

The Global Observatory of Transnational Criminal Networks

# **Introduction to Firearms Trafficking**

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*Introduction to Firearms Trafficking*

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## Introduction

Trafficking firearms involves the manufacture and illegal distribution of firearms, their components and ammunition. The firearms that are usually most trafficked are: (i) Small arms (revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, and light machine guns) and (ii) light weapons (heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable anti-tank missile and rocket launchers, portable anti-aircraft missile launchers, and mortars of less than 100 mm caliber).<sup>1</sup>

According to a brief elaborated by the Council on Foreign Relations of United States a 2012 issues, the financial value of the illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons is worth \$1 Billion per year, higher than the value reported in 2010 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which estimated a value of this criminal market between \$170 Million and \$320 Million.<sup>2</sup>

The international trend of illegal trade of firearms usually goes from developed countries that manufacture and sell the guns, to purchasers in developing countries, especially in countries with high demand of guns due to civil and domestic conflicts or small wars. In those countries, the guns are also resold and smuggled, usually to neighbor territories.

Bearing this in mind, the aim of this paper is to introduce the main characteristics of this illegal activity, related to the social, economic and politic background of the countries or regions involved. The document conveys information about (i) general background characteristics of some of the most involved countries or regions and (ii) relevant data about firearms trafficking in those territories.

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<sup>1</sup> The Small Arms Survey (2015) Available in: <https://goo.gl/bgWjJQ>

<sup>2</sup> Transnational Crime Intelligence (2014) Value of Trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons. Available in: <https://goo.gl/8dlwef>

# 1. Background of countries involved in Firearms Trafficking

Currently, trafficking of arms occurs almost in every region of the world; however, this trafficking is usually focused in areas affected by intense domestic conflicts, violence or presence of organized crime and criminal networks, where the demand for illicit weapons is higher.<sup>3</sup> As a result, most of the sales (almost 75%) are targeted to developing countries located in (i) Africa, mainly Libya, Sudan and South Africa, (ii) Middle East, mainly Saudi Arabia and Syria, and (iii) Latin America, mainly Central America.<sup>4</sup>

The 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council (US, Russia, France, United Kingdom and China), together with Germany and Italy, account for around 85% of the arms sold between 2004 and 2011, a trend that currently remains stable. The high participation of these countries is relevant because while trafficking of arms has been usually conducted by private entities or actors, these governments contribute to boost the criminal market by arming paramilitary groups involved in insurgencies against rival governments, often conducted in contravention of United Nations arms embargoes.<sup>5</sup>

## Arms providers

The countries with an important participation in the legitimate arms market are also, usually, the producers and therefore providers of trafficked guns. Specifically, between 2011 and 2014, United States and Russia dominated the arms market in developing nations, with both countries leading the ranking on the value of arms transfer agreements. China and some countries in West Europe, such as France, United Kingdom, Italy and Germany, have also participated arming subversive or paramilitary groups developing nations (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Small Arms Survey (2013) Every Day Dangers. Available in: <https://goo.gl/mkqTzD>

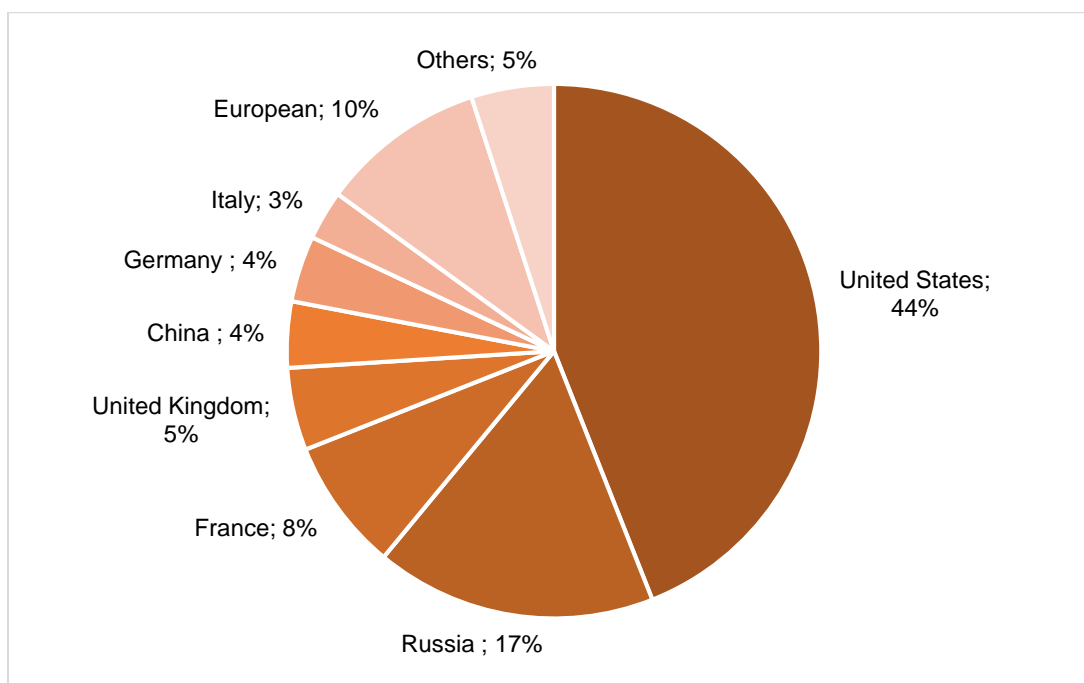
<sup>4</sup> Global Issues (2013) The Arms Trade is a Big Business. Available in: <https://goo.gl/q3E0er>

