**Small Arms And Light Weapons Trafficking**

Introduction

The United Nations Firearms Protocol defines ‘illicit trafficking’ as *“the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components, and ammunition from or across the territory of one State Party to that of another State Party if any one of the States Parties concerned does not authorize it in accordance with the terms of this Protocol or if the firearms are not marked in accordance with article 8 of this Protocol”.*[1](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-1-849)

Most trafficked firearms are legally manufactured but undergo ‘points of diversion’, when they are transferred illegally.[2](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-2-849) Illicit firearms transfers can occur domestically or across land borders. However, this entry focuses primarily on the illicit movement of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and their ammunition across maritime borders and by maritime means of transportation. SALW trafficking is the the most common form of weapons trafficking. SALW trafficking is the most common form of weapons trafficking.[3](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-3-849)

A ship with a large deck

Description automatically generated with medium confidence*Illicit arms captured by the US Navy, but the US Navy. This file is a work of a sailor or employee of the*[*U.S. Navy*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Navy)*, taken or made as part of that person’s official duties. As a*[*work*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Work_of_the_United_States_Government)*of the*[*U.S. federal government*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_government_of_the_United_States)*, it is in the*[***public domain***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/public_domain)*in the United States.*

Characteristics

*Routes*

SALW trafficking is a global issue. According to data collected by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), North America is the principal subregion of departure for seized firearms, with Europe and Western Asia also acting as significant departure points.[4](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-4-849) Central and South America, alongside Western Asia, account for up to 80 per cent of trafficking destinations. Illicit flows within subregions (e.g. South America, Northern Europe, West-Africa and Western Asia) account for a significant proportion of firearms trafficking, with trafficking by land remaining the most common type of cross-border case.[5](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-5-849)

While global in scope, SALW trafficking is understood to be an episodic issue which responds to demands and crises. As an example, there are concerns of firearms trafficking following the flow of weapons into Ukraine following Russia’s invasion.[6](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-6-849) Many of the firearms trafficked in the EU are thought to be legacy weapons from armed conflict in the Western Balkans.[7](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-7-849)

Seizures reported in cases involving ships and boats tend to be larger than those on land, suggesting that the maritime sphere better facilitates the large scale flow of illicit weapons.[8](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-8-849) Interceptions from vessels accounted for only around 6 per cent of all customs cases, but 33 per cent of the total number of firearms seized by customs.[9](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-9-849)

*Practices*

Maritime SALW trafficking takes place through the concealment and transportation of illicit weapons by ship in containers, often facilitated by falsified or misleading declarations and fake recipients.[10](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-10-849) In one indicative example, 362 arms were seized by Tunisian authorities in the Port of La Goulette, after firearms were concealed inside vehicles from Marseille and Genoa being transported in cargo ships.[11](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-11-849)

Other means include the evasion of checks, either by moving smaller quantities of arms by smaller boats to avoid detection, or the jettisoning of firearms from larger vessels at pre-arranged points distant from shore for smaller boats to collect. The former practice has been documented on the Malaysia-Thailand border where small boats carrying smaller quantities of arms dock at illegal jetties,[12](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-12-849) and in Colombia with small fishing vessels,[13](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-13-849)

While seizures of firearms components are relatively rare, there have been cases of these being concealed within metal items or parts of machinery onboard vessels.[14](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-14-849)

*Criminality*

Not all seizures of SALW derive from criminal activity. Some may instead arise out of infringements of an administrative nature, and are lightly criminalized. Administrative offences typically relate to expired licences, improper storage, or inadequate maintenance. [15](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-15-849)

Traffickers often use sea transport for larger shipments. Cases of seizures from vessels involved more than five times the number of firearms typically intercepted from other types of transportation, suggesting that the smuggling of SALW by maritime means entails high degrees of criminality and organisation.[16](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-16-849)

As with other forms of trafficking, criminality can be obscured by the overlap between the licit and illicit markets.[17](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-17-849) Illicit firearms flows are complex and often take place in a way that obscures the original country of origin. Arms may be exported legally, but then later diverted into illegal markets for example. [18](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-18-849)

Armed conflict is a significant cause of diversion, not only driving demand but also supply.[19](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-19-849) Conflict can under mine the ability of authorities to manage state stockpiles of weapons and enforce regulations on civilian firearms possession and use. It may also result in a significant accumulation of weapons, which can later be diverted into the illicit market.[20](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-20-849)

*Perpetrators* *& Demand*

The UNODC suggests that the demand for illicitly sourced and trafficked firearms derives from three main factors: crime, conflict and speculation.[21](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-21-849)

The intended illicit use of firearms by criminals may vary, with perpetration of violent crime being the most common. Firearms become an instrument of violent crime in different ways, mainly threatening and perpetrating violence that result in homicide, assaults, robberies, extortion or kidnapping.[22](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-22-849) These can be ad hoc and perpetrated by individuals with handguns, often facilitated by those means which are more common but occur at a smaller scale (e.g. land-based trafficking).[23](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-23-849) Because it allows the transportation of greater volumes of firearms, maritime trafficking can facilitate more organised forms of criminality, and therefore also needs to be organised to a greater degree.

