Silencing the guns in Bamako and Lagos

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Summary

This study explores the complex relationships between urbanisation and transnational organised crime, focusing on how illicit arms shape urban violence and are leveraged by criminal groups. It maps the nexus between arms trafficking actors and criminal groups operating in other organised markets in urban contexts and proposes interventions that engage with diverse layers of urban governance and stakeholders in the cities. The study focuses on Bamako and Lagos as urban centres in which arms trafficking and urbanisation intersect.

Key findings

- There are multiple drivers and enablers of arms trafficking.
- Armoury theft is a major source of illicit weapons and ammunition.
- Arms trafficking is highly segmented and spatially concentrated.
- Illicit firearms enter cities through various entry points.
- Organised crime groups operate across multiple illicit businesses.
- Elite support to ethnic militias drives private armament outside of state control.
- The centralised governance framework on security forecloses potential collaboration from subnational governments to address urban arms trafficking.
Introduction

Urban spaces have emerged as the new frontier for insecurity in West Africa, with trends in urbanisation shaping the dynamics of criminality in the region. The growth of cities has been rapid and concentrated in a few centres in recent decades. This concentration contributes to the unplanned growth of low-income informal settlements and overwhelms the capacity of municipal authorities.

As urbanisation grows, many cities have become globalised, and crime has increased in complexity and scope. With human migration comes the coexistence of various cultures within cities, and the problems associated with managing these differences and the conflicts they provoke. The growing proliferation of arms in West African cities, especially in the aftermath of conflicts in Libya (2011) and Mali (2012), has further exacerbated these challenges.

Urban connectivity in cities offers important opportunities for licit trade and brings substantial development benefits. However, it also creates openings for illegal trade, which is equally reliant on the infrastructure that cities offer. Cities in West Africa are connected to international markets, empowering criminal syndicates to form connections with groups operating elsewhere within the country and overseas, including via diaspora connections.

Connectivity and vast urban spaces coupled with weak rule of law and low compliance to development control facilitate transnational organised crime, with actors operating in a range of different illicit markets in the same space. Therefore, this policy brief presents key findings of a broader study on the complex relationships between urbanisation and arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos. The study seeks to:

- Situate arms trafficking in the context of broader instability in West Africa;
- Identify and examine the spatial dynamics of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos;
- Identify the actors, arms trafficking routes, transshipment, sources and concealment methods in the cities;
- Ascertain the typologies of illicit firearms and the impacts of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos;
- Analyse the drivers and enablers of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos;
- Appraise state and institutional responses to trafficking and proliferation of firearms in the cities;
- Recommend integrated solutions to the challenges of firearms trafficking in the cities.

Key informant interviews were carried out with an array of respondents drawn from the custom services, police, gendarmerie, civil society organisations, city residents, women and youth groups, academics, naval officers, member of the Conseil National du Transition (National Transitional Council of Mali) and investigative judges. Research participants were asked questions about the prevalence of illicit weapons and ammunition, state responses to the trafficking of arms and the consequences of firearms trafficking in the cities. The study also drew from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project in estimating and analysing direct harms associated with the trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in the cities.

Summary of findings

Actors, sources of illicit arms and trafficking routes into Bamako

The illicit economy of arms trafficking in Bamako is composed of diverse actors. They range from underground traders, such as local firearms fabricators and corrupt security personnel, to the end users. The end users include various violent extremist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoune Battalion, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), all affiliates of the Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and other coalitions of violent extremist groups, as well as gangs of armed robbers and
unidentified armed groups. Clan-based elites residing in Bamako traffic arms to their local communities in remote regions where insecurity is rife to assist with self-defence.

Arms are trafficked along the Niger River, which is over 4 000 kilometres long and stretches from the border between Sierra Leone and Guinea through Bamako and on to the Gulf of Guinea. According to military sources in Bamako, the arms trafficked along the Niger River are mostly small-calibre weapons. A substantial number of illicit weapons in Bamako are manufactured in illegal workshops within the city itself. The rugged geography of Bamako helps to conceal these factories, which are located at the bottom of caves, behind hills and in ravines.

Chart 1: The supply chain of illicit firearms in Bamako

Transshipment of illicit firearms, smuggling and concealment methods

The transshipment points for the illicit weapons circulating in Bamako are mostly Libya, Niger, Algeria, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Nigeria, as well as more distant locations such as Turkey, Afghanistan and Slovenia, among others. Weapons seized by Malian authorities were manufactured in countries including China, the US, Italy, the Czech Republic, Egypt and Russia. In November 2020, illicit weapons concealed in a commercial bus transporting passengers from Bamako to Koro in the Mopti region were discovered by the Regional Customs Directorate of the city of Balazans in Segou. Sub-machine guns and a large quantity of ammunition were seized.
Actors and arms trafficking routes into Lagos

Arms trafficking actors include underground traders and end users in Lagos. The underground traders include blacksmiths (the local fabricators of firearms), corrupt security personnel, criminal businessmen engaged in smuggling contraband and a host of other amorphous criminals. The end users are politicians, kidnappers, armed robbers, petroleum pipeline vandals, ethnic militias, road transport workers and commercial motorcycle riders, cultists and criminal gangs operating in various neighbourhoods within the city.