<sup>5</sup> Small Arms Survey. Illicit Traffic, Available in: <https://goo.gl/LcZmrp>

<sup>6</sup> Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://goo.gl/gbl5ZT>

As a result, the main producers and distributors of guns worldwide, have in common that are developed nations, with leading economies<sup>7</sup>, a very high human development<sup>8</sup>, and a high level of income<sup>9</sup>.

**Figure 1. Arms Sales, by Supplier, 2004-2011 (in billions of constant 2011 US dollars)**



**Source:** Review of Richard F. Grimmett (2012) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011. Available in: <https://goo.gl/kfFjqM>

## United States

United States currently leads the expenditure of weapons worldwide, in fact, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, among the top 20 global weapon dealers, 16 are U.S. corporations, including: (1) **Lockheed Martin**, (2) **Boeing**, (3) **Northrop Grumman**, (4) **General Dynamics** and (5) **Raytheon**.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> GDP 2015: United States (17,42 trillion); Germany (3,868 trillion); United Kingdom 2,989 trillion); France (USD 2,829 trillion); Italy (2,141 trillion); Russia (1,861 trillion) Available in: <https://goo.gl/y2GEQ0>

<sup>8</sup> Human Development Index: United States (0,914); Germany (9,11); United Kingdom 0.892); France (0.884); Italy (0.872); Russia (0.874). In: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries>

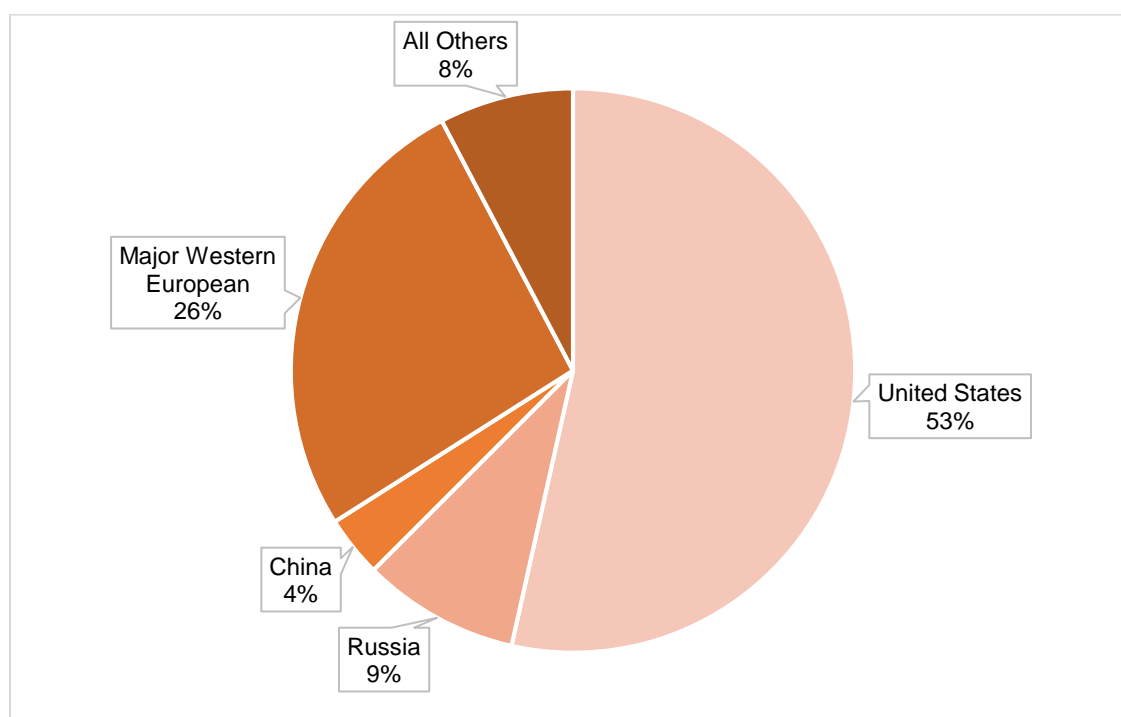
<sup>9</sup> High Income: United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Russian Federation, France, Germany and Italy. Available in: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/>

