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Western Balkans: a link between arms trafficking and terrorism

MARTINA SCRIVANI

Nota autore

Martina Scrivani is a postgraduate student in International Cooperation Policies for Development at Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan. Her Master's final thesis was related to Western Balkans conflict and post-conflict, the rising of organised crime, arms trafficking and its link with jihadist extremism, both in Middle East and within the European Union.

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She attended a French course on European Affairs and International Relations at Science Po University in Paris.

She worked as intern for a Colombian NGO, on the field, in the North of the country and this experience gave her the opportunity to discover closely the operating of development programmes.

Abstract

The connection between Western Balkans and Daesh is real, still represent a huge problem and it is related to the big amount of arms trafficked every year, by criminal groups or local governments, directly or thanks to the collaboration of third countries, as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and United States, whose provide armaments to certain Syrian supported groups of fighters. Facts demonstrate that the same military equipment risk to be diverted to jihadist groups, or Daesh affiliates, through different pipelines: on the battlefield, due to corrupted functionals, or by thefts.

The arms trade has not only an "illegal aspect" but also a "legal" one, as most of the States who were part of former Yugoslavia, are now involved in a business without precedent. Lots of the old communist stockpiles have been rehabilitated and the arms industries work a full regime to meet the market demand.

The main importer is Saudi Arabia, who do not compare in any "black register" of arms and who can reroute the armaments to Syria or Yemen.

The threat is not only restricted to conflict areas, as Syria and Iraq, but concerns also the European Community itself, in particular for the alarming presence of the so-called "lone wolves", able to spread panic and death.

European authorities are trying to take measures to counter terrorism in all its forms, but this struggle still affects the region and its citizens.

Key-words

Western Balkans, arms trafficking, jihadism, terrorism, Daesh.

Globalization as a phenomenon of global market unification has encouraged a huge movement of people and goods, pushing this exchange also in other areas – including innovation – by promoting the emergence of forms of communication facilitated by new technologies and greater interconnection. In addition to this positive aspect, both from a social and cultural point of view, the progressive and irreversible globalization has also facilitated the expansion of criminal phenomena from one country to another.

The trafficking of drugs, smuggled goods, people reduced in semi-slavery, are accompanied by those of firearms, following the trends of wars all over the world and answering a demand that shows no signs of decreasing.

Traded armaments range from light weapons to “heavy” military instruments and transfers can be conducted legally, by State entities, or illegally, implemented by organized crime groups. Moreover, in recent years, the arms market has been able to benefit from a new illicit sales method: the dark web, completely digitalized, based on the use of virtual currencies, far from the physical exchange of goods and money, difficult to find and as a result, less actionable.

Worldwide, the great arms exporters are few, but they are accompanied by a series of small merchant countries, which contribute to exacerbate wars and terrorism with their war instruments.

Among these States stand out the Western Balkans, famous for being part of communist Yugoslavia and for having experienced the most brutal and bloody ethnic conflict in Europe after the Second World War.

Hostilities, in addition to causing thousands of victims, have produced wakes that impact on the nation-building attempt, put in place by individual countries and their local authorities: rampant corruption, permanence of a highly developed and well functioning black market, incorporation of ethnic conflict’s advocates, both in political parties and in the bureaucratic apparatus, and rehabilitation of old military arsenals.

Weapons, along with organized crime, represent a challenge for those territories that are trying to emancipate themselves from the consequences of the war, but who struggle to re-establish a fully transparent and legal type of economy.

This problem does not only concern the Western Balkans but also extends to the countries who have any kind of connection with them, in particular those who trade with companies producing weapons or those who, by proximity, are likely to be involved in the illegal trafficking of Balkan criminals.

The arms of the former Yugoslavia contribute to exacerbate the Middle Eastern conflicts of Syria and Iraq and, unfortunately, serve as military support for the rebels established in the territory and for the Daesh affiliates.

Balkan armaments have become part of the terrorist arsenals, not only in Syria, but also in Europe, because of the numerous extremist cells present, as shown by the Paris attacks, made with old Yugoslavian rifles¹.

A number of treaties have been established and ratified to discourage misguided arms trafficking and national legislation has been implemented whose purpose is to regulate this trade, but the theory is frequently untied from the practice.

