



# re-assembling small arms

United Nations Association in Canada

By **David Beal**

## A new weapon of change...

In July 2001, the United Nations held a [Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects](#). The Conference built on a growing international awareness of the scope of the challenges to peace and security posed by small arms and light weapons (SALW). Although some hoped that the Conference would break new ground by establishing clear international standards and controls on the trade of SALW, most analysts predicted that the Conference would make its mark instead by demonstrating a new resolve amongst the key players of the international security community to devote serious attention to the small arms problem. More concrete measures would follow.

That the [Programme of Action](#) adopted at the Conference failed to establish binding international controls – or even standardized measures – does not mean that the Conference was a failure. As has been the case with many achievements in the international security regime, the global spread of shared ideas about appropriate conduct has been a prerequisite for lasting change. The Geneva Conventions, for instance, which have for many years worked to regulate the conduct of warfare and to provide a range of humanitarian protections for both noncombatants and injured or captured combatants, would not have been implemented without the efforts of one man to convince world leaders that war-fighting cannot be divorced from moral concerns and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> Most other internationally recognized mechanisms of humanitarian concern have followed a similar pattern of concrete change arriving on the heels of a long period of norm-building.

It was thus encouraging that the Programme of Action from the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference laid out an agreement among delegates to reconvene no later than 2006, and to hold biennial meetings to take stock of the status of implementation of measures to regulate and control the proliferation of SALW at national and regional levels. While critics point out that delegates were unable to agree on standardized measures or controls (let alone an agreement on where to draw the line between legal and illicit arms), the promise to reconvene at regular intervals indicated that there was sufficient momentum to keep the SALW issue on the international agenda.

### What are small arms and light weapons?

“Small arms are weapons designed for personal use, while light weapons are designed for use by several persons serving as a crew. Examples of small arms include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. Light weapons include heavy machine-guns, mortars, hand grenades, grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns and portable missile launchers.”

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## ...is quickly dismantled

This momentum has now come under attack from an unexpected source. As the events of September 11 continue to refashion the international political landscape, there is a real risk that the engine driving the rise of small arms to well-deserved infamy will stall in the

face of the security regime’s new preoccupation with the war against terrorism.

**If the sudden deceleration of the small arms agenda seems an inevitable reaction to the world’s awakening to the scope and complexity of the problem of international terrorism, it does not diminish the importance of redoubling our efforts to keep the agenda alive.**

The human security dimension of the small arms problem has certainly not diminished simply because we have opened our eyes to the threat of terrorism. According to Aaron Karp, “although the exact numbers are lacking and may never be at hand, there is no doubt that these are the weapons that have caused most of the violent, unnatural death and destruction in the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup>

Neither has the human development side of the problem become any less acute. Virginia Gamba, the former director of the Arms Management Programme of the South African [Institute for Security Studies](#), notes that the persistent and widespread availability of inexpensive small arms “may escalate conflicts, undermine peace agreements, intensify [the] violence and impact of crime, impede economic and social development and hinder the development of social stability, democracy and good governance.”<sup>3</sup>

The following paper will consider how we might go about rebuilding the political will needed for an effective and sustainable response to the small arms issue.

The paper will not address the many practical issues of small arms control; for this, the reader can find a wealth of information (the links provided throughout are a good starting point). Moreover, although critics are right to point out that the Programme of Action does not represent a consensus on what steps should be taken to address the small arms problem, nor whether bilateral or multilateral mechanisms are most appropriate, it does identify a number of areas in which countries can focus more practical efforts as they see fit.<sup>4</sup>

The paper will depart from the intuition that the precise combination of steps and modalities taken is less an issue than is ensuring that policy-makers remain committed to taking an integrated and comprehensive approach to the small arms issue. With this in mind, the paper will explore the various components of the norm-building campaign leading up to the UN Conference in July 2001, in the hopes of addressing three questions: Why was the campaign a success? How it has been affected by the events of September 11? How do we re-assemble the political support needed to once again move forward?

To read the full **Programme of Action**, [click here](#).

For a brief summary of the **Programme of Action**, [click here](#)  
(Project Ploughshares)

The paper will consider three main aspects of the norm-building campaign: the appeal to values; the appeal to interest; and the appeal to confidence. It will suggest that although the first two elements have been weakened by the attacks on New York and Washington, by shaking the confidence of the security regime, the attacks have also paved the way for the creation of a new, more robust small arms agenda.

### **The human cost: appealing to values**

“Human marketing,” which draws emotional links between victims and those in a position to effect change, is one of the most powerful tools available to those working towards an effective small arms programme. By mobilizing public concern, it creates enormous pressure to change the international norms that define the frameworks shaping both conflict and conflict resolution. Because it is not policy-specific, human marketing is also able to gain the support of a broad cross-section of the international community, and to generate an equally broad range of policy options.