<sup>10</sup> American Free Press (2012) Inside the Murky World of International Arms Smuggling. In: <https://goo.gl/RwGTAC>



In 2014, The United States ranked first in arms transfer agreements with developing nations, with a participation of \$29.8 billion or 48.2% of these agreements. Between 2007 and 2014, the highest purchase orders in firearms happened in the Near East (58.2% of arm transfer agreements) and Asia (32,2% of arm transfer agreements) (Figure 2- 3).<sup>11</sup>

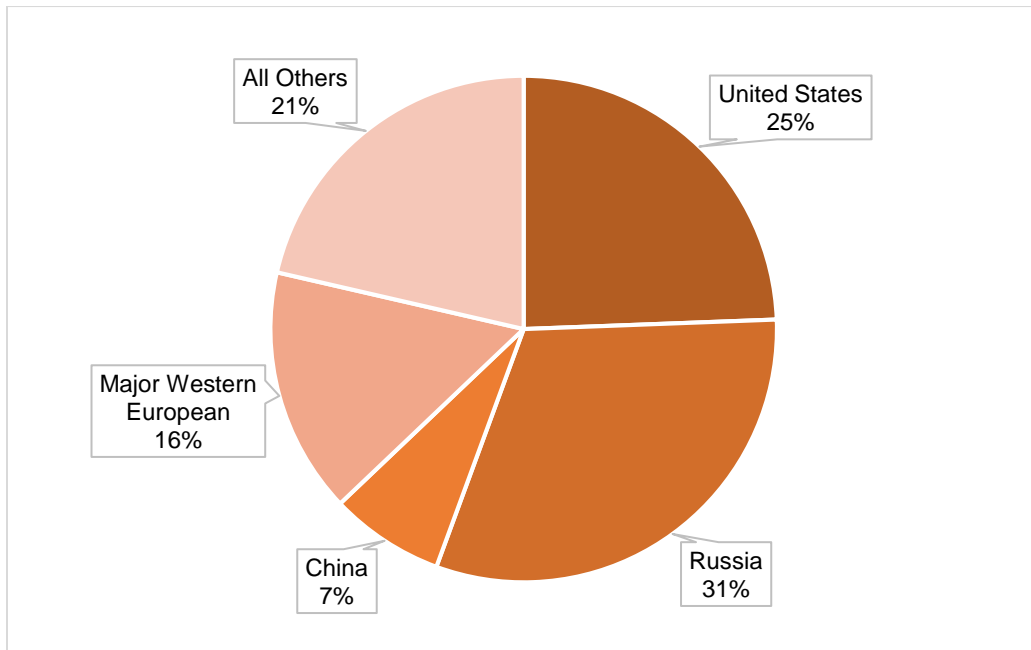
**Figure 2. Arms Transfer Agreements with Developing Nations in the Near East (2004-2011)**



