

THE POLITICS OF SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION

The issue of small arms proliferation continues to pose a significant global security problem. **Stephanie Koorey**, one of Australia's leading specialists on conventional arms control and proliferation, spoke with defence analyst **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about the scale of the problem today, its implications for global security, and whether proliferation can be regulated.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What are the many dimensions of small arms proliferation? How serious is the problem globally?

Stephanie Koorey: It is important to remember that small arms, like all conventional weaponry, have a legitimate place in the defence of the state. The most widely held definition of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is hand-held and crew-served weapons of under 100 mm calibre. That covers everything from handguns to automatic rifles to shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles and their ammunition. They are not inherently illegal, but in certain circumstances they can be illegal and illicit.

Part of the problem is getting accurate data on the circulation of legal and illicit stockpiles of small arms and light weapons. Few states openly disclose their stockpiles, and it is hard to put a number on the illicit market. That said, the latest estimates suggest that 875 million legal and illicit small arms are in existence. Out of a total conventional arms trade of about US\$60 billion, the legal small arms and light weapons trade is estimated at about US\$8 billion, which is around double the 2010 estimate of around US\$4 billion. This is partly due to better data collection and the longstanding conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The illicit market is estimated at about US\$1 billion, but again, it's not a hard-and-fast figure, and figures don't always tell the whole story of small arms and light weapons, which are often stolen, gifted or transferred unofficially,

and black market prices vary considerably. This year, prices in Lebanon were skyrocketing because weapons were in high demand in Syria, whereas the prices per year of a standard AK-47 since the 1980s in Afghanistan have varied wildly for reasons that don't always coincide with major political events.

Also, armed violence—including by criminal gangs—and conflict accounted on average for more than 500,000 deaths a year in the first decade of this century. It surprises most people that most of these are from violent crime, not conflict. Data coming out of the Arab uprisings, however, may well challenge this.

The main issues with small arms and light weapons are easily stolen and transferred, easy to use, and small and light enough to be easily hidden and carried.

Most small arms are also reusable as long as you have the right ammunition. The problems caused by small arms misuse include armed crime, human rights abuse, gang violence, and conflicts. These feed into other endemic



Dr Stephanie Koorey is a Visiting Fellow with the Fragile States Project, UNSW Canberra.

problems such as cycles of violence, poverty and crime, transnational gunrunning, undermining professional security forces, and toppling legitimate governments. The disproportionate firepower in modern automatic weaponry enables local gangs to create and rule fiefdoms, illegally take over countries by force, and create dependent, subterranean economies that feed back into the conflict. Examples of such groups are the rampaging Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the militant Taliban in Afghanistan, and the organised drug cartel of the FARC in Colombia. More recently, the well-armed Somali pirates have extended small arms to the maritime domain.

I also think the creation of supposedly pro-government militias is a significant problem. Australia recently commended the political changes in Myanmar, particularly the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and her continued involvement in politics. However, one of the tactics of the military leadership in Myanmar was to create pro-government militias, mostly to defeat the numerous anti-government groups that have been fighting the central government for decades. Such groups are loose cannons, can become lost commands and criminal gangs, and are always incredibly hard to disarm. They are also not always small—the United Wa State Army, in northern Myanmar, has more than 20,000 members and is essentially Southeast Asia's largest drug cartel.

The thing to remember, however, is that this is not a purely quantitative issue; in fact, small numbers of automatic weapons in the hands of criminals or insurgents are disproportionately destabilising. For example, only 700 firearms were collected, and then destroyed, by the Australian-led intervention in the Solomon Islands in 2003. This conflict lasted five years and displaced thousands of people.

Also, in 2005, approximately 840 firearms were accepted during the disarmament of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in northern Sumatra, a group that had fought the Indonesian armed forces for decades. This is not so unusual—armed groups often have fewer weapons than is supposed. Even the decommissioning of the Irish Republican Army in 2005 brought forth

an armoury of only approximately 1,000 rifles plus a few hundred assorted small arms and light weapons. Admittedly, such groups also use non-firearm weapons such as machetes and explosives. The size of the armoury largely depends on a group's tactics.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: When is a weapon licit and how are illicit small arms and light weapons proliferated?