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### **NGO human marketing campaigns played a particularly important role in building the normative foundations of the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference.**

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During the Cold War, the popular imagination of the Western world was occupied with the memory of two World Wars, and with the fear of nuclear holocaust. In as much as disarmament was an issue of serious political engagement, discussion focused primarily on weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Nuclear, chemical and biological weapons (and to a lesser extent, their conventional delivery systems such as missiles, submarines and aircraft) were the talk of the day. It was not until the egregious violations of human rights carried out in such previously ignored places as Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia caught the eye of the international community that there was a real opportunity to consider the consequences of the proliferation and misuse of small arms.

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**Although accurate figures are hard to come by, a typical estimate for the number of deaths wrought at the hands of small arms since 1990 is four million.**<sup>5</sup>

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As is often the case, however, changing deeply entrenched attitudes was a long, drawn out process. Portraying small arms as problematic – even in a time defined by both a powerful demand for global change and by a heightened sense of optimism that the New World Order was manageable – proved decidedly difficult. For many in the North, small arms seemed neither as dangerous nor as illegitimate as weapons of mass destruction. For many in the South, weapons like the AK-47 assault rifle had even acquired positive overtones as a powerful cultural symbol of liberation and decolonization. Michael Fleshman notes that the Mozambican flag still features the silhouette of the rifle, and that “freedom songs from the struggles against minority rule in Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Angola often extolled its virtues, and those of the fighters carrying it.”<sup>6</sup>

It should thus come as no surprise that although the UN affirmed its commitment to small arms action as early as the late 1980s, it would take a concerted effort by a number of conflict-embroiled Southern states, sympathetic “like-minded” states, and NGOs to bring portable conventional weapons (small arms, light weapons and landmines) to the forefront of the international imagination.

Most of those who first took up the challenge came from the traditional disarmament community. Such organizations as [Human Rights Watch](#), [BASIC](#) (British American Security Information Council), [CDI](#) (Center for Defense Information), the [Worldwatch Institute](#) and [Saferworld](#) (and soon after, organizations like the [ICRC](#) and [Oxfam](#)) all established programs dedicated to raising the profile of the small arms agenda by appealing to the moral consciousness of international civil society.<sup>7</sup>

Landmines were the first portable conventional weapons to be pursued with any vigour by the security regime. The 1997 Ottawa Convention, which gained widespread international support

for the abolishment of anti-personnel landmines, demonstrated that once a strong normative base is developed - once the realm of the “possible” is redefined - substantive change is possible. The Ottawa Process, initiated and driven primarily by NGOs, also demonstrated more clearly than ever the power of NGOs and other “norm entrepreneurs” to affect the political agendas of the security regime by appealing directly to universal values.

### Which NGOs are working on the SALW issue?

A good place to start is [IANSA](#), an international network of over 340 organizations. Some of the most active independent organizations are:

[BASIC](#)  
[BICC](#)  
[CDI](#)  
[Christian Aid](#)  
[Fund for Peace](#)  
[ICRC](#)  
[International Alert](#)  
[Human Rights Watch](#)  
[NISAT](#)  
[Oxfam](#)  
[Project Ploughshares](#)  
[Saferworld](#)  
[Viva Rio](#)  
[Worldwatch Institute](#)

Of course, international political reform also requires the active support of state leaders, and the Ottawa Process gained much of its strength from the willingness of “like-minded” states such as Canada to push the agenda through the necessary political channels.

The President of Mali, one of the countries most directly affected by small arms violence, is widely credited for having started this process in earnest for the small arms agenda. It was at his request for assistance with a national arms collection programme that the UN dispatched first a fact-finding mission

and later an Advisory Mission to West Africa in 1994. The **Sahara-Sahel Advisory Mission Report** (1995) concluded that the small arms collection efforts such as the one in Mali required coordination with broader efforts to achieve regional security and development. The conclusion marked an important step forward for the small arms agenda because it tied small arms to problems more easily digested by the international security regime, and because it underscored that the direct casualties of small arms violence are only a part of the human cost exacted by small arms. Widespread access to small arms also undermines national capacities to foster economic growth and political stability.

Following this mission, a number of like-minded governments and NGOs have worked, both individually and through umbrella networks like the Norwegian-created International Action Network on Small Arms ([IANSA](#)), to further mobilize popular pressure as a tool of the small arms agenda. Targeting the overwhelming Northern fear of weapons of mass destruction, these organizations worked to bring an appreciation of the scale of the small arms problem home by emphasizing that small arms victimize people around the world, from the global South to Chicago’s South Side. As [Project Ploughshares](#) Executive Director Ernie Regehr suggests,

“In our streets and homes and on the world’s more than three dozen battlefields, weapons from small handguns to automatic assault rifles were the de facto weapons of mass destruction of the last century and promise the same for the one just dawning.”<sup>8</sup>

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**That weapons such as the ubiquitous AK-47 assault rifle had become by the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference an internationally recognized symbol of violence was both a sign of tragedy and a source of hope.**

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Human marketing remains an integral component of the struggle to keep small arms at the forefront of the world’s imagination in the wake of September 11. A number of organizations remain involved in this effort. Some hope to create tangible links between victims and the international community through such creative endeavours as [Christian Aid’s](#) “Transforming Arms into Ploughshares” programme. The programme has collected and destroyed more than 200 000 small arms and light weapons in Mozambique by offering farm tools and other much needed equipment in return for voluntarily-surrendered weapons. In turn, Mozambican artists re-assemble the weapons fragments into sculptures to be sold around the world.

