



ماعت للسلام والتنمية وحقوق الإنسان  
Maat For Peace, Development, and Human Rights

# Fact sheet

## Proliferation of SALW in Areas of Violence and Armed Conflict and their Impact on Human Rights

Prepared by  
Ahmed Al-Sanhouty

## Overview of Small Arms and Light Weapons

Widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the world reflects the global inaction towards human rights, as these weapons directly impact the lives of citizens. They are the primary cause of civilian casualties, resulting in a large number of deaths and leaving even more wounded. Additionally, they instill fear and suffering in communities, prolong conflicts and criminal activities, and hinder social and economic development. These weapons are used indiscriminately by civilians, insurgents, terrorists, armed groups, and criminal organizations, enabling human rights violations and abuses of international humanitarian law, including mutilation, rape, sexual violence, enforced disappearances, torture, and the recruitment of child soldiers.

Armed violence refers to the unlawful use of weapons to harm others or destroy property. It can arise from political conflicts, wars, social unrest, ethnic or religious discrimination, or organized criminal activities. It encompasses wars, armed conflicts, and various forms of everyday criminal activities. Armed conflicts represent long-term confrontations between states or between armed groups and states, or even between armed groups themselves. These conflicts are categorized under international humanitarian law as either international conflicts, involving armed force between two or more countries regardless of the cause or severity of the conflict, or non-international armed conflicts, occurring between government armed forces and forces of one or more

**A distinction should be made between armed violence and armed conflicts based on several criteria, including parties involved, duration of fighting, nature of military directives and resulting violence, and quantity of weapons and military equipment utilized. However, it is important to note that every armed conflict can be considered a form of armed violence, but not vice versa.**

armed groups, or between such groups within the territory of a state. The armed confrontation must reach a certain level of intensity, and the participating parties must demonstrate a minimum level of organization.

Small arms are designed for personal use and include handguns, light machine guns, small machine guns (including submachine guns), fully automatic rifles, assault rifles, and semi-automatic rifles. They also encompass firearms, which are portable weapons with a barrel designed to fire or easily modified to fire a shot, bullet, or projectile through the action of an explosive substance. Additionally, they include other destructive devices such as explosive bombs, incendiary bombs, gas bombs, hand

grenades, rocket launchers, missiles, missile systems, and mines. Ammunition refers to bullets or projectiles, including their complete components such as cartridge cases, primers, propellant powder, and bullets.

Light weapons, on the other hand, are portable weapons intended for use by multiple individuals operating as a crew. Examples include heavy machine guns, machine guns, howitzers, mortars with a caliber of less than 100 mm, grenade launchers, anti-



tank weapons, recoilless guns, shoulder-launched portable rockets, anti-aircraft weapons, launchers, and air defense weapons.