**Source:** Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://goo.gl/aJnV3D>

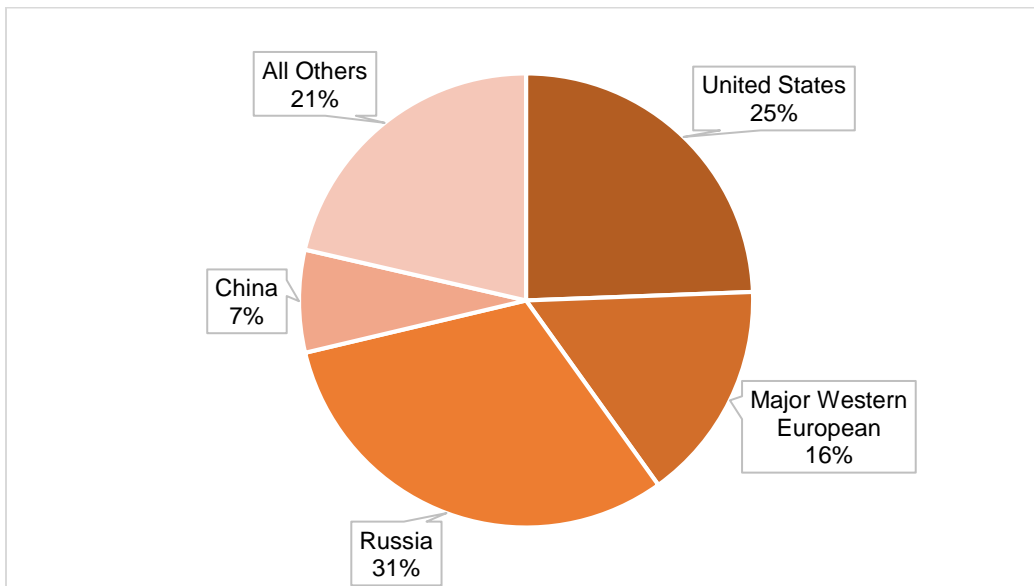
<sup>11</sup> Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. In: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R44320.pdf>

**Figure 3. Arms Transfer Agreements with Developing Nations in the Near East (2011-2014)**



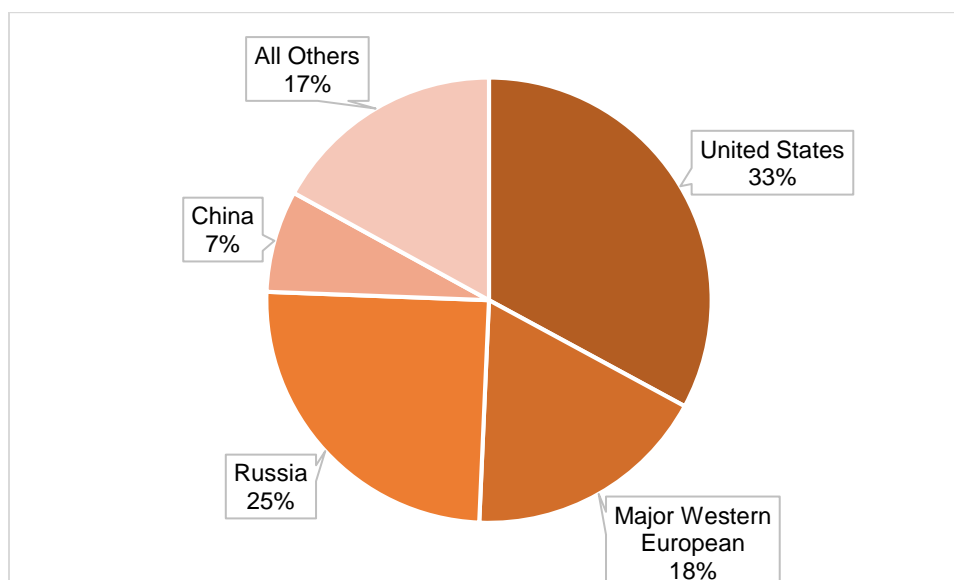
**Source:** Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://goo.gl/aJnV3D>

**Figure 4. Arms Transfer Agreements with Developing Nations in Asia (2004-2011)**



**Source:** Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://goo.gl/aJnV3D>

**Figure 5. Arms Transfer Agreements with Developing Nations in Asia (2007-2014)**



**Source:** Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://goo.gl/naA1GG>

Regarding the involvement of United States in gun trafficking worldwide, in 2012 a study found out that almost 70% of firearms recovered in Mexico between 2007 and 2012 were traced to the US. Most of these firearms were not manufactured in the United States; however, loose state gun and ammunition control laws in the southern states happened to favor the gun smuggling towards Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

## **Russia**

Russia is the second source of armament worldwide. Between 2007 and 2014 Russia made \$41.7 billion in arms trade agreements. Also, in 2014 this country ranked first in the value of arms delivered to developing nations, with \$8.4 billion or 40.8% of such deliveries. Also in 2014, Russian arms agreements with developing nations included two Kilo submarines valued on \$1.2 billion and around 200 T-90 battle tanks for approximately a value of \$1 billion with Algeria, S-400 air defense systems totaling nearly \$3 billion with China, and anti-tank shells valued on \$432 million with India.