Others have tried to maintain an awareness of the small arms problem by collapsing not only the distinction between small arms and weapons of mass destruction, but also the distinction between low-intensity small arms violence and more concentrated instances of international terrorism such as the attack on the World Trade Center. Paul Wilkinson, Director of the [Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence](#) at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, for example, suggests that “we are now dealing with cases of sub-State groups inflicting death on such a scale that we cannot describe it in any other way than by the description of ‘mass terrorism.’”<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, small arms and light weapons are simply not as glamorous or emotionally compelling as international terrorism. SALW advocacy campaigns which rely too heavily on human marketing face an uphill battle in a world in which political and media leaders – not to mention private funders - are likely to have their sights firmly set on the scourge of terrorism for some time to come.

## The practical cost: appealing to interest

Although it is important to sustain the effort to highlight the human suffering caused or facilitated by widespread and inexpensive access to small arms and light weapons, keeping the small arms agenda on solid ground will require attacking the problem from more than one angle. Any campaign for political reform must also appeal more directly to the interests of decision-makers.

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**While appealing to values has been an integral part of the SALW norm-building campaign, an equally important facet of the struggle is that both states and international organizations such as the UN had to first be convinced that tackling the SALW agenda is in their *interest* more narrowly defined.**

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As the massive military and financial investments poured into humanitarian intervention, peace enforcement, and peacebuilding operations in the mid-1990s failed to resolve the intra-state and regional conflicts making their way onto the television screens of Northern publics, policy makers began to realize that easy access to small arms and light weapons was a key obstacle that could not be ignored. The continued proliferation and misuse of small arms not only discouraged socio-economic development in post-conflict societies, but also diverted critical resources from the international security regime's efforts to secure peace in the first place.

In 1995, acting on a proposal by Japan, the UN commissioned a [Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms](#) to address the issue of small arms and to provide practical policy options. In 1997, the Panel recommended to the Secretary General that, given the magnitude of the small arms problem, "the UN should consider the possibility of convening an international conference on the illicit arms trade in all its aspects."<sup>10</sup> Following an endorsement of

these recommendations by the succeeding [Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms](#), the UN General Assembly acknowledged that,

"virtually every part of the UN system was dealing in one way or another with the consequences of the armed conflicts, insecurity and violence due to the easy availability resulting from the excessive accumulation and recurrent use of small arms."<sup>11</sup>

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**From long-term development programmes to short-term emergency relief, peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations, it had become indisputable that small arms disturb the entire spectrum of efforts to achieve peace and security.**

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In August 1998, the UN [Department of Disarmament Affairs](#) responded by establishing a mechanism for [Coordinating Action on Small Arms](#) (CASA) to coordinate inter-agency small arms efforts at the UN. CASA in turn convened the 2001 Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, raising the profile of the small arms agenda to new heights.

### **Who at the UN deals with the SALW issue? Everyone.**

Agencies most directly affected include:

[DDA \(Conventional Arms Branch\)](#)  
[CASA](#)

[DPKO](#)  
[OCHA](#)  
[UNDP](#)  
[UNHCR](#)  
[UNICEF \(Children in War\)](#)  
[UNIDIR](#)

[Security Council](#)  
[General Assembly](#)  
[Disarmament Commission](#)  
[Conference on Disarmament](#)

## Fatal attraction

It might easily be argued that just as September 11 has cornered the market for the kind of campaign designed to attract public attention to the SALW cause, so too has it come to dominate the more circumscribed interests of policy makers. Whether in the recent international response to humanitarian emergencies in East Africa, drug-running in Colombia, conflict in the Middle East, or oil smuggling in Iraq, the war against terrorism has become a defining element of the action framework used by decision-makers to define the policy options of the security regime.

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**It will most likely prove exceedingly difficult to convince policy makers to uphold the level of commitment to the small arms agenda when critical time and resources are so readily exhausted by the war against terrorism.**

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In a security regime increasingly defined by its members' "return to interest," it is also more important than ever to cultivate an interest in the small arms issue.

One tack that offers hope is the ongoing effort to establish a reliable empirical measure of the scope and costs of SALW proliferation. Empirical studies of both small arms transfers and small arms violence such as those carried out by the [Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers](#) (NISAT) database, the [ICRC](#), and the Geneva-based Graduate Institute of International Studies' [Small Arms Survey](#) will all help to underscore the magnitude of the small arms problem in quantifiable terms, as well as to supply policy-makers with the information they need to develop effective policies.

The task, however, remains a daunting one. At the national level, many states do not have the means to collect and process data, nor the analytical tools to measure more indirect costs to development.<sup>12</sup> Although some analysts

point out that accurate monitoring of arms transfers is more a question of political will than of sheer technical difficulty, it is far from clear that political will is forthcoming in the post-September-11 security regime – especially when one of the main strategies adopted by the coalition against terrorism has been to rearm certain sectors of the Afghani population.

