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Strategic priority



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## ARMS TRAFFICKING AND TERRORISM: ANALYSIS AND ANTICIPATION OF THE THREAT

The evolution of the terrorist threat on French soil has seen a transformation of its modus operandi in recent years<sup>1</sup>. Whereas the use of a firearm during an attack was regular during the period 2015-2016, bladed weapons attacks are now the most frequent. Indeed, the last use of a firearm during a terrorist attack dates back to May 2021 in La Chapelle-sur-Erdre : a jihadist grabbed the service weapon of a female municipal police officer after stabbing her, and used it against local gendarmes. The previous terrorist shooting took place in March 2018 during the events in Trèbes and Carcassonne, which claimed the lives of four people, including Colonel Arnaud Beltrame from the French Gendarmerie. The gradual disappearance of firearms from the terrorist arsenal in recent years can be explained in several ways (tougher penalties for arms traffickers, limitations of flows during the pandemic...), but could be only temporary in view of the current context.

The origin of illegally held weapons varies in France. At the national level, the majority come from thefts from individual gun owners, which represents approximately 9,000 weapons stolen each year<sup>2</sup>. Internationally, several supply channels exist, the main one being the Balkans. Beyond the terrorist threat, the main clients of arms trafficking remain organized crime, and mainly drug traffickers, in order to protect and extend their drug trading territory. It is also through their contacts among drug traffickers that many terrorists have managed to arm themselves before carrying out their acts<sup>3</sup>, equipped with long guns that give them a much greater operational capacity.

Although the closure of the borders and the drastic reduction of flows during the period 2020-2021 seemed to have limited arms trafficking, it has seemingly resumed in France. The shootings that took place in Marseille<sup>4</sup>, Lyon<sup>5</sup>, Grenoble<sup>6</sup> during the summer of 2022 illustrate this trend. Weapons are also frequently discovered

- 1 For the year 2021 see : RODDE, Alexandre. "Terrorism in France: Panorama of radical movements in 2021". *The CREOGN Research Notes*, Issue 66, January 2022. URL : <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/crgn/publications/creogn-research-note/terrorism-in-france-in-2021-overview-of-the-french-extremist-movements>
- 2 For more information on arms trafficking in France, see the excellent article by Philippe Nobles: "Les armes illicites sur le territoire national: Filières d'approvisionnement, armement des criminels et stratégie de lutte" (Illicit arms on French territory: supply channels, arming of criminals and combat strategies). *Cahiers de la Sécurité et de la Justice*, n°51. URL : <https://www.vie-publique.fr/catalogue/279404-les-armes-feu>
- 3 We can cite Mohamed Merah, Amedy Coulibaly or the Kouachi brothers as examples.
- 4 F.B. "Marseille: New shooting at the Paternelle". *La Provence*, August 2018. URL : <https://www.laprovence.com/actu/en-direct/6865750/marseille-nouvelle-fusillade-nocturne-a-la-paternelle.html>
- 5 "Lyon: between shootings and conflicts with the police, a year under tension in the Duchère". *Lyon Capitale*, June 2022. URL : <https://www.lyoncapitale.fr/actualite/lyon-entre-fusillades-et-conflits-avec-la-police-une-annee-sous-tensions-a-la-duchere>
- 6 MAILLARD, Ugo. "Two victims during a shooting in Grenoble: the shooter arrived on a scooter". *Actu.fr*, August 2022. URL : [https://actu.fr/auvergne-rhone-alpes/grenoble\\_38185/deux-victimes-lors-d-une-fusillade-a-grenoble-le-tireur-est-arrive-sur-une-trottinette\\_53273416.html](https://actu.fr/auvergne-rhone-alpes/grenoble_38185/deux-victimes-lors-d-une-fusillade-a-grenoble-le-tireur-est-arrive-sur-une-trottinette_53273416.html)

during searches and come from a variety of criminal backgrounds: the Chechen community in Orleans<sup>7</sup>, trafficking linked to Belgium in the Val-d'Oise<sup>8</sup>, survivalism in the Puy-de-Dôme<sup>9</sup>, and numerous robberies of gun shops in Switzerland by French criminal groups<sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the demand for quality weapons continues to outstrip the supply capacity of traffickers, leading to an increase in the price of military grade weapons. In this situation, it remains complex for a terrorist acting alone to acquire good quality firearms. However, two recent factors, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the proliferation of 3D printed firearms, require particular vigilance.

