Secretary-General’s Report on small arms and light weapons

Countering terrorism

The spread of small arms and light weapons, especially in conflict-affected and fragile countries and regions, fuels insecurity, terrorism, and crime. In 2021, the majority of terrorist attacks were perpetrated with firearms, including small arms. A strong correlation between terrorism and organized crime, including arms smuggling as a source of financing, persisted. Terrorists also demonstrated increased interest in harnessing new technologies to obtain affordable and innovative weapons online and offline.¹

Terrorist groups continued to benefit from easy access to large quantities of weapons. Of particular concern are the developments in Afghanistan, where the Taliban take-over of the country triggered one of the most significant large-scale diversions of military equipment. Stark economic, financial, and humanitarian conditions increase the risk of arms trafficking and acquisition by networks of terrorist and criminal groups in the country and across its borders.² In Somalia, Al-Shabaab spent a quarter of its annual budget on the purchase of arms, ammunition and explosives.³ In the Sahel and the Middle East, terrorist groups maintained procurement networks to acquire parts of explosive devices.⁴ The travel of foreign terrorist fighters further increases the probability of illicit transfers of small arms and ammunition.

Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 2370 (2017) on preventing terrorists from acquiring weapons, and 2482 (2019) on the linkages between terrorism and transnational organized crime, emphasise the importance of eliminating terrorists’ access to weapons. Addressing the arms-crime-terrorism nexus and disrupting the supply of weapons to terrorists requires comprehensive and cross-cutting efforts, with robust border security and management strategies, enhanced stockpile management, collection and analysis of detailed data on the illicit trafficking of such weapons to terrorists, detection and disruption of criminal networks, and tackling the challenges posed by new technologies.

The seventh review resolution of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/75/291) expressed deep concern that terrorists may benefit from transnational organized crime in some regions, including from the illicit trafficking of arms. During focused discussions held by the Security Council in October and November 2021, Member States also highlighted that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons exacerbated terrorism and transnational organized crime.

The review resolution of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy encouraged Member States to prevent and disrupt terrorist procurement networks for such weapons, and urged them to adopt and implement the necessary legislative or other measures to establish as criminal offences under their domestic law, the illegal manufacture, possession, stockpiling and trade of small arms and light weapons and their ammunition. The resolution further called upon Member States to intensify the exchange of information regarding trafficking in arms.

¹ The Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2022.
² Twenty-ninth report (S/2022/83) of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 3 February 2022; Conflict Armament Research, Illicit Weapons in Afghanistan, September 2021; International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Weapons in Afghanistan: the Taliban’s Spoils of War, February 2022.
³ Hiraal Institute, Somali Al-Shabab’s Arsenal: From taxes to terror, February 2022.
and to enhance coordination of efforts on national, subregional, regional and international levels.

Principle 52 of the 2015 Security Council guiding principles on foreign terrorist fighters (Madrid Guiding Principles) and its 2018 Addendum also recognizes the need of Member States to address the illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons, in particular to terrorists, consistent with international law. The absence of measures to control and monitor the movements of such arms across borders is assessed to increase the risk that such weapons will fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Thus, strengthening the capacity of border control and customs authorities to detect and dismantle the networks engaged in illicit arms trafficking by increased cross-border cooperation and information exchange should remain an imperative for all Member States.

In order to enhance international cooperation and assistance modalities and procedures, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism jointly with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and in cooperation with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the United Nations Office on Disarmament Affairs are supporting Central Asia countries, through an inter-agency project on “Addressing the Terrorism-Arms-Crime Nexus: Preventing and Combating the Illicit Trafficking of Small-Arms and Light Weapons and their Illicit Supply to Terrorists”. These efforts contribute to the enhancement of beneficiary States’ national legislative, strategic and operational capacities to prevent, detect and counter the firearms trafficking and consequently the associated activities of terrorism and organized crime, through national trainings, regional conferences and legislative assessments.

The 43-member United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact and its thematic working groups has helped serve as a platform to exchange information, research findings, develop guidelines, and mobilize joint efforts to help Member States strengthen their capacities related to preventing terrorist access to small arms and light weapons. Within the framework of its Working Group on Border Management and Law Enforcement relating to Counter-Terrorism, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, working as chair of the working group, and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research jointly developed technical guidelines to support Member States in the implementation of Security Council resolution 2370 (2017). The technical guidelines aim at contributing to the enhancement of Member States’ legislative, strategic, and operational capacities to prevent, detect and counter the acquisition, illicit trafficking and use of different weapons, systems, and components, including small arms and light weapons, improvised explosive devices and unmanned aircraft systems.