How committed governments remain to the small arms agenda will become more clear in the coming months as follow-up consultations on national and regional capacities are organized. It should be kept in mind, however, that governments (and even more so, the international institutions of which they are members) have a limited capacity to absorb reform. A large part of which will have been exhausted by the scramble to design and implement anti-terrorist programmes.

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**It is clear that to re-establish a real interest in the small arms agenda, small arms must be tied to the massive investments pledged to the war against terrorism.**

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## Rebuilding tactical interest

Recognizing this need, a number of observers have called attention to the many functional links between terrorism and the small arms trade, proposing that an effective campaign against terrorism must include a small arms programme as a central component. In October 2001, the UN's Department for Disarmament Affairs held an international [Symposium on Terrorism and Disarmament](#) to “discuss terrorism and its relationship to disarmament, and the contributions that multilateral treaties and institutions in the field of disarmament could make to address this threat” (emphasis added). Participants such as Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, of the [Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence](#), stressed that as small arms and light

weapons are in many cases the primary tools of terrorism, common sense dictates that anti-terrorist efforts must include measures to control the spread and misuse of small arms.

There are a number of reasons to hope that the tactic of calling attention to the functional ties between international terrorism and the small arms trade will yield results. First, it is certainly the case that the communication channels, methods, and financing mechanisms used to sustain an active trade in illicit weapons are easily adapted to support the activities of terrorists, both domestic and international. The functional link is a real one, and merits real consideration by policy-makers. In November 2001, the European Parliament agreed, calling for an international **Arms Brokering Convention** to regulate the activities of the middlemen who finance and transport small arms.

Some observers take this as a sign that the war against terrorism may actually help the SALW cause by forcing policy-makers to address those politically sensitive but vital aspects of the small arms trade that were until September 11 regarded as off-limits. Loretta Bondi, Advocacy Director for the [Fund for Peace's](#) Arms and Conflict Program, welcomed the European resolution, pointing out that,

“the [2001 UN Small Arms] Conference turned a blind eye to the actions of illegal traffickers. Only 11 countries in the world have laws dealing with illicit arms brokering. Now we hope that this issue will be on everybody's radar screen and remain there until an agreement on an international treaty is reached.”<sup>13</sup>

A second reason for optimism is that past efforts of a similar nature have made significant advances. In 1998, a number of analysts observed that the distinction between small arms violence and criminal violence is less distinct than was previously acknowledged. To the Vienna-based [UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice](#),<sup>14</sup> BASIC analyst Geraldine O'Callaghan

argued that the “breakdown of national boundaries has ended the distinction between conflict and crime. Firearms are the weapons of choice for combatants and criminals alike.”<sup>15</sup> Since then, the Ad Hoc Committee to the [UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) has drafted the [UN Protocol Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition](#) (AKA the *Firearms Protocol*).

The **Firearms Protocol** was opened for signatures in July 2001, and will remain open until December 2002. The Protocol will not enter into force until ratified by 40 countries. Mali and Brazil signed on to the Protocol at its adoption in July. A total of 25 countries have signed (as of 02/02), and none have ratified.

The Firearms Protocol is designed to facilitate the prosecution of criminal firearms brokers by creating mechanisms to render firearms trafficking more transparent to investigators. One example is the import-export-transit system, which requires all countries through which firearms pass to exchange and document authorization, as well as to clearly mark the firearms themselves.

Unlike the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference, the Firearms Protocol is not based in an arms control framework, and limits the scope of the restrictions on state-to-state transfers of arms as commodities. Moreover, the Firearms Protocol is limited to those weapons that a single person can carry and use.

The tactic is not without problems, however. While there is some reason for hope, there is also reason to think twice before jumping on the anti-terrorist bandwagon.

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**Basing support for the SALW agenda on the pragmatic consequences of small arms for the war against terrorism implies a tacit acceptance that the priorities of the disarmament agenda (and in particular, the SALW agenda) are subordinate to those of the war against terrorism.**

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In his opening remarks for the Symposium on Terrorism and Disarmament, for example, UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs Jayantha Dhanapala directed the brunt of his concern towards thinking about how the disarmament community could shape “global efforts against terrorism *in the area of* disarmament and non-proliferation,” reiterating that the disarmament community “must make greater progress in achieving our disarmament and non-proliferation goals *and thereby* contribute to the creation of a safer and better world in which terrorism cannot breed and flourish” (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

The problem is not only one of semantics, but also of action. In a world of limited resources, political will, and historical memory, it leaves the door open to a false sense that measures to control the trade and use of small arms can safely be relaxed as dictated by the (purportedly) more urgent demands of anti-terrorism. The US, for instance, has been actively arming anti-Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, and the European Union has recently ended a sales ban on weapons to the anti-Taliban forces of the Northern Alliance. Considering the long and well-known role of externally-supplied small arms as fuel for the history of violence in Afghanistan, it is clear that the small arms agenda has in this instance taken a backseat to anti-terrorism.