## I) Arms trafficking from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

The occurrence of a large-scale armed conflict on the European continent mechanically leads to an increase in the number of weapons in circulation and to their propagation in criminal and terrorist circles. The assault rifles used by the Kouachi brothers during the Charlie Hebdo shooting and the jihadists of the 2015 Paris attacks are a clear example: all were Yugoslav Zavasta, from the conflict that took place fifteen years earlier. Since the beginning of the conflict in the Donbass region in 2014, the Donbass was already becoming a known supply area for weapons and ammunition. In 2021, Small Arms Survey published a report titled "*Making the Rounds: Illicit Ammunition in Ukraine*"<sup>11</sup> on the issue, which indicated that a significant number of grenades, rockets and antipersonnel mines were being disseminated throughout Ukraine by traffickers sourcing from the conflict zone in the east. While the report noted the lack of border permeability for arms trafficking, the possibility of acquiring arms in Ukraine may have attracted some terrorist volunteers. The arrest by the *Sloujba Bezpeky Oukrayiny* (SBU) of Frenchman Grégoire Mouteaux on May 21, 2016 proves this. Close to the ultra-right and having listed targets in France, he was arrested at the Ukrainian-Polish border in possession of "125 kg of TNT, two anti-tank rocket launchers, five Kalashnikov assault rifles and more than 5,000 rounds of ammunition"<sup>12</sup> and sentenced to six years detention in Ukraine. At the time, the Ukrainian government put in place a number of measures to combat the spread of these weapons<sup>13</sup>. Since the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, the situation has become more complex. The arrival of the Russian army and the shipment of arms and ammunition by the Western coalition have multiplied the number of weapons in circulation in the country. Foreign volunteers fighting on both sides may also facilitate arms trafficking with their home countries, or simply bring weapons acquired on Ukrainian soil back with them. Arms trafficking across the Moldovan border is of particular concern to European Union officials, who declared that, regarding the arms in Ukraine, "*not all of them are in good hands*". Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, said in June: "*We still have problems with arms trafficking from (this region) to organized crime, which fuels the violence of criminal networks in the European Union*"<sup>14</sup>. If the argument is valid for any armed conflict, it was nevertheless immediately taken up by Russian propagandists insisting on this risk for the European Union, and then contradicted by the Ukrainian authorities<sup>15</sup>. To respond to these risks, the European Union announced on July

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- 7 HERMANS, Thomas. "Pistols, rifles, Kalashnikov... : a real arsenal discovered during a search in a house in Orleans". *france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr*, March 2022. URL : <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/centre-val-de-loire/loiret/orleans/pistolets-fusils-kalashnikov-un-veritable-arsenal-decouvert-lors-d-une-perquisition-dans-un-domicile-d-orleans-2516104.html>
- 8 NAIZOT, Frédéric. "Val-d'Oise : les copains d'enfance écoulaient des fusils d'assaut", *Le Parisien*, April 2022. URL : <https://www.leparisien.fr/val-d-oise-95/val-d-oise-les-copains-denfance-ecoulaient-des-fusils-dassaut-01-04-2022-RDCLN44TJZDABNFTK5USUOIOME.php>
- 9 TURCAN, Maud. "More than 200 weapons seized by the Thiers gendarmes from a survivalist in Courpière (Puy-de-Dôme)". *La Montagne*, June 2022. URL : <https://www.lamontagne.fr/courpiere-63120/actualites/plus-de-200-armes-saisies-par-les-gendarmes-de-thiers-chez-un-survivaliste-a-courpiere-puy-de-dome-14139108/>
- 10 PAIR, Stéphane. "Trafic d'armes : la Suisse, nouvel arsenal du grand banditisme". *France Info*, December 2021. URL : [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/le-choix-franceinfo/on-a-des-armes-de-guerre-vos-voyous-le-savent-et-vous-les-laissez-faire-la-suisse-nouvel-arsenal-du-grand-banditisme\\_4848719.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/le-choix-franceinfo/on-a-des-armes-de-guerre-vos-voyous-le-savent-et-vous-les-laissez-faire-la-suisse-nouvel-arsenal-du-grand-banditisme_4848719.html)
- 11 SCHROEDER, Matt, SHUMSKA, Olena. "Making the Rounds: Illicit Ammunition in Ukraine". Small Arms Survey, January 2021.
- 12 FRANCE 24 with AFP. "Frenchman sentenced in Ukraine, accused of preparing attacks during Euro-2016" France 24, May 2018. URL : <https://www.france24.com/fr/20180522-ukraine-six-ans-prison-francais-accuse-attentats-euro-2016-mouteaux-kalashnikov>
- 13 "Making the Rounds: Illicit Ammunition in Ukraine". Small Arms Survey, January 2021.
- 14 LE FIGARO with AFP. "Ukraine: the EU, worried about arms trafficking, strengthens its cooperation with Moldova". *Le Figaro*, July 2022. URL : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/ukraine-l-ue-inquiete-d-un-traffic-d-armes-renforce-sa-cooperation-avec-la-moldavie-20220711>
- 15 LE FIGARO with AFP. "The "rumors" of arms trafficking are "Russian propaganda", assures Ukraine". *Le Figaro*, July 2022. URL : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/les-rumeurs-de-traffic-d-armes-sont-de-la-propagande-russe-assure-l-ukraine-20220713>