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<sup>12</sup> Topher McDougal, David A. Shirk, Robert Muggah and Jhon H Patterson. (2013) The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Traffic Across the U.S. - Mexico Border. Available in: <https://goo.gl/9T930L>

The capture of Viktor Bout in April 2002, the single biggest private arms trader in the world, pointed out the involvement of Russia in firearms trafficking. This Russian citizen established his business after the collapse of Soviet Union, he purchased a fleet of Soviet military aircraft including **Antonov** and **Ilyushin** cargo planes as surplus of the Cold War and employed them in operations to deliver firearms to various combatants in Africa, and anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan during the 1990s.

According to United Nation documents, in exchange for illicit diamonds, Viktor Bout supplied weapons to Liberian President Charles Taylor to destabilize Sierra Leone. Also Viktor Bout supplied arms to both sides in the Angolan civil war and delivered weapons to various warlords across Central and North Africa. Operating through Eastern Europe, Bout transported weapons through Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine to Liberia and Angola until he got arrested in 2002.<sup>13</sup>

## China

From 2011 to 2014, the value of China's arms transfer agreements with developing nations was approximately of \$3 billion annually. In 2014, the total of China's arms agreements had a value of \$2.2 billion. Most of these agreements can be partially attributed to continuing contracts with Pakistan, a key historic client. Rather than large agreement for major weapons, China had several smaller valued weapons deals in Asia, Africa, and the Near East. This situation is related to the lower level of sophistication of Chinese weapons, in contrast to those weapons produced in Russia or United States.

Regarding the involvement of firearms trafficking, in 2014 it was discovered the case of a mining magnate committing mafia-style crimes, including gunrunning, with the support of corrupt officials who worked for the state. Liu Han, the magnate, and his younger brother Liu Yong were related to an investigation for murder, assault, illegal detention, interference in state functions, affray, extortion, gambling, illegally buying and selling guns, illegal gun ownership and fraud.<sup>14</sup>

In 2015, an organized firearm gang of 24 suspects was dismantled in China's Hubei Province. The suspects were accused of manufacturing, selling (primary online) and

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Grant (2012) "Merchants of Death: The International Traffic in Arms" In: Origins, vol. 6, issue 3. Available in: <https://goo.gl/0lwFSr>

<sup>14</sup> Reuters (2014) Update 1- China charges former mining magnate with murder, gun-running. Available in: <https://goo.gl/3kAeex>

possessing guns without license. In the process, 23 guns, 70 rifle bullets, 135 hunting gun bullets, 10,000 buck shots and 1,000 pieces of gun- manufacturing components were seized.<sup>15</sup>

## **Western Europe**

France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy—the four main West European arms suppliers—have supplied a wide variety of sophisticated weapons to a number of purchasers. The four suppliers, as a group, registered a significant decrease in their collective share of their arms transfer agreements with developing nations between 2013 and 2014. This group fell from 25.4% in 2013 to 9.5% in 2014 of arm trades agreements. Of these four nations, France was the leading supplier with \$4.3 billion in agreements in 2014. Italy, meanwhile registered \$800 million in arms agreements in 2014. All of them can produce both advanced and basic air, ground, and naval weapons systems.<sup>16</sup>

Although these nations have strong laws and regulations to confront gunrunning, the terrorist attacks in France, 2015, evidenced a gun trafficking ring operating in West Europe. Investigations carried out by the Europol and the French police suggest that weapons flow from Russia via the Balkan states into the rest of Europe. Also, according to Europol, many weapons trafficked in West Europe come from the western Balkans after being held illegally after armed conflicts in the region.<sup>17</sup>

## **Arms Purchasers**

According to a United States Congress study, developing nations continue to be the primary target of foreign arms sales activity by weapons suppliers. Between 2007 and 2010, the value of arms transfer agreements with developing countries comprised 74.4% worldwide

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<sup>15</sup> India Today (2015) "Online gun running gang busted in China; 24 held". Available in: <https://goo.gl/zAVSXi>