Take the logic one step further:

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**A strategy which collapses the distinction between anti-terrorism and SALW campaigns runs a real risk of leaving the small arms agenda high and dry when terrorism gives way to the next Big Threat.**

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There is no doubt that Mr. Dhanapala, long a proponent of the small arms agenda, is aware that riding the anti-terrorist wave is less than ideal. Not only does it create a dependence on the popular fear of terrorism, but it also weakens the small arms agenda in at least two further aspects.

First, even a cursory scan of the scores of testimonials emphasizing functional ties between the small arms trade and international terrorism reveals that disarmament as a component of a larger anti-terrorist campaign is likely to focus on weapons of mass destruction, pushing small arms back into the peripheral vision of the international security regime. Chemical, biological and nuclear weapons have already begun to retake precedence over small arms in the minds of security officials, despite the fact that small arms continue to extract a greater toll in terms of both international and human security.

Second, although the impact of small arms is felt around the world, the scope and immediacy of the problem is one experienced most directly by Southern communities. The lion’s share of public pressure driving the anti-terrorist campaign, by contrast, comes from the North. If one of the reasons that the small arms agenda had so much trouble getting off the ground *before* September 11 was that the security regime is more sensitive to potential threats to the developed North, a small arms campaign fuelled by a fear of international terrorism may become less likely than ever to commit resources where they are needed most – in long-term programmes designed to change the incentive

structures creating a demand for small arms throughout the developing world.

There is also no doubt that Mr. Dhanapala and the many others working towards keeping the SALW agenda alive have chosen the tactic of riding the anti-terrorist wave in recognition that the politics of anti-terrorism have quickly assumed tidal proportions, more than capable of overriding initiatives with less (readily apparent) urgency.

If the tactic is a function of political necessity, however, yet another chink in its armour may provide an opportunity to turn September 11 to the advantage of the small arms agenda:

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**It is difficult to base the SALW agenda on the premise of functional links between terrorism and small arms when we have little more than a vague notion of how these links actually function.**

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To draw one of the most salient examples from the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference, it is not clear the extent to which the trade in small arms relies on the informal or “black” market, as compared to the formal trade networks between states and legal brokers. As the American delegate to the Conference reminded participants, it is also far from clear the extent to which the use of small arms by non-state or sub-state actors can be considered illegal, or even illicit. There are far more examples than can be listed here of areas that have yet to be addressed in a systematic manner by current research. The point is that our practical knowledge base when it comes to small arms – and ties between small arms and terrorism – remains plagued by uncertainty and confusion.

In the next section, I will suggest that this uncertainty is the key to turning September 11 to the advantage of the small arms agenda.

## Strategic thinking

Turning once again to the buildup of the small arms agenda prior to September 11, we find a third element. As noted above, the first element was that the proliferation and misuse of small arms was perceived as standing in direct contradiction to the *values* of the peace and security regime. The second element was a recognition that since easy access to small arms is a source of inefficiency in development projects, peace operations and post-conflict peacebuilding programmes, small arms thus also stand in the way of the *interests* of the peace regime.

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**The third element contributing to the outcome of the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference was a perception that the small arms agenda was practical – that the small arms problem was something that could be tackled with the expectation of at least limited success.**

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One side of the practical question is that of developing concrete, workable solutions to various aspects of small arms proliferation and misuse. A number of NGOs and academics have worked towards this goal, proving themselves to be an invaluable source of information for policy-makers. In the months leading up to the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference, for example, [International Alert](#), BASIC and Saferworld combined efforts to produce a practical briefing series called [Biting the Bullet](#). In addition, a growing number of regionally specialized initiatives, such as the [International Resource Group on Disarmament and Security in the Horn Africa](#) (IRG), are working towards field-based solutions adapted to local conditions. Finally, national and regional follow-up consultations scheduled to take place in the coming months will provide welcome additions to the practical policy dialogue.

A second side to the practical question pertains less to front-line “micro”

challenges than to the “macro” logic of the regime as a whole. As important to the development of the 2001 Conference as a menu of practical field initiatives was that the creation of a small arms regime robust enough to make a difference was seen as politically feasible.

This third element was not yet firmly in place by July 2001. One of the principle reasons that Human Rights Watch’s Joost Hilberman lamented that the 2001 Conference produced little more than a “Program of Inaction”<sup>17</sup> is that the small arms problem is far more complex and far-reaching than the landmine problem, and therefore far more resistant to the kind of consensus-building needed for concrete international action. Although a resolution to the small arms problem demands unprecedented international cooperation between states, international and regional organizations, and non-governmental organizations, the understanding of small arms issues in both public and official circles remains uncertain, to say the least.

If handled correctly, however, it may be possible to use the very uncertainty that plagued the UN Small Arms Conference to exploit the powerful political dynamic created by the war against terrorism. The same twist of fate that has jeopardized the momentum of the small arms agenda has also provided the ideal conditions for a new, stronger momentum to emerge.