11th the establishment of a Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management, based in Chisinau, Moldova. The platform will target six specific risks, including firearms trafficking and terrorism prevention<sup>16</sup>. While these efforts seem appropriate, they must be sustained in the coming years. Assault rifles from the Yugoslav conflict have proven to have a life span of several decades. This will also be the case for those in circulation in Ukraine today.

## II) 3D printed weaponry

Like the issue of arms trafficking from Ukraine, the presence of 3D manufactured weaponry in criminal or extremist circles is nothing new but seems to be becoming more common. In 2013, plans for the Liberator, a special .38-caliber pistol that was entirely 3D printable, were released by the company Defense Distributed and became an immediate success with 100,000 downloads in the first 48 hours<sup>17</sup>. While the weapon was relatively ineffective at the time of its release, the development of new models such as the Grizzly, a 22LR rifle, or the FGC-9, a 9mm submachine gun, illustrates the growing effectiveness of this type of weapon. Not all of these weapons are fully 3D printable, but can also be hybrids, or part of kits that allow for the "completion" of an existing non-functional weapon, making them modular and multiplying the possibilities of manufacturing, trafficking and innovation. Criminal and terrorist networks have realized the value of this type of weaponry. On October 9, 2019, Stephan Balliet, a 27-year-old ultra-right militant, killed two people in an attack in the city of Halle, Germany. He was the first European terrorist to use 3D printed weapons. The shotgun and submachine gun he made were of poor quality, sparking numerous shooting incidents, but were financially accessible and easy to build. A year later, Dean Morrice was arrested by UK police in the Bristol area, who discovered a 3D printer, firearm blueprints and Balliet's manifesto at his home<sup>18</sup>. Since 2019, there have been six cases of 3D printed weapons being seized in the UK, including from a 15-year-old girl in Derbyshire<sup>19</sup>, but also from the hands of activists in an Irish separatist group, Óglaigh na hÉireann<sup>20</sup>. In the Canary Islands, Spanish police dismantled a 3D printed weapons workshop run by ultra-right-wing militants in September 2020. In the United States<sup>21</sup>, ATF agents counted 19,344 3D-printed weapons seized in criminal investigations, a 1000% increase in five years. Nearly 700 of these weapons were used in a homicide or attempted homicide case<sup>22</sup>. The concern about the problem in the United States is shared by European officials. At the Europol conference "*Printing insecurity: Tackling the threat of 3D printed guns in Europe*," the spread of such weapons was described as a "*current and future threat [...] fully on Europol's radar as a result of the increasing number of weapons seized during investigations in Europe in previous years.*"<sup>23</sup>. While the firepower and quality of these weapons remain limited for the time being, their manufacturing price is decreasing every year and their lethality is established. Recently, it was a weapon manufactured using instructions found online that enabled the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July 2022<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, in addition to the threat of 3D printed weapons, the threat of improvised weapons and accessories that increase their firing capacity, such as bump

16 "Informal Home Affairs Council: EU launches platform to support internal security and border management in Moldova" press release of July 11, 2022.

17 VEILLEUX-LEPAGE, Yannick. "CTRL, HATE, PRINT: Terrorists and the appeal of 3D-printed weapons". International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2021.