The “Balkan bridge” links peoples and cultures, but also buyers and arms dealers, “lone wolves” and local criminals.

The Balkan bridge promotes exchanges from East to West and connects the Middle East to Europe, in a view, unfortunately, very often negative.

The absence of a solid institutional framework is a characteristic feature of those countries which, after experiencing conflict situations, are forced to rebuild their economic and social fabric.

This structural precariousness facilitates the establishment of deviant forms of economic management, often linked to the birth or development of groups connected to organized crime.

In this regard, we speak of shadowy, submerged economies, which are beyond state control or often subject to them. In fact, it is not uncommon the close connection between public bodies and the local mafia, in a relationship of collusion of interests, mostly economic, difficult to undermine.

Research and literature on this matter often tend to neglect the criminal dynamics, considered as collateral phenomena of the post-war transition; on the contrary, it is necessary to consider organized crime in the study of international relations, especially in respect to its effects on the societies and the economies that are moving towards peace.

In first analysis, the transnational criminal activities grew simultaneously with the global economy, reaching a turnover of about one trillion dollars in the last decade. This increasing has made the gray or semi-legal sector particularly relevant in those areas subject to strong instability².

Secondly, the advent of economic globalization has contributed to the creation of new opportunities for the illegal business, on various levels: from

¹ Dennis Lynch,, 2015.

² Francesco Strazzari, *Notte balcanica – Guerre, crimine, stati falliti alle soglie dell'Europa*, Il Mulino, 2008, p. 27

the goods exchanged, to the transport logistics, to the strategies adopted in response to the actions of contrast and repression³.

Finally, it is particularly important to understand how criminal agendas can influence political instability and the strengthening of structures and violent mechanisms within society.

The failure of peace building attempts can be sought not only in those turbulent processes typical of transition, such as the affirmation of an elective democracy or the start of a market economy, but also in the development of parallel dynamics, linked to lawlessness and to the role played by criminal networks⁴. It is therefore necessary to read the extralegal economy as a factor having a decisive weight in the social fabric's reconstruction and in the consolidation of the post-conflict institutional structures.

The triggering cause is to be found in the outbreak of the wars that have affected the Balkan peninsula and which have led to the weakening of the state apparatus, accompanied by a strong legal vacuum and the coexistence of organized crime groups within the State itself⁵.

The combination of these elements has favored the creation of the ideal breeding ground for the explosion of the criminal phenomenon, making the Western Balkans one of the most important epicentres of organized crime⁶, not only at regional level but also at transnational and global one.

Local criminal networks focus primarily on drug trafficking, stolen vehicles, cigarette smuggling, oil, money laundering, weapons and human trafficking.

A further, but not less important, traffic is linked to arms. This kind of illicit market represents the least visible activity among those conducted by criminal organizations in the region. On a social level, moreover, it is perceived as a minor problem compared to the trafficking of drugs or human beings, despite its dangerousness and its connections with extremist groups all over the world.

This type of business takes place on two levels: the first concerns light weapons and is managed by organized crime, while the second is related to military weapons and equipment, conducted by national governments.

To better understand the contemporary arms trafficking it is necessary to read its origins, both cultural and warlike, linked to the '90s civil conflict.

In the first instance, a common hypothesis concerning the presence of firearms in the Western Balkans is related to the so-called "gun culture",

³*Id.*

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵Věra Stojarová, *Organized Crime in the Western Balkans*, working paper for "ECPR Conference", Pisa, 2007, p. 1.

⁶After Russia and China.

which predisposes the population not only to acquire and possess armaments, but also to use them⁷.

Although there are few scientific analyzes on this issue, sources from the academic literature trace the Balkan weapons culture to the figure of the “bandit”, which carries with it “connotations of oppression, thirst for freedom, and heroic masculinity”⁸.

The bandit’s representation has roots in popular folklore but also in the history of the region, with particular reference to the Ottoman Empire and its state-building practices: the consolidation of its power and its authority derived, in fact, from agreements made with the local armed bands. When, over the course of the Eighteenth century, the Empire began to falter, becoming increasingly weak, and ideas of national liberation began to make its way, the figure of the bandit quickly assumed a strong cultural relevance. Moreover, the period of insecurity that accompanied the emergence of nation-states led not only to the proliferation of gangs of bandits, but also to the idea that weapons could guarantee personal, family and community security.

