Small arms trafficking in the Sahel: The role of tri-border towns

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Summary

This report examines the key demand factors, actors and markets at the core of the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. The worsening situation of SALW trafficking, especially at tri-border intersection points, necessitates a coordinated response to effectively control the criminal flow of arms and ammunition.

Recommendations

- Immediate and substantial investments in border communities are required to address the socio-economic drivers of organised crime.
- A joint border community policing partnership framework is needed to enable shared intelligence and resources for addressing insecurity and reducing organised crime.
- Regional illicit financial flow tracing frameworks need to be standardised, and national anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing capabilities strengthened.
- A tracing system for artisanal production of small arms should be promoted and implemented at the national level for accountability and source identification purposes.
Introduction

This report is part of a research series commissioned by the Organised Crime: West African Response to Trafficking (OCWAR-T) project. The report provides empirical insight into the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Sahel region, with a specific emphasis on the dynamics of markets, key actors and underlying demand factors. The study relies on descriptive case studies of three Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries – Nigeria, Niger and Burkina Faso. The three countries are part of the West African Sahel, with the latter two also belonging to the G5 Sahel.

As a transitional zone, the Sahel’s approximately three million square kilometres serve as a climatic and ecological buffer zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the more humid savannas and forests to the south (Chart 1).

The region boasts considerable mineral resource endowments; however, its primary strategic significance lies in its potential to disrupt global security. Owing to the persistent and currently escalating security crisis, the region has emerged as one of the most critical global conflict hotspots, hosting some of the world’s fastest growing fundamentalist Islamist groups. The West African Sahel is an expansive theatre of multifarious conflicts with grim attendant humanitarian consequences. Addressing the role of the illicit proliferation of SALW in triggering and exacerbating the conflicts is central to conflict prevention and management strategies in the region.

According to the 1997 United Nations (UN) Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, small arms are ‘weapons designed for personal use’ and include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. Light weapons are defined by the Panel as ‘those … designed for use by several persons serving as a crew.’ The list includes ‘heavy machineguns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable...’
anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of a calibre of less than 100 millimetres. The report adopts the definition of SALW as contained in Article 1 of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which is in pari materia with the UN definition.

The Small Arms Survey estimates that the worldwide tally of firearms exceeds one billion, with a substantial proportion being held by civilians. Nonetheless, the precise scale of firearm circulation in West Africa remains a subject of contention, as conflicting data contribute to uncertainty surrounding this matter. According to the director of the UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa, there are around 500 million illicit weapons in circulation in West Africa and Nigeria accounts for over 70% of them.

Another Nigerian study puts the number of small arms in the hands of civilian non-state actors at around 6145000. The regional estimates in relation to the global estimate underscore the knowledge gap that exists on the exact dimensions of the regional illicit firearms market and the nature of interventions required to address it.

Several mutually reinforcing factors influence the illicit flow of arms and ammunition in the Sahel region. The major factors influencing demand include changing trends in conflicts, insurgency, political instability, banditry, resource-based violence between farmers and herders, inter- and intra-communal tensions, violent religious extremism or terrorism, cultural practices, security crises and personal safety, weak state capacity, poor socio-economic conditions, climate change and state support of non-state actors.

Furthermore, a NATO report argued that the illicit circulation of arms in the Sahel has enabled criminal actors to militarise their activities to a level where they now routinely deploy to attack commuters on highways across the region.

That report concluded that arms trafficking posed a major threat to the region’s security, and that revenue from illicit arms trade lubricates transnational organised crime in the region. The report attributed the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 to the upsurge in open arms markets in Libya, but added that Libya was not the sole source of arms supplied to criminal networks operating in the Sahel.

**Methodology**

The research for this report approached the study themes by identifying some of the hotspots for arms trafficking in the Sahel, found mostly where two or three countries share borders. These criminal tri-border areas, which serve as conduits or corridors for smuggling and trafficking arms, are referred to as ‘nodes’.

The concept of nodes as a frame of analysis has been used in a number of studies on arms trafficking; mapping of the proliferation of illicit transnational flows, including weapons in four South American border triangles; as well as by the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) to map the Regional Counter-Terrorism Node in East Africa.

This report used nodes to identify specific corridors or hotspots for arms trafficking in the Sahel, which could also form the basis for cross-border cooperation in stemming the illicit flow of SALW in the region.

The researchers used a qualitative and descriptive approach to explore the dynamics of arms trafficking in the three West African Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. The approach provided the opportunity to highlight country-specific contexts as well as cross-cutting themes.

Secondary data from research reports, journals, magazines, policy documents, unpublished works, daily newspapers, periodicals and other online sources were extensively reviewed and analysed to provide insight into the illicit firearms ecosystem in the Sahel.
The focal countries were selected due to their prominence in the literature as originating sources for some of the circulating illicit arms in the region, their hosting of the region's most deadly non-state actors, and the disruptive potential they hold for regional security.

The literature review was supplemented with key informant interviews with more than 30 stakeholders across the three focal countries. The stakeholders included investigative journalists, customs officials, police officers, lawyers and prosecutors, community leaders, leadership of national-level arms control units, and local and regional experts on SALW in the West African Sahel. Some informants were pre-identified because of their direct knowledge of or involvement in the issues, while others were identified using a snowballing approach. The field data were triangulated with follow-up phone calls to confirm some of the research findings.