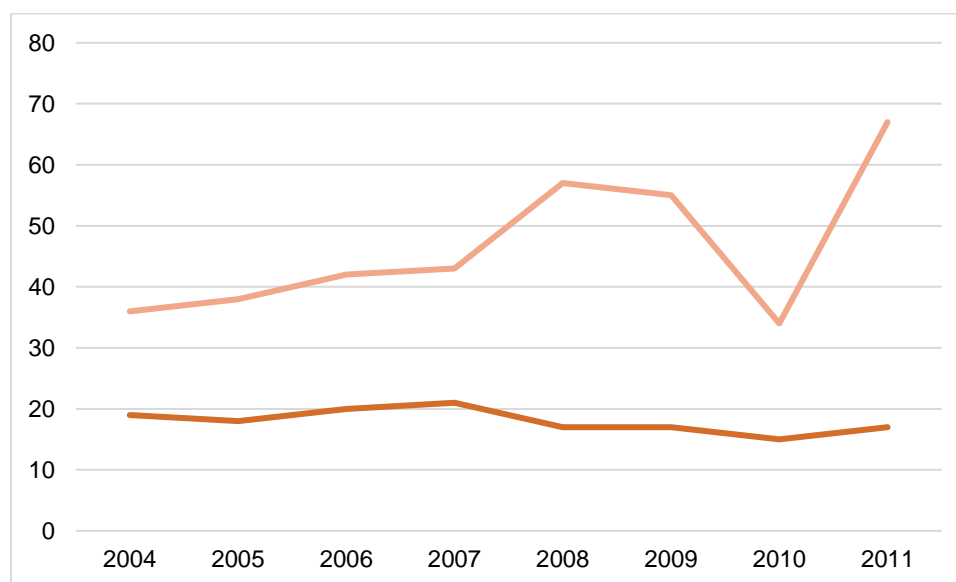
<sup>16</sup> Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R44320.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> The Daily Basis (2015) "This is How AK-47s Get to Paris". Available in: <https://goo.gl/0NBsGn>

(Figure 4). Between 2011 and 2014, the percentage increased to 75.5% of all these agreements globally and in 2014 it reached 86.0%.<sup>18</sup>

As previously stated, trafficking of fire arms is a significant issue in Africa (mainly in Libya, Sudan and South Sudan), Middle East (mainly Syria), and Latin America (mainly Central America). These regions and countries where the traffic of firearms takes place share the common characteristic of experiencing high levels of unemployment and poverty<sup>19</sup>, medium of low human development level<sup>20</sup>, income inequality<sup>21</sup> and systemic corruption. Also, these territories are or recently were involved in armed conflicts, and usually have a strong presence of gangs and organized crime that demand guns to perform criminal activities.

**Figure 6. Global arms sales, by recipients, 2004-2011 (Billions USD)**



**Source:** Review of Richard F. Grimmett (2012) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011. Available in: <https://goo.gl/FwdWYy>

## Africa

<sup>18</sup> Catherine A. Theohary (2015) Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014. Congressional Research Service. Available in: <https://goo.gl/63Dz99>

<sup>19</sup> Unemployment rate 2011-2015: Libya (19.2%), Sudan (14.8%), South Sudan (-), Syria (10.8%), México (4.9%), El Salvador (6.2), Nicaragua (5.3%), Honduras (3.9), Colombia (10.1). Available in: <https://goo.gl/wC7Xn0>

<sup>20</sup> HDI 2015: Libya (0.724) Sudan (0.479), South Sudan (0.467), Syria (0.598) México (0.756) El Salvador (0.666), Nicaragua (0.631) Honduras (0.606), Colombia (0.720). Available in: <https://goo.gl/Wh8fhi>

<sup>21</sup> Gini Index: Libya (-) Sudan (-), South Sudan (-), Syria (-) México (48.1) El Salvador (43.5), Nicaragua (-) Honduras (53.7), Colombia (53.5). Available in: <https://goo.gl/QwdCIX>

The political and economic instability of African Countries related to forming states and democracies, as well as the persistent inequality in land property and income, the intense corruption and a low level of human development, among other local situations, have fueled the emergence of armed conflicts across the continent.<sup>22</sup> Before 2012, due to intense situations of violence, Mali, Somalia and South Africa were the main hotspots for firearms trafficking, while now the focus of this criminal activity turned to Libya and Sudan.

## Libya

According to The United Nations, Libya is the epicenter of the illegal weapons trade including MANPADs [portable air defense systems], which fuels conflicts in at least 14 countries worldwide. According to The panel of experts of The UN, the main obstacles to contain the proliferation of illicit weapons are the difficulty of controlling non-state armed actors over the majority of stockpiles in Libya (currently three ports in the country are controlled by rebel groups) as well as ineffective border control systems.