Transshipment points, smuggling and concealment methods

The transshipment points for illicit weapons flowing into Lagos are mostly Cameroon, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Libya, Mali and Niger, as well as Iran, Russia, Bulgaria, China, South Africa, Turkey, the US and Ukraine, among others. Criminal firearm importers and traffickers use different smuggling strategies and concealment methods. The smugglers falsify import papers and merchandise declarations to smuggle firearms through Lagos’ seaports.

In one incident, 1 100 rifles seized at Tin Can Island port were concealed in a 20-foot container, which the importer had declared as containing water closets and hand basins. Another gun runner concealed illegal firearms in a container declared to be plasma televisions.
Convergence: Drivers and enablers of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos

Drivers of arms trafficking

The primary drivers of arms trafficking are a combination of mutually reinforcing factors that include: visible networks of transnational criminal groups; thriving gangs and cults that require arms; insecurity and the need for self-defence; guns as means of livelihood; and population influx.

In Bamako, the increasing presence of transnational terrorist groups continues to act as a major driver of arms trafficking. AQIM, Al Mourabitoune Battalion, FLM, part of JNIM and the Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM) coalition of militant Islamist groups are dominant violent extremist groups with international reach. They leverage their connections to other underground groups in terror-infested countries to procure and smuggle arms to Mali and operate cells on the fringes of Bamako.15

In Lagos, kidnappers, armed robbers, petroleum pipeline vandals, ethnic militias, members of the road transport workers, commercial motorcycle riders, cultists and criminal gangs operating in various neighbourhoods across the city provide a ready market for arms traffickers. The much-dreaded cultist gangs – popularly known as No Salary boys, Awawa boys and One Million Boys – terrorise the city residents with SALWs.16 These gangs procure their illicit arms through local blacksmiths and a range of other sources.17

Enablers of arms trafficking

In analysing the enablers, border porosity remains a critical factor. Generally, in West Africa, the porosity of the region’s borders favours the circulation of various illicit products and fraudulent importation, in particular small arms and ammunition. This situation benefits two categories of small arms carriers: private individuals who use weapons for self-defence and various criminal groups.

Already weakened by a rebellion and subsequent military coups in recent years, Mali’s security services face critical capacity gaps that include: inadequate human and material resources; poor coordination; inadequate training; and trust deficits between communities and forces posted to the borders.18 These challenges have provided impetus for criminal groups operating in the underground economy to smuggle different types of SALWs into Mali, and Bamako in particular.
Given Nigeria’s myriad security challenges, porous borders have long been recognised as a reality. They are directly linked to the country’s most persistent security threats – terrorism, banditry, communal and sectarian violence, drug smuggling and arms trafficking. Widespread corruption among border officials facilitates the cross-border trafficking of contraband such as arms by networks of transnational criminal groups.

Poor urban planning is another enabler of arms trafficking in the cities. Uncompleted and abandoned buildings in Bamako and Lagos have become places where criminals can plan their operations, as well as stockpile and distribute illicit firearms. In Bamako, police officers from the Kalabancoro Police Station recovered illicit firearms from a criminal syndicate occupying an uncompleted building in Commune V. In Lagos, guns hidden in uncompleted and unoccupied houses and plots of land were recovered by operatives of the Lagos State Police Command’s task force. Also, improvised explosive devices, bombs, AK-47 rifles, cartridges and daggers were recovered from suspected terrorists.

Closely linked to the challenges posed by poor urban planning is the widespread adoption of commercial motorbikes as an alternative means of transportation. The Association of Commercial Motorcycle Operators has emerged as an urban militia using illicit weapons to foment violence. In the first half of 2021, 320 commercial motorcycle operators were arrested in connection with 218 criminal incidents and 480 guns of various calibres were seized from them.

Armoury theft, often with the collusion of security personnel, remains a major source of illicit weapons and ammunition in Lagos. This is partly due to poorly managed police and military stockpiles in the country. In Bamako and its outskirts, insurgents and military insurrectionists regularly launch deadly attacks on security forces’ outposts, military installations, security convoys and checkpoints to loot weapons. Another critical enabler of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos is access to the sea, ports and waterways.