Some interview respondents in Nigeria and Niger were reluctant to provide critical information in certain thematic areas. This reluctance is potentially attributable to the underground nature of the illicit firearms trade in the two countries, the unwillingness of stakeholders to engage out of personal safety concerns, and the inaccessibility of some knowledgeable stakeholders.

A major shortcoming of the study is the lack of data from Mauritania. The country has been linked to illicit arms flows across the Sahel, particularly in Nigeria, Niger and Burkina Faso. While Mauritania was therefore initially included in the study, it was later excluded because the research team in Mauritania failed to submit data.

Based on the interviews and the literature analysis, six nodes of illicit arms trafficking were identified in the region: Mallam Fatori, on the Niger–Nigeria–Chad border; Tinzaoutine, on the Algerian side of the Algeria–Niger–Mali border; Tera, on the Niger side of the Mali–Niger–Burkina Faso border; Murzuq, on the Libyan side of the Libya–Chad–Niger border; Porga, on the Benin side of the Benin–Burkina Faso–Niger border; and Gaya, located in the Dosso region of Niger at the Niger–Benin–Nigeria border (see Chart 2). These nodes are also used by other transnational organised criminal groups in the region, highlighting the convergence of criminal groups at these nodes.

**Drivers of arms proliferation**

**Security crises and personal safety**

The persistent security crises at the national and regional levels, and limited effectiveness by states across the region to fulfil their duty to safeguard their territories, are key drivers of the proliferation of the illicit firearms trade in the region. Insecurity across the region is largely a product of the activities of extremist groups, bandits and organised criminal groups, inter-ethnic conflicts and a surge in urban violence.

Stakeholders in all three focal states emphasised personal security as a key factor motivating individuals to acquire firearms. The president of the national youth movement in one of the focal countries stated:

> there are families who buy Kalachs [AK-47s] to ensure their safety. For example, I know a family living in Sollé in the border area of Mali, who bought Kalachs by selling livestock. This family that owned a 12 calibre was convinced to abandon them for much more sophisticated weapons.18

According to stakeholders in Burkina Faso, communities like the Mossi are arming themselves because they feel the state has abandoned them and are also joining the Koglweogo groups – armed self-defence groups – that operate together with the Defence and Homeland Volunteers (popularly referred to as Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland, or VDP) in that country.19
A news report from Nigeria notes that ‘for many owners [of guns], they believe that access to personal guns will protect them better than authorised security operatives.’ A community leader in Funtua, north-west Nigeria, confirmed that in an attempt for self-defence, people tend to illegally possess arms. The level of insecurity, especially in northern Nigeria, and the poor handling of the armed banditry are the driving factors in illicit arms possession as people have no faith in the government. There were cases of security personnel involvement … there were reported incidents when armed bandits attacked a particular village or community but the security personnel will arrive hours after the armed bandits perpetrated their heinous acts and left with captives. Hence, people decided to possess arms by any means necessary to defend themselves against any intruder.

Escalating insecurity driven by opportunist urban criminals, bandits, terror groups and organised criminal groups has resulted in a widespread increase in individual gun ownership, primarily but not exclusively for personal protection.

For example, on gold-panning sites in Yatenga province in Burkina Faso, as on other gold-mining sites in the country, gold miners use their weapons for personal protection, but at times these weapons are also used for criminal activities. Similarly, traders buy weapons for their own safety and to protect themselves against armed bandits.

Farmer–herder conflicts

The Sahel is the site of historic conflicts between herders and farmers over grazing rights and this has driven both parties to resort to arms to protect their interests.

According to informed stakeholders in the focal countries, pastoralists across the region are taking up arms with the primary objective of safeguarding themselves and their livestock from the threats posed by bandits and other opportunistic criminals. One interviewee stated, ‘Today, more than 80% of the Fulani population owns weapons.’

Weak state capacity

Weak state capacity and ineffective governance structures in border communities fuel the illicit trade in arms in the region. Criminal networks thrive in the near-absence of meaningful governance at the six nodes. There, arms are needed to sustain their illegal activities.

The study found that traffickers take advantage of weak or ineffective government controls at border towns. These towns are also strategically and conveniently located for arms traders who use their porous borders to escape without detection and arrest by moving to hideouts in neighbouring countries. This becomes even more complex for law enforcement officers at tri-border points where three countries converge, with little or no cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

These governance failures, compounded by demographic and environmental pressures, are the contextual starting point for analysing all components of the illicit firearms spectrum, from financing to smuggling, trade, usage, illicit fund recycling and policy responses.