Stephanie Koorey: It's actually a trickier issue than you might think. There are political and legal processes aimed at curtailing the transfer and production of 'illicit' small arms and light weapons. While we can mostly agree that criminals and terrorists access small arms and light weapons through illicit means (transfers that violate arms embargoes are illegal under international law), there is less substantive agreement over when an armed group is deemed 'illicit.'

This has become particularly apparent with the Arab uprisings in Libya and Syria. What should we do when the insurgents, not the state, become a more acceptable political entity? Should the other countries arm them? To avert unacceptable human suffering, it may be morally justified to do so, but is it legally justified? And when foreign states start supplying arms to insurgents in a conflict-ridden country, what precedent does this set?

The standard ways in which illicit small arms proliferate are through transfers from a benefactor to a recipient; 'leakages' from state and civilian stocks; and acquisitions of recycled weapons from previous transfers. Two other means are often overlooked: homemade weapons and ammunition, and battle captures. Pinpointing how and when any single weapon becomes illicit is often impossible. Any armed group's arsenal is likely to include a combination of sources, but not all groups receive direct transfers from a beneficiary; organised crime groups almost certainly will be involved in transfers as traffickers and recipients as well as benefiting from leakages and recycling, and homemade weapons can sometimes be of very high quality for crime syndicates as well as armed groups. Japanese yakuza (members of traditional

organised crime syndicates) have reportedly been importing Filipino gunsmiths rather than black market guns because the risk is lower and the product just as good. But because of the inherent recyclability and concealability of small arms, a weapon could start off as legally produced, legally transferred, stolen from a government arsenal, seized in battle or bought from corrupt officials, and re-rifled by a gunsmith. A more recent means of proliferation in north Africa was an outpouring of weapons from Libya—including from the Malian fighters involved in the Libyan conflict taking weapons back to Mali with them—and the result has been an armed crisis there.

Similarly, the weapons used in the conflicts in Southeast Asia and the Pacific have not usually been shipped to non-state combatants from outside the region. They are mostly stolen or bought from within the country or sometimes a neighbouring country. Movies such as *Lord of War* and *Blood Diamond* certainly have resounding truths in them, particularly for the vicious civil wars that have beset much of Africa for so long; weapons, particular Soviet arsenals, were simply sold off after the fall of communism. However, Soviet small arms are not in abundance in Southeast Asia or the Pacific; the Kalashnikov-style automatic weapons found in this region are mostly Chinese copies of the Soviet AK.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Who are the users of illicit small arms and how widespread is the trade?

Stephanie Koorey: Governments would say terrorists, insurgents, criminals and gunrunners. But who are the illicit users in Syria at the moment? It's not as clear cut as we might suppose. Most Western societies have an awkward relationship with firearms and conventional weapons. We don't like weapons in the 'wrong hands,' but we also don't agree on who are the 'wrong hands' until it is too late. And weapons become profoundly iconic when the rebels become the victors against the perceived oppressor; the AK especially so. In this region, the AK appears on East Timor's Coat of Arms as a symbol of liberation; this is

extraordinary given the AK was not particularly prevalent in East Timor's liberation struggle, but the point is that it symbolises their victorious armed struggle.

But victory and defeat come at a price: during conflict, arms are used against civilians; other criminal and militant groups; and government, police and armed forces, creating casualties and human, national and regional insecurities. There is an argument that the only licit arms are those in government hands, but there is no consensus on this at all.

Most Western societies have an awkward relationship with firearms and conventional weapons. We don't like weapons in the 'wrong hands.'

Unlike in the United States, private individuals in Australia cannot use or keep automatic weapons at home. Often it takes a major incident to spark interest in gun control; for example, after the Port Arthur massacre, former Prime Minister John Howard introduced much stronger gun laws.