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**The anti-terrorist dynamic is, to a large extent, driven by an unusually strong motivation amongst the key players of the security regime to understand and address head-on a fundamental uncertainty about how the world works.**

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Policy-makers and analysts alike have been forced to acknowledge an alarming erosion of the capability of contemporary modes of thought and practice to predict, control, or even regulate political violence. The SALW community now has the opportunity –

and the responsibility – to help fill this gap by drawing attention to the lessons (to be) learned from the failure of the security regime to prevent small arms and light weapons from becoming one of the most destabilizing and devastating problems of our time.

What do observers of the small arms issue have to contribute?

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**The many parallels between the threats to peace and security posed by small arms proliferation and by international terrorism suggest that rather than bearing witness to an abrupt and fundamental change in global politics, September 11 has given the international security regime an incentive to come to terms with a series of more gradual shifts in the international political economy - gradual shifts in which small arms have been entangled at every step.**

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The argument, then, is that the effort to address the proliferation and misuse of small arms must be integrated with the war against terrorism not simply because small arms contribute to a practical problem called terrorism, but also because the dynamics of the small arms problem are tied to the same cultural, socio-economic, and political shifts that underlie terrorism. It follows that the analytical frameworks, modalities and strategies employed to deal with small arms and light weapons are applicable to a wide range of threats to peace and security – including, but not limited to, terrorism. In other words, how we think about small arms - and what we do about small arms - can teach us much, both about how we should approach the war against terrorism and about the sort of security challenges we are likely to face in the future.

A careful consideration of the many parallels between the questions of small arms and terrorism is beyond the scope of this paper; indeed, it is beyond the scope of current research. Potentially the

most valuable contribution that the uncertainty of the post-September 11 security regime can make to the small arms agenda (and vice-versa) is that has created the opportunity and incentive to strengthen the field of small arms research.

As a starting point, however, it is useful to consider a few examples of what the SALW problem can teach us about international terrorism (and other threats to international peace and security):

- One of the most psychologically gripping aspects of the terrorist threat is that it blurs the line between civilians and combatants.

That most *victims* of terrorism are civilians is precisely what makes it so terrifying, and what creates popular pressure to react. But most victims of small arms and light weapons are civilians too. The ICRC reports that 60 to 80 percent of casualties in contemporary conflicts are civilian.<sup>18</sup> If that's not terrifying enough, the UN reported last year that "two million children have been killed in the last ten years in conflicts where small arms have been used; five million have been disabled; and twelve million left homeless".<sup>19</sup> Moreover, we have already noted that such figures fail to account for the suffering experienced as a result of impeded or suspended peace operations, development projects and altered local economies.

- For policy-makers, the blurring of civilian-combatant categories in the ongoing war against terrorism is thorny for a different reason – that it is extremely difficult to respond with military force (and maintain any semblance of legitimacy) when the *perpetrators* of violence are not professional soldiers operating under clearly defined chains of command.

The coalition against terrorism has so far been able to justify military

action on the basis that there are clear ties between Al-Qaeda operatives and the Taliban, who are more easily included in the familiar category of state actors engaged in acts of international warfare. Even then, however, problems such as whether or not to afford captured fighters status as prisoners of war (POWs) under the Geneva Conventions' prisoners' rights protocol continue to plague the international response.

By contributing to what Ernie Regehr calls the "**demilitarization of war**," small arms present similar challenges to the international response to a whole host of transnational crimes and humanitarian emergencies. It is here worth quoting Regehr at length:

"Much of modern small arms technology, in addition to being widely available, is durable, reliable, simple to operate, and deadly. Without any particular expertise or training required, small arms and light weapons have transformed armed combat from the 'profession of war,' carried out by professional military organizations and soldiers, or even volunteer soldiers trained and commanded by professionals, to the terror of civil chaos fanned by armed civilians, some supporting governments as civilian militias, some attacking governments, and some engaged in inter-communal strife with little reference to national governments."<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the American experience in Mogadishu demonstrates that it can be extremely difficult to determine when and how a military response can be considered appropriate in situations in which armed combatants are not acting under an organized authority, let alone under a state with a monopoly on military force. The problem is compounded by the fact that is near-impossible to distinguish even loosely organized combatants from innocent civilians

when up to 70 percent of civilians (many of them children) in post-conflict societies own small arms for reasons of self-protection.<sup>21</sup>

Since direct military action of the sort seen in Afghanistan will likely continue to be a policy tool of the security regime in the future, it is vital that lessons from previous experience with small arms be learned. The alternative is a failure to establish limits on the scope and conduct of international peace and security operations, leading to mission-creep, inefficiency and illegitimacy.

- Dual-use technology is another example of the threats posed to the security regime by both small arms and terrorism. While a rifle may seem a much more easily identified (and therefore controlled) security threat than a commercial airliner or a box-cutter, the widespread legitimacy of small arms has, for all intents and purposes, raised the same questions about how to regulate otherwise useful and socially acceptable technology.