While seaports play an important role in urban development, they also serve as trafficking hubs. The likelihood that a container will be searched is low – on average, around one in ten are searched due to the sheer volume of transported goods. Port operators are under pressure to process huge volumes of...
cargo in short periods of time. When the complicity of port officials is added to this dilemma, preventing the illicit flow of arms into Lagos via the seaports becomes more complicated. In 2017, the NCS declared that two senior officers were wanted for colluding with port clearing and forwarding agents to illegally import 661 pump-action rifles into the country.

**Impacts and implications of SALWs trafficking and proliferations in Bamako and Lagos**

The proliferation of and easy access to SALWs in Bamako and Lagos prolongs existing conflicts, threatens the stability of polarised communities and promotes violent crimes in both cities. More importantly, it puts civilians at a high risk of death or injury from weapons-related violence. According to data collected by ACLED, there were 34 separate attacks in Bamako and its peri-urban areas between 2011 and 2021 (Chart 4). These attacks have been attributed to armed criminals (62%) and terrorist groups (21%).

According to ACLED data, there were 20 attacks linked to armed groups in Lagos in 2020, 18 in 2021 and 25 up to June 2022 (Chart 5). ACLED data show that, since 2011, these attacks have been perpetrated by various armed groups, including unknown criminals (43%), the National Union of Road Transport Workers (16%), cultists (7%) and communal militias (9%). ACLED data show that 241 people died in targeted attacks by various armed groups in Lagos between 2012 and 2021.
Conclusion

Addressing arms trafficking and the associated security challenges in cities requires an integrated approach with complementary actions by state authorities, multilateral agencies, civil society and city residents. It is imperative to develop new ways of thinking around what effective responses to arms trafficking should look like in Bamako and Lagos.
Recommendations

City governments

- Greater investment in building relationships with local communities through concerted engagement with civil society and community-based organisations and groups.
- Formal registration of all gunsmiths to garner more intelligence about their operations, thereby enabling the association to track and report on the scale, pattern and supply of production to the designated government agency, such as the police department.
- Support viable economic livelihood systems in frontier communities to diminish the lure of facilitating cross-border weapons smuggling sustained through kinship and communal ties.
- Enact legislation on effective planning regulations to forestall the proliferation of uncompleted and abandoned buildings in the cities, coupled with efforts to ensure that uncompleted buildings are properly policed to avoid conversion to criminal hideouts.

Central governments in Mali and Nigeria

- Greater collaboration with subnational tiers of governments to address the immediate challenge of border porosity.
- Concerted efforts to recruit, train and post adequately equipped security personnel to the borders will boost surveillance and stem the flow of arms into the cities.
- Prioritise targeted socio-economic interventions to ameliorate the poverty and lack of opportunities that affect neglected populations who desert the rural regions and undeveloped towns to seek economic opportunities in cities, thereby creating an enabling crime environment in the cities.
- Stemming the tide of illicit arms and ammunition into Lagos and Bamako requires a demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration programme that also offers credible alternative livelihood options in safe spaces within the cities. The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) and Commission Nationale de Lutte contre la Prolifération des Armes Légères (CNLPAL) should lead on this recommendation in Nigeria and Mali respectively.

Multilateral institutions

- Speedy implementation of the ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy (EIMS), adopted on 29 March 2014, with a focus on its fundamental pillars of maritime governance, maritime safety and security, and maritime research and sensitisation.
- Facilitate the establishment of a decentralised structure at subnational levels of government to strengthen local action in combating arms trafficking.
- Support campaigns to raise awareness, collect, register and mark legal firearms and destroy illegal ones through partnerships with Lagos state, the regional government in Bamako and international development partners.

Law enforcement agencies

- Improve infrastructure and deploy extensive contraband-detecting technologies at authorised ports of entry.
- Deploy electronic border surveillance systems to strengthen existing immigration checks and enhance security at unmanned border corridors.
Civil society and the media

- Assist governments to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in SALWs through advocacy campaigns in communities and the mass media.
- Monitor the implementation of states’ commitment to implement national action plans aimed at stemming the flow of illicit SALWs into the cities.
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Notes


3 Interview with a member of the Conseil National du Transition (National Transitional Council of Mali), November 2021.

4 Interview with a senior military officer in Bamako, November 2021.


6 Official document on arms smuggling and control in Mali seen by the researchers in Bamako, November 2021.


8 Ibid.

9 Interview with Nigerian Chief Superintendent of Police, Zone 2 Command Headquarters, Lagos, October 2021.


21 Phone interview with a lawyer and expert of security sector reform in Lagos, Nigeria, August 2022.


26 Makinde Azeez, Soldier selling weapons to armed robbers has been caught, 2015, www.naijaloaded.com.ng/news/soldier-selling-weapons-to-armed-robbers-has-been-caught.


30 Ibid.

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