

Arms procurement by terrorist groups:
**A matter of urgency
for global security**



‘An ABC of Terrorist Financing’

Excerpts from Sen. Nathalie Goulet’s book



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Without a doubt, there is a strong link between arms trafficking and terrorism – not only Islamic terrorism, but also that of the ultra-left and ultra-right.

The proliferation of conflicts worldwide has fueled the rapid growth of the mainstream weapons market. In 2022, for example, French arms exports soared to 27 billion euros (\$29.25 billion).¹

In its yearbook published in March 2023, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that global arms sales, including those by Chinese companies, had hit a record high.²

With combined sales of about \$2,240 billion, the thriving of this economic sector has implications not only for global economies and job markets, but also for national security and state sovereignty issues.³

As the sector grows, so in its shadow the parallel market for illegally trafficked arms, which plays a significant role both in arming and funding terrorist operations, is also thriving.⁴

The trafficking of small arms and heavy



weapons, and the trade in associated spare parts and ammunition, poses a serious threat to global peace and security. In addition, there is the issue of the regional artisanal workshops, many of which have been operating at least since the Spanish Civil War, and which can still be found today across parts of Africa and Asia, such as in the Tribal Areas in Pakistan.⁵

The situation in Libya demonstrates the extent of these issues. Libyan weapons that found their way into the Sahara and Sahel regions following the 2011 fall of Col. Muammar Qaddafi can now be found

A Ukrainian serviceman prepares 155mm artillery shells in eastern Ukraine, 2023.
AFP



across an area stretching from Nigeria in the west to as far east as Syria.

According to a report by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism in 2021, weapons from Libya have reached Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Somalia, Egypt, and the Gaza Strip.⁶

As a result, several terrorist organizations have easy access to these weapons and generate significant revenues by selling them on to other groups. For example, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis, and Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya, have all benefited from the trafficking of arms from Libya.⁷

The arsenal used in the terrorist attack on the Bataclan theater in Paris on Nov. 13, 2015, in which 90 people were killed, came from Bulgaria.⁸ Weapons of war purchased in Eastern Europe, Serbia, and Macedonia, often hidden within construction materials, are delivered to terrorist groups, mainly via the port of Thessaloniki in Greece. These weapons have been found in the possession of the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and in the hands of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese militant group which is listed by many countries as a terrorist organization.⁹

Daesh took over the coastal city of Sirte in June 2015. Twitter

In June 2020, Forbes magazine estimated that Hezbollah's arsenal included more than 100,000 high-precision missiles and rockets, partly transited through Syria and partly manufactured in Lebanon.¹⁰

In 2006, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 called on Lebanon to disarm militias on its territory, but 18 years later the resolution remains unimplemented.¹¹ The disarming of Hezbollah would represent a significant victory for security in the region, but there is no sign of any imminent action by the Lebanese state.

Indeed, the situation in Lebanon has now further deteriorated and Hezbollah, acting as an Iranian proxy, continues to undermine peace and security, especially in the Red Sea region, where it is offering direct help to the Houthis.¹²

Meanwhile, when US forces withdrew from Afghanistan, they left behind substantial stockpiles of weapons. It is a matter of concern that these weapons have already fallen into the hands of terrorist groups, including the Taliban and other organizations operating in the region, presenting a clear risk that these armaments will be used against their former owners.¹³



WEAPONS PURCHASED ON THE DARKNET

The trade in weapons on the hidden backroads of the internet is an issue that encompasses three concerns: arms trafficking, Bitcoin, and the darknet.

In 2019, Tracfin, an arm of the French finance ministry set up to combat money laundering, was notified by a foreign financial intelligence unit about a French national who had purchased weapons on the darknet. The purchase was made in Bitcoin for an amount under €500.

Investigations into the buyer's bank accounts and an analysis of the blockchain revealed crypto-asset purchases totaling nearly €800, and that weapons had also been purchased directly online for an amount just under €6,000.

The analysis led investigators to a darknet market, accessible only via the anonymized Tor network, managed by a paramilitary organization that was selling weapons acquired from an east European army. The market was mentioned on a pro-terrorist network as a place to buy weapons anonymously. Over a two-year period, the site took in more than 56 Bitcoins, the equivalent of \$314,000.

Two recent factors - the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the proliferation of 3-D-printed firearms - call for particular vigilance

The outbreak of a large-scale armed conflict on the European continent inevitably leads to an increase in the number of weapons in circulation and to their propagation in criminal and terrorist circles.