A number of observers have commented that small arms are widely accepted as legitimate tools of security forces (police and military), and are often used for the purposes of civilian sports and self-defence. In some countries, small arms have become a symbol of machismo, self-sufficiency or liberty. That small arms have acquired widespread military, economic, and cultural importance makes it that much more difficult to establish a simple, universally applicable message about the appropriate use of small arms - let alone binding international controls on their production, use and transfer.

While physical measures need to be taken to improve control and storage of existing national stockpiles of small arms (as well as to collect and destroy those arms that are now not

under state control), the need to improve marking, record-keeping and tracing mechanisms is likely to be just as important – and more immediately relevant to the war against terrorism.

- Terrorists and small arms brokers are each able to move quite easily across vast and very complex transnational networks. Indeed, one of the challenges that each pose to security officials is that they move more easily than state actors, who are often more constrained to formal channels of action and communication.

Whereas one of the key sticking points impeding the development of a more substantive Program of Action at the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference was a limited willingness to move beyond traditional bilateral mechanisms for cooperation between state security forces, many state leaders have since September 11 highlighted the need to transcend the traditional geographical and political limitations of international diplomacy.

Previous attempts to track and control the movement of small arms can teach us much about what kind of information sharing and cooperation among security forces (including police, border and customs officials, and intelligence agencies), is most useful for building a more capable security regime.

- On the other hand, it would be a mistake to underestimate the extent to which both small arms (brokers) and terrorists rely on state actors as they circulate around the world. Just as US President George Bush has emphasized that state actors are often complicit in the operations of the “shadowy underworld” of terrorists, so too have analysts of the small arms question long argued that the security regime must resist the

temptation to focus effort exclusively on the black market.

On one hand, the development of electronic banking systems and highly mobile multinational corporations have made it easier for “legitimate” actors to become entangled in the small arms trade.

On the other hand, Chris Smith remarks, “[small arms] brokers and dealers are frequently finding that weak states provide either a conduit that offers the benefit of poor policing, corrupt officials, porous borders and organized crime networks or warlords...”<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, anti-terrorist and anti-SALW campaigns must each begin with better intelligence and a better understanding of how changes in international political and economic structures are affecting the conduct of both foreign policy and business. Before answering such simple questions as “how do people acquire small arms?” they must also each develop new methods to monitor and/or regulate private transactions that can happen very quickly, across very large distances, and using a mixture of highly sophisticated technology and low-tech strategies to avoid detection.

- If it would also be a dangerous mistake to focus exclusively on Southern states when trying to understand either terrorism or the small arms trade, it is unfortunately true that so called “failed states” are key nodes in the networks through which both the small arms trade and international terrorism operate. The challenge now is to develop new ways to understand the phenomenon of “failed” states that take into account the various ways in which local political, economic and social structures interact with the global structures in which they are embedded. How, for instance, do civil servants, professional soldiers, and those involved in organized

crime respond to state collapse? How do the influx of foreign aid, peacekeepers, elections monitors, transitional administrators, and foreign NGOs alter these patterns? Any attempt to prevent the reproduction of a culture of violence in which armed force is seen as the only/best course of action must be equipped to embrace such questions.

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**Post-September 11 uncertainty may also be a boon to the small arms agenda for a different reason: policy-makers are now more likely to include civil society – traditionally excluded from the realm of international security - in the policy process.**

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Edward Laurance of the [Monterey Institute of International Studies](#) warned in 1997 that despite evidence “that weapons-focused policies are inexorably tied in with the larger issues of development and human rights, very little is being done to create the type of coalition that will enhance the very necessary contribution of NGOs in the solution to these problems.”<sup>23</sup> Specifically, the sense of uncertainty and insecurity heightened on September 11 may improve this situation in two regards:

Since September 11, it has become almost commonplace to hear policy-makers recognizing a need to include conflict analysis in the response of international terrorism. Although this has too often taken the form of assuming that poverty and terrorism are tied in a simple causal relationship, the underlying intuition that there are deep structural causes to political violence is a valid one. So is the increasingly popular recognition that the “solution” to violence must grow out of a convergence of the fields of development, human rights, migration, cultural interaction and reconciliation, good governance, etc. With regards to small arms, this is particularly encouraging as an indication that future efforts to tackle the small arms issue will give more attention to the

*demand* for small arms, even though the demand side of the problem has proven more entrenched than the supply and transfer aspects.

Second, although some have rightly faulted the international coalition against terrorism for too quickly adopting a state-centred response to a more diffuse problem, the security regime is learning. To participants of an electronic symposium, [\*The Future of Conflict Prevention in the Post-September 11 World\*](#), Sandra Melone, Executive Director of the [European Centre for Common Ground](#) remarked,

“I thought that the EU would be even more skeptical towards conflict prevention; that the work of NGOs in the field of conflict transformation would be

increasingly regarded as ineffective. But, every EU official to whom I’ve spoken has said that it’s time to find new ways of addressing the conflicts in our world; that old ways aren’t appropriate or enough anymore; it’s time for new thought; concerted action, which needs to involve people from the various sectors of society – governmental and non-governmental.”