Although the notion of bandit can refer to a social phenomenon, it also reflects the Ottoman character of the local elites, with a certain degree of tolerance towards local bandits, who never represented a threat to central power or colonial domination.

While the bandit’s socio-cultural image could shed light on the symbolic meaning of owning a gun and even using it in certain situations, it is not clear to what extent it actually determines the proliferation of firearms⁹.

Regarding the war-spreading relationship of armaments, it can be said that the transformations and institutional weaknesses of the early 1990s had a strong impact on the levels of weapons in the Western Balkans, especially in quantitative terms, given the large number of instruments warfare out of government control.

One of the primary reasons for the high number of firearms in the region is related to the fact that, before 1991, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugo-

⁷ Small Arms Survey, *Handgun Ownership and Armed Violence in the Western Balkans*, Armed Violence Issue Brief n. 4, 2014, p. 2.

⁸ Locally defined with the names o *hajduk*, *haidut*, *uskok* e *klepht*.
Id.

⁹ Recent studies show that culture and tradition do not represent the primary source of problems related to widespread possession of weapons in the region, even if there are exceptions: according to interviews conducted in Montenegro, Albania and Serbia, numerous subjects have stated that the possession of weapons depended from tradition (22%, 16% and 15% respectively, as opposed to 5% found in the rest of the countries).
Id.

slavia had the fourth largest army in Europe and a corresponding industrial military complex¹⁰.

The Yugoslav People's Army (also called Yugoslav National Army or JNA) was composed of two elements: regular land forces controlled by the Federal Government of Belgrade, and territorial defense forces, particularly important for the protection of the large armaments stockpiles. When the wars in Croatia and Bosnia broke out, these stocks passed under the control of the People's Army and, consequently, of the Serbian government. Furthermore, part of the weapons was assigned to paramilitary and criminal groups, supported by the various local governments and playing a key role in the conflict.

Following the Dayton Accords of 1995, some weapons came into the hands of civilians, while others were obtained by organized crime groups, whose importance in the region was constantly growing.

Another reason for the proliferation of firearms is the result of the widespread clandestine channels operating in Croatia and Bosnia during the war: the disintegration of the Federation and the outbreak of the conflict led to the imposition of international sanctions and the embargo of arms in all the Yugoslav republics, which particularly hit the two countries, which had to resort to smuggling to arm their own armies¹¹.

Although it is difficult to accurately estimate the quantity and value of the armaments that flowed into Croatia during the period considered, between 1993 and 1995 around 308 million dollars of weapons were supposed to have been illegally introduced into the country. Similarly, about 38 million dollars of armaments were smuggled into Bosnia, only during the last year of the conflict, while it is estimated that the total value of illegal arms imports in the country, during all the years of the war, reached 800 millions of dollars¹².

Another circumstance that contributed to the increase in arms circulating in the Western Balkan countries was the fall of the Albanian regime of Enver Hoxha, in 1990. He placed particular emphasis on the creation of a strong and well-equipped army, leading to a constant increase in arms within the borders of the region. Following the fall of his regime, the majority of these military resources were looted¹³ and only a small part, equal to 15% of the total, returned to the authorities. The responsibility for the largest proportion of the looting was attributed to the local population, which has led to the spread of illicit weapons and ammunition.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹ Unlike Serbia and Montenegro, where these measures had little effect, since, as previously mentioned, they had inherited the JNA troops and their armed escorts.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

However, it is considered that a significant part of the latter, about 150,000, was smuggled across the border with Kosovo and sold to various rebel groups, including the Kosovo Liberation Army, the Albanian National Army and the National Liberation Army.

It was the paramilitary factions themselves that played a crucial role in smuggling, especially given the different availability of armaments among the various warring parties, which not only influenced the conduct of war, but also the types of illegal markets in which were involved the different organized crime groups. For example, in Croatia and Bosnia, the latter played a crucial role in providing arms to their respective countries, in close cooperation with the central government; contrary to what happened in Serbia where, given the abundance of weapons under the army's control, the main focus of organized crime groups was not the arms trade, although they dealt with it, but the smuggling of gasoline, drugs, cigarettes, food and other scarce goods¹⁴.