As a consequence of the inability to secure its borders, Libya has let weapons to be handed to radical groups, fueling the conflict, terrorism and insecurity in almost every continent.<sup>23</sup>

## Sudan and South Sudan

According to The Guardian, Sudan and South Sudan are some of the most heavily armed countries in the world. Sudan, in fact, is known as the “*Africa’s arms dump*” due to the high number of arms related to the armed conflict between government forces, paramilitaries, rebels, militia, foreign fighters, bandits as well as *inter-* and *intra*-communal warfare. Global arms trade and smuggling from neighboring states is one of the issues intensifying the situation of violence in Sudan.

In South Sudan, for instance, ownership of guns and small arms has increased during its three years as an independent nation. Arms and ammunition are openly available in local markets across the country, at very affordable (around US\$1 per cartridge). The increase in gun ownership is partly due to the number of rebel and militia groups that have recently emerged.

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<sup>22</sup> Small Arms Survey (2013) *Survival at Stake: Violent land conflict in Africa*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/J1BjgK>

<sup>23</sup> RT (2014) *Libya is epicenter of illicit arms trade –UN* Available in: <https://goo.gl/eUYaZe>

The spread of firearms in Sudan and the trade of illegal weapons are related to Liberation movements, especially those in neighboring countries. For many years' liberation movements and valley people of the *Turkana* of Kenya, the *Dodoth* of Uganda and the *Toposa* of South Sudan, have traded arms across the three countries' borders.

According to Jonah Leff, Director of Operations at Conflict Armament Research, most of the traded arms in Sudan and South Sudan are small guns such as AK-type assault rifles. PKM machine guns and RPGs are also available, but in much smaller quantities. Even so, German HK G3 rifles sometimes cross the border from Ethiopia and Kenya.”<sup>24</sup>

## Middle East

Conflict areas in the Middle East, and especially the strong and increasing presence of extremist groups during the last decade, have fueled the firearms trafficking in the region. However, although radical groups are the ones performing trading weapons illegally, there is evidence of the involvement of Departments of Security of countries with economic or political interest in the region.

For instance, it was recently uncovered that in 2012 the State Department of the United States moved guns off the radar from Libya (Benghazi Port) through Turkey to Syria, to support Islamic revolutionary groups there.<sup>25</sup> In fact, corporate media reports that ISIS in Iraq received many of its weapons due to the Iraqi retreat from Mosul. ISIS, however, already had plenty of weapons before the takeover, mostly from the United States.

Jamal Maarouf, leader of the Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF), claimed that the U.S. provided weapons to them. Also, al-Nusra (al-Qaeda-linked group) and other terrorist groups in Syria have received weapons indirectly from the SRF. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, helped in the creation of al-Nusra, so when the group was dissolved, its members integrated to ISIS, which means that pre-ISIS members have indirectly received weapons from United States.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Charlton Doki & Adam Mohamed Ahmad (2014) 'Africa's arms dump': following the trail of bullets in the Sudans. In The Guardian. Available in: <https://goo.gl/0Hz4XJ>

<sup>25</sup> The federalist papers (2016) Bombshell: US was smuggling guns to Syria through Benghazi consulate. Available in: <https://goo.gl/X8d8X0>

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Nimno (2014) Isis and the plan to Balkanize the Middle East. Infowars: <https://goo.gl/VjwMhD>



## Latin America

The high demand of weapons in Latin America is related to organized crime activity, especially to drug trafficking. Mexico is currently one of the countries with an increasing number of illegal weapons seized in the border with United States. According to the Mexican annual report elaborated by the Attorney General Office<sup>27</sup>, 60% of all confiscated weapons in Mexico are mainly seized in the states of Tamaulipas, Guerrero, and Jalisco, with 7 out of 10 weapons confiscated coming from the United States.

According to the Small Arms Survey Report, 2013, the illicit trade in firearms in Mexico's border with United States is likely to be at least 100–200 units per day, or 35,000–70,000 units each year. These weapons usually end up in the hands of drug trafficking organizations members who are willing to purchase powerful weapons, such as .223 and 7.62 × 39 mm caliber rifles, 5.7 × 28 caliber rifles and pistols, and .50 caliber rifles'.

