

ISSUE DESCRIPTION

COMMITTEE Disarmament and International Security Committee
ISSUE Combating and Preventing Illicit Arms Trade
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Introduction

The laws regulating the trade of arms are outlined in the Arms Trade Treaty of 2014, including 113 member states. There are three main categories of arms trade: legal or regulated transfers, illicit grey-market transfers, and illegal black-market transfers. Grey-market transfers include transfers made by a country finding loopholes in laws and regulations, while black-market trades are “in clear violation of ” laws. Illegal arms trade between extremist groups has a negative effect on the population of the areas involved. Many have to flee or sell their properties in order to find a better life or protect their families.

Major parties include some African countries often referred to as Sahel countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

There are countries or regions where the possession of a gun (with a license) is legal, for example, in the United States where Federal Firearm Licensees can lawfully own guns. However, because of vague laws and the greatness of the web of dealers, it is difficult to crack down on illegal trade. In 2022, the Safer Communities Act was passed by Congress and since then the government has been working on closing loopholes that have been repeatedly exploited by dealers.

Definition of Key Terms

License - A document that allows the holder to purchase, sell, and use firearms.

Civil war - A war between citizens of the same country.

Dark Web - A special part of the World Wide Web that is only accessible with special software that allows users and operators to remain anonymous.

Illicit arms trade - The trade of arms on the so-called “grey market” by finding loopholes in laws and regulations.

Illegal arms trade - The trade of arms that is in clear violation of laws and regulations.

Embargo - An official ban on trade or other commercial activities with a particular country.

Federal Firearm Licensees (FFL) - People in the US with a license to carry a firearm.

General Overview

THE HISTORY OF ILLICIT AND ILLEGAL ARMS TRADE

The first agreement for international arms trade was created in the 16th and 17th centuries when Europe began opening up and trading with America and Africa. Due to the Industrial Revolution, technologies developed rapidly which also resulted in more advanced weapons that were traded across the world.

All countries wanted to produce the most technologically advanced weapons, and this arms race eventually contributed to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. During the war, American arms exports increased rapidly from \$40 million in 1914 to \$2.3 billion in 1918. The interwar period saw a number of smaller conflicts and civil wars, when, notably Greece, started illegitimate arms transfers to Germany.

The Cold War period saw intense competition between the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR. Throughout this time, both countries provided their allies with armaments and aid in proxy wars and also exported to Iran, Libya, and Egypt.

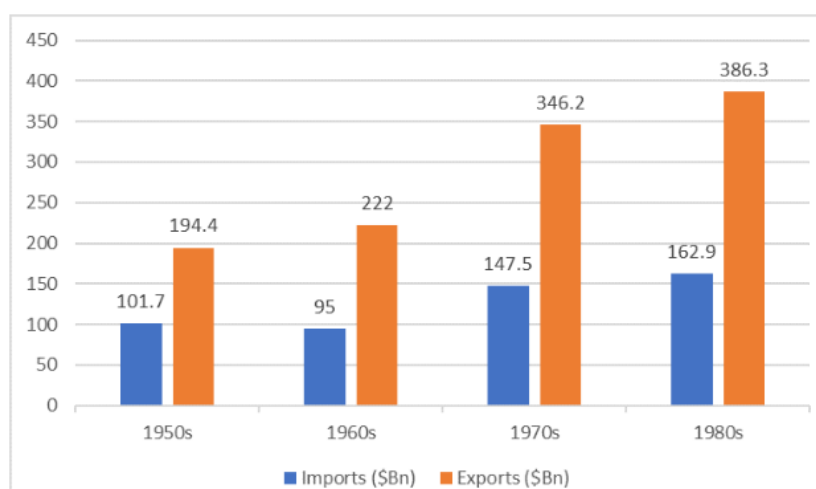


Figure 1: total of the top ten importing and exporting countries by decade (in \$ billions)

Countries may export arms for a number of reasons; they export to allies for protection, for reasons of internal or international politics, or to support an ally in a conflict. However, legal trade can easily become illicit because of differences in state policy; while some countries allow certain transfers, others may not. However, the Arms Trade Treaty clearly forbids the export of arms “in violation of United Nations Security Council embargoes or international agreements”, so when a country breaks such agreements, that is when illicit trade becomes illegal trade.

