Introduction

On 28 November 2002, two SA-7 shoulder-fired missiles narrowly missed Tel-Aviv bound Arkia flight 582 as it took off from Mombasa (Kenya) airport. The only signs that the 261 passengers on board had narrowly escaped death were a "light jolt" and the trails of white smoke left by the missiles as they sailed past the plane. While many of the passengers remained oblivious to the attacks until the pilot informed them of the near-miss hours later, at least one of the would-be victims correctly sensed what had happened. "I was sure it was a terrorist incident," passenger Avi Farodj later recalled. "…I thought we were doomed. And frankly, I still cannot really believe we were saved."[1]

The attack was a terrifying reminder of the immediate and widespread threat posed by small arms and light weapons (SA/LW).[2] The scourge of SA/LW is often overshadowed by the so-called weapons of mass destruction (WMD) — chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear — despite the fact that threat from catastrophic WMD attacks remains largely theoretical while their more mundane conventional counterparts cut short an estimated 500,000 lives a year.[3]

Horrified by the devastation wrought by SA/LW in the developing world, humanitarian and arms control groups have focused primarily on the human, economic, social, and political toll of SA/LW proliferation on the Global South — the world's poor. Their efforts have increased awareness of the need for aggressive action to curtail the flow of SA/LW to war zones and underdeveloped regions. Less attention has been paid to the clear links between international arms trafficking and the threat that is now the number one preoccupation of policymakers in the *developed* world: terrorism.[4]

The following report highlights the link between SA/LW, terrorism and other transnational criminal activity in Latin America in order to build support

for US ratification of the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Explosives, Ammunition, and Other Related Materials (often shortened to the OAS Firearms Convention). The OAS Firearms Convention is the only legally binding regional agreement aimed at preventing the illicit transfer of firearms, ammunition and explosives. It was opened for signature in November 1997 and as of February 2004 it had been signed by 33 of 34 OAS member states, 22 of which have gone on to ratify it.[5] Complementing the Convention is the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission's (CICAD) Model Regulations for the Control of the International Movement of Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition. The Model Regulations seek to harmonize procedures and documentation used by OAS member states to control the import, export and in-transit movement of firearms.[6]

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The need for full implementation of the OAS Convention is pressing despite the lack of attention it receives from policymakers and the press. The witches' brew of evils boiling in Colombia — which is fueled by illicit arms transfers — is a direct threat to Americans at home and abroad. Also of concern are large, inadequately controlled caches of Cold War weaponry in Central America — a potentially lucrative source of profit for unscrupulous arms brokers and a deadly threat to the rest of us.

The OAS Convention helps to restrain the illicit trade in SA/LW by

- facilitating the sharing of information on arms smugglers and their actions,
- requiring the establishment of basic export controls, and
- encouraging the transfer of legal and technical assistance needed by States Parties to control trafficking in their countries.

Report Outline

The following report is divided into four sections. Section I explains why US policymakers should concern themselves with the OAS Convention by highlighting the threats to US interests posed by the vibrant Latin American illicit

trade in SA/LW. Particular emphasis is placed on arms trafficking to the Colombian illegal groups both because of the acute threat they pose to US lives and interests, and because of the high level of arms trafficking needed to sustain their operations. Section II introduces and explains the Convention, including the requirements it imposes on member states. Section III uses a case study of arms trafficking to illegal groups in Colombia to highlight the practical value of the Convention in the battle against illicit arms transfers. Section IV discusses the United States' role in the development of the Convention and the need for its continued support, including ratification.