From January 2009 to July 2011, 75 per cent of firearms reportedly bound for Mexico and seized at the US border were rifles, shotguns, and machine guns. The ratio of handguns to other firearms seized at the border is also similar to the ratio of handguns seized in Mexico, accounting for 24 per cent of seized firearms (vs. 28 per cent for firearms seized in Mexico.). This could indicate the suspicions that United States is one of the main sources of weapons smuggled in Mexico.<sup>28</sup>

Among the seized weapons, fragmentation grenades, rockets, and anti-personnel mines were also found. Convictions include members of criminal networks such as **Sinaloa Cartel**, **Los Rojos**, **The Jalisco Cartel - New Generation (CJNG)**, **Los Zetas**, **The Pacific Cartel**, and the Knights Templar<sup>29</sup>, among others.

Due to Gangs activity, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador also report a relevant presence of trafficked firearms and ammunitions. The illegal trade of guns in this region is strongly related to systemic corruption of state officers and law enforcers. For instance, in September

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<sup>27</sup> Procuraduría General de la República, PGR.

<sup>28</sup> Small Arms Survey (2013) Chapter 12: Captured and Counted: Illicit Weapons in Mexico and The Philippines. Available in: <https://goo.gl/HqGa9X>

<sup>29</sup> This network emerged after the "Familia Michoacana" restructuration.

2015, a former coronel, **Roberto Pineda Guerra**, was arrested for running a stockpile of weapons in El Salvador.<sup>30</sup>

In Colombia, the traffic of firearms is specially related to the armed conflict subversive and paramilitary forces, as well as criminal gangs. In the case of the FARC guerrilla (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), there is evidence that weapons were mainly traded from United States and Eastern Europe, and smuggled through Venezuela and Brazil.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Elijah Stevens (2015) "El Salvador: ExMilitary Official Arrested for Arms Trafficking Insigth Crime, Available in: <https://goo.gl/v9Vq7r>

<sup>31</sup> Infodefensa (2009) Colombia ha solicitado a 27 países informar sobre armas decomisadas a las FARC. Available in: <https://goo.gl/RCaUQx>

## Conclusions

- Firearms trafficking, or gunrunning occurs almost in every region of the world, but is focused specially in war zones or territories affected by high levels of violence and organized crime activities.
- The flow trend of firearms trafficking occurs mainly from developed countries to developing countries. The main suppliers of weapons are, in order, the United States, Russia, China, France Italy and Germany. The main receivers of illegal weapon trade are developing nations, especially in Africa, Middle East and Latin America.
- The smuggling of weapons in conflict zones has destabilized several regions, and currently boosts the rise of extremist groups and, therefore, global insecurity. The main effects in terms of violence and political instability are observed in Africa, where efforts to consolidate democracy are constantly undermined by intense corruption, criminal activity and flows of trafficked firearms.
- The border between the United States and Mexico is the main hotspot for firearms trafficking in the Western Hemisphere. The fact that the proportion of handguns vs. firearms seized in the border is similar to the proportion seized inside Mexico, indicates that there is a constant trafficking flow across the border, feeding the fire capacity demands of Mexican criminal networks. The convergence of (i) a legal gun market across the United States, (ii) intense drug trafficking activity, and (iii) complex criminal networks operating across Mexico, make the US-Mexico border and “hyper-border”<sup>32</sup> with several trafficking flows that include movement of humans (specially migrants), money, arms, drugs and hydrocarbons.
- While most of illegal gun suppliers are private actors and entities, evidence suggests that the involvement of governments, deliberately arming groups of nations in conflict, intensifies the global trafficking and destabilization of several countries.

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<sup>32</sup> Sullivan, John (2013). “Cross-Border Connections: Criminal Inter-Penetration at the US-Mexico Hyperborder”. Vortex Working Papers: <https://goo.gl/ONML6Z>

## About the Authors

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Philosopher and MsC in Political Science. Founder and CEO at Vortex Foundation. Eduardo has researched in the areas of organized crime, kidnapping, corruption, drug-trafficking and State Capture. As partner, advisor or consultant, he currently researches on the structure and impact of Transnational Criminal Networks with scholars, institutes and Universities in North, Central and South America, Europe and Africa.

### Diana Santos

Sociologist from the Universidad del Rosario (Bogotá, Colombia). Currently assisting projects at Vortex Foundation and The Global Observatory of Transnational Criminal Networks, especially modeling transnational criminal networks, and writing research papers. Interested in: Interdisciplinary studies and visual communication of knowledge.