Although the recent spate of fatal shootings in the United States has brought the issue back into the public arena, not much will change in US gun policy with the Second Amendment to the US Constitution ensuring the right to bear arms. Americans take their right to bear arms seriously—there are 90 guns for every 100 people in the United States, and individuals can amass personal arsenals as members of gun clubs and even militias. But of course not everyone the United States is necessarily a gun owner. This also reflects a passionate and ongoing debate: Does the easy access to guns cause public bloodbaths or is there a weakness in our societies that prevents us from identifying mass murderers before they load up and kill?

All countries are affected by gun crime to varying extents, and this is mostly seen as a domestic law and order issue and related to national gun laws. It becomes more significant when weapons cross borders and transnational crime groups morph into or work with insurgent

or terrorist groups, as is allegedly happening between groups such as the Jemaah Islamiyah in north-eastern Indonesia and the Abu Sayyaf in south-western Philippines.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What impact have the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan had on the illicit small arms industry?

Stephanie Koorey: The 2012 *Small Arms Survey Yearbook* has done the most comprehensive work on this. The black market in Iraq contains some expected as well as unexpected weapons such as caches of tens of thousands of small arms; a preponderance of AK-47s (from Eastern Europe and China); a few Belgian FALs (Fusil Automatique Léger or light automatic rifle); German G3s and Mausers; a large number of mortars and MANPADS (man-portable air-defence systems); a surprising number of weapons of Iranian origin; and curiosities like World War II German rifles etched with Nazi swastikas.

It's a similar story in Afghanistan, where fewer than 10,000 weapons have been seized so far. There is the ubiquitous AK-47 (a large number which are of Chinese origin), an abundance of mortars, and a large number of high-quality homemade weapons from northern Pakistan (a clear giveaway is that the date stamp is from 35 years before the weapon first entered use). But larger systems such as MANPADS are not turning up in seizures in Afghanistan.

It is more useful to look at this in terms of demand rather than supply. The 10,000 plus weapons found in Afghanistan may indicate that demand there is still high, and working out areas of greatest demand will often help reverse-engineer weapons movements. For example, there have been reports of US arms shipments going missing in Iraq, and the number of weapons being used by intervention forces and those opposed to them is patently apparent. Because demand in Iraq for illicit weapons was strong, weapons went in and stayed in; however, I'm certain that weapons from Iraq are now reaching Syria where demand is now high. Similarly so in Gaza, where one observer recently posited that weapons from the Libyan civil war have come

into the hands of Hamas, and I must say his argument and evidence are credible.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What does future hold for small arms proliferation? Can the illicit small arms market be controlled?

Stephanie Koorey: There are currently two major initiatives on small arms control: the UN Programme of Action (PoA) and the Arms Trade Treaty. I have been fairly critical of both. The PoA lacks policy clarity and the Arms Trade Treaty is too ambitious on paper; ironically, neither will change the situation on the ground very much. There are also frequent disarmament and arms destruction ceremonies, but I doubt these will achieve what they claim. We tend to 'fetishise' weapons and think that when we remove the weapon, we remove the problem. It's not that simple. We also have to remove the desire for the weapon.

What will make a difference is a better understanding of the illicit end-user market, and that means looking beyond two-dimensional control and disarmament. This could involve looking at this issue in terms of three dimensions: supply reduction, demand reduction, and disarmament. Demand reduction is less well articulated in policy and practice, but I see it as having two pillars: tangible demand and intangible demand. Tangible demand is when people obtain or retain their weapons for practical reasons—for example, during and after a conflict when insurgents don't trust the new government or because it's the most efficient way for criminals to get what they want.

Intangible demand is more of a psychological attachment to a weapon, particularly for those who see themselves as freedom fighters or revolutionaries, and therefore, as legitimate weapons owners. Their weapon is less a tool and more a symbol of heroism and comradeship, and therefore, has an inherent iconic value. In societies with low social trust and high individual weapons use, there is little incentive to disarm. Weapons buybacks or amnesties don't work in these contexts. Again, this is playing out in Libya and Afghanistan, and will play out in Syria.