

Disarmament and International Security Committee

Illicit Arms Trade in Conflict Zones: The black market circulation of weapons intensifies civil wars and destabilizes fragile regions particularly in the Middle East and Africa

1. History of the committee

The Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC), also known as the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, was created in 1945 with the founding of the UN. From the start, it has played a central role in promoting international peace and security. Its main responsibility is to discuss disarmament and global security issues that affect stability worldwide. Although DISEC cannot pass binding resolutions, it makes influential recommendations to both the General Assembly and the Security Council, shaping international debate and cooperation.

Over the years, DISEC has addressed a wide range of security concerns. During the Cold War, much of its work focused on nuclear weapons and arms control, as well as on the regulation of chemical and biological weapons. It has also paid attention to conventional weapons, such as small arms and light weapons, which continue to fuel conflicts across the globe. Its discussions have influenced key treaties and agreements, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In recent decades, the committee's agenda has expanded to include new and evolving threats. Issues like terrorism, cyber warfare, the illicit arms trade, and even the militarization of outer space are now central to its work. These reflect the changing nature of global security, where non-state actors and advanced technologies pose new challenges to peace.

Even without binding power, DISEC remains an essential forum for dialogue and cooperation. Its debates and recommendations continue to guide international efforts to prevent conflict and to build frameworks for disarmament and collective security.

1. Introduction

When weapons fall into the wrong hands, the consequences for regions already suffering from instability can be devastating. Illegal arms sales, often carried out in secrecy through the black market, allow militias, insurgents, and rebel groups to prolong fighting and fuel violence. This constant supply of weapons undermines fragile peace efforts, worsens humanitarian crises, and prevents communities from recovering after conflict.

The illicit trade in arms is not just a local problem—it has become a global challenge. Networks of smugglers, corrupt officials, and organized crime groups link producers, transporters, and buyers across continents. In many cases, weapons originally produced legally are diverted into illegal markets, where they are purchased by actors determined to defy international law.

Nowhere is this issue more pressing than in conflict zones, particularly in regions such as the Middle East and Africa, where the flow of illicit arms intensifies civil wars, fuels terrorism, and destabilizes already fragile states. The result is a cycle of violence that prevents sustainable development, weakens state authority, and poses a direct threat to international peace and security.

As the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, the Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC) has the responsibility to address these urgent concerns. While it cannot impose binding measures, DISEC serves as a critical platform for debate, negotiation, and cooperation among member states. Through its work, the committee seeks to find effective strategies to disrupt illicit arms networks, strengthen international frameworks like the Arms Trade Treaty, and promote collective action to reduce the spread of illegal weapons in conflict zones.



This session calls upon delegates to explore both the causes and the consequences of the illicit arms trade, to evaluate the effectiveness of current international responses, and to propose new solutions that can help the global community move closer to lasting peace and security.

2. Historical context

The problem of illicit arms trade has deep roots in modern history, dating back to the Cold War. During this period, powerful nations supplied weapons to their allies, client states, and proxy groups around the world as part of their strategic competition. Arms shipments often went to rebel movements and insurgent groups, fueling conflicts across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. While these transfers were frequently justified as part of geopolitical rivalry, many of the weapons ended up circulating long after the original conflicts ended.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the problem grew even more acute. Huge stockpiles of Soviet-era weapons were left without proper oversight or secure storage, and many of them were sold illegally on the global black market. These weapons quickly spread to regions already experiencing instability, becoming a key factor in prolonging wars and enabling armed groups to resist peace efforts.

In Africa, illicit weapons flows contributed directly to devastating civil wars in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, where militias and rebel groups relied heavily on smuggled arms to commit atrocities and sustain long campaigns of violence. Similarly, in the Middle East, conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan saw a flood of illegal weapons, many of which were later trafficked into other conflict zones such as Syria and Yemen. These cases illustrate how the circulation of illegal arms not only intensifies local wars but also destabilizes entire regions.



Recognizing the global nature of the problem, the international community sought to establish mechanisms to regulate the trade. One of the most significant steps was the adoption of the **Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in 2013**, which aimed to set international standards for the legal transfer of conventional arms and to curb their diversion into illicit

markets. However, the treaty's effectiveness has been limited by the fact that not all major arms-producing and arms-importing states have signed or ratified it, leaving significant gaps in enforcement and compliance.