Poor socio-economic conditions

Poor socio-economic conditions in the West African Sahel, including poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities, as well as the region’s huge youth population, are major drivers of the trade in SALW.
stakeholders emphasised that poverty and lack of opportunities for young people, especially in border and rural communities across the region, are driving the trade in arms. A traditional leader in northern Nigeria stated:

Poverty has become a deadly disease and has contributed eminently to the possession of illegal weapons; the result of absolute poverty is social unrest, political instability, terrorism, increase in kidnapping, arm[ed] robbery, etc. Poverty is the most important factor in the increase in possession of illegal weapons, which forced people to [get] involved in illegal activities as a source of livelihood. Many young people joined Boko Haram as a result of poverty, some joined bandits, armed robbers, and various terrorist groups just to earn a living.24

Climate change

Climate volatility has precipitated an array of adverse consequences, including droughts, heat waves, desertification, diminished rainfall, floods and wildfires. This has led to a decline in agricultural productivity, loss of grazing land and a reduction in inland water bodies. A stakeholder in Burkina Faso emphasised that, aside from terrorism, climate change is regarded as the most significant threat facing the region.25

The impact of climate change on rural communities leads to the emergence of new conflicts and intensifies existing ones, creating a growing demand for arms and perpetuating a cycle of armament within communities.

Previous research has emphasised, for example, how rapid changes in environmental conditions have shifted the dynamics between farmers and pastoralists from coexistence and cooperation to competition, exacerbating conflicts between the groups.26 This in turn fuels the demand for firearms in the region.

State support of non-state actors

Across the region, governments increasingly turn to ethnic militia and other informal security service providers to address insecurity. The study found that states are either directly or indirectly procuring arms for these entities or condoning their self-procured arms.

In Nigeria, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other non-state actors bear arms that are provided by the government in the fight against terrorism and banditry in northern Nigeria.27 In 2022, the government awarded a pipeline surveillance and protection contract worth US$63 million to a former Niger Delta militant.28 In Burkina Faso, the VDP, Dozzos (traditional hunters), Koglweogo and other state-backed groups are allowed to bear weapons without any formal supervisory control over usage.

Tri-border illicit firearm trade nodes

Respondents across the three countries believe that, if properly managed, border areas could be potential buffer zones against organised crime, failing which they will continue to serve as attractive crossings for such crime.29 Over 70% of respondents in the three countries viewed borders in the Sahel as weak security zones due to their ease of permeability.30

A 2022 threat assessment report of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted:

Open markets for buying and selling firearms in the Sahel are often located in small towns and villages along strategic corridors. Many of the areas, known as hubs for weapons trafficking, are simply areas with a low state presence along borders or transportation routes where multiple criminal activities take place.31
Chart 2 shows the six border towns covered in this study, from where arms traffickers operate to meet the demand.

**Tinzaoutine**

Tinzaoutine is located on the Algerian side at the apex of the Algeria–Mali–Niger border. Traffickers supply arms and ammunition from northern Mali to border towns such as Tinzaoutine by taking advantage of the weak border controls and numerous informal crossing points along the three countries.32 Tinzaoutine is a central point where illicit arms are traded, depending on how demand evolves in the three countries. Arms dealers come to the town for clandestine meetings with terrorist groups operating in Niger and Algeria. Most sellers are emissaries of Alliance Touareg Nord-Mali (ATNM) forces led by Ag Bahanga.33

**Murzuq**

Libya’s border town of Murzuq is at the apex of the Chad–Libya–Niger border. The Fezzan region in which Murzuq is located is rich in petroleum resources, making it a highly strategic region. An Aljazeera report described the town as a hub where the ‘massive illicit trade of weapons, petrol and food goods move south across porous desert borders, while drugs, alcohol and people are smuggled in’.34

The strategic importance of the town as a node in the regional arms trade was underscored in 2019 when leaders of terrorist groups and Chadian rebels met in Murzuq to regroup and distribute weapons to militants.
The competition to arm was further exacerbated by airstrikes of joint US–Africa Command operations that resulted in the deaths of 43 Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants.35

**Mallam Fatori**

Mallam Fatori is located in the north-eastern region of Nigeria, along the borders of Niger and Chad, within the Lake Chad Basin (LCB). The town bore the impact of Boko Haram insurgency and now the control of the town is contested between the Nigerian security services and Islamist insurgents.36 A small arms survey report identified the town as one of the 'most notorious arms smuggling frontiers' in north-eastern Nigeria.37

**Gaya**

Gaya district is part of the Dosso region of Niger at the apex of the Benin–Nigeria border. Arms smugglers have taken advantage of the intersection of the borders of the three countries to conceal their activities. According to a source,

> they conceal arms caches amongst communities living along the border lines on both sides of the three countries, and using these porous borders they smuggle the arms and ammunition in whichever country the demand arises. This is a major challenge to law enforcement officers because the communities are bound not to speak out lest they are punished severely by the arms smugglers. In most cases, the smugglers are also part of those families, and therefore it would be seen as betraying their own if they disclosed.38

A large quantity of arms and ammunition that flows illicitly into Niger originates from Libya, a central regional arms supply node, moving towards areas experiencing conflict in Niger. While some of these arms are transported in small numbers by individuals, others are moved in larger quantities by more organised networks. For instance, in April 2022 the Niger army intercepted a convoy of cars carrying weapons from neighbouring Libya.39