Regarding the current situation, a research carried out by the Small Arms Survey shows that in the Western Balkans there are between 3.2 and 6.2 million weapons, registered or not.

The typology varies from country to country: in Macedonia, of the 157,000 registered firearms, most are pistols, revolvers, rifles and carbines; in Serbia the registered weapons are 1.2 million and 90% of these are constituted by pistols and rifles. In the country, 874,000 people own a weapon. The same survey estimated that there are around 100,000 registered firearms in Montenegro, such as in Macedonia and Serbia, most of which are light weapons. Furthermore, there are about 80,000 licensed gun owners in Montenegro (compared to around 60,000 unregistered), most of whom are civilians, men and only 500 are state officials¹⁵.

But the most alarming data refer to weapons not equipped with identification documents, whose figures remain particularly high¹⁶: the highest number of unregistered weapons is visible in Serbia and is presumably between 500,000 and one million.

The amount of unlicensed weapons is also high in other countries, such as Kosovo (260,000), Bosnia-Herzegovina (between 150,000 and 750,000),

¹⁴ According to some estimates, up to 643,220 have been raided between light weapons and armaments.

Id.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5

Croatia (150,000-600,000), Albania (about 200,000), Macedonia (160,000-450,000) and Montenegro (40,000-90,000)¹⁷.

The presence of such a large number of unregistered weapons in Balkan area has contributed, over the years, to the development of a flourishing traffic handled by organized crime.

Illegal weapons can be obtained in different ways: through illicit exchanges between citizens, including paramilitary and criminal units, or illegal actions of a company¹⁸.

There are many factors that favor the possession or trade of illegal weapons: first of all, the so-called economic and criminal “grey areas”, to which they belong the smuggling of drugs and people, the seizure and usury, that are linked to the possession of arms, whose circulation is facilitated by the presence of porous legal borders, coupled with widespread corruption.

Another crucial element is the substantial difference in the price of arms in this region and in EU member states¹⁹, which provides additional incentives for smuggling. Finally, terrorism and the outbreak of conflicts in the Middle East further increase the demand for arms among members of extremist groups in the concerned countries.

Understanding the exact functioning of exchanges and especially of illegal international trafficking is very difficult, the sources come mainly from investigations carried out by local organizations or from journalistic inquiries²⁰.

It is evident, however, that the Balkans remain “one of the epicentres of global arms trade, transit area and source of illegal weapons”²¹.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the sums reported correspond to an estimate of the unregistered weapons, as the data in question remain rather incomplete.

¹⁸ Small Arms Survey, *Handgun Ownership and Armed Violence in the Western Balkans*, Armed Violence Issue Brief n. 4, 2014, p. 5.

¹⁹ Unlicensed production, weapons produced legally but introduced on the black market or illegal sales.

Svetlana Djurdjevic-Lukic, *Small Arms and Human Security in the Western Balkans: beyond conflict and fatal victims*, working paper for “Second International Conference on Human Security”, 2014, p. 8.

²⁰ Where an AK-47 is about three times more expensive.

Id.

²¹ The difficulty is also linked to the transport of the weapons themselves, which is carried out through small or medium-sized deliveries, making it difficult to contrast by the local governments.

Ludovic Lamant, *Da dove vengono le armi usate dai terroristi*, Mediapart, 2015 (<https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/2015/11/20/traffico-d-armi-in-europa>).

The business in question as well as being undoubtedly profitable, would also be “multi-ethnic”, as it develops thanks to the close collaboration between criminal groups, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation²².

Next to the illegal traffic, there is a “legal” one, although the limited available sources: the most complete and exhaustive is surely represented by the report conducted by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), in collaboration with Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).

Since 2012, when the Arab Spring has turned into real armed conflicts, 1.2 billion euros of arms have passed through the Balkans, by air and by ship. According to arms and human rights experts, the trade in question is almost certainly illegal, even though the concerned governments do not consider it as such²³.

The arms business is extremely flourishing, profits are around hundreds of millions of euros, factories contribute to the growth of national GDP and the lowering of the unemployment rate, reasons that disincentive a change of perspective from local institutions.

The exporting countries have been able to benefit from the granting of many arms export licenses, which should guarantee the final destination of the goods, even though there are many proofs of their arrival in the hands of Syrian and Iraqi rebel armed groups, accused of abuse and atrocities towards, in particular, of the civilian population.