Since the beginning of the conflict in the Donbas in 2014, the region has been recognized as a hub for the trade in weapons and ammunition. In 2021, the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey published a report titled "Making the rounds: illicit ammunition in Ukraine," which indicated that a significant number of grenades, rockets, and antipersonnel mines sourced from the conflict zone in the east were being disseminated by traffickers throughout Ukraine.¹⁴

While the report highlighted the restricted border access for arms trafficking, the possibility of acquiring arms in Ukraine may have attracted certain terrorist buyers, as indicated by the arrest by the Security Service of Ukraine of Frenchman Gregoire Moutaux on May 21, 2016. Close to the ultra-right and having listed targets in France,

Daesh militants launched an attack in Jan. 2016 to seize key port terminals in northern Libya's Ras Lanouf region. AFP

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Moutaux was arrested at the Ukrainian-Polish border in possession of “125 kg of TNT, two anti-tank rocket launchers, five Kalashnikov assault rifles and more than 5,000 rounds of ammunition” and sentenced to six years’ detention in Ukraine.¹⁵ At the time, the Ukrainian government put in place a number of measures to combat the spread of these weapons.¹⁶

I personally had a meeting in Kiev with the head of the Ukrainian intelligence Vasily Gritsak in 2016. He showed a lot of concern about the situation.

He was right in April 2023. Two French far-right activists were caught at Paris bus station coming back from Ukraine with weapons. They were equipped with an assault rifle magazine and aiming optics, elements of weapons obviously prohibited throughout the national territory. They were taken into custody for violation of weapons legislation in the premises of the second judicial police district.

- How many more are traveling with weapons, and the far-right ideology associated, including Islamophobia?

- That is the dark side of massive arms delivery in Ukraine.

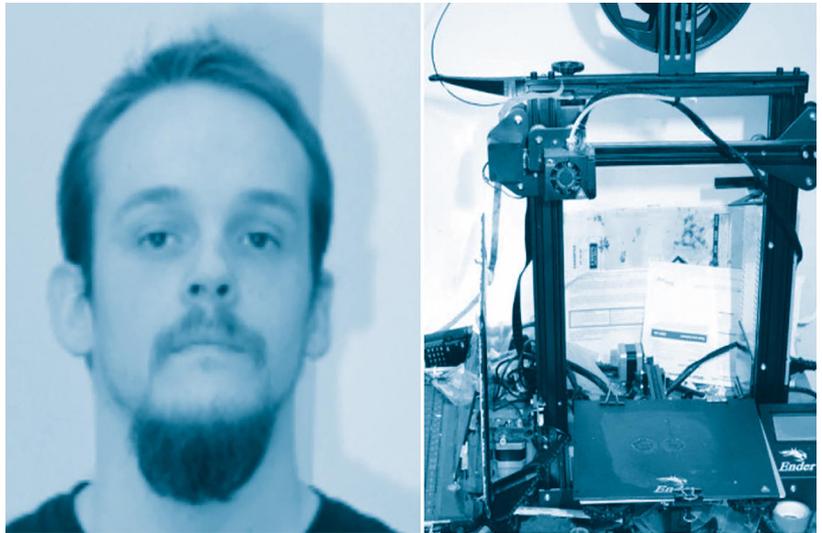
Since the Russian invasion on Feb. 24, 2022, the situation has become even more complex. The arrival of the Russian army and the shipment into the country of arms and ammunition by the Western coalition have multiplied the number of weapons in circulation in the country.

Foreign volunteers fighting on both sides may also facilitate arms trafficking with their home countries, or simply return home with weapons acquired on Ukrainian soil. Arms trafficking across the Moldovan border is of particular concern, and it is highly likely that not all weapons are or will remain in good hands.

Certainly, there is a real threat that arms trafficked from Ukraine will find their way into the hands of organized crime groups in various countries.

New technology and deadly consequences: 3-D printed weaponry

The prevalence of 3-D manufactured weaponry in criminal or extremist circles appears to be on the rise.¹⁷ Access to this



3D Printer owned by Morrice. File

type of weapon and ammunition for use in terrorist activity would constitute a radical development of the terrorist threat.

Weapon trafficking from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the dissemination of 3-D printed and makeshift firearms also present an opportunity for extremist movements, not just those associated with Islamic terrorism.

