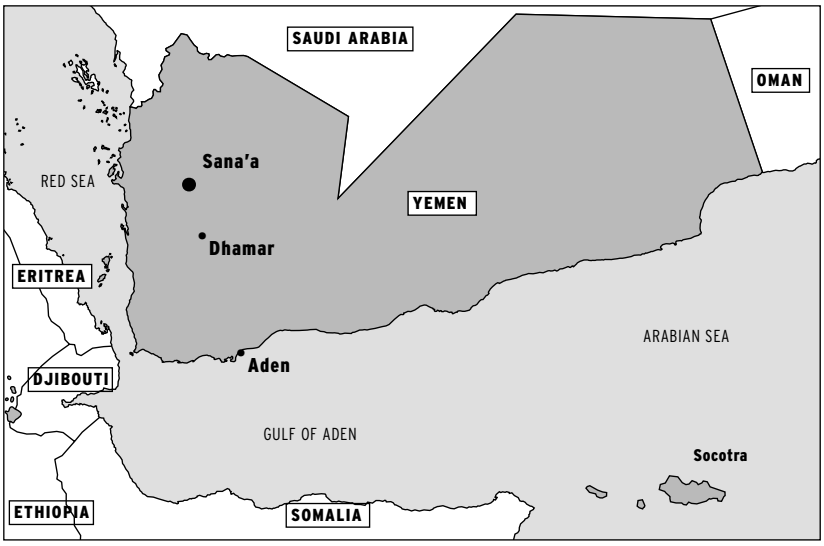
This chapter examines the prominence of weapons in Yemeni life and describes some of the contexts in which they are held and used. The Yemeni case provides an opportunity both to study a heavily-armed society's customs and controls, and to broaden our understanding of the relationship between people and their demand for small arms.

Weapons are an ordinary feature of Yemeni life, and personal weapons can range from small daggers to artillery.

Personal weapons play an integral role in the social and symbolic life of many Yemeni men. However, the commonly repeated figure of 50 million small arms and light weapons in the country is a significant over-estimate. Even though there is no hard data on the exact numbers of weapons in circulation, results gained by using deductive methods based on participatory research place the figure at between six and nine million. The estimate produced here suggests approximately 40 weapons per 100 people. Thus Yemen should still be considered heavily-armed, but it is not at the top of the ranking of states. In the United States, for example, the prevalence of small arms is approaching one weapon per person.

Despite the large small arms stockpile, demand for additional weapons persists and continues to be met by importers. Most small arms appear to be imported legally from foreign suppliers, including Argentina, Brazil, China, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and the United States. Ammunition is known to be supplied by various countries, including Brazil, China, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Philippines, Poland, the Russian Federation, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Map 5.1 Yemen and its neighbours



In Yemeni life, tribal rules of behaviour, more than civil law, are the main determinants of weapons possession, use, and the consequences of use. Informed but not overruled by the moderating influence of Islam, tribal law is a major socialising factor that determines the usually unwritten rules about intra- and inter-tribal relations regarding weapons use. Indeed, state law is considered largely ineffectual and somehow antagonistic to tribal traditions,

and therefore often scorned or ignored. Instruction for the future is largely derived from the past, from where Yemenis seek principles for the perpetuation and stabilization of social life. This implies that researchers should not look to state law to understand the rules that govern Yemeni life but rather to communal life and tradition. It further implies that the source of social rules for small arms use is in the lessons taught by the tribe to its members and parents to their children.

Weapons play a role as actual instruments used in conflict, but also as a statement about identity.

Insights gained into the root causes of the stability of Yemeni society also demonstrate that the demand for small arms is not an automatic reaction to fears of insecurity, the effects of poverty, or even the politics of exclusion. Instead, the demand for small arms is grounded in local belief systems that are part and parcel of the political and social order. In Yemen, weapons demand is a result of unique, deeply rooted identities and values. To understand the relationship of men to their weapons is to explore the foundations of Yemeni society.

Despite the great number of highly lethal small arms in Yemen, the level of armed crime appears to be relatively low, although evidence is accumulating that violent crime is rising and taking new forms, including kidnapping people for money, serial killing, seemingly random killings, and breaches of traditional sanctuary rules. The slow but accelerating process of urbanization in Yemen may explain the rising crime rates, though this has not yet been demonstrated. But it is clear that, as people move to the cities, their bonds with their tribes and communities are weakened, leading to fewer social controls on their behaviour.

The primary reasons for the apparently low levels of criminal violence in Yemen—as distinct from intra- or inter-communal violence—is the strong and central role of tribal values in Yemeni life, moderated and refined by Islamic law and spiritual teachings. Violence, in Yemeni life, is a deliberate act of the community. Though conflicts do sometimes get out of hand, this is frowned upon. Instead, killings within and among tribes may be laboriously decided through clear social rules.

The chapter suggests that there is a great need to more closely explore the role that weapons play in the life of different communities around the world. By understanding why people possess and use weapons as they do in different societies and cultures—what they use them for, what they signify, and what they communicate to their owners and to others—matters of stockpiling, concepts of security, and the possibilities of reducing or controlling misuse come into better focus for policy-makers. Such efforts will enable donors, implementing agencies and local community actors to devise more legitimate, sustainable, and useful programmes around the world.

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Weapon sales from the back of a truck.