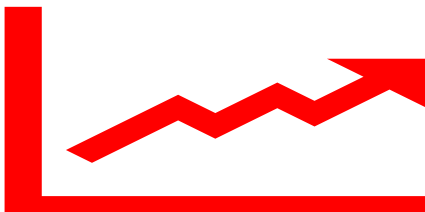
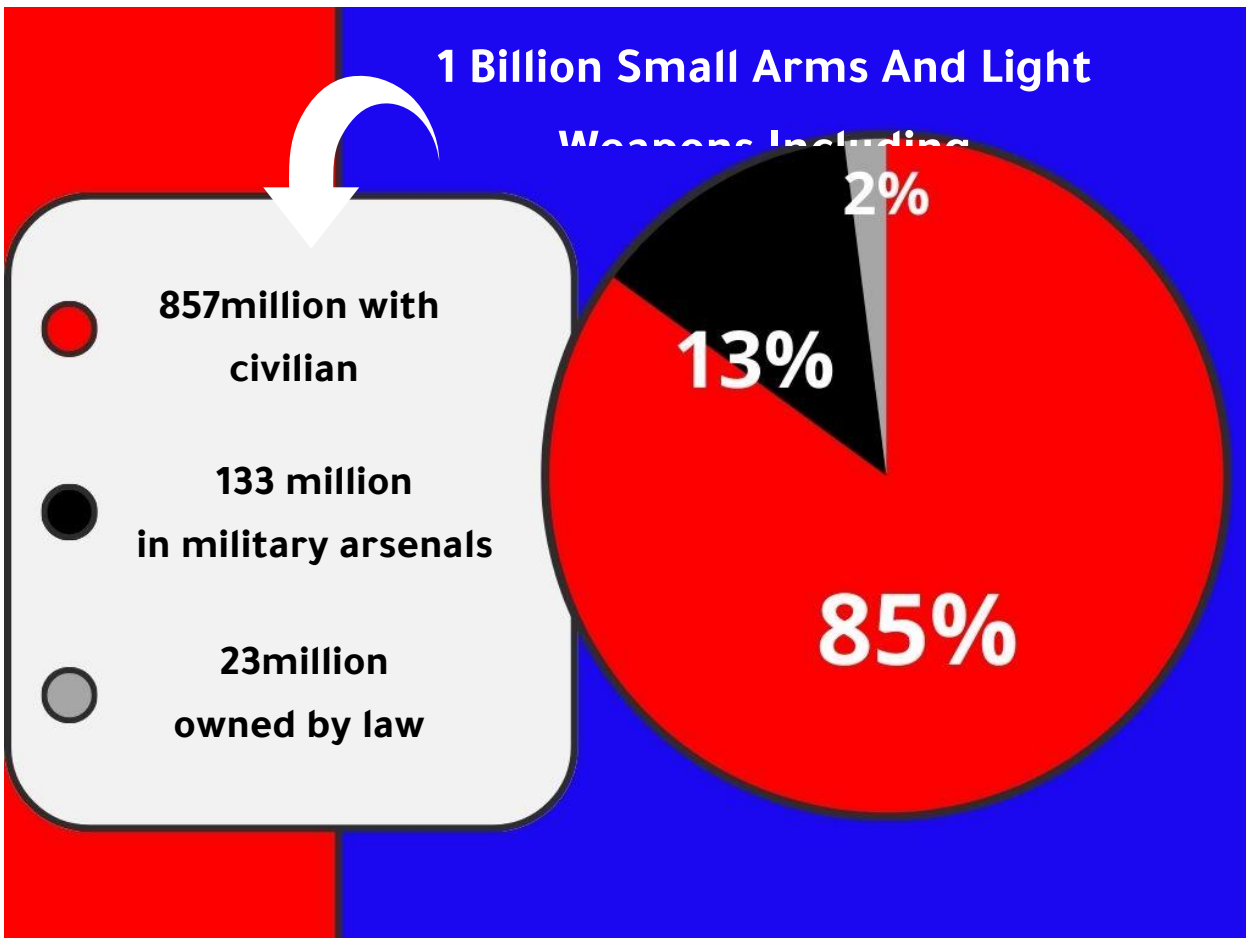
Small and light weapons possess a range of characteristics that make them highly desirable among gangs, armed groups, and terrorist organizations. Their affordability, widespread availability, and ease of concealment during armed conflicts give them a distinct advantage in combat situations. Furthermore, these weapons require minimal logistical support, are low-maintenance, do not necessitate extensive training, are difficult to trace, and can be stored in harsh weather conditions.



There are numerous ways in which small arms and light weapons can be misused, particularly in environments where states struggle to control access to and the illegal possession of firearms. This includes weapons seized from enemies during combat, stolen from peacekeeping stocks or taken from United Nations forces, as well as those obtained by armed, terrorist, or criminal groups through illicit smuggling.