If this indeed is the case, civil society actors may well be in a good position to coordinate their efforts with those of state and international institutions as never before. As the small arms agenda benefits from the development of a new and more integrated set of tools that move beyond the traditional arms control framework, so will the international security regime benefit from the ability

to move beyond a way of thinking about threats to peace and security as a series of discrete emergencies to be engaged only through the framework of crisis management. In turn, the cultivation of new cooperative mechanisms between what have become parallel kingdoms of both research and action will allow for the development of a security community with the right mixture of willingness and ability to turn the broad ideals of the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference into a more specific set of implementation priorities.

*Links to other websites do not imply endorsement of or by the site owners/authors.*

## **WORKING PAPER**

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- <sup>1</sup> For an interesting account of Henry Dunant's (ICRC) role in the birth of the Geneva Conventions, see: Finnemore, Martha, 1996. National Interests in International Society. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Karp, Aaron. 2000. "Negotiating Small Arms Restraint: The Boldest Frontier for Disarmament?" *Disarmament Forum*, vol 2. Geneva : UNIDIR.
- <sup>3</sup> as quoted in Fleshman, Michael. 2001. "Small arms in Africa: Counting the cost of gun violence," *Africa Recovery*, Vol 15 No 4, Dec 2001. United Nations Department of Public Information.
- <sup>4</sup> For a good discussion of the Programme of Action in its practical aspects, see: Regehr, Ernie. 2001. "The UN and a Small Arms Program of Action," *Ploughshares Monitor*, Dec 2001.  
Available online at: [www.ploughshares.ca](http://www.ploughshares.ca)  
Another good source of information about the practical aspects of the SALW issue is International Alert's series of background papers, *Biting the Bullet*. Available online at [www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org).
- <sup>5</sup> DPI/2183-March 2001-30M. United Nations 2001. "small arms: United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects," Department of Public Information, March 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> Fleshman, Michael, 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> Ezell, Virginia. 1998. "International Small Arms Disarmament: Menace or Challenge?" *presentation*, Small Arms Annual Conference, Exhibition & Firing Demonstration, Columbus, GA, June 18, 1998.  
Text available online: <http://www.dtic.mil/ndia/arms/>
- <sup>8</sup> Regehr, Ernie. 2001. "Small Arms and Light Weapons: A Global Humanitarian Challenge," *Working Paper 01-4*, Project Ploughshares. Available online:  
<http://www.ploughshares.ca/CONTENT/WORKING%20PAPERS/wp014.html>
- <sup>9</sup> Wilkinson, Paul. 2001. "Overview of the terrorist threat to international peace and security," *presentation*, United Nations Symposium on Terrorism and Disarmament. Text available online: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dda/sympterrsm.htm>
- <sup>10</sup> A/52/298, Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms (August 27, 1997).
- <sup>11</sup> Biggs, David. 2000. "United Nations Contributions to the Peace Process," *Disarmament Forum*, vol 2. Geneva : UNIDIR  
NB : This quote is Biggs' paraphrase of the original report, A/54/258, Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms (August 19, 1999).
- <sup>12</sup> Fleshman, Michael. 2001.
- <sup>13</sup> as quoted in Fund for Peace, 2001, "Fund for Peace Welcomes Action on Arms Trafficking and Terrorism," *Media Update*, Fund for Peace, November 19. Available online:  
<http://www.fundforpeace.org/programs/acp/advocacy/mu011119.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> The Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice is an element of ECOSOC. In 1997, the Commission also passed a Resolution on Firearms Regulation for the Purpose of Crime Prevention and Public Health and Safety, based largely on a backgrounder prepared by the Canadian Department of Justice.
- <sup>15</sup> Vienna, 7<sup>th</sup> session, 21-30 April 1998.
- <sup>16</sup> Dhanapala, Jayantha. 2001. "Opening Remarks," *presentation*, United Nations Symposium on Terrorism and Disarmament. Text available online: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dda/sympterrsm.htm>
- <sup>17</sup> as quoted in Human Rights Watch, 2001. "UN: 'Program of Inaction' on Small Arms: Conference Ending with Little Result," Online: <http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/07/smallarms0719.htm>
- <sup>18</sup> Boutwell, Jeffrey & Michael Klare, 2000. "A Scourge of Small Arms," *Scientific American*, Vol 282, No 6. June.
- <sup>19</sup> DPI/2183-March 2001-30M.
- <sup>20</sup> Regehr, Ernie. 2001.
- <sup>21</sup> cf Boutwell & Klare, 2000.
- <sup>22</sup> Smith, Chris. 2000. "The 2001 Conference – Breaking Out of the Arms Control Framework," *Disarmament Forum*, vol 2. Geneva: UNIDIR.
- <sup>23</sup> Laurance, Edward. 1997. "The Light Weapons Problem: The Way Ahead," *Working Paper*, Canadian Council for International Peace & Security, Oct 24, Ottawa.