**Tera**

Tera is located in the Liptako-Gourma area where the borders of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso meet. This zone extends to areas of Mali and Niger to the east and north-east.40 As noted earlier, the flow of both SALW and conventional weapons from Libya after the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 was primarily facilitated by Tuareg rebels from Mali and other armed groups operating in the Sahel and LCB. The route used in the transportation of these arsenals indicates that the networks involved were keen on selecting regions that were less governed and prone to instability and other criminal activities.41

According to local sources, the weapons are transported from Libya by Tuareg fighters who form part of the smuggling network. They are either taken to villages in the Bilma area at the tri-border node of Niger, Libya and Algeria, or to Murzuq on the borders of Libya, Niger and Chad.42

Similarly, weapons smuggled into Niger and Burkina Faso from Mali are traded in the three tri-border towns of Tera (Niger), Oudalan near the Sahel Reserve (Burkina Faso) and Tessit, near the Reserve Partielle Faune d’Ansongo-Menaka (Mali), having been transported through ‘friendly’ villages along the Algerian and Nigerien borders.43

**Porga**

Porga is located at the tip of the Benin–Burkina Faso–Niger border. Analyses indicate that the Sahel is the new epicentre of terrorism in Africa.44 The Liptako-Gourma Authority (LGA)45 is characterised by considerably porous borders prone to a wide range of organised criminal activities, not least trafficking of arms, drugs and human beings. The region highlights the consequences of border fragility as it is yet to formalise a common front to combat transnational organised crime.
Illicit arms traffickers take advantage of border weaknesses to traffic arms across borders, trailing conflicts as they shift from one country to another. A study conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) on illicit activities in the border areas of the Liptako-Gourma region found a close link between criminal networks and armed violent extremist groups.

### Commonalities across the six nodes

The study found the following commonalities across the six nodes:

- **Small-scale informal businesses**: Often the borders thrive with small-scale businesspeople selling items that they buy from one side of the border and sell on the other side, depending on demand factors. Most illicit markets follow similar trading patterns.

- **Cross-border ethnic linkages**: The inhabitants of border areas tend to belong to the same or similar ethnic groups. This is a binding phenomenon that pervades all activities that call for solidarity among people, including criminal activities.

- **Low government presence**: Limited or absent government presence creates a lacuna, allowing organised criminal groups trafficking in all forms of goods to operate.

- **Conflict-impacted communities**: The communities have been impacted by insurgencies and ethnic conflicts in the last decade, thus creating a context of uncertainty and chaos that allows transnational organised crime to thrive.

- **Criminal networks operating arms smuggling routes in the nodes are relatively well organised, and the nodes are violent spaces prone to instability.**

### Weapons trafficked

Across the three focal countries, the study confirmed the prevalence of illicit arms trafficking, with pistols, Kalashnikovs (automatic rifles) and shotguns being the most common types of trafficked firearms. Of the three, respondents consistently selected pistols as the most widely trafficked weapon across all three countries.

According to a weapons and ammunition trainer and specialist from Burkina Faso, ‘the weapons that are used by criminal networks are mainly AK-47 Kalach [Kalashnikovs], PKM machine guns, and automatic pistols that are used by traffickers.’

Another respondent in Burkina Faso stated that ‘commonly trafficked weapons are essentially automatic pistols in various forms. There are also 12 calibres, machine guns and Kalashnikovs used by the big bandits.’

In Nigeria, a respondent in the north-west region stated that ‘AK-47, pump-action guns, pistols are the most trafficked weapons.’ In Niger, a respondent identified ‘the Kalashnikov, rocket launcher, [and] pistol’ as the most commonly trafficked arms. Respondents ascribed the predominance of these types of arms to the ease of concealment while trafficking.

There is no evidence in the literature validating the claim of pistols being the most trafficked weapon in the region; however, assault rifles are the most seized illicit arms in the three countries. The study also found that local arms production is a major source of illicit arms circulating in the region (discussed later).

Despite evidence indicating long-distance firearms trafficking to the Sahel, involving air routes from France and Turkey through Nigeria, it seems that the predominant source of firearms in the region stems from intracontinental procurement within Africa.
According to respondents interviewed for the study, the prices of illicit assault rifles in Burkina Faso range from US$254 to US$1,357, depending on sophistication and source of procurement. Prices for illicit assault rifles in Niger are between US$85 and US$1,357. The 2017 Global Financial Integrity report puts the average price of an AK-47 rifle in Nigeria at between US$1,292 and US$2,067. Presumably, the higher prices in Nigeria are indicative of the high demand for illicit arms and the deeper underground nature of the market in the country as a result of a comparably efficient policing regime.

**Actors involved in the illicit arms trade**

Based on primary evidence from the field research undertaken in the three focal countries, the following actors were identified in the illicit trade of arms in the region.

**Gunsmiths and other artisanal arms producers**

Artisanal producers of small arms are important actors in the proliferation of illicit arms in the Sahel. All respondents identified these actors as central to the continuous flow of arms in the region. Gunsmiths in Ghana and Nigeria are the primary sources of craft weapons and are also modernising the local arms production to improve the lethality and automation of these arms.

