

Short- and long-term consequences for Europe

6.1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the various short- and long-term consequences that the possession and identified use of SALW by terrorist organisations as a source of finance in West Africa and the Middle East, as described in chapters 2 and 3, may have for Europe. We will analyse these consequences in light of the initiatives taken at an international and regional level to combat this phenomenon, as described in chapter 4 and chapter 5.

6.2. The consequences of SALW possession

6.2.1. Short-term consequences

First of all, on the short-term, SALW possessed by terrorist organisation can be used for organising and executing attacks on European actors and interests in West Africa and the Middle East. The French armed forces, for example, currently have about 5,100 troops deployed in the Sahel region as part of Operation Barkhane.⁵⁸⁴ Although in much lower numbers, other armed forces from EU Member States, such as Estonia⁵⁸⁵ and Sweden,⁵⁸⁶ also have boots on the ground in the region through the Takuba Task Force. European soldiers have repeatedly been the target of Islamic militants. In Mali, for example, at least 50 French soldiers have been killed since 2013.⁵⁸⁷ Often these attacks involve the use of IEDs,⁵⁸⁸ but also other types of SALW have been used as instruments of violence against European soldiers in the region. In 2019, for example, a French helicopter was forced to land after it was hit by enemy fire from a 7.62mm calibre firearm.⁵⁸⁹ In addition to these violent attacks on European soldiers, SALW have also been used to kidnap European citizens for ransom by al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel-Sahara region in the past two decades (see 2.3.1) Likewise, in the Middle East SALW have also been used as instruments by IS and other groups to carry out kidnapping of foreign nationals, including EU citizens, for ransom (see chapter 3).

Second, the use of SALW offers terrorist organisations the opportunity to plan and execute attacks on European soil. An in-depth investigation by Conflict Armament Research into the weapons of the Islamic State has demonstrated that this organisation possessed not only large quantities, but also a wide variety of SALW.⁵⁹⁰ This terrorist organisation used its SALW to control large territories in Iraq and Syria and to finance its activities (see chapter 3). This has also enabled the organisation to plan and organise terrorist attacks on European soil. Various law enforcement investigations have revealed in recent years that the Paris attack in November 2015 and the Brussels attack in November 2016 as well as the foiled attack on the Thalys train between Belgium and France in July 2015 were organised and coordinated by ISIS members in Syria.⁵⁹¹ Europol further warned that foreign terrorist fighters

584 Sylvie Corbet, "France seeks strategy change to reduce troops in West Africa", *AP News*, January 7, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/ndjamena-chad-paris-summits-france-5a27ec73a69390e2ccf4dab80651a6db>.

585 Estonian Defence Forces, *Operations abroad*, <https://mil.ee/en/defence-forces/operations-abroad/#t-barkhane>, last updated: December 22, 2020.

586 Swedish Armed Forces, *Swedish Special Forces to Mali*, 7 September, 2020, <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/news/2020/09/swedish-special-forces-to-mali/>; Swedish Armed Forces, *Mali (Task Force Takuba)*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/activities/current-international-missions/mali-task-force-takuba/>.

587 "Sahel conflict: Two French soldiers killed in Mali", *BBC News*, January 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55522236>.

588 See for example: "Two French soldiers killed during operation in Mali", *France24*, January 2, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210102-two-french-soldiers-killed-during-operation-in-mali>.

589 "French Helicopter Shot Down Over Mali: The Story of A Daring Rescue", *Defense-Aerospace.com*, June 24, 2019, <http://www.defense-aerospace.com/articles-view/release/3/203801/a-daring-rescue-after-french-army-gazelle-is-shot-down-in-mali.html>; "French Gazelle that force-landed in Mali was hit by enemy fire", *DefenceWeb*, June 26, 2019,

<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/aerospace/military-helicopters/french-gazelle-that-force-landed-in-mali-was-hit-by-enemy-fire/>.

591 Mark van Eeckhaut, "Met de zegen Abdelhamid Abaaoud", *De Standaard*, November 17, 2020.

(FTFs) returning to Europe from countries like Syria and Iraq pose a significant security threat, among others because they have increased their proficiency for carrying out attacks, either under direction or independently, through their combat experience and military training in the use of weapons and explosives.⁵⁹²