ILLEGAL AND ILLICIT ARMS TRADE IN EUROPE

Illegal arms trade is mostly under the control of organised crime groups and the market for firearms is limited. Most groups trade arms for supplementary income and do not rely on the profits they make. In addition, most firearms are intended for personal use and not targeted attacks. However, the EU has set up an organisation, the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats, EMPACT, to fight organised crime within the EU by focusing on 10 major topics in the period of 2022-2025.

The main origins of trafficked weapons and crime groups are the Balkans and the territories that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. The main sources of the weapons are burglaries, embezzlement of legal arms, and the selling of legal arms on the dark web.

There are multiple organisations within the EU that support Member States. Europol is an organisation that helps the cooperation between Member States and also individual countries in dealing with illegal trade. The European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) helps member states by sharing information on illegal trade in the context of anti-terrorism. The European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) is working to assess the connection between illegal migration and illegal arms trade and trafficking.

ILLEGAL AND ILLICIT ARMS TRADE IN AFRICA

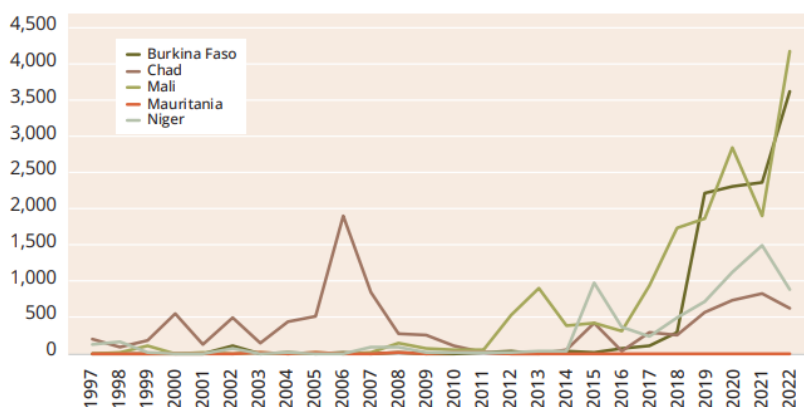
The Sahel region in Africa is the main hub for illegal arms trade and is made up of five countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. The weak governments and governmental controls allow for criminal groups in the region to fight among themselves for power. This in turn results in the suffering of the 300 million people also living in the region. Many farmers and herders have taken up arms to protect their animals and self-defence militias are being legalised in many of the Sahel countries. This means that civilians can carry arms, mostly without a license, which has been complicating formulating of regulations and laws. In addition, because

of the danger of non-governmental organised groups, traders have also started using arms for personal protection as well as the protection of goods.

Even though there is some evidence of arms traffic from France and Turkey, most are still produced and traded within Africa (trade from Libya has expanded since 2019). Markets are located in smaller towns and where there is “low state presence” and the trade of arms usually means the exchange of them in “opportunistic ways”. Because most of the conflicts in the Sahel are caused by ethnic tensions, the trade of arms also often relies on a partnership between certain ethnicities and groups.

There is evidence of a connection between violent extremist groups and weapon trafficking. For example, all nine individuals arrested in 2015 in Niger, caught while transporting a large shipment of “weapons, ammunition and cash”, were affiliated with a terrorist group. However, the connection between the two groups is not that strong and rather works on a client-seller basis.

FIG 1. Number of fatalities in the Sahel countries per year, 1997-2022



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January 1997 and 17 November 2022.

Figure 2: fatalities in the Sahel countries per year, 1997-2022

ILLEGAL AND ILLICIT ARMS TRADE IN NORTH AMERICA

The United States’ underground market for arms plays an important role in both Canadian and Mexican armed violence. These three countries are interconnected concerning gun violence and the illegal trafficking of arms. The illegal trade of arms is also connected with the trade of drugs; the rise in gun violence on the west coast of Canada was later connected to Mexican drug markets. The trade of guns between these three countries is especially profitable, as while Mexico and Canada have strict rules on firearms, this is not so strictly regulated in the US.

In the US, it is legal to carry a firearm with a license, and it is estimated that one in four American adults own at least one gun. The production, export, and import of arms are closely regulated, as all guns must have firearms and all transactions must be overseen by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). In addition, trade can only be completed by federally licensed dealers (FFLs). However, most transfers do not involve an FFL but are rather exchanges between individuals, a type of trade that is “outside the scope of federal regulations”.