Respondents across the three countries noted the progressive sophistication of artisanal arms production, to the extent that it has become a major illicit weapon production pipeline in the region. According to a parliamentarian in Burkina Faso, there are all kinds of highly sophisticated local weapons such as homemade rocket launchers. The real concern today is the local manufacture of weapons in our country. The weapons possessed by the terrorists are mostly locally made and highly sophisticated.

Locally made weapons are substantially cheaper than imported ones and include reverse-engineered automatic and semi-automatic rifles, including AK-47 rifles and their variants, shotguns, pistols and rocket launchers. These weapons are largely used by hunters, bandits and other criminal organisations. An investigative journalist in Burkina Faso stated that ‘there are also other modernised homemade weapons brought back from Ghana by hunters; these weapons are mostly in the hands of bandits.’

Secondary sources point to the huge impact of artisanal weapons in the region, as many criminal groups, hunters, ethnic militias and other non-state actors rely on these types of weapons. However, extremist groups of the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State franchises rely more on industrially manufactured weapons. While there is no empirical certainty about the percentage of illicit arms that are locally manufactured, 60% of firearms seized in Burkina Faso in 2016/17 were artisanal productions. Similarly, 73% of weapons seized between 2014 and 2017 in southern Nigeria were locally manufactured.

**State security actors**

Evidence points to the role of state security actors in the illicit arms trade in the Sahel region. Leakages from state armouries are a main source through which illicit arms enter the market, largely through capture during conflicts, losses and theft for profit from armouries. For example, according to a 2022 news report, the Nigeria Police Force cannot account for 178,459 firearms, including 88,078 AK-47 rifles and 3,907 assorted rifles and pistols. Another report from Nigeria claims...
that Boko Haram factions ‘have for a long time largely relied’ on weapons confiscated from the military after sacking troops from their camps.\textsuperscript{66}

In Burkina Faso and Niger, weapons lost on the battlefield find their way into the illicit firearms market. A member of the Burkina Faso national organisation responsible for arms control stated that

\begin{quote}
80\% of the weapons held by armed groups come from government stockpiles; in other words, the traffic comes from within. We must therefore secure our stocks. We also have blacksmiths who make homemade weapons used by the people.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

\section*{Hunters, vigilantes and ethnic militias}

The study found that hunters, vigilantes, ethnic militias and other non-ideologically based non-state actors are active players in illicit arms circulations, particularly of locally manufactured weapons. In Burkina Faso, traditional hunters called Dozzos have a long tradition of using firearms and have created a cultural system around ownership and transfer of firearms. According to a state human rights promotion agency leader,

\begin{quote}
It would therefore be very difficult to disarm these groups, especially since these groups of hunters do not use their weapons for criminal purposes. The Dozzos, for example, parade with their weapons during community ceremonies and the populations are familiar with these groups.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

As noted, hunters, vigilantes and ethnic militias across Nigeria mainly use artisanal weapons, with most of them not registered and tracked.\textsuperscript{69}

\section*{Fundamentalist groups}

Islamist fundamentalist groups across the region are a critical factor in the illicit firearms trade. Moreover, the Sahel is home to the world’s fastest growing and deadliest terrorist groups.\textsuperscript{70} Smuggling of arms, assets and foreign currencies by cash couriers is one of the main ways that terrorist groups in West Africa, including Boko Haram, fund their activities.\textsuperscript{71}

SALW are the preferred weapons of choice for terror groups in the region. According to the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), SALW were used in 538 of the 699 attacks by terror groups in the region in 2022.\textsuperscript{72}

\section*{Transnational criminal organisations}

Organised criminal networks play a significant role in the illicit arms trade in the region. They engage in various criminal activities, including arms trafficking, and profit from the instability and conflicts in the region. These transnational organised groups are active in the tri-border points focused on in this study. Settlements and trading centres in these areas offer conducive environments for cross-border trafficking of arms and ammunition based on kinship and cultural affinities across boundaries. The study also found that transnational organised criminal networks in the Sahel region are contiguous with those in the LCB as a result of the movement of violent extremists and fighters from one
war zone to another in search of illicit markets for arms and ammunition. This highlights the networked nature of groups involved in supplying weapons for the various ongoing conflicts in the region. The incentive is profit and the study found that ‘arms traders who import illegally make huge profits on these SALW that sometimes go up to 100%.’

As mentioned, the toppling of the government of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 was the regional catalyst for the upsurge in the flow and availability of weapons from the Libyan national stockpiles. This extensive access to illicit arms for organised criminal groups to market across the region is still impacting simmering conflicts there.

Legacy firearms

A UNODC report shows that some of the rebels involved in the 1990 Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger, alongside previous uprisings, managed to retain a considerable cache of their weaponry. These arms are either stored in hidden caches or are in the possession of individuals. This also applies to weapons in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire from the 1990s to the 2010s, as well as arms from recently settled conflicts such as the Niger Delta crisis.

Youth and women

The study found that young people are active in the illicit arms trade and are mostly used as SALW couriers across the region. Youth bring in weapons and ammunition from Chad and Niger, sell them through their agents locally and then move on to the next destination, depending on demand. This intra-regional migration of people is developing into a form of ‘weapons tourism’, with arms runners in the Sahel supplying terrorists who move between countries, taking advantage of the porous borders.