6.2.2. Long-term consequences

A potential long-term consequence of the possession and use of SALW by terrorist organisations in the West Africa and the Middle East, is the increased risk that some of these weapons will eventually be trafficked into Europe. In its most recent Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, Europol added that “various conflict zones in the periphery of the EU have the potential to emerge as major sources of firearms trafficked to the EU.”⁵⁹³ A recent UNODC report noted that, although such illicit arms flows are currently rather exceptional, the potential risks of future illicit firearms flows into the EU from neighbouring conflict zones, including several countries in the Middle East and North Africa, should not be underestimated.⁵⁹⁴ The illicit proliferation of SALW in Libya has especially raised serious concerns for the internal security of the EU. Chapter 2 of this reports not only describes how SALW from Libya have ended up in the hands of terrorist organisations and other non-state actors in West-Africa, but also indicates that some arms flows have reduced—and may have even reversed, with weapons now flowing back into Libya due to increased domestic demand. Chapter 3 moreover warned that goods are sometimes also trafficked from Libya across Egypt, through the Sinai region, into the Middle East, and through the Mediterranean into southern Europe. These findings confirm that the armed conflicts in the country have transformed Libya into the epicentre of illicit firearms trafficking in the region,⁵⁹⁵ and underline the potential risk of seeing some of the SALW currently possessed by various terrorist and non-state armed actors active in West and North Africa eventually finding their way into Europe through Libya. In this regard, Europol has noted that “some firearms originating from the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Mali are already available on the European black market and these countries may emerge as major sources of illegal firearms trafficked to the EU.”⁵⁹⁶ As mentioned in chapter 5, the EU has recently announced that, in line with the 2018 EU SALW Strategy, it would step up its international cooperation with countries in North Africa and the Middle East with regard to combatting illicit firearms trafficking.⁵⁹⁷

Finally, it is important to stress that combatting the direct and indirect use of SALW as a source of financing for terrorist organisations and targeting such a crime-terror nexus outside of the EU is not only beneficial for peace and stability in the countries involved, but on the long term also beneficial for the internal security situation within the EU. Very often SALW end up in terrorist hands after being possessed and traded by criminals. Yet, this crime-terror nexus can also be inversed. Our analyses suggest that the risk exists that SALW currently in the hands of terrorist organisations outside of Europe might eventually be trafficked into the EU and end up in illicit local gun markets where they can be used by criminals as well as Europe-based terrorists. In the EU, terrorists tend to rely on their criminal connections to acquire weapons for carrying out their attacks.⁵⁹⁸ While illicit gun markets in

592 Europol, *TE-SAT 2017: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*, (The Hague: Europol, 2017), 14, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/tesat-report>.

593 Europol, *SOCTA - European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment: Crime in the age of technology*, (The Hague: Europol, 2017) 54, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/socta-report>.

594 UNODC, *Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts, Components and Ammunition to, from and across the European Union: Regional Analysis Report*, Vienna: UNODC, 2020: 22. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/firearms-protocol/publications.html>.

595 Francesco Strazzari and Francesca Zampagni, “Illicit firearms circulation and the politics of upheaval” in: Duquet, N. (ed.), *Triggering terror: Illicit gun markets and firearms acquisition of terrorist networks in Europe*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, (2018): 435-460, https://flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/project_safte_eu_neighbourhood_north-africa.pdf.

596 Europol, *Exploring tomorrow's organised crime*, (The Hague: Europol, 2015), 41, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/exploring-tomorrow%E2%80%99s-organised-crime>.

597 European Commission, *2020-2025 EU action plan on firearms trafficking*, 24 July 2020, COM (2020) 608 final, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20200724_com-2020-608-commission-communication_en.pdf.

598 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE,” *Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute*, 2018, https://flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/vrede_syntheserapport_safte_

the EU are traditionally ‘closed markets’ with restricted access for people outside criminal networks and rather limited access to military-grade firearms or light weapons,⁵⁹⁹ the potential increase in trafficking of such weapons into the EU from Africa or the Middle East could significantly accelerate access to these weapons and lead to an increase in use and circulation of these weapons within the criminal underworld in the EU and therefore also make it easier for terrorists to carry out more sophisticated and more lethal attacks within the EU.

“Individuals who are inspired by or have some kind of loose connection to ISIS getting their hands on illicit arms to carry out attacks in the main portion of Europe...Illicit arms are moving through criminal networks and those criminal networks could provide it to a ISIS sympathiser.”

Middle East expert based in North America

The possession and use of SALW by terrorist organisations as a source of finance can also impact the long-term efforts deployed to prevent and counter the spread of violent extremism. While the EU has an important role to play in both the short- and the long-term establishment of peace and stability in the West Africa and the Middle East, the direct and indirect use of SALW as a source of financing by terrorist organisations clearly undermines this in both regions. The illicit proliferation of SALW has a conflict-igniting effect since easy access to these – generally easy to use – weapons significantly facilitates the possibility of carrying out terrorist attacks and engaging in armed combat. The proliferation of such weapons not only contributes to the risk of an outbreak of violence, but also tends to intensify and sustain existing armed conflicts and violence. The continued presence of these weapons in post-conflict situations also threatens this fragile situation by increasing the risk of returning to conflict and violence.

6.3. A greater European involvement

Aware of these threats the EU has committed to preventing and curbing the illicit trade in SALW not only within Europe, but also in other regions around the world through various actions in its 2018 EU SALW Strategy (see chapter 5).⁶⁰⁰ This EU SALW Strategy complements the EU Global Strategy (2016), which underlines the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to conflicts (both multidimensional as well as multilevel) and the need to strengthen international cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism. While the EU SALW Strategy explicitly includes a number of actions in the Africa and the Middle East, these actions are actually rather limited. As mentioned in chapter 5, the EU approach to combatting illicit proliferation of SALW and the use of these weapons by terrorist organisations in West Africa and the Middle East is mainly focused on supporting regional organisations in their actions to combat illicit SALW proliferation. Our analysis has indicated that several initiatives have been taken by these regional organisations, but that their impact generally remains limited due to the complex reality of power struggles within the region, which are sometimes connected to illicit or grey transfers of SALW between neighbouring countries. To be effective the EU should continue its efforts to contribute to peace and stability in these regions by strengthening the relevant regional organisations, whilst remaining realistic about its potential impact.