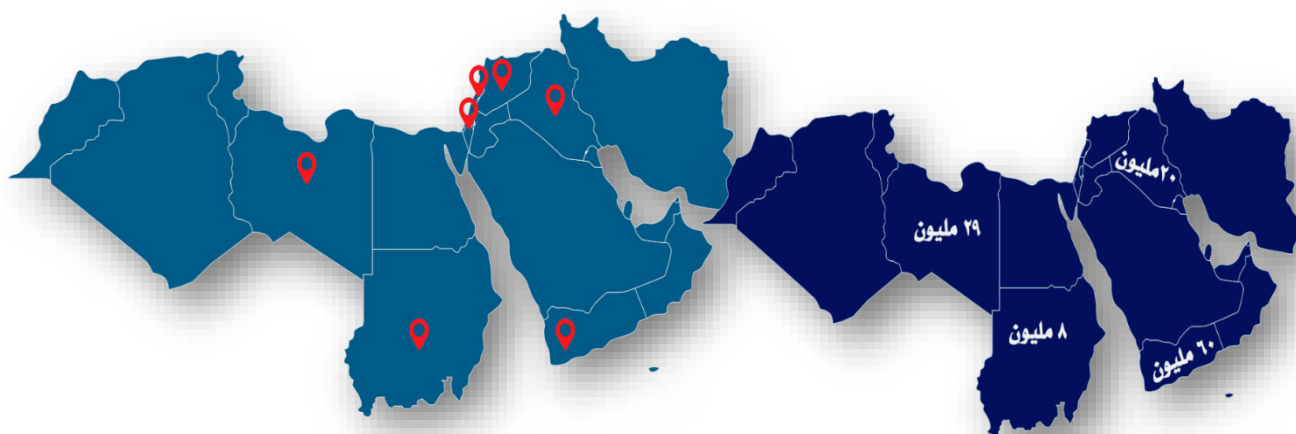
### **Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in Conflict Areas**

Proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons has increased globally due to the escalation of conflicts and armed confrontations, posing a threat to international peace and security. Estimates suggest that there are approximately one billion small arms and light weapons worldwide, with **857 million** (85%) in civilian hands, **133 million** (13 %) in military arsenals, and **23 million** (2 %) owned by law enforcement agencies.



In recent years, global violence has intensified, with armed violence rates rising by over 40% between 2020 and 2023.

Nearly 50 countries worldwide are afflicted by varying degrees of armed violence, with 13 countries facing severe risks. These countries include [Palestine](#), [Myanmar](#), [Syria](#), [Yemen](#), [Sudan](#), [Ukraine](#), [the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), [Iraq](#), [Mexico](#), [Nigeria](#), [Colombia](#), [Haiti](#), and [Brazil](#). These regions experience different forms of armed violence, ranging from severe violence and the presence of armed groups (e.g., [Nigeria](#), [Sudan](#), and [Ukraine](#)) to mass civilian killings (e.g., [Palestine](#) and [Myanmar](#)) and the prevalence of armed gangs (e.g., [Mexico](#), [Haiti](#), and [Brazil](#)). Small and light weapons play a pivotal role in all these conflicts, perpetuating civil wars, organized crime, and terrorist activities.



In the Middle East and North Africa region, seven countries are embroiled in disputes and conflicts, namely **Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria**. Small and light weapons exacerbate these conflicts. Sudan, for instance, experiences widespread civilian possession of weapons, with an estimated **eight million** small and light arms in circulation. Libya is home to the largest uncontrolled weapons stockpile globally, estimated to contain between **150 and 200 thousand** tons of weaponry and approximately **29 million** individual weapons. Yemen's market is flooded with an estimated **60 million** firearms, while **Iraq** is estimated to have approximately **20 million** weapons in the possession of clans and illegal organizations.

In **Syria**, armed groups and terrorist organizations possess millions of small and light weapons, which they employ to commit human rights violations. Similarly, in **Lebanon**, these weapons exacerbate conflicts and sectarian tensions among certain armed groups. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has also expanded due to the widespread availability of small arms. Since October 7, 2023, there has been an increased demand for firearms among civilians in **Israel**, raising concerns about a potential escalation in armed violence and mass killings.

In Africa, estimates indicate that there are approximately 100 million small arms present on the continent, particularly in the **Horn of Africa**, the countries within **the violent belt of** Central Africa, and certain regions of **West Africa**. Non-state actors, including individuals, private companies, and non-state armed groups, possess **over 40 million** of these small arms. **Alarmingly, nearly 80% of these weapons are unregistered and unmarked.**