18 DEARDEN, Lizzie. "Police issue warning over terrorist use of 3D-printed guns as UK neo-Nazi jailed". *The Independent*, June 2021. URL : <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/3d-printed-guns-terrorism-uk-morrice-b1865750.html>

19 "Derbyshire schoolgirl to stand trial on six terror charges" BBC, June 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-derbyshire-57505689.amp>

20 BURGESS, Sanya. "3D-printed guns are appearing on British streets - and the police are taking notice". *Sky News*, June 2022. URL : <https://news.sky.com/story/3d-printed-guns-how-easy-is-it-to-obtain-an-illegal-firearm-in-the-uk-and-who-is-doing-it-12630777>

21 "Pictures released of Spanish police raiding 3D-printed gun factory in Tenerife" *Canarian Weekly*, April 2021 / <https://www.canarianweekly.com/posts/spanish-police-3d-printed-guns-tenerife>

22 JOHNSON, Bridget. "Extremists Urge 'Clandestine' 3D Gun Printing for 'Defense and Offense' as New ATF Regulations Loom". *Homeland Security Today*, August 2022. URL : <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/extremists-urge-clandestine-3d-gun-printing-for-defense-and-offense-as-new-atf-regulations-loom/>

23 Translation by the author.

24 CLARKE, Colin P, SHELZI, Joseph C. The Assassination of Shinzo Abe and the Threat Posed by DIY Weapons". *lawfareblog.com*, July 2022. URL : <https://www.lawfareblog.com/assassination-shinzo-abe-and-threat-posed-diy-weapons>

stocks<sup>25</sup> or auto sears<sup>26</sup>, which can also be 3D printed and can transform a semi-automatic weapon into an automatic weapon<sup>27</sup> should be a concern for security services.

## Potential impact on terrorism in France

Weapon trafficking from the Ukrainian conflict and 3D printed weapons affects the French main three terrorist movements in different ways. The respective impact on the operational capacity of each of them can be anticipated. The jihadist movement, the main threat on French territory, has an organizational capacity that allows it to acquire good quality shoulder weapons, notably through its contacts among drug traffickers. While the evolution of jihadist modus operandi is tending towards the autonomous operators and a reduction in the number of cells<sup>28</sup>, the financing capacity of jihadist groups remains greater than that of any other movement on French soil. Arms trafficking from the Ukraine to Moldova, and then to French drug dealers, could thus provide the jihadist network with weaponry. The latter has a minority of veterans of the Iraqi-Syrian zone who have since been released from prison and who potentially possess the operational capacity necessary to use this type of weaponry and ammunition. The ultra-right movement, a minor but growing threat in France, has several advantages concerning the acquisition of firearms. Several dozen militants linked to the ultra-right have joined the conflict in the Donbass to fight on both sides. They have access to Russian-Ukrainian weaponry and are able to organize its return to France for potential terrorist actions. The combat experience acquired could also benefit the movement in the recruitment, indoctrination and training of its militants. Moreover, it appears that the manufacture of 3D weapons remains a method favored by the ultra-right, whether in England, Germany, Spain or the United States. As a result, an attack carried out with a 3D weapon by an ultra-right militant in France remains a serious risk. Finally, the ultra-left movement, which currently favors a strategy of sabotage and arson throughout the country, seems to be the least likely to take advantage of the opportunities offered by arms trafficking from Ukraine or by 3D printing of arms. Nevertheless, the proliferation of armed ultra-left groups in the United States, such as Redneck Revolt or John Brown's Gun Club, may be indicative of a future change of strategy in Europe. The ultra-left also has a small number of activists fighting in Ukraine and able to take advantage of the weaponry present there. Regarding 3D printing, it is important to note the ability of the ultra-left to quickly adopt technological advances to further their cause, as they did with data encryption.

Weapon trafficking from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the dissemination of 3D printed and improvised firearms constitute an opportunity for extremist movements present on French soil to gain operational capacity. Access to this type of weapon and ammunition to commit terrorist acts would constitute a radical evolution of the terrorist threat on French territory. Although terrorist shootings have remained rare in France for several years, this is a risk that requires constant vigilance and an anticipation effort, as initiated in this article.

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25 A device that can be attached to a semi-automatic firearm in place of a conventional gunstock, enabling it to fire bullets more rapidly.

26 A device that overrides a handgun's trigger bar, allowing it to fire multiple times with the single pull of a trigger.

27 GLOVER, Scott, DEVINE, Curt. "A device that can turn a semi-automatic weapon into a machine gun in moments is wreaking havoc on American streets". *CNN*, July 2022. URL : <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/30/us/automatic-machine-gun-fire-invs/index.html>

28 See RODDE, Alexandre. *"Le jihad en France : 2012-2022"*, to be published by Editions du Cerf.