6.4 Tightening SALW exports

An important aspect of the illicit proliferation of SALW in West Africa and the Middle East that the EU can have a direct impact on is the export of such weapons from the EU to these areas and the neighbouring regions. Various EU Member States are significant producers and exporters of SALW: according to the Small Arms Survey: Italy, Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Spain, Croatia and Belgium belong to the ‘top exporters’ of small arms worldwide (with a value of more than 100 million

lr.pdf.

599 Ibid.

600 Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on the Adoption of an EU Strategy Against Illicit Firearms, Small Arms & Light Weapons & Their Ammunition,” *European Union*, 13581/18, November 19, 2018, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13581-2018-INIT/en/pdf>.

USD in 2017).⁶⁰¹ Both the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and the EU Common Position 2008/944/CFSP on arms export urge countries to take into account the risk of diversion of SALW into terrorist arsenals. The ATT stipulates that, prior to the authorisation of a conventional arms export, State Parties need to assess the potential that the weapons could be used to commit or facilitate an act constituting an offence under international conventions or protocols relating to terrorism to which the exporting State is a Party (Article 7). The EU Common Position stipulates that, in their assessment of applications for arms export licenses, Member States need take into account the behaviour of the buyer country with regard to terrorism (Criterion 6) and to consider the risk that the weapons might be diverted to terrorist organisations or individual terrorists (Criterion 7).

While direct exports of SALW from EU Member States to terrorist organisations have not been documented, the previous chapters have demonstrated that terrorist organisations also possess and use EU-made SALW. These weapons are generally diverted into the arsenals of terrorist organisations long after original export from the EU. Given that SALW are durable goods with generally a very long lifecycle, many opportunities of diversion can exist at various phases during their lifecycle. Chapter 2, for example, notes that marksman rifles observed in West Africa have been traced back to exports from Eastern European countries to Libya in the late 1970s. Yet, the diversion of EU-made SALW into the arsenals of terrorist organisations can also occur much more rapidly. Chapter 2 also underlines that assault rifles possessed by terrorist and other armed groups in West Africa had been produced between 1951 to as recently as 2017. The previously mentioned report by Conflict Armament Research moreover demonstrated that unauthorised retransfer is a significant source of weapons for IS. These weapons mainly consist of Warsaw Pact calibre weapons and ammunition, purchased by the United States and Saudi Arabia from EU Member States in Eastern Europe. In some cases, this type of diversion happened within a very short time frame. Conflict Armament Research, for example, documented a case of diversion of an advanced anti-tank guided weapon manufactured in the EU that was legally exported to the United States, subsequently illegally supplied to a party in the armed conflict in Syria and eventually ended up in the arsenal of IS forces in less than two months after its initial export from the EU.⁶⁰²

6.5. Conclusion

Previous analyses have shown that exports of SALW and ammunition from the EU have fuelled the illicit proliferation of these weapons across the globe for several decades, which has resulted in an unknown number of these weapons ending up in the hands of terrorist organisations.⁶⁰³ Despite the illicit proliferation of SALW in West Africa and the Middle East, and the observed unintentional and intentional diversion of SALW into the arsenals of terrorist organisations, notably through battlefield capture and state-sponsorship, EU Member States have continued to export to both regions, as well as countries that have carried out unauthorised retransfers. In 2019, for example, EU Member States granted export licenses for firearms destined for the Middle East for 63.2 million euros.⁶⁰⁴

The illicit proliferation of SALW in West-Africa and Middle East therefore not only pose significant security risks on the short term in these regions, but also significantly impacts the prospects for peace and stability in these regions and poses some long-term security risks for Europe as well.

601 Nicholas Florquin, Elodie Hainard, and Benjamin Jongleux, "Trade update 2020: An Eye on Ammunition Transfers to Africa," *Geneva: Small Arms Survey*, (2020): 21, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/S-Trade-Update/SAS-Trade-Update-2020.pdf>.

602 "Weapons of Islamic State: A three-year investigation in Iraq and Syria," Conflict Armament Research, 2017, <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-islamic-state/>.

603 Nils Duquet, "The 2018 EU SALW Strategy: Towards an integrated and comprehensive approach," *Brussels: EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium*, 2019. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/eu-non-proliferation-and-disarmament-papers/2018-eu-salw-strategy-towards-integrated-and-comprehensive-approach>.

604 Council (2020), *Twenty-Second annual report according to Article 8(2) of Council Common Position 2008/944 CFSP defining common rules governing the control of exports of military technology and equipment*, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 11 December, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/NL/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3A0J.C_.2020.431.01.0001.01.NLD&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2020%3A431%3ATOC.