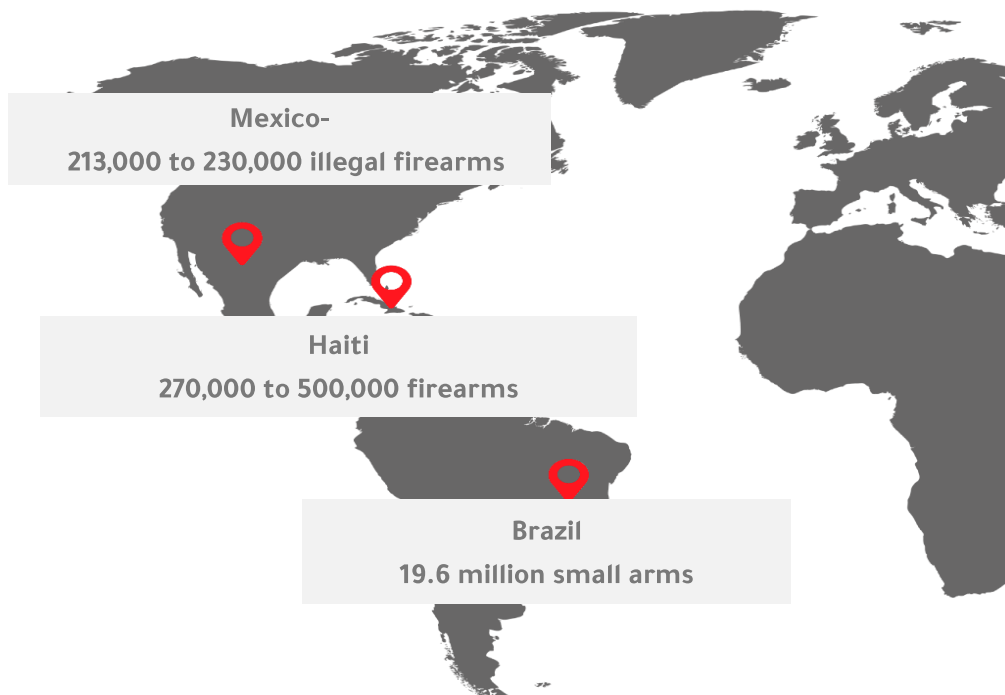
**In the African Sahel region alone, there are an estimated 30 million** small arms and light weapons in civilian possession. The countries most affected by armed conflicts in this region include **Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia**. Corruption plays a significant role in supplying weapons to terrorist

organizations across the continent. For instance, some officers have been found selling weapons to the terrorist group Boko Haram, which they use to target and kill civilians.

Southeast Asia is home to over **160 million** firearms among civilians, and conflicts and disputes are escalating in several countries, including **Myanmar, Pakistan, Afghanistan**, and **India**. In **Afghanistan**, more than **300,000** American weapons have fallen into the hands of the Taliban, raising concerns about potential human rights violations. Similarly, in Myanmar, the military has produced numerous small arms and light weapons, which they have employed to target civilians. These weapons are often sourced from military companies in various countries, such as **Israel, United States, France, India, and Japan**.

**For instance, CAA Industries, an Israeli arms manufacturing company, was found to have exported weapons manufacturing equipment to the Myanmar army. This equipment contributed to the production of rifle parts, including handles and supplies, despite the army's involvement in violations and war crimes.**

**In the Latin American and Caribbean region, the presence of small arms and light**



weapons contributes to an upsurge in criminal activities, leading to internal unrest, particularly in **Mexico, Brazil, and Haiti**. Brazil, for instance, is estimated to have around **19.6 million** small arms, with **58%** of them being unregistered. In Mexico, illegal weapons flow from the United States of America has been on the rise, with an estimated **213,000 to 230,000** firearms being transferred annually. In Haiti, the number of illegal weapons in civilian possession and those held by criminal groups ranges from approximately **270,000 to 500,000**.

On the European continent, the protracted war in Ukraine poses the risk of increased circulation of small arms and light weapons within the country. Concerns and estimates are indicating that some military aid and weapons provided to Ukraine may be diverted to armed and terrorist groups in conflict-ridden regions, particularly in the Middle East and African hotspots. This situation is compounded by the widespread flow of weapons from European countries and the United States to Ukraine without sufficient control, especially regarding weapons obtained by the United States and France as a result of legitimate efforts to combat arms smuggling operations to Yemen, necessitating their destruction, storage, or disposal. It is worth noting that there have been numerous instances of corruption in arms procurement operations, as revealed by the Ukrainian government recently, further exacerbating the transfer of weapons to illicit markets for sale.