Technically, according to a statement by the former US ambassador in Syria, Robert Stephen Ford, the trade that crosses Turkey, the Gulf States and Jordan, is under the CIA supervision, although in practice the procedures are often circumvented.

According to an examination by BIRN and OCCRP, based on international reports, sales contracts and flight logs, a large number of weapons in the hands of the Daesh, including rifles, grenades, rocket launchers, anti-tank armaments and machine guns, have Balkan origins and interest countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. In total, these eight countries, since 2012, have sent, as already mentioned, 1.2 billion euros of arms and ammu-

²² Stefano Giantin, *Traffico d'armi nei Balcani, Belgrado rilancia l'allarme*, Il Piccolo, 2016. (<http://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it/trieste/cronaca/2016/10/10/news/traffico-d-armi-nei-balcani-belgrado-rilancia-l-allarme-1.14227853?ref=search>).

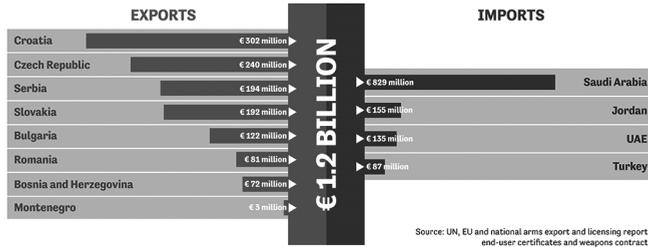
²³ *Id.*

dition to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates and Turkey, although there is a presumption that the number is actually much more conspicuous²⁴.

The four recipient countries are expected to supply arms to Syria and Yemen, as no purchases were made from Eastern Europe before 2012 and the pace of imports is still not slowing down; on the contrary, 2015 represented a year full of acquisitions, with particularly important orders²⁵.

€ 1.2 Billion Arms Pipeline to Middle East

Since 2012, eight Central and Eastern European countries approved the shipment of at least € 1.2 billion worth of arms and ammunition to four key arms suppliers of Syria and Yemen. An investigation by BIRN and OCCRP has revealed that some of the weapons have been diverted to Western-backed opposition groups but are also in use by fighters of Islamist groups, including ISIS.



With regard to logistical details, as reported previously, the weapons of Eastern Europe are delivered to the Middle East countries through the use of cargo flights and ships²⁶.

The identified flights, carrying weapons in the conflict areas, were, in total, 68 during the years 2015-2016. The most affected European cities were Bratislava, Sofia and Belgrade, city where was found the highest frequency of departures.

The arms loads were directed towards Saudi or Emirates military bases, or carried out by official arms exporters.

Many of the organized air travel for deliveries do not take place directly, but they make additional stops in other Eastern and Central European countries, probably to load other goods, before reaching their final destination.

²⁴ Lawrence Marzouk, Ivan Angelovski e Miranda Patrucic, *Making a Killing: The €1.2 Billion Arms Pipeline to Middle East*, OCCRP, 2016 (<https://www.occrp.org/en/makingakilling/making-a-killing/>).

²⁵ Patrick Wilken, a researcher of Amnesty International, said the facts would lead to a systematic displacement of arms to armed groups guilty of serious human rights violations and, if that were the case, such transfers would violate the UN Arms Trade Treaty.

Id.

²⁶ This is due to bureaucratic gaps: data on arms export licenses for four of the eight countries concerned were not made available for the year 2015, as well as for seven out of eight countries for 2016.

Id.

The European Union has provided flight statistics that confirm the researchers' hypothesis: the flights leaving the airports of Bulgaria and Slovakia have delivered, since the summer of 2014, 2,268 tons of cargo, equal to 44 flights, to Saudi and Emirates military bases²⁷.

Once they reach the respective importing countries, the weapons are routed to Jordan and Turkey, using two secret command centers, the so-called Military Operation Centers (MOCs), coordinated by security officers and military forces from Gulf countries, Jordan, Turkey and the United States, capable of controlling the distribution of equipment to the various supported Syrian opposition groups²⁸; from the MOCs the weapons arrive by land, or launched with parachutes by military aircraft, up to the border with Syria²⁹.