According to informed stakeholders in the three focal countries, youth involvement in SALW trafficking is informed by a number of factors: history of abuse by state security agencies, driving the need to acquire arms to protect themselves; substance abuse, which drives aggression; the lure of easy profits; poverty; and lack of education.

Evidence from the three focal countries shows that women, especially older women, are also actively involved in the illicit arms trade as couriers. Some of these women have lost sons, and for revenge agree to smuggle arms to avenge their dead. According to a youth leader in Burkina Faso, ‘Women are heavily involved in SALW trafficking. They hide weapons in goods, loincloths and cereals. They are at the very heart of traffic and play an important role in concealing and selling SALW through their network.’ Reported incidences of arrests of female illicit arms couriers, particularly in Nigeria, confirm this finding.

Socio-cultural factors

The socio-cultural dynamics of cross-border relations also factor into regional arms trafficking. Cultural and filial connections between communities that straddle borders in the six nodes mean there are daily commutes by the populations across boundaries. These commutes may also be used to traffic weapons. For example, wedding ceremonies, baptisms and market days are all opportunities to cross borders with weapons. This situation is difficult for customs officers to control.

Weapons are often moved using motorcycles. Traffickers use this method to evade custom controls and other policing actors. There are records of arrest in Nigeria of gunrunners who conceal arms on motorcycles and traffic them across boundaries. Weapons are also often concealed in bags of grain and other goods on carts.
Arms proliferation and the economy

The study found limited evidence concerning the impact of illicit arms funds on the local economies in Nigeria and Niger. Findings from Burkina Faso demonstrate a discernible impact on communities throughout the nation. All experts interviewed in Burkina Faso were of the unanimous view that funds generated from SALW trafficking are primarily reinvested into real estate.

According to the coordinator of a regional arms monitoring network, ‘the most fashionable form currently is real estate and land. But also there are fake shops or disguised businesses that are increasingly found in Burkina Faso.’82 Another civil society organisation (CSO) leader noted, ‘The sums generated by arms trafficking are invested in land and real estate. Generally, traffickers will not buy shares with their money. Real estate remains their area par excellence of money laundering.’83

Money from illicit arms trafficking is also invested in livestock as well as gold panning or small-scale gold mining. Associations of young people in Djibo allegedly buy oxen that they transport to Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria under the guise of a trade association that is funded by money from the sale of arms.

Lavish lifestyles and the myth of easy profits associated with those at the top of the arms trafficking networks may be creating disincentives for young people to engage in lawful businesses. According to a respondent in Burkina Faso, ‘The arms dealers in this country live in total opulence and luxury in habitats that belong to them and this presupposes that there is a real financial profitability.’84

The unnaturally high profit margin that accrues to arms smugglers provides the impetus for young people in border communities to abandon farming and other employment for the organised criminal world of arms smuggling.

Conversely, the economic losses because of conflicts that are exacerbated by illicit arms proliferation are staggering. For example, Nigeria loses US$14 billion annually in potential income to herder–farmer clashes;85 the damage wrought by Boko Haram and other fundamentalist groups in the Nigerian north–east is estimated at about US$9 billion.86 According to a report by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the cost of violence in Nigeria – calculated as security expenditure to manage violence as well as its economic impact – rose from US$69.3 billion in 2007 to US$132.6 billion in 2019.87

Illicit arms trafficking frequently coalesces with various other transnational criminal activities, including drug trafficking, human trafficking and smuggling. These criminal pursuits collectively wear down the social fabric of society and entrench regional instability. These research findings confirm that the gains derived from illicit gunrunning are regularly channelled into other criminal enterprises.

Impact of arms proliferation on security

The regional expansion of the illicit arms market has led to an intensification of deadly terror attacks in the region. In the first half of 2022, ACSRT recorded 699 terrorist attacks that resulted in 5,412 deaths across Africa – on average, 902 deaths per month. As noted earlier, SALW were used in 538 of the 699 attacks and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were used in 105 of the attacks.88

Globally, the Sahel is the most impacted region by terrorism, accounting for 43% of global terrorism-related deaths in 2022. Countries in the region rank among the most impacted globally – Burkina Faso (2nd), Nigeria (8th) and Niger (10th) – underscoring the profound effect of the illicit arms trade on regional security.89 The effective containment of the ongoing surge in Jihadist violence within the region unequivocally hinges on the ability to shut the illicit arms pipeline that supplies the region’s criminal networks.
Apart from the conflicts fuelled by Jihadist movements, the region experiences three other types of conflicts: intercommunal conflicts driven by competition over resources, conflicts involving organised criminal groups such as bandits and groups of outlaws, and confrontations between state forces and militant armed groups. These conflicts have been exacerbated by the availability of advanced illicit weaponry to non-state armed actors.  

Across the region, bandits and other criminal groups are creating a huge humanitarian crisis that far outweighs the impact of terrorism. In Nigeria, the current epicentre of the banditry crisis, bandits have industrialised kidnapping for ransom and funds from these criminal activities drive the regional trade in SALW and lubricate other transnational crime in the Sahel.  

