

Drew McKevitt
Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy
Department of History
Temple University
Fall 2005

Why study small arms?

The American invasion of Iraq in March and April 2003 may sadly prove to be the best public relations boost that the study of small arms proliferation and its myriad effects ever receives. During the weeks of invasion, the police and military institutions that protected the resources of the Saddam Hussein regime collapsed, leaving virtually all of their resources in the hands Iraqi citizens. In the ensuing chaos, an estimated 7-8 million small arms flooded into civil society in a matter of weeks. US war planners had failed to account for the destabilization of Iraqi security forces that left precious stores of weapons unguarded and open to public theft and sale. Before the first Gulf War, Hussein controlled the world's fourth largest army. Though his military strength was considerably reduced over the following twelve years, he still maintained large reserves of conventional small arms. By May 2003, these arms were dispersed throughout a deteriorating Iraqi society.

One publication dedicated to studying proliferation, the *Small Arms Survey* (2004), has called this crisis the "single most significant small arms transfer the world has known." If we imagine Iraq to be roughly the size and population of California, how would such a transfusion change daily life for Iraqis, who had just witnessed the disintegration of a tight-fisted three-decade dictatorship? How would sudden widespread gun ownership shape economic, social, and cultural behaviors? Prewar Iraq had relatively low levels of small arms ownership (roughly 15 for every 100 citizens); ownership was legal, but registration fees were costly. After the collapse of the regime, one gun for every three Iraqis floated around unchecked by any central authority. The impact was tremendous, dramatic, and singular – estimates of civilian casualties by mid-2005

ranged from 30,000 to over 100,000; death and injury were accompanied by devastating effects on development.

Historians must ask themselves, when we turn to write the history of the Iraq War, will the sudden infusion of weapons into society play a prominent part? If we follow the pattern of previous histories of American military action abroad, then it probably will not. CENFAD, however, hopes to shift historical focus toward these issues, to draw attention to the ways that small arms can have a dramatic and shaping impact on all spheres of society. As the Iraq case dramatically illustrates, if such weapons were not easily accessible (i.e., had the US military made efforts to protect weapons caches), we might be telling a much different story.

The Iraq crisis was only the most remarkable in a long line of international and regional crises shaped by the proliferation of small arms. Albania in the 1990s suffered terribly from the sudden transfusion of 500,000 small arms; nearly one million people were massacred in Rwanda in 1994 with small arms sold by Europe, China, and Egypt; and Afghanistan represented the greatest crisis of the 1980s, where an estimated five million small arms entered society as a result of the superpowers' proxy wars. After 1991, small arms killed approximately 500,000 people annually, 300,000 in armed conflict, though that number has been decreasing in recent years. Why study small arms? There is convincing evidence that when small arms are present in an unstable society, they have a remarkable ability to shape virtually every aspect of social life.

What are the issues?

Small arms (and light weapons) are broadly defined as any weapon that can be carried and operated by one or two people. These include sidearms (handguns), assault rifles, standard rifles, submachine guns, light and heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, portable antitank/antiaircraft weapons, and mortars; small arms need not necessarily imply firearms, as the use of Chinese-manufactured machetes in Rwanda in 1994 illustrates. There are 600 million small arms circulating globally; 1,249 companies produce small arms in 90 countries, but most production is concentrated in the US, Europe, and large developing countries like China, Brazil, and Egypt.

The US annually produces 3 million SALW, valued at \$3 billion. The industry employs more than 16,000 Americans, but its most visible influence comes in the form of powerful lobby groups like the NRA. The US is the world's largest exporter of small arms, followed by Russia and China. Export dollar figures are misleadingly small in terms of defense budgets: two billion dollars worth of small arms is a tremendous amount, yet only one American-made large conventional weapon can carry an equivalent price tag.

Large scale distribution of small arms to the developing world began in the Vietnam War era, approximately 1950-1975. The US transferred millions of SALW to Southeast and East Asia and the Middle East as well as to its traditional European allies. The 1980s witnessed a new wave of distribution, with the US sending millions of weapons to Central Asia and Central America. In the international context of the Cold War, the Soviet Union behaved much the same way, transferring millions of small arms to client states throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

With the apparent collapse of the Cold War international system in 1991, superpower concern for maintaining stability within ideological client states and fighting proxy wars waned considerably. With the lack of hegemonic attention toward regional conflicts, violence in developing regions escalated to levels previously unseen, or at least unaccepted, by the superpowers during the Cold War.

Small arms and light weapons can have devastating direct and indirect effects on communities. The obvious direct effects are death and injury. Upwards of 90% of all casualties in violent conflicts in the last fifteen years have been civilians, many of them children.

Indirect effects of small arms proliferation are more difficult to quantify, but no less destructive qualitatively. Broadly, SALW distribution inhibits the essential elements of development: social, political, economic, and cultural institutions are denied the opportunity they need to mature. The end of open hostilities in regional conflicts does not entail the end of the inhibition of development. Scholars and activists have been working on methods for implementing the process of DDR – demobilization, disarmament, and reconstruction – in

postconflict regions. The social dynamic created by the presence of small arms often fatally inhibits this process.

In unstable societies with widespread small arms proliferation, the scale and intensity of criminality dramatically increases. The social perception of insecurity leads civilians to believe that acquiring arms is a legitimate means for conflict resolution. The security dilemma intensifies at the local level; spiraling insecurity leads to more and more arms acquisitions. In regions like Central America, with weak local and national police authorities, wealthy citizens construct and hire private security organizations. These organizations, often much larger than national police forces, consist of overly armed mercenaries looking for excuses to use their weapons. At the state level, this creates great tension, insecurity, and the multiplication of sovereignty. If one of the primary functions of the state is to maintain a monopoly of force, the growth of large private security organizations dramatically reduces sovereignty and feeds a security crisis.