Some of the Islamic groups not supported by the US, have received weapons from Turkey and Saudi Arabia and have often clashed with the same factions endorsed by the Military Operation Centers.

Syria does not seem to be the only belligerent country concerned, in fact, BIRN and OCCRP researchers, support the thesis that even Yemen seems to have received Serbian assault rifles through air launches carried out by the Saudis.

The United States is also involved in traffic: data show that the Department of Defense and the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) played a crucial role in the purchase and delivery of significant military equipment to Syrian opposition groups, whose provenance is, once again, Balkan³⁰.

Since the last months of 2015, SOCOM has carried out a commission of three cargo ships, in order to transport 4,700 tons of weapons and ammunition, from Romanian and Bulgarian harbors, to the Middle Eastern territories. Among the goods transported there were a wide range of armaments, including heavy machine guns, rocket launchers, anti-tank weapons, projectiles, mortars, explosives, rockets and grenades, whose origin is unfortunately unknown³¹.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ The analysis took place through the identification of aircraft and ships that deliver armaments, added to a detailed analysis of airport timetables, the history of cargo carriers and flight tracking data. Thanks to this study, journalists were able to monitor the flow of weapons in real time.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Former US Ambassador Ford said that "each of the countries involved to help the armed opposition maintained a final decision-making power over which groups in Syria would receive assistance".

Id.

³¹ A Free Syrian Army commander based in Aleppo told to BIRN and OCCRP that weapons from Central and Eastern Europe were being distributed in Syria, saying that "we are not interested in the country of origin, we only know that they come from Eastern Europe".

In the two-year period 2014-2016, SOCOM has allocated 27 million dollars to Bulgarian weapons and ammunition and 12 million dollars to Serbian military goods, for operations linked to Syrian rebels³².

A specific case concerns Serbia, and in particular a weapon called “Coyote”.

Many social networks, in February 2016, showed a picture of two young Syrian boys holding a *Zastava M02 Coyote*, a heavy 12.7mm armament manufactured by the Serbian company *Zastava*³³.

After a year of careful analysis by BIRN and OCCRP, what emerged confirms the facts listed above: the weapons were sold to a Bulgarian enterprise specialized in arms brokering, the Bulgarian Industrial Engineering and Management (BIEM), based in Sofia, for the export of the M02 to Saudi Arabia in the years 2015-2016, from which they were sent to Turkey, to the northern Syrian border, in order to be acquired by fighters on the spot.

According to some interviews conducted by journalists towards some Syrian soldiers, the latter would have played two weeks of training in the Saudi desert in order to learn the correct use of the powerful Coyote, only to be transferred, via Turkey, on the field of the Syrian battle together with the weapons themselves.

In 2015, BIEM commissioned a large order from the state-owned *Zastava Arms*, which produces its own version of the Russian AK-47 and the heavy M02 machine gun. While the details of the contract remain confidential, fragments of official information, including the accounts of *Zastava* for 2015, indicate that BIEM has paid 2.75 million euros for 205 Coyotes. A weapons expert, said that the figure corresponds to the typical price for the purchase of such armament, whose value corresponds to about 12,000 euros per piece³⁴.

One of the majority members of BIEM is the Bulgarian entrepreneur Petar Mandjoukov, an arms dealer, media mogul and former agent of State Security, the communist secret service; his company, BIEM, had already been linked to other arms disputes, although he always claimed to comply with international law.

Id.

³²This purchase is part of an American training and equipment program, whose total value amounts to 500 million dollars.

Id.

³³A proof of such delivery resides in images published on social media by a Syrian Kurdish group, in which they show a warehouse full of boxes of ammunition arrived through a US mediation in northern Syria.

Id.

³⁴*Id.*

The export license of BIEM for the sale of Coyote has been granted by the Serbian Ministry of Commerce on the basis of a legal document called “final certificate”, which guarantees the direct use of the weapon by, in this case, the forces of security of Saudi Arabia. Although any further export of the equipment requires Serbia’s approval, the Coyotes seen in Syria appear to have been illegally diverted to the country by the Saudis and this may not be a surprise for Serbian officials: they are responsible for issuing weapons licenses and they are also aware of the disregard of the Wahabite armed forces for such armaments, which prefer latest equipments and more sophisticated weapons.