The progressive sophistication of arms carried by bandits points to the existence of a network of regional arms traffickers that service these organised criminal groups. The illicit arms-fuelled security crisis across Nigeria was responsible for the death of 53,418 Nigerians between 29 May 2015 and 15 October 2022.  

Arms trafficking is increasingly militarising politics and the political process across the Sahel. Politicians rely on groups of armed youths to support them by threatening political opponents. Some politicians abuse their positions by aiding and abetting arms trafficking. They supply youths with arms, finance the purchase of arms and/or intervene in the arrest of youths caught with arms, including by bribing law enforcement agencies to release them.  

In Burkina Faso, research findings show that the concentration of illicit SALW is a microcosm of the situation in the rest of the Sahel region. The findings indicate that criminal networks have taken advantage of the relatively weak state presence in peripheral areas of the country, coupled with porous borders, to traffic SALW from conflict zones in the region into Burkina Faso. For instance, the tri-border region where Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso converge recorded 35% of trafficked SALW (Chart 3).
The ECOWAS region is home to Africa’s first continental initiative to control the illicit proliferation of SALW – the Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons, 2000 (Bamako Declaration). The adoption of the Bamako Declaration by African states preceded the adoption of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA) in 2001.

ECOWAS adopted the Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition, and Other Related Materials on 14 June 2006. This Convention became legally effective on 29 September 2009 and holds jurisdiction over the parties involved. Its origins can be traced back to the ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation, and Manufacture of Light Weapons in 1998, which was time-limited and politically bounded.

The ECOWAS Convention contains crucial clauses pertaining to the transfer, manufacture and civilian possession of weapons; state-owned weapons; law enforcement and institutional arrangements. In regard to weapon transfers, there is a broad prohibition, though some exceptions apply, particularly concerning national defence and security needs. Furthermore, the Convention outlines specific requirements for marking and recording weapons that are lawfully transferred under these exceptions.

Member states are also obligated to control the manufacturing of weapons, which entails registering and listing manufacturers and sharing this information with other ECOWAS member states. Additionally, the Convention mandates that state parties must prohibit civilians from possessing, using and selling light weapons. The possession, use or sale of small arms by civilians is also subject to regulation. Moreover, state parties are tasked with establishing systems for stockpile management and secure storage of state-owned weapons.

The problem of illicit arms proliferation is thus not a product of regional lack of initiative, as the regional frameworks in place already address critical components of the illicit trade. Rather, implementation challenges arise at national levels with respect to the structure, capacity and political will of the respective states.

Burkina Faso has a well-structured policy landscape for regulating firearms. In 2021, the country established the Autorité de contrôle des importations d’armes et de leur utilisation (HACIAU). This central body is responsible for overseeing arms importation and control within the country. The main goal of HACIAU is to enhance transparency and accountability in the country’s control regime regarding the transfer of military commodities. This move was aimed at strengthening Burkina Faso’s mechanisms for effectively regulating the inflow and utilisation of arms.

In 2001, the Commission nationale de lutte contre la prolifération des armes légères (CNLPAL) was established to address the issue of SALW proliferation. After the adoption of the ECOWAS Convention in 2006, the CNLPAL’s responsibilities were enhanced to encompass all aspects related to illicit SALW and ammunition. This included activities such as monitoring, sensitisation, collection and recording, as well as advocacy efforts.

In 2021, the CNLPAL and HACIAU merged to form the Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes (National Commission for Arms Control, or CNCA). The country also has four principal pieces of legislation regulating the use and transfer of firearms in the country.
In Niger, civilian ownership, possession and use of firearms is tightly controlled and requires a licence from the government. Generally, firearms are restricted to security forces, such as the police and military, and private ownership is limited to individuals who can demonstrate a legitimate need for self-defence or hunting purposes.101 The law requires that a record of the acquisition, possession and transfer of each privately held firearm be retained in an official register. State agencies are also required to maintain records of the storage and movement of all firearms and ammunition under their control.

Niger has, however, made considerable progress in combating transnational organised crime. For instance, in addition to the country being a member of the Intergovernmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA),102 it is also implementing the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS).103 This system captures travellers’ biometric and biographic data by way of document readers, fingerprints and webcams.

Niger is among the few African countries that have installed the Personal Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System (PISCES), a biometric registration system connected to the International Criminal Police Organization’s (INTERPOL) alert lists.104 However, Niger’s ability to effectively ward off arms traffickers also depends on the actions of its neighbouring countries.

The Nigerian Firearms Act (1990) provides that individuals may not possess or have under their control any firearm or ammunition without a licence from the president or from the Inspector General of Police.105 President Muhammadu Buhari signed an executive order on 22 May 2019 to remove, revoke and banish all firearms certificates and licences throughout Nigeria.106 The legality of the order is subject to debate, with existing court judgment questioning its validity.107

Thus, across the three focal states, the law tightly regulates private sales, and ownership and production are controlled.

