Silencing the guns in cities
Urbanisation and arms trafficking 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 points

- 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.¹ 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.² 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.

Research objectives

The broad objective of this study is to analyse the complex relationships between urbanisation and arms trafficking in West African cities. Specifically, it 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.

Methods

The research methodology is based on key informant interviews and secondary data sources. Data were collected from a wide range of independent sources. This enabled the author to compare and triangulate oral testimonies with the available literature and quantitative research findings.

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 consequence of firearms trafficking in the cities. Due to the sensitivity of the study, most respondents consented to be quoted and referenced anonymously.

The study also drew from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project. The ACLED project collects data on violent events within countries, including attacks by various armed groups. The ACLED information becomes pivotal in estimating and analysing direct harms associated with the trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in the cities.
Definition of key terms

Urbanisation

Urbanisation refers to the evolution and growth in city size, density and diversity. Driven by population mobility, segregation and industrialisation, urbanisation is underpinned by the mass movement of people from rural to urban settings and the consequent physical changes in urban morphology. In 2019, the United Nations (UN) estimated that more than 50% of the world’s population (4.2 billion people) lived in urban areas and projected that this figure would increase to six billion people by 2041.

As a constant process of socio-economic transformation, urbanisation has profound consequences, one of which is an increase in the concentration and dynamics of crime. This is especially the case in developing nations where urban change has not been managed efficiently. The capacity of governments to deal with this criminality is out of step with the ability of criminal actors to subvert security and criminal justice systems. As the process of transformation becomes the permanent experience of city dwellers, urban centres are increasingly vulnerable and emerging as hubs for crime, making them ever more dangerous to live in.

Illicit arms trafficking

The UN Protocol Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition (the Firearms Protocol) describes illicit trafficking as ‘the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition from or across the territory of one State Party to that of another State Party if any one of the States Parties concerned does not authorize it, or if the firearms are not marked in accordance with the aforementioned UN Protocol.’

According to Europol, the illicit trade in SALWs is a modest market. It remains closely linked with other illegal activities and is a supplementary rather than a primary source of income for organised criminal groups. Globally, the illegal firearms trade generates between €125 million to €236 million annually, which represents 10% to 20% of the total trade in legal firearms. In 2015, it was estimated that 640 million illicit firearms were in circulation, which accounts for one illicit firearm per 11 people across UN members.

Across Africa, large numbers of weapons have been stolen from state armouries and trafficked for many years. These diverted weapons are often traded in the underground market and end up in the hands of terrorists, criminal groups and other non-state actors. The proliferation of illicit arms has had a destabilising effect on many regions in Africa, fuelling multiple insurgencies and armed conflicts in the Sahel region and enabling other forms of crime in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Mali and Nigeria. Within West Africa, cities such as Bamako and Lagos have become important hubs for arms trafficking.

Situating arms trafficking in the context of broader instability in West Africa

Since West African countries started gaining independence in the late 1950s, there have been intrastate conflicts, marked by civil wars, ethnic and religious clashes in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast and Niger, among others. While the frequency of civil wars and large-scale conflicts dropped dramatically in the new millennium, representing a watershed in the political stability in the region, other forms of violence and new threats have emerged over the last two decades. They include insurgencies by violent extremist groups, separatist agitations in Nigeria, Ghana and Togo, longstanding ethno-national conflict, pastoral conflict and urban violence. Arms trafficking and proliferation are both enablers of the insecurity in the region and driven by the heightened instability.
Arms trafficking not only forms part of a complex web of interdependent criminal markets stretching through West Africa and the Sahel, but it has also become a common denominator for armed groups operating in the region. Illicit flows of weapons, drugs, migrants and smuggled commodities are strategically ordered according to the levels of profit, risk and tactical importance associated with a particular commodity. Weapons are at the top of this order, serving as both an important trafficked commodity and as a means of buying protection and maintaining control over populations and key trafficking routes.14

The trafficking of SALWs in West Africa is driven by easy access to stockpiles of arms and aided by weak responses from state security actors, who often lack resources and capacity. The vast expanse of porous borders, contested governance in remote territories and the absence of effective state institutions further enable the movement of SALWs across national boundaries and through the region, injecting new levels of competition and violence into local-level conflicts.15

Arms trafficking into West African countries flows overland from North and Central African countries, through maritime entry points and inland waterways. Armed groups such as bandits, criminal herdsmen and violent extremist groups source their weapons through land routes; separatist groups, sea pirates and other criminal groups operating along coastal West Africa source their illicit arms through water routes.16

In 2018, of the estimated 117 000 civilian-owned firearms circulating in Niger, only 2 000 were legally registered. The Nigerien military and law enforcement only have approximately 20 000 firearms among them. Civilians in Mali possess 206 000 firearms, while Burkinabe civilians possess 175 000. In the same year, Nigeria recorded more than 6 154 000 firearms in civilian possession, with only 586 600 with the Nigerian military and law enforcement agencies. These figures do not even represent the total volume of SALWs owned or available within these states.17