Trafficked firearms can also facilitate violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups for political or ideological reasons, such as insurgents or terrorists.[24](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-24-849) The involvement of terrorist networks has also been recorded in firearms trafficking,[25](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-25-849) with cooperation between crime and terror networks for the purposes of weapons exchange (normally with criminal networks providing weapons to terrorist groups rather than the other way round).[26](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-26-849)

More organised weapons transfers of this type can include machine guns and submachine guns, rifles, assault rifles or rocket propelled grenades. While such weapons are involved in a small percentage of trafficking cases, they are more likely to be conducted by cross-border, well organised and larger trafficking operations.[27](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-27-849) Maritime routes are preferred for these activities because ships have more space for larger consignments.[28](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-28-849) Around one fifth of all customs seizure cases that included machine guns and submachine guns involved such firearms in batches of four or more.[29](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-29-849) This requires significant criminal organisation, often including document fraud. Trafficking by smaller boats is also often well-organised but tends to involve smaller groups of perpetrators and is generally focused on evading regulation by landing at illegal entry points.[30](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-30-849)

Arms are also trafficked in order to break sanctions and embargoes.[31](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-31-849) North Korea has been a particular focus for this kind of activity,[32](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-32-849) and there are also cases in Africa.[33](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-33-849) In one example provided by the UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea, a Sudanese national organised the shipment by boat of 25,000 readily convertible blank-firing pistols from Turkey to Eritrea in January 2017.[34](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-34-849) According to shipping documentation, the intended final consignee was an Eritrean state-owned import and export company based in Asmara.

Illicit arms transfers are sometimes undertaken by states to non-state actors. Marsh and Pinson for example state ‘the largest contemporary example of the state-sanctioned illicit trade was the CIA-led supply of arms and training to anti-Assad groups in Syria (‘Timber Sycamore’), lasting from 2013 to 2017’.[35](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-35-849) Other examples include seizures of weapons flowing to Syria and Yemen, most likely from Iran.[36](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-36-849)

Scope

*Seizures*

It is difficult to measure the scope of firearms trafficking. One commonly employed proxy is to analyse seizures as an indication of the scale of the trade.[37](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-37-849) UNODC analysis released in 2020, suggested that roughly 550,000 illicit firearms were seized in both 2016 and 2017.[38](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-38-849)

There are limitations to using seizures as a measurement. First, not all firearms that are trafficked are successfully intercepted and seized, so the actual number of arms trafficked are likely to be much higher than those seized. Some countries underreport seizures for administrative reasons or do not provide any information at all.[39](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-39-849) On the other hand, not all seizures recorded within this number are explicitly linked to trafficking activities. Many of the recorded seizures are of single firearms, seized for illegal possession within national territories rather than for trafficking across borders (which comprised only only 9 per cent of cases in the 2020 analysis).[40](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-40-849)

While the majority of seizures are of single firearms, larger consignments account for a significant share of the total. For example, half of firearms seized by customs officers globally involved 18 or more firearms.[41](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-41-849) This may suggest that the phenomenon is more widespread than the seizure numbers indicate. A further difficulty remains in assessing the proportion of SALW that are trafficked through maritime routes. Only six per cent of customs cases included interceptions from vessels rather than across land or by other means.[42](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-42-849)

*Diversion*

A second estimate is based around data on diverted (stolen or lost) firearms.[43](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-43-849) The challenge with this indicator is that it does not cover all trafficked firearms and does not measure the share of firearms illicitly crossing borders. Data on diverted firearms may also not have the same reporting requirements as seizures, and there is an overall lack of transparency concerning governmental stockpiles.[44](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-44-849)

*Licit Market* *Circulation*

A final estimate is made by analysing the illicit market in the context of the licit market. 857 million SALW are in the hands of civilians, 133 million in military arsenals, and 23 million owned by law enforcement agencies.[45](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-45-849) Small Arms Survey estimates the global authorised trade in firearms at approximately US$1.58 billion, with unrecorded but licit transactions making up another US$100 million.[46](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-46-849) The most commonly cited estimate for the size of the illicit market is ’10 percent to 20 percent of the licit market, which would be about US$170 million to US$320 million per annum’.[47](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-47-849) As before, however, this figure does not delineate between those moved by maritime routes, and those transported over land.

