

The Illicit Arms Trade and Its Devastating Consequences

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(Sudanese refugee in Chad - Photograph: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images/The Guardian) "Hallmarks of genocide in El-Fasher" (UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan, 2026): the Rapid Support Forces, that receive arms from the UAE among others (Amnesty International, 2026), carried out mass atrocities, including widespread rape.

Key Messages

- **The illicit trade in arms and weapons is a major driver of mass violence and atrocities.** In non-international armed conflicts, in particular, it fuels hostilities and reduces the chances of a settlement.
- Even where the export of arms and weapons is authorized under domestic law, **it remains illicit when arms and weapons are transferred despite a clear risk that the recipients will use or divert them in violation of international humanitarian law or human rights law.**
- Excessive interpretation and assessment discretion is left to national licensing authorities. Risk assessments should be based on the actual conduct of the recipient, taking into account the factual findings of competent international bodies, including investigations mandated by the UN Human Rights Council, rather than on assurances provided by the recipient.
- While all EU member States (4 of which are among the world's top 10 major arms suppliers: [SIPRI, 2025](#)) have ratified the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), their practice is highly uneven and problematic.

Context and Purpose

This brief follows the GLITSS COST Action CA21133 (final book workshop at the Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia, May 18-20, 2026) and draws on Chapter 10 of Volume 1: "The Illicit Trade in Arms and Weapons and Its Devastating Consequences, Including the Facilitation of Mass Atrocities" (co-authored with Francesco Giumelli).

Insights and Findings

1. Conflict creates demand for arms and weapons. Weak governance and low levels of legal compliance and enforcement facilitate the illicit flow of arms and weapons.
2. The illicit arms trade is estimated to be worth between USD 1.7 and 3.5 billion per year. An estimated 857 million firearms are held by civilians worldwide, although only a small proportion are legally registered. More than 1,000

companies in over 100 countries manufacture small arms, creating a vast and diversified supply chain that is vulnerable to diversion ([Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025](#)). Reported global exports of small arms and light weapons increased sharply between 2019 and 2024 ([Small Arms Survey, 2025](#)).

3. There is a clear nexus between illicit arms transfers/exports and the commission of mass atrocities against the civilian population.
4. **National restrictions can be circumvented using foreign subsidiaries.**
5. Criminal accountability (with regard to traffickers and brokers, as well as public officials and corporate actors involved in arms exports despite being fully aware of the clear risks of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights) should be further developed and strengthened. **Such accountability also fosters a greater sense of responsibility among all relevant actors. However, it remains complementary to the primary preventive approach.**
6. Multilateral cooperation, including with regard to embargo-monitoring mechanisms, must be strengthened and adequately resourced.

Policy Relevance

Illicit trade of arms and weapons has major adverse effects. It increases the capacity of armed actors to conduct attacks against the civilian population and humanitarian actors. It forces civilians to flee. **It devastates infrastructure, disrupting agriculture, food security and people's livelihoods. It further weakens governance and law enforcement, causes educational and sanitary regression, as well as acute humanitarian crises.**

Recommendations

- **Strengthening the EU Common Position** (2008/944/CFSP) by introducing more stringent risk-assessment criteria from a preventive perspective, thereby fostering greater consistency in Member States' practice, as well as enhanced transparency of procedures and information.
- **Include the reckless use of AI**, leading to serious breaches of international humanitarian law, among the relevant risk assessment criteria.
- **Start an international campaign** to amend the ATT (art. 20) with a view to endowing it with an independent supranational monitoring body.
- **Engage more actively in promoting** responsible governance at the local and national levels, as well as post-conflict disarmament and effective management of arms depots and stockpiles.

Contact & Attribution

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