Serbia has been asked to stop the export of weapons that can be diverted, especially in the war zones and to non-state groups accused of war crimes, according to a series of regulations: the national law against arms trafficking; the Arms Trade Treaty supported by the United Nations and the European Union’s common position on the arms trade, with which the country is lining up in the expectation of joining the EU community. In 2013, therefore, sales of Saudi Arabia were stopped, but they were resumed two years later, when was approved the agreement on the transport of M02 to the Wahabi kingdom, together with a series of other weapons and ammunitions, for a sum of which amounted to 135 million euros³⁵.

The Syrian war has therefore helped the flowering of the arms business in Serbia: the armament factories that work at full capacity have added further shifts or have stopped taking new orders to meet the demand.

In 2015, *Zastava* recorded an increase of 34% compared to the previous year, equal to 35.7 million euro. *Krusik*, another state-owned missile and munitions company, reported a 73% growth in turnover (26.4 million euros) over the same period³⁶.

In addition, the Serbian Civil Aviation Directorate confirmed the presence of 49 flights, departing or in transit in the country, carrying weapons and ammunition, from 1 of June 2015 to 4 of July 2016³⁷. Ten of these flights were made to Al Kharj Prince Sultan airbase, in Saudi Arabia and to Al Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, probably containing weapons or ammunition; while 14 were, in all certainty, loaded with armaments of war, according to documents from the Serbian Civil Aviation itself.

³⁵ Ivan Angelovski, Jelena Cosic, Lawrence Marzouk e Maria Cheresheva, *The Coyote’s Trail: A Machine Gun’s Path from Serbia to Syria*, OCCRP, 2017. (<https://www.occrp.org/en/makingakilling/the-coyotes-trail-a-machine-guns-path-from-serbia-to-syria/>).

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

The total flights were divided as follows: 28 Belgrade-Gedda; 9 Belgrade-Prince Sultan Air Base; 5 Belgrade-Al Dhafra Air Base; 2 Belgrade-Sharurah; 1 Belgrade-Tabuk; 1 Nis-Amman; 1 Nis-Gedda³⁸.

The challenge to combat arms trafficking from Eastern Europe to Syria and Iraq is not the only one to be tackled: a further source of alarm concerns the so-called “lone wolves” or the different terrorist existing cells within the European countries.

According to a survey carried out by the *Time*, in recent years there has been an exponential increase in the number and type of weapons that cross the borders from East to West. The demand for simple guns has decreased, while the demand for assault military weapons has increased; this reflects a very different kind of crime: small criminals and drug dealers prefer small, easily concealable weapons; on the contrary, terrorists buy AK-47s who can inflict maximum damage³⁹.

Given the high number of weapons circulating in the Western Balkans, ranging from three to six million, the area is particularly liable to internal and international traffic. Within Schengen area, weapons can cross the borders with great ease and representatives of the French police, following the Paris attacks, said that there are links between Balkan organized crime and terrorists⁴⁰.

The arms market works based on a basic system of supply and demand. Starting from 2011, the amount of illegal armaments going from South-eastern Europe to different parts of the European Union, through “micro-traffic” dynamics, which consists in the transport of small quantities of weapons by individuals, has certainly increased and it is extremely difficult to track⁴¹.

Experts confirm that the Charlie Hebdo attacks, on 7 of January 2015, were made using weapons from the Western Balkans and from Eastern Europe⁴²: some of them were Slovakian deactivated weapons, while others are presumed to be Croatian and Serbian, with the addition of Bosnian munitions.

It is evident, therefore, that the traffic and the spread of weapons in the Balkans is a risk, not only for the Middle Eastern theaters of war, but also for

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Lawrence Marzouk e Ivan Angelovski, *The Middle East Airlift*, OCCRP, 2016 (<https://www.occrp.org/en/makingakilling/the-middle-east-airlift/>).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Naina Bajekal e Vivienne Walt, *How Europe's Terrorists Get Their Gun*, *Time*, 2015 (<http://time.com/how-europes-terrorists-get-their-guns/>).

⁴² *Id.*

the European Community itself, subjects to threats and terrorist attacks carried out through equipment that come from neighbouring countries and that can claim thousands of victims.

The scope of the arms trade is thus critical, both towards the Middle East and the territories of the Eurozone.