Some of the arms seized by security and law enforcement agents over the years were identified as coming from Sudan, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, China, Bulgaria, Egypt, Poland and Romania. While some of these weapons were left over from the Cold War era, newer models of automatic weapons or Chinese-style Kalashnikovs have also been confiscated in recent years.18

SALWs trafficking from Libya, especially from 2011 to 2013, significantly enhanced the capability of armed groups and terrorists in several parts of the Sahel, particularly Mali.19 Hundreds of Tuareg fighters left Libya during and after the conflict, bringing anti-tank weapons, mortars and heavy machine guns with them into northern Mali. In January 2012, the Libyan fighters teamed up with local Tuareg separatists and started a rebellion. Within three months the government had lost control of large areas in northern Mali.20

In the tri-border region of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, recent cooperation between militants from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a splinter group of Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) indicates an expansionist agenda among terror groups. In Nigeria’s northwest, criminal and jihadi operations are converging as the region becomes...
increasingly vulnerable. Banditry, especially kidnapping for ransom, is widespread and some level of criminal coordination is taking place among the different jihadi and bandit groups.\(^{21}\)

There have been reports of arms trading between the groups, and the progressive sophistication of the arms used by bandits points to the existence of a network of international arms smuggling that spans Nigeria’s northwest and the central Sahel.\(^{22}\) Corrupt government officials are complicit in the criminal market that supplies arms to the bandits and terrorists in northwest Nigeria. For instance, in May 2022, three soldiers were arrested by military authorities for selling arms and ammunition to bandits and terrorists in Zamfara State.\(^{23}\)

On the coastal front, an arms trafficking nexus has been established between the Niger Delta militants in the oil-rich region of Nigeria and separatist groups. During the hostage-taking crisis in the Niger Delta from 2007 to 2008, the funds raised through kidnapping for ransom were used to procure arms and sustain the violent activities of the militants. Recently, the trend is for arms to be smuggled into separatist enclaves in Abia, Anambra and Imo states in southeast Nigeria and southwest Cameroon through the Gulf of Guinea.\(^{24}\)

The observable rise in secessionist movements in the gulf, from the renewed quest for the sovereign state of Biafra in Nigeria’s southeast to the Ambazonia separatist campaign in northwest and southwest Cameroon, is underpinned by the illicit flows of SALWs transported via maritime channels in the Gulf of Guinea.\(^{25}\) West African cities have also become transit corridors for illegal weapons, and bear the direct burden of harms associated with trafficking and illicit usage of SALWs.

### Lagos: A coastal city flooded with illicit firearms

Lagos is the nerve centre of economic activities in Nigeria. Home to over 21 million residents, the country’s busiest seaport, which controls over 75% of Nigeria’s imports, and 180 kilometres of coastline, the city is undoubtedly a huge and accessible market for the West African economy.\(^{26}\) The rate of urbanisation in Lagos has been on an upward trajectory since colonial times, and the rate of migration to the city has remained very high compared to other cities in Nigeria. This has brought both immense profit and severe challenges to the city.

This rapid urbanisation has been poorly managed in the midst of decaying social and public infrastructure. This has serious implications for employment opportunities, food supplies, social services, housing, transport and urban security. These competing demands and challenges combine to make the city vulnerable to crime and violence. Urban and organised crime are some of the most pressing social issues confronting Lagos, constituting a serious public safety and security challenge.\(^ {27}\)

As a form of organised crime, arms trafficking in Lagos has become spatially concentrated, with some urban enclaves such as Ikorodu, Ojo, Oshodi, Mushin and Badagry emerging as transit corridors and destinations for
illicit firearms. Like most cities in the world, the urbanisation of Lagos is underpinned by migration, commerce and the development of frontier settlements.

**Migration**

Internal migration from other states has always been one of the factors driving urbanisation in Lagos. It has been estimated that 86 immigrants arrive in Lagos every hour, representing the highest figure in any city in the world, with no plans to leave. Africa’s largest city in terms of sheer population concentration is growing at an unprecedented rate, with the UN projecting that its population will be over 24 million by 2030.

The high level of migration brings opportunities as well as challenges to the city. While the migrants provide critical labour for the informal and formal sectors, unskilled migrants who are unable to secure employment often take to the underground economy and engage in illicit activities, including traffic robbery, where criminals attack and steal from motorists.

According to various reports by the police, over 100 traffic robbers were arrested in the city between January and March 2021. This crime commonly occurs along heavy traffic routes such as CMS, Costain Bridge, Ojota Underbridge, Ojodu-Berger, Otedola Bridge, Maryland, Ikorodu Road, Gbagada, Mile 2, Mushin, Orile and Oshodi Bridge, where urban criminals thrive on the incessant traffic gridlocks in the city.

**Commerce**

Lagos is often described as the commercial capital of West Africa. It has made a name for itself as a hub of technological and industrial enterprises, creativity and innovation, serving as the headquarters of global and national brands and rapidly advancing towards a 24-hour economy. The city generates 10% of Nigeria’s total GDP of $432.3 billion. Its air and sea connectivity to other major African cities and global markets makes it a destination of choice for foreign direct investment.