Firearms trafficking is a largely hidden phenomenon, meaning the scope of the issue is still not entirely understood, especially in the maritime realm.

Impact

Firearms are instrumental to much criminal violence, particularly homicide. They are also used by organised criminals and sustain many armed conflicts and terrorist activities. Firearms trafficking facilitates conflict and crime and is prevalent in areas with relatively high levels of violent deaths.[48](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-48-849) An example is the Niger Delta, where illicit fuel from bunkering is traded offshore for weapons, which then facilitates the continuation of armed conflict. This trade not only impacts individuals and communities but can also lead to significant state and even regional instability.[49](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-49-849) Because trafficked weapons often remain behind at the end of conflicts, disputes can be reignited or even spread to neighbouring countries.[50](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-50-849)

Linkages & Synergies

Firearms trafficking is linked to several other forms of maritime criminal flow. Routes where firearms are trafficked are also used for illicit goods such as drugs, as is the case between Brazil and Paraguay.[51](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-51-849) There is a further interaction between wildlife trafficking and firearms trafficking, with identified linkages between the higher prevalence of weapons and poaching.[52](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-52-849) There have also been instances of fishing vessels trafficking firearms, linking trafficking activities to IUU Fishing networks,[53](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-53-849) and weapons may also be traded for illicitly sourced goods such as charcoal and fuel.[54](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-54-849)

Responses

*International*

Firearms trafficking and the need for SALW controls have long been recognised as a significant issue at the international level.[55](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-55-849) In consequence, a wide variety of international and regional instruments that have been established to combat the trade.

The Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition (‘the Firearms Protocol’) supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and was adopted by the General Assembly in 2001.[56](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-56-849) The Firearms Protocol addresses the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking aims to support member states to address the transnational nature of the phenomenon and its links to organised and other serious crime. This includes law enforcement and legal capacity building measures, as well as technical support on issues such as data collection.

The Protocol is complemented by the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA).[57](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-57-849) and by the UN International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons – the International Tracing  
Instrument in 2005.[58](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-58-849) ITI aims to promote the development of marking, record-keeping, and tracing measures, including international cooperation in tracing, and also defines when SALW are illicit.[59](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-59-849)

The Arms Trade Treaty has also targeted the trafficking of illicit firearms.[60](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-60-849) Effective in 2014, it focuses on to the point of diversion, with obliging members to strengthen export regulations and track the destination of exports. It also aims to strengthen legislation against supplying arms to areas under embargo. However, it has been criticised for including few explicit sanctions for breaching this provision among other limitations.[61](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-61-849) The Security Council has established the Sanctions Committees to monitor and verify arms embargoes but they have no fixed mechanism to prevent sanctioned arms transfers.[62](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-62-849) Instances of a supplier state being hit with sanctions for transferring small arms illegally are rare.

Interpol has played a significant part in the fight against firearm trafficking. It has helped to ensure communication between law enforcement agencies worldwide, while managing an international criminal database.[63](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-63-849) A range of states and institutions also offer international capacity building to strengthen national efforts, particularly regarding diversion.[64](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-64-849)

*National*

National policies centre on three distinct a forms of countermeasure.

The first comprises measures to prevent licit firearms being diverted into the illicit market. The US, for example, one of the largest points of departure, has enacted a number of policies such as improving licensing and oversight of dealers and the screening of purchasers.[65](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-65-849) This aligns with the recommendations of the International Action Network on Small Arms, which recommends policies such as registration, theft reporting, tracing of firearms and dealer oversight.[66](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-66-849) Stockpiles must also be sufficiently guarded to ensure government arms are not illicitly diverted.[67](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-67-849)

Second, the strengthening of customs and border agencies  to intercept firearms when entering their destinations or points of transhipment.

Finally, the strengthening of investigative activities focused on the networks that facilitate trafficking is required, including sufficient intelligence gathering.[68](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-68-849)

These national policies require capacity, coordination, and training that is not present in all cases.[69](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-69-849) Weak preventive, regulatory and security measures, as well as weak border control capacity and insufficient training are all significant obstacles to an effective response in prevention and interception. A lack of specialised skills, and insufficient information exchange and coordination between law enforcement agencies are all ongoing obstacles to investigation efforts.[70](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2022/10/10/small-arms-and-light-weapons-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-70-849)

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