### Impact of Small Arms and Light Weapons on Human Rights

Impact of small arms and light weapons on human rights is significant. These weapons pose a major dilemma as they contribute to the death and injury of civilians through hostile acts committed by terrorist and armed groups. They also perpetuate crimes such as sexual violence, rape, torture, enforced disappearance, and the forced recruitment of children in armed conflicts. Furthermore, they facilitate the continuation of terrorist activities and organized crimes.

It is estimated that small arms and light weapons are responsible for approximately **262,800 deaths annually**, which averages to **700** deaths per day. Every two minutes, one person dies as a result of these lethal weapons. For instance, according to UN estimates, from the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria until June 2022, nearly **76,417** people were killed due to the use of small arms and light weapons.

In 2022, small and light weapons were the second leading cause of civilian deaths in areas affected by armed conflicts worldwide, accounting for 14% of all such fatalities. Additionally, they were the second most commonly used weapons in terrorist attacks during the same year, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa region. For



example, the use of firearms in terrorist attacks increased from 31% in 2012 to 42% in 2022.

In conflict situations, the availability of small arms and light weapons, along with their ammunition, contributes to sexual violence. Approximately 70% to 90% of conflict-related incidents of sexual violence involve the use of these weapons, especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Haiti, and Libya. Children are particularly vulnerable to the proliferation of small arms. The increasing availability of these weapons through legal and illegal channels has resulted in a disturbing rise in the number of child victims since 1990, especially in conflicts where small arms are utilized.

**One million children were killed**



**5 million people became disabled**



**12 million children have become homeless**



Proliferation of small and light weapons exacerbates the activities of criminal gangs and contributes to high murder rates, particularly in unstable regions. In **Mexico**, an average of 94 murders per day were recorded in 2021, with gang-related weapons being the primary cause of death. Similarly, in Haiti, gangs control an estimated 80% of the capital city and rely heavily on small and light weapons. As a result, the number of reported killings in 2023 nearly doubled to around **4,500** people, and reported kidnappings increased by over 80% to nearly **2,500** cases.

## Recommendations:

- Encourage participation in and compliance with global treaties such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and the UN Program of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), which establish standards for responsible arms trade and stockpile management.
- States should establish comprehensive and effectively enforced laws regulating the production, sale, possession, and transfer of firearms. This includes implementing clear licensing procedures, conducting background checks, and maintaining record-keeping systems.
- Countries need to invest in technology and provide training to border officials to improve their ability to detect and intercept illegal shipments of small arms and light weapons.
- Strengthen international and regional cooperation, including exchanging information and expertise on illicit transfers of small arms and light weapons and improving their tracking.
- Provide support and empowerment to civil society organizations working to prevent armed violence and promote arms control, including ensuring they have sufficient funding.

## References

- الأسلحة الصغيرة والخفيفة والاتجار الغير مشروع فيها، مؤسسة ماعت للسلام والتنمية وحقوق الإنسان، <https://2u.pw/g98sbNT>
- انتشار الأسلحة الصغيرة يُوْجج التوترات بالساحل الأفريقي، الاتحاد، <https://2u.pw/wn62SEb>
- هاآرتس شركة أسلحة إسرائيلية أرسلت معدات إلى ميانمار بالرغم من الحظر الأمريكي، <https://2u.pw/TwwIWcF>
- تحرك لجمع 20 مليون قطعة سلاح فاقمت سفك الدم العراقي، <https://2u.pw/FV80aVd>
- International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons. <https://2u.pw/SbtJNtM>
- West Africa has a small weapons crisis – why some countries are better at dealing with it than others. Theconversation. <https://2u.pw/SNGrP8j>
- Hope Fades in Haiti as Gangs Spread, Outside Help Blocked. <https://2u.pw/WHOxLa4>
- Mexican cartels, US guns? Arms trafficking and the Mexican cartel arsenal .<https://2u.pw/S5q1v8i>
- Over 700 a day dying from small arms fire; main ‘weapons of choice’ for criminals and terrorists . <https://2u.pw/V3GRDxx>
- ACLED Conflict Index. <https://2u.pw/hNSK5g4>
- Categorization of an armed conflict. <https://2u.pw/1oU47yu>
- THE EU INITIATIVE ON ILLICIT TRAFFICKING OF SALW BY AIR TRANSPORT. <https://2u.pw/o1GphqH>