It is important to note that there is no consensus between the different policies and laws a state may make. In some states, regulations are more stringent as opposed to others which makes it difficult to regulate trade on a national level.

Major Parties Involved

Sahel countries: There is a so-called “trafficking web” across the Sahel region in Africa, mainly involving the countries Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

France: France is involved in arms trafficking to the Sahel region.

Russia: While Russia was the largest exporter of arms to Africa (2017-21), due to the war in Ukraine, all of its resources are directed to that region. This will result in an estimated 26% loss in profits.

Syria: Received arms from the USA for the civil war efforts in 2011. In Northern Syria, a license is not required to buy firearms, therefore, informal trade is booming.

Iraq: The lack of control over military storage and imports has resulted in increasing illicit arms trade and violence (especially connected to the Islamic State (IS))

Türkiye: Türkiye together with France, connected to arms trade with the Sahel region.

United States of America: As it is legal in the USA to possess a firearm (with a permit), there has been a problem over the years of controlling the trafficking of firearms especially on the dark web.

United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT): An institute within the UN that “leads and coordinates” approaches and actions to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA): An institute within the UN that is working towards complete international disarmament and also addresses the humanitarian impact of new technologies.

Human Rights Watch (HRW): A non-governmental organisation that aims to investigate and report human rights violations around the world.

Timeline of Events

16th-17th century - European traders laid down the foundation of the international arms trade by starting to ship arms to Africa, America, and Asia as well.

1600s - the formation of the East India Company. This organisation allowed for arms to be sold and traded around the world and played an important role in the expansion of the British Empire. The company itself was a “mass purchaser of firearms”.

18th-19th century - The Industrial Revolution brings about more sophisticated technology and more developed weapons.

1914-1918 - World War One accelerated weapons development as the countries grappled to defeat each other. In addition, trade increased because countries exported to their allies.

1947-1991 - The Cold War saw two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, struggle to beat each other by developing more and more advanced weaponry and technology. Even though the two powers never fought a direct war, both exported arms to their allies who fought in so-called proxy wars..

1990s to 2008 - Viktor Bout, the world’s best known illegal arms trafficker, was operating. This Russian man supplied weapons to various conflict zones, mostly in Africa, fueling many conflicts himself. He was arrested in 2008.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Over the years, numerous initiatives have been undertaken to address the issue of preventing illicit arms trade. Recognizing the consequences many nations decided to cooperate with others so that unregulated arms trade can be avoided. Various efforts have been made to establish comprehensive frameworks and agreements.

The most important agreements and organisations which act in this field:

- November 21, 1995 – Dayton Peace Agreement – Ended the war between Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia and led to effort of controlling arms flow in the Balkans
- Programme of Action (PoA) – It was established in 2000 to “Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons” and was adapted by all UN member states in 2001.
- 2005 – The UN adopts the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) – It “requires states to ensure that weapons are properly marked and that records are kept” in a timely and reliable manner
- December 24, 2014 – Arm Trade Treaty (ATT) enters into force – Regulates the international trade in conventional arms. It includes small arms, battle tanks, combat aircraft and warships as well

Possible Solutions and Approaches

Addressing the problem of unlicensed gun dealers who are not Federal Firearm Licensees in the USA.

Tightening national regulations is a critical component in the global effort to combat illicit arms trade. Countries play a great role in controlling the production, sale and export of weapons within their borders. Strengthening regulations involves implementing laws that govern arm manufacturing, licensing and exports as well. By enhancing regulatory frameworks, nations can minimise the risk of weapons falling into the wrong hands, prevent diversion to illicit markets, and contribute to global efforts in maintaining peace and security.

In the US and other countries where the possession of guns is legal, there should be a national framework implemented. In addition, governments should explore the opportunities to fill loopholes in legislation in order to limit arms trafficking within the country (in the case of non-FFLs for example) or internationally.

Explore the use of advanced technology, for instance, satellites, Artificial Intelligence (AI) or data analytics to monitor and track illicit arms movements. Satellite imagery provides a real-time view of regions prone to arms trafficking enabling authorities to identify suspicious

activities and illicit trade routes. AI can process a vast amount of data. Data analytics can help in interpreting complex information, facilitating the identification of potential threats in time.

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