In 2013, plans for the Liberator, a special .38-calibre pistol that was entirely 3-D printable, were released by the company Defense Distributed and became an immediate success, with 100,000 downloads in the first 48 hours.¹⁸

While the weapon was relatively ineffective at the time of its release, the development of new models such as the Grizzly, a 22LR rifle, or the FGC-9, a 9 mm submachine gun, illustrates the growing effectiveness of this type of weapon technology.¹⁹

Not all these weapons are fully 3-D printable; they can also be hybrids, or part of kits that enable the completion of an existing non-functional weapon, making them modular and multiplying the possibilities for manufacturing, trafficking, and innovation.²⁰

The significance of this type of weaponry has not gone unnoticed by criminal and terrorist networks. On Oct. 9, 2019, Stephan Balliet, a 27-year-old ultra-right militant, killed two people with a homemade gun in an attack in the city of Halle, Germany.

Balliet was the first European terrorist known to have used 3-D printed weapons. The shotgun and submachine gun he made were of poor quality and prone to misfires, but they were affordable and easy to build.²¹

A year later, Dean Morrice was arrested



in the Bristol area of the UK by police who discovered a 3-D printer, firearm blueprints and Balliet's manifesto at his home.²² Since 2019, there have been six cases of 3-D printed weapons being seized in the UK, including one in the possession of a 15-year-old girl in Derbyshire and others in the hands of a Real IRA dissident splinter group.²³

In September 2020, Spanish police dismantled a 3-D printed weapons workshop run by ultra-right-wing militants in the Canary Islands.²⁴

It is in the US, however, that the greatest proliferation of such weaponry has been seen. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives reported it had seized 19,344 3-D printed weapons, a 1,000 percent increase in five years. Nearly 700 of the weapons had been used in a homicides or attempted homicides.²⁵

US concerns about the issue were echoed during a Europol conference in Berlin in May 2022, titled "Printing insecurity: tackling the threat of 3-D printed guns in Europe." The spread of such weapons was described as a "current and future threat

Forces loyal to Libya's parliament retook the center of the eastern coastal city of Benghazi in Feb. 2016, following fierce fighting with armed groups, including Daesh. AFP

... fully on Europol's radar as a result of the increasing number of weapons seized during investigations in Europe in previous years."²⁶

While the firepower and quality of these weapons remains limited for the time being, the cost of their manufacture decreases year after year, and their lethal capabilities have already been proven. In July 2022, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated with a weapon that was created using instructions found online.²⁷

Along with the threat of 3-D printed weapons, security services must also consider the risk from makeshift weapons and add-ons that increase their firing power, such as so-called bump stocks or auto sears. These items, which can transform a semi-automatic weapon into a fully automatic one, can also be 3-D printed.

Furthermore, the rise of armed ultra-left groups in the US, such as Redneck Revolt or John Brown Gun Club, may signal a future shift in strategy in Europe. The ultra-left also has a small number of activists fighting in Ukraine, where they may acquire some of the weaponry present. When it comes to 3-D



printing, it is also worth noting the ultra-left's ability to swiftly adopt technological innovations, such as 3-D printing, just as it did with data encryption.

The international community relies on the sum of the wills – or lack of will – of individual nations.

With this issue, like many others, the obstacle lies in the lack of will and a tremendous lack of efficiency, partly due to the many financial interests behind weapon manufacturing and sale.²⁸

The UN Security Council has stressed the need to curb the illicit trade and supply of small arms and light weapons to terrorists. Back in 2010, the UN revealed that the illicit trade in firearms was worth between \$170 million and \$320 million per year.²⁹

Faced with an upsurge in armed violence, the international community's response has instinctively drawn on various international instruments, yet the cooperation of security forces, such as Interpol, remains crucial for intervention on the ground.

The instruments developed to tackle these threats include the UN Convention against

Transnational Organized Crime and its protocol against the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition, which came into force on July 3, 2005.³⁰

In addition, there is the Arms Trade Treaty³¹ and the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.³² This program was adopted in 2001 and provides a robust and universal framework for international action in this field.

In response to these risks, on July 11, 2022, the EU announced the establishment of a Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management, based in Chisinau, Moldova.³³

The platform targets six specific risks, including firearms trafficking and terrorism prevention.³⁴

While these efforts seem appropriate, it is crucial that they are sustained in the coming years. Assault rifles from the Yugoslav conflict have proven to have a life span of several decades³⁵ and the same will be true of those in circulation in Ukraine today.

A picture taken on February 27, 2016 shows damaged buildings after forces loyal to Libya's internationally recognised parliament retook the centre of the eastern coastal city of Benghazi following fierce fighting with armed groups including Islamic State (IS) jihadists. AFP

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