

Sourcing the Tools of War:

SMALL ARMS SUPPLIES TO CONFLICT ZONES



A police director inspects a box of mortars seized from paramilitary groups in northern Colombia in July 2000. The arsenal comprised automatic guns, mortars, machine guns, and almost 100 grenades.

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Addressing large international transfers to conflict zones—involving many hundreds of weapons or millions of rounds of ammunition—is a high priority on the international small arms agenda. This chapter focuses on the role of the many different sources of supply in a selected number of recent or current internal conflicts in Africa, the Americas, and Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The chapter underscores that sources are varied and that the focus on large international arms transfers should not obscure the need to study other sources of supply,

particularly from a regulatory perspective. It considers the various means by which small arms find their way to conflict areas: domestic production (government-authorized or illicit); theft, leakage, sale, and other outflows of weaponry from existing (mostly state) stockpiles; and transfers from abroad (large- and small-scale legal trade, illicit 'ant trade', or large-scale trafficking).

The case studies include Colombia and Haiti in the Americas; Liberia and Mali in West Africa; and Tajikistan and Georgia in Central Asia and the Caucasus. These six internal conflicts differ in terms of origin, duration, existence of an arms embargo, the number of casualties, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the number of combatants and belligerent groups. Thus, the case studies present a wide range of conflict scenarios. Yet since the conflicts are roughly contemporaneous—covering the early 1990s to the present—they allow for meaningful comparisons. Moreover, the pairing of two case studies within each region can reveal whether combatants tap into similar international trafficking networks, even if conflict scenarios are dissimilar. The sample thus allows for some general—albeit tentative—conclusions on the nature of the sourcing of tools of war.

The main conclusions of the chapter are:

- As a conflict continues, small arms procurement patterns of governments and of insurgents often become more sophisticated, diverse, and entrenched.
- Transfers to conflict zones include an important 'ant trade', a small but steady trickle of weapons that can produce large accumulations over time.
- Through corruption, theft, free distribution, and sales, government stockpiles constitute an important source of small arms in virtually all conflict zones. In some conflicts, they are the dominant source for all combatants.
- Since the 1990s, economic motives—including greed—have been highlighted as key factors in the arms trade. Even in the post-cold war era, however, political affiliations and loyalties remain important in elucidating small arms transfer patterns.
- In long-standing conflicts whose parties have financial resources at their disposal, local production can be an important source of supply. While rare, this case can also apply to insurgents.
- In order to stem the flow of small arms to conflict areas, issues such as border control and corruption must be added to the international agenda.

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The Americas. In Colombia, combatants have relied on domestic production of small arms (both state-controlled and well-organized and sophisticated illicit production by the FARC guerillas), state stockpiles, the international authorized trade, and international illicit deals (small-scale and the 'classic' larger transactions involving brokers and forged documentation). Colombia exemplifies how weapon sources can become diversified as a conflict wears on, and as combatants become wealthier. In contrast, small arms sources in Haiti have been less varied. Many of the small arms held by the Haitian government, as well as by the different armed groups active in the country, have reportedly come from the abolished Haitian Army.

Despite the differences between weapons sourcing in Colombia and Haiti, however, some similarities exist. One is the role of the ant trade, while a second is the part inadvertently played by the United States, which has become a source country of illicit guns shipped by members of the Colombian and Haitian diasporas, among others.

West Africa. Liberian arms sourcing patterns are often perceived as typical of the West African region. For the Liberian insurgents, state stockpiles were of secondary importance from 2000 to 2003. Because of the considerable diamond and timber resources in their possession, as well as foreign political and military backing, Liberian insurgents were in a position to organize and purchase substantial consignments of small arms from abroad. The same was true for the Liberian government. The Malian case reveals, on the other hand, that the picture is not uniform. Here, sourcing was not influenced by the development of arms markets in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe from the early 1990s onwards. For Malian armed groups, which lacked financial and natural resources and foreign backing, seizures from state stockpiles were the key source of small arms. The Malian state relied mainly on stocks accumulated before the rebellion.



A Tajik soldier holds his gun and bandolier in December 1992.

Again, the comparison reveals that time can be a significant factor in diversifying weapons procurement. President Charles Taylor's forces and the rebels had already fought for seven years when conflict erupted again in 2000, and hence they could rely on pre-established trafficking networks. This was not the case for Malian groups. As the Malian rebellion wore on, however, insurgent and militia groups also developed increasingly sophisticated trafficking methods, although through different channels and not on the same scale as in Liberia.

Central Asia and the Caucasus. Small arms acquisition patterns in the Tajik and

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Georgian civil wars have some strong similarities. Former Soviet stockpiles of small arms were of paramount importance in both conflicts, while domestic production was of little significance. All possible types of leakage from the Soviet armed forces occurred: theft, seizure, sales, and handouts. In general, handouts were politically motivated. A noteworthy difference is that international supplies played a much greater part in Tajikistan than in Georgia. In the Tajik conflict, especially the opposition was dependent on supplies originating from other states in the region; in the Georgian civil war as a whole, this was not the case.