

Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe

Project SAFTE generated new insights into illicit firearms markets in Europe and terrorist access to those markets. In recent years, several terrorist attacks have been carried out using firearms in Europe, causing the deaths of hundreds of people and injuring hundreds more. In addition, law enforcement agencies across Europe have foiled several other plots to carry out terrorist attacks using firearms. These incidents demonstrate that terrorists in the EU are able to access various types of firearms, including military-grade guns. In this fact sheet, the main Project SAFTE findings concerning firearms acquisition by terrorists are discussed.

Terrorists' use of firearms in Europe

The use of firearms by terrorists is not a new phenomenon in the EU. From a historical perspective groups with a wide range of terrorist ideologies have carried out attacks with firearms. Separatist terrorist groups such as ETA and IRA, for example, have relied heavily on firearms to carry out their activities and attacks.

According to Europol, **firearms have in recent years become the most prevalent type of weaponry used in terrorist attacks in Europe**. A number of recent terrorist shootings have received a great deal of international media attention, for example the Toulouse-Montauban attacks in 2012, the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in 2014, and the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015.

Because of the high number of casualties in some of these incidents, most of the focus has been on jihadi attacks. However, apart from these religiously-inspired attacks, numerous separatist, right-wing and left-wing attacks with firearms have also been recorded in Europe in recent years.

Terrorists in the EU possess and use a **wide range of firearms**.

These include:

- various models and brands of pistols and revolvers
- military-grade firearms such as assault rifles and sub-machine guns.

Firearms that are relatively unsuited to most terrorist attacks – e.g. shotguns, riot guns, and even replica firearms – have also been seized from terrorist networks.

This observation suggests that **not all terrorists have access to a wide range of firearms** and many need to make do with the ones they have access to.

Differences among types of terrorist actors

The findings from Project SAFTE indicate that clear distinctions can be identified in the acquisition, possession and use of firearms among different types of terrorist networks in the EU. Whereas historically the IRA, for example, relied heavily on international arms transfers, especially from the United States and Libya, ETA mainly turned to local sources of firearms supplies, such as thefts from security forces stockpiles and illicit manufacturing of firearms. The perpetrators of the recent religiously-inspired terrorist attacks have, however, mainly acquired their firearms through access to local criminal markets.

Firearms acquisition via the criminal market

The recent high-profile religiously-inspired terrorist attacks in Europe demonstrate that, in their search for firearms, the networks responsible tend to rely on members with criminal pasts who use their (often pre-existing) connections in the criminal underworld. An obvious **crime-terror nexus** can therefore be observed: terrorists with criminal antecedents have acquired various skills through their criminal pasts that can be used in the planning and execution of terrorist attacks. One of these skills is that of being able to access weapons more easily.

The observed **increased availability of military-grade firearms** on the criminal markets can be linked to:

- the **increased cross-border smuggling of legacy weapons** from armed conflicts in the Western Balkans
- the recent increase in the **trafficking of deactivated firearms and acoustic expansion weapons** that can easily be reactivated.

Given the traditionally closed character of illicit firearms markets in Europe, in which having the right connections and being trustworthy are crucial factors, this is an important observation. Firearms – especially the more sophisticated variety – are only available to individuals with the right (criminal) connections and reputations.

Most terrorists seem to prefer automatic assault rifles because they perceive these weapons as being able to cause maximum casualties in a short period of time. However, being able to acquire them usually depends on the availability of these types of weapons on local illicit firearms markets. Importantly, the increased availability of military-grade firearms on criminal markets has been observed in several EU member states. This poses serious security risks given the criminal

connections of many contemporary terrorists: **the easier it becomes for criminals to acquire these firearms, the easier it also becomes for terrorists with criminal connections.**

Direct diversion from legal ownership

Apart from acquiring firearms via the criminal market, a small number of members of religiously-inspired terrorist networks in Europe have also obtained firearms by directly diverting them from the legal firearms sphere. The M95 rifle used in the Copenhagen attacks in 2015, for example, was acquired through targeted theft by the perpetrator.

Cases where religiously-inspired terrorists legally own firearms are exceptionally rare in the EU. This seems more common among members of extremist, especially right-wing networks. Some of the firearms that have been found in these networks were legally owned.