The three countries have initiated targeted programmes on community conflict resolution and the recovery of illegal arms and weapons from non-state actors. For example, the Nigerian amnesty programme resulted in the submission of arms and the rehabilitation of around 30 000 former armed agitators.108 Sources from Burkina Faso noted that government interventions are focused on addressing communal conflicts.109

**Conclusion**

At the core of the Sahelian illicit arms proliferation is the crisis of governance. This renders states ineffective in providing customary services. This is negatively compounded by unwieldy demographic explosion that far outstrips economic growth, and poorly managed inter- and intra-community conflicts that have triggered cycles of conflict and provided avenues for criminal entrepreneurs to flourish. There is an overwhelming demand for arms in the region by private citizens and communities for protective purposes, and this demand factor is critical in addressing regional arms proliferation.

The demand for arms in the Sahel is fluid and dynamic. The Libyan conflicts of 2011 and 2014 have defined the illicit arms market in the region more than any other singular event. The first conflict led to the flow of SALW and conventional arms into countries in the region; the outbreak of the second conflict in Libya in 2014 had a reverse effect. The Tuaregs and criminal networks operating between Libya, Mali and the rest of the Sahel countries started amassing weapons and trafficking them to Libya.

According to a source familiar with arms trafficking in the Sahel, when the weapons land in Libya, they are sold to rebels through middlemen at 1.5 times more than the price they were sold for when they originally left
‘The demand knows no owner,’ quipped a respondent. A former Tuareg fighter interviewed during this research stated that ‘weapons of war have eyes, ears, and nose … they can smell, hear, and see where conflict is building up, and they move there. When they touch the conflict zone, it all blows up, pwaaaah!’

The demand, markets and trends pertaining to the illicit proliferation of SALW in the Sahel call for wider regional coordination that encompasses all the actors. This analysis thus applies beyond the countries under study.

Key findings

Markets

The study found that border towns, particularly where three countries converge (tri-border points), are significant market points for arms trafficking. The key tri-border nodes discussed in this report – Mallam Fatori (Nigeria), Tinzaoutine (Algeria), Tera (Niger), Murzuq (Libya), Gaya (Niger) and Porga (Benin) – have relatively porous borders, with limited government security/border agents.

Without effective state security, organised criminals such as arms traffickers and violent extremists use cross-border trade to conceal their activities. Traffickers transport arms and ammunition via deserted informal routes in the arid areas to avoid interception. Those passing through formal border-crossing points are facilitated by security agents who are part of cross-border criminal networks. The arms and ammunition are concealed in cargo trucks, camel cargo and private vehicles and are sometimes carried by civilians pretending to be ordinary travellers.

Settlements and trading centres in these tri-border areas offer some of the most conducive environments for cross-border trafficking of arms and ammunition. They function as centres of fiscal strength and regional trade, enhancing regional integration, but are also misused by criminal networks that transform them into nodes of insecurity.

Demand

International and regional stakeholders have predominantly focused on the various Jihadist insurgents and armed state actors in the region in their analyses of the illicit arms market. While these groups dominate the market of industrially produced arms, individual arms users who rely on artisanal arms are becoming a significant factor in the analysis of the arms market in the region. Pastoralists, farmers, traders, criminal gangs and opportunist criminals are investing resources in illicit arms to protect themselves and their livelihoods as a result of the region’s escalating insecurity but, in the process, are creating cycles of violence.

Actors

The fact that most circulating arms in the region originate from Africa suggests that government security services and their armouries are primary actors in the regional illicit arms market. Local artisanal producers are improving local production quality and their increased share of the arms market, becoming progressively central to any discussion on arms control in the region. The other actors in the market – armed groups, criminal networks and terrorist and violent extremist groups operating in the region – are the target of regional and international control measures.

Distortion of local economies

The illicit arms economy in the region is negatively distorting local economies as proceeds from the trade are reinvested in other areas. It is also influencing young people in the Sahel to abandon legitimate pursuits for the profits offered by criminal enterprises.
Legal frameworks

At the regional and national levels across the three focal states, there are sufficient legal regimes prohibiting the ownership and transfer of illicit firearms. However, challenges remain, including the capacity of states to implement the laws and the inadequacy of current regional collaboration to efficiently implement regional frameworks. Although the region is a continental pioneer in the creation of regional systems to limit the dangers of the illicit proliferation of firearms, it has struggled to translate these into practice.

Recommendations

• Targeted socio-economic investments by states as well as regional and international development agencies are needed in border communities to address the social and economic drivers of organised crime there.

• Current trans-border management systems need to effectively co-opt traditional leadership from the respective countries into border communities’ management structures.

• A joint border communities policing/security partnership framework is needed at the local and operational level that allows for shared pooling of intelligence and resources to address the insecurity in these communities that creates opportunities for organised criminal groups to operate.

• Illicit financial flow (IFF) tracing frameworks are currently more effective in some states in the region than in others. National anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing capacity thus needs to be standardised and strengthened.

• Deeper engagement is needed between local arms producers and governments. The marking and tracing of locally produced small arms should be promoted and adopted to improve accountability and to identify the sources of illicit weapons.

• ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel should strengthen institutional cooperation and work together to promote the practical implementation of the ECOWAS Convention, as well as other regional, continental and international small arms instruments.

• The ECOWAS Convention should be revised to incorporate specific criminal offences related to the trafficking of arms and stockpile management, theft, corruption, arms diversion and illegal artisanal arms.
Small arms trafficking in the Sahel

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