

Small Arms and Terrorism

International control of small arms and light weapons is a critical part of counter-terrorism strategies because:

- **Small arms and light weapons are the weapons of choice for terrorists and terrorist groups**
- **Small arms help create conditions in which terrorist networks thrive**
- **Multi-dimensional responses can reduce terrorists' access to small arms**

Small arms and light weapons are the weapons of choice for many terrorists. Of the 175 terrorist attacks documented in the U.S. State Department's 2003 report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, approximately half were committed with small arms and light weapons. These incidents ranged from targeted assassinations to indiscriminate attacks on crowded public places. An example of the latter occurred in Bogotá in November 2003 when members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia lobbed fragmentation grenades into two crowded bars, killing one person and wounding 72. In other cases, small arms and light weapons are used to carry out attacks in which other weapons (typically bombs) inflict most of the casualties. During the May 2003 suicide bombing of American residential compounds in Saudi Arabia, for example, the bombers gained access to their target only after other members of their team used small arms to kill security guards and open the gates surrounding the compound. Small arms are also an integral part of the criminal activities that fund the operations of many terrorist organizations, such as the drug trade.

Small arms and light weapons proliferation contributes indirectly to terrorism as well. As evidenced by al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan in the 1990s, failed and failing states are attractive areas of operation for terrorists, who use them as safe havens and tap into the vast criminal networks that spring up in the absence of effective law enforcement. The civil wars that often contribute to state failure are sustained and exacerbated by access to large quantities of these weapons.

Governments pursue many different strategies for reducing terrorists' access to small arms and light weapons. These strategies include strengthening export controls, securing government stockpiles, destroying surplus weapons, improving border security, and increasing cooperation between national and international law enforcement organizations. Additional steps are taken to secure weapons that are particularly dangerous in the hands of terrorists, such as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. Some governments that produce, export or import these weapons require mandatory monthly physical inventories and separate storage of missiles and launchers.