The investigations carried out against the Balkan countries involved in transfers to Saudi Arabia and, consequently, to Syria, have not had a substantial impact at local level, as the states have initially blocked exports, which are, however, almost immediately resumed, in the name of profit, with no considerations on presumed violations of international and humanitarian law.

Although countries like Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Albania have ratified and incorporated into their legal systems most of the international treaties on transnational crime and weapons, along with the creation of local law enforcement systems, it is clear how far the implementation is untied from the regulations themselves.

Intermediate destinations, such as the Saudi Kingdom, Jordan, the Emirates and Turkey, certainly have an impact on the choice of export by the Balkan countries, as well as on the subsequent transfer of war instruments. The fact that such countries have the power to import armaments, even if diverted elsewhere, allows exporters to sell their stocks legally and de-empowers them on a legal and moral level.

As long as international law remains confined to mere voluntary implementation and as long as international sanctions remain subject to economic and geopolitical interests, the respect for human rights will always be in the background. The arms movements control, not only internally but also in respect of the third countries involved, is fundamental and must not be underestimated in any way, although this concept may seem unrealistic and utopian.

The implementation of more stringent measures towards powers such as Saudi Arabia, would be a first step to prevent the Balkan weapons from contributing to fuel the ongoing conflicts, as well as to arm the many affiliates of the Islamic State.

The underlying problems that characterize countries who emerged from a brutal ethnic conflict since only two decades and that continues to have evident repercussions, relapse not only on the native societies but also on the realities that come into contact with them, by triggering a vicious circle with dramatic and dangerous implications.

The assimilation of good judicial, bureaucratic and economic practices is still far from being completed, although all the states of the Western Balkans

are trying to reach the EU standards of the, with the aim of a future membership.

Unfortunately, however, the existing dynamics are extremely difficult to undermine: corruption is not accepted but still tolerated, as it is necessary for the population wellbeing and appears, in the eyes of citizens, as a problem of impossible solution; as well as crime and the development of parallel markets, which were so useful during the war period in the 1990s, and became part of the institutional structure of a still weak and divided area.

The failure to dismantle the Yugoslav war arsenals has certainly influenced the traffic, characterized by a significant reduction in costs, due to the lack of a real production of military instruments, but only by the rehabilitation of present and fully functional stocks. It would therefore be necessary getting to the root cause, through a work of correct de-activation of armaments, perhaps by implementing an economic reward mechanism for weapons made inoperable; as well as the development of a more precise and effective weapons cataloguing, by their registration in appropriate internationally and obligatorily shared registers.

Moreover, the work of change and cooperation should start from the bottom, through a radical change of perspective by those who still suffer from the consequences of the war and who have feelings of distrust of state bodies and military apparatus. It is not easy to erase the occurred atrocities, just as it is not easy to fully re-establish a state of law, when the same political class took part in the armed struggle two decades ago.

Surely, as demonstrated by the implementation of domestic legislative measures and the signing of the UN treaties, there are signs of improvement and progress has been made, at least from the theoretical point of view.

In practice, the gaps remain, above all because of the enormous amount of money that arms deals bring to state coffers.

Greater economic diversification, better structural plans for the reduction of unemployment and the implementation of an effective transfer control system would be needed, not only by local authorities but also thanks to the support of international organizations, first and foremost the European Union.

It is clear that illegal weapons and terrorism are closely connected, both for the Daesh operational theaters in Syria and Iraq, and for the direct armaments market from Eastern Europe to the so-called “lone wolves” or to the European extremist cells.

The prevention of Islamic attacks should also incorporate the fight against the reckless transfer of firearms, therefore, pay more attention to the exports of individual countries, through practical collaboration and the imposition of real sanctions; moreover, it would be crucial the implementation of strategies

aimed at hindering the actions of the various European criminal groups, trying to focus not on the profit, but rather on the law.

Europe, in particular, should protect its citizens and those of third countries, following the logic of humanity and learning to erect walls, not so much to remove those people who flee from war or hunger, but on the contrary, to prevent the claiming of other victims by lethal tools, capable to spread horror and panic in its population.

Fighting without weapons, against weapons, is difficult, but not impossible, and fighting terrorism without terror must be a priority.

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La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

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