The historical trajectory of illicit arms trade demonstrates that this challenge is not new but has evolved alongside global politics. From Cold War proxy conflicts to today's civil wars and terrorism, the uncontrolled circulation of weapons continues to threaten international peace and security.

3. Current Issue

The illicit arms trade has become one of the most pressing threats to international peace and security in the twenty-first century. Unlike legal, regulated weapons transfers, the black market operates in secrecy, moving millions of unregistered arms across continents without oversight. This shadow network connects suppliers, smugglers, corrupt officials, and buyers ranging from militias to terrorist organizations. Once weapons enter these channels, they are almost impossible to track, fueling conflicts that devastate entire regions.

In Africa, the Sahel region has been overwhelmed by small arms and light weapons that slip easily across porous borders. Fragile states such as Libya, Sudan, and Somalia have become hubs of illegal arms markets, where weapons are sold openly and often end up in the hands of extremist groups like Al Shabab, Boko Haram, and ISIS-affiliated cells. These groups thrive on the steady supply of black-market weapons, enabling them to destabilize entire governments and spread violence beyond national borders.

The Middle East faces a similarly alarming reality. Ongoing wars in Syria and Yemen have been prolonged and intensified by the constant flow of smuggled arms. Militias and insurgent groups in these conflicts are sustained not only by regional suppliers but also by weapons diverted from legal shipments or stolen from poorly secured stockpiles. As a result, peace efforts remain fragile and humanitarian crises deepen.

Yet the illicit arms trade is not limited to unstable regions. It is a global phenomenon tied

to both supply and demand. Many of the weapons circulating on the black market originate from major arms-producing countries, including the United States, Russia, and European states, where weak export controls or corrupt practices can allow weapons to be diverted into illegal channels. In Latin America, for example, American-made firearms are frequently trafficked into Mexico and Central America, where they strengthen drug cartels and criminal networks. Once weapons fall into these markets, they often move across continents, showing that no region is immune.

According to United Nations estimates, there are hundreds of millions of small arms currently circulating worldwide, with only a tiny fraction being tracked through legal frameworks. Weak governance, corruption, and lack of international coordination allow smugglers to operate freely, making the illicit arms trade not just a regional issue but a truly global challenge. If left unchecked, it will continue to fuel wars, empower terrorist networks, destabilize fragile governments, and undermine international security.

4. Past International actions

The United Nations established the Arms Trade Treaty in 2013 with the aim of controlling the trade of conventional weapons. DISEC has made many attempts to address small arms and light weapons however the implementation has been lacking. The Security Council has instituted embargoes in countries such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Advocacy groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have made attempts to reveal the impact of illegal arms trades on civilians. While some of these efforts have been successful many have not because countries with the ability to supply weapons tend to ignore the regulations.

5. Subtopics

- **Border Control** – weak borders let weapons cross freely into conflict zones
- **Role of Major Arms Exporters** – how some states ignore the impact of their arms trade
- **Corruption** – how officials sometimes allow arms smuggling for personal gain
- **Terrorist Groups** – how black market weapons make them stronger
- **Effectiveness of International Treaties** – why the Arms Trade Treaty has limits

6. *Positions*

The United States Russia and China actively engage in arms dealing more scrupulously observing rules that limit their commerce. Most African nations like Mali, Niger and Somalia get the worst brunt of illegal arms and thus desire more proactive steps. Countries in the Middle East are more split as some of their governments seek order while armed factions within the region profit from illegal arms. The European Union actively participates in the enforcement of treaties and rigid rules. Countries in Latin America are also interested as they suffer from black market arms and fueled violence from gangs.



7. *Guiding questions*

- How can DISEC make stronger recommendations that will actually be enforced?
- Should major exporters like the US, Russia and China be pressured to sign more treaties?
- How can the UN stop corruption that lets black market weapons move freely?
- What role should regional organizations like the African Union play in controlling borders?
- Can disarmament work in places where millions of illegal weapons are already in circulation?

8. *Suggested sources*

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