Societies in armed conflict expend already scarce resources on purchasing and maintaining arms and on the public health crises that result. The quality and availability of social services are significantly reduced; hospitals lose resources or must close, and regional public health standards diminish. In regions where NGOs feel that they can no longer protect their employees (like Iraq), humanitarian organizations remove their essential resources and services.

Armed conflict devastates regional economies. Productivity is severely curtailed, if not altogether halted, and chronic instability often forces foreign investors to pull their resources out of regions in conflict. When economies take terrible turns for the worse, civilians in developing countries often turn to small arms as an immediate solution: as Kofi Annan has said, “a man with a gun does not starve.”

What has been the role of governments/NGOs in curbing proliferation?

The apparent increase in regional conflict in the early 1990s led many international policymakers, particularly in the United Nations, to take note of the tools which enabled combatants to propagate this new surge of violence. In 1995, UN Secretary-General Boutros

Boutros-Ghali drew attention to the issue by calling on the Security Council to focus on what he called “micro-disarmament”: “practical disarmament in the context of the conflicts the United Nations is actually dealing with, and of the weapons, most of them light weapons, that are actually killing people in the hundreds of thousands.” He argued that the UN must parallel efforts to curb the spread of nuclear and chemical weapons with progress on controlling the proliferation of small arms.

Boutros-Ghali’s call to action both legitimized and encouraged the base of activists already dedicated to the issue. By the second half of the 1990s, international organizations emerged, notably the umbrella organization IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms), dedicated solely to curbing small arms proliferation. In 2001, the United Nations held its first major multinational conference dealing with these issues. That conference produced a Programme of Action, a detailed list of specific recommendations that all states should (but not must, as the PoA is a non-binding agreement) implement as a first step toward disarmament. The PoA has been called a lowest-common denominator agreement, that is, it recorded only the most minimum requirements that would get particularly stubborn nations to sign on. The Bush administration participated, but, led by an obstinate undersecretary for arms control named John Bolton, protested against any vigorous international initiative to curb the legal and illegal trade in small arms. The administration took its cue from the National Rifle Association, which made its first international pronouncements during the conference, denouncing any international convention that might affect American arms sales abroad.

In 2003, IANSA produced a two-year progress report on how well states had fared in implementing the recommendations of the PoA. IANSA concluded that the “glass is 95% empty,” and there was little encouraging evidence that efforts were improving, but it did not give up hope altogether. The report pointed to the follow-up UN conference in 2006 as an opportunity to implement change. Why have states been so resistant to implementing the PoA? Essentially,

the ones with the power to take action do not feel immediately threatened by the issue, and the states that desperately need to take action lack the centralized power necessary to do so.

International activists pushing this issue have tried to place small arms in crises frameworks that have worked successfully in the past; pollution, AIDS, nuclear proliferation, and landmines have all benefited from strong and successful international action networks. In adopting a similar structure, small arms activists hope to convince governments and populations that small arms proliferation is just as pressing as these international crises. As the IANSA report shows, efforts have not been tremendously successful so far.

What conclusions have scholars drawn?

Despite the international attention directed at small arms proliferation, activism has far surpassed scholarship in drawing attention to the major issues for study. In Jeffrey Boutwell and Michael Klare's book, *Light Weapons and Civil Conflict*, the authors list the conclusions which scholarship had drawn in early period of activism in the mid-1990s. First, there is a close symbiotic relationship between small arms trafficking and contemporary forms of violence. Next, the outbreak of ethnic and regional conflict has generally preceded a dangerous internal arms race. The immense worldwide abundance of SALW fuels these internal, regional, and ethnic conflicts. Boutwell and Klare argue that small quantities of arms have the ability to make very big messes. And finally, there are a variety of licit and illicit means by which small arms users acquire their weapons, most of which are terribly understudied.

We can take several other conclusions away from recent scholarship. First, and perhaps chiefly, small arms proliferation is an essential element in determining the success or failure of conflict and postconflict societies. The myriad ways that small arms inhibit development are apparent. Second, SALW can play a central role as a ritualistic symbol of culture in society, either malignantly, as they have in Mozambique, where an automatic rifle adorns the national flag and violence plagues society, or benignly, as in Yemen, where gun ownership is remarkably high but civil society is relatively peaceful. This cultural element refutes the mechanistic

“accessibility thesis,” which argues, crudely, that the more guns available to a society, the more violent that society will be.

Further, in light of the events of September 11, 2001, and the Bush administration’s flawed response, small arms are an even more vital issue to international security because of their connection to economies of international terrorism and crime. Arms flow freely in crime networks, along with drugs, precious minerals, and women and children, providing terrorist organizations with lucrative revenue. Al Qaeda has been especially successful at profiting off of such illicit trade networks; if the Bush administration could pull its attention away from the “great man theory” of terrorism and refocus on the economic roots of the phenomenon, of which small arms are a major contributor, it could perhaps fight a more effective war on international terrorism and crime. Finally, distributing small arms in the name of “freedom” is no less dangerous than doing so in the name of terror, as large US transfers to Afghanistan and Iraq in the last three years have made clear. Throwing weapons at a society is no step toward curing its ills.