

Captured and Counted

ILLICIT WEAPONS IN MEXICO AND THE PHILIPPINES

The massive cache of weapons seized in the border town of Reynosa, Mexico, could easily have been mistaken for the arsenal of a well-equipped infantry battalion: hundreds of assault rifles, sub-machine guns, sniper rifles, grenades, and grenade launchers along with thousands of rounds of ammunition. The weapons—discovered during the pursuit of a high-ranking drug cartel member in November 2008—are illustrative of Mexico's thriving black market in small arms and light weapons, which is dominated by the country's powerful and well-financed drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs). Fuelled by billions of dollars in drug revenue each year, the cartels are among the best-funded non-state armed groups in the world.

Some firearms identified as 'weapons of choice' may not be as widespread as commonly assumed.

There is little disagreement that the arsenals built with these funds are vast, but their precise composition and the sources of their contents are subjects of much debate. Do the DTOs have the 'wealth and armies of nations', as some claim? Does their wealth afford them access to weapons that are unavailable to armed groups of lesser means? Are there notable differences between the weapons acquired by the profit-motivated Mexican DTOs and those obtained by groups in other countries whose ambitions are more ideological or political? This chapter attempts to answer these and other questions through data-driven analysis of illicit small arms and light weapons in countries affected by high-intensity organized criminal violence and low-intensity armed conflict, namely Mexico and the Philippines.

The main findings from this chapter include:

- Armed groups in Mexico and the Philippines have acquired few, if any, technologically sophisticated light weapons, such as portable missiles.
- Nearly 90 per cent of illicit rifles seized in the Philippines were US-designed models.



An army soldier catalogues seized weapons in a warehouse at the Secretary of the Defence headquarters in Mexico City, Mexico, April 2009.
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Table 12.1 Illicit weapons recovered by the Mexican military, 2009–12

Weapon category	Quantity	Percentage of total
Firearms*	4,200	80%
Grenades and grenade launchers**	985	19%
Rockets	16	<1%
Mortar systems and rounds	10	<1%
RPG launchers and rounds	7	<1%
Improvised explosive devices	2	<1%
Landmines	0	0%
Recoilless rifles and rounds	0	0%
Portable missiles (MANPADS and ATGWs)	0	0%
Total	5,220	100%

Notes:

* Includes all firearms and major accessories for firearms.

** This category includes hand grenades, projected grenades and launchers, rifle grenades, and other (unspecified) grenades, but not rocket-propelled grenades or launchers.

- Despite their vast wealth, drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico do not possess the full array of light weapons available to governments and some state-sponsored armed groups.
- The data suggests that some firearms identified as ‘weapons of choice’ of drug traffickers in Mexico are not as widespread as commonly assumed. These include .50-calibre rifles and 5.7 mm × 28 mm pistols, which combined account for less than 1 per cent of all seized firearms studied.
- The data provides little clarity on the proximate sources, age, condition, and intrastate and international movements of illicit weapons. More data on these aspects would significantly improve public understanding of black market weapons in Mexico and the Philippines.

The chapter is the second instalment of the Small Arms Survey’s multi-year study on illicit small arms and light weapons. The purpose of the study, launched in 2012, is to improve public understanding of illicit small arms and light weapons through the compilation and analysis of hitherto unavailable or underutilized data from official (government) sources. During the first phase of the study, reported in the *Small Arms Survey 2012*, the Survey analysed data on illicit small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons ammunition in three high-intensity armed conflict zones: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.

Armed groups in Mexico and the Philippines have acquired few, if any, portable missiles.

The focus of the current phase is on illicit weapons in countries affected by high-intensity organized criminal violence and low-intensity armed conflict. To this end, the Survey collected data on more than 5,000 illicit small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons seized in Mexico, which is home to some of the largest and most powerful organized criminal syndicates in the world, and approximately 1,000 weapons seized in the Philippines, where several ideologically, politically, and religiously motivated armed groups are active.

The data reveals several similarities and differences between the weapons seized in Mexico and the Philippines. In both countries, the majority of seized weapons were firearms, which accounted for 80 per cent of small arms and light weapons seized in Mexico (see Table 12.1) and 69 per cent of weapons recovered in the Philippines. Also notable is the apparent absence of portable missiles or latest-generation light weapons. No man-portable air defence systems or anti-tank guided weapons are listed among the seized weapons, nor is there any mention of thermobaric or tandem HEAT infantry rockets. ■