Chart 3: Map of Lagos showing CMS, Costain Bridge, Ojota, Ojodu-Berger, Otedola Bridge, Maryland, Gbagada, Mile 2, Mushin, Orile and Oshodi
There is also a thriving network of formal and informal local businesses that operate within the city, ranging from fabrics to food markets. These commercial centres are strategically located throughout the city and are usually monolithic in the ethnic configuration of their key actors and merchants.

The famous Balogun market located on Lagos Island is dominated by Yorubas, Mile 12 market at Ikorodu Road is mostly Hausa/Fulani merchants of northern Nigeria extraction, while the Alaba International Market located in Ojo and Computer Village in Ikeja are predominantly Igbo traders from Nigeria’s southeast. Both the Hausa/Fulani and Igbo merchants are seen as migrants in Lagos.

This has given rise to urban identity politics, which often pitches the different ethnic groups against one another and has precipitated an arms race in a quest for self-defence. This is undergirded by inter-ethnic tensions characterised by episodic incidents of violent conflict in the city. The contestation between urban residents who consider themselves indigenes (the Yorubas) versus ‘settlers’, whom they consider to be ‘outsiders’ (other Nigerians such as Igbo, Hausa and Fulani traders), is reflected across commercial hubs.

**Frontier settlements**

The Lagos conurbation covers multiple administrative areas that can be categorised into four distinct urban delineations. The municipality, Lagos Island, served as the headquarters of the Lagos colony and remains the core of the contemporary metropolis and its central business district. The Lagos Metropolis comprises 16 local government areas. Lagos State covers 20 local government areas (the 16 urban local governments and four rural local government areas). The Lagos megacity covers Lagos State and its peri-urban interface, including coastal and border towns such as Epe and Badagry.34

These remote and isolated settlements in the peri-urban areas of Lagos have emerged as smuggling hubs for different contraband.35 Badagry is an area with a vibrant smuggling economy that connects Nigeria with Benin and other West African countries on the coastline. Badagry is also a major border post for the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) and is guarded by Nigeria’s border policing agencies. However, smugglers often bypass border police, trafficking contraband to Lagos through less protected corridors around Badagry such as Aivoji, Whanyingbeme, Tosuvi, Akoro, Ozimigbo, Azangbeme, Sapo and Boglo.36
Areas immediately adjacent to the western side of the Seme border, where informal trade has become the main source of income for most residents, have also emerged as transit points for smuggling all kinds of contraband, such as food items, drugs, petroleum products and SALWs, into Lagos. An excerpt from the findings of an investigative report by a major Nigerian newspaper confirms the complexity of smuggling around the outskirts of Lagos, as quoted below.

There is no type of goods that we can’t carry across or bring in here; at worst, we go through the waterside … If you are coming in with large quantities of contraband, we have the type of cars we use to bring such goods in and the time so that nobody will disturb the cars … In case you have any thing that you want us to help you take across to either Seme or to bring to Nigeria, let us know; that is what we do.

**Actors and arms trafficking routes into Lagos**

Various actors ranging from underground traders to end users play a role in the criminal economy of arms trafficking 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 include 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.

One gun runner explained the multiplicity of actors and embeddedness of security officials and politicians in aiding the illicit economy of arms trafficking in Lagos:

We operate [arms trafficking] as black market all over the country. If you come to that market and ask, someone will surely link you up with us. We have an association, and we keep in touch with one another. Our major base is Lagos … If you come to Ibadan or Onitsha and ask for a Lagos contact, it will be given. Most of the people in Lagos are retailers. If kidnappers are getting weapons, it could be from the local retailers … some of my customers are high-profile Nigerians especially politicians, [and] security men especially policemen. They always refer those who applied for arms to me. We love selling to politicians especially those that will eventually win the election. This is important because they will be the ones who will eventually protect us in case of arrest.

**Chart 6: The supply chain of illicit firearms in Lagos**

![Chart 6](source: Author’s compilation)
Within Lagos, weapons are stolen from police armoury stockpiles and sold on the black market by corrupt Nigeria Police Force personnel. As of January 2020, a total of 178 459 weapons and ammunitions could not be accounted for across all police commands in Nigeria, including Lagos. Of these, 88 078 were AK-47 rifles and 3 907 were assorted rifles and pistols.

Arms are trafficked into Lagos via five distinct routes: waterways, the airport, border towns, inland states and the trans-Saharan route. The Lagos Port Complex (Apapa) and the Tin Can Island Port, which together process 75% of Nigeria’s annual imports, have emerged over the years as strategic transit points for the flow of illicit arms into Lagos. This is despite an increasing presence of security operatives ranging from customs to navy and other law enforcement agencies.

The first entry point is the waterways. A total of 21 548 608 weapons and ammunitions were shipped into Nigeria illegally between 2010 and 2017. According to the NCS, the largest cache of live ammunition, totalling 21 407 933 rounds, was intercepted at the Lagos Port Complex in November 2010, while 1 100 pump-action guns were confiscated at Tin Can Port in September 2017. Although there is little available data on arms trafficking in Lagos for the years 2018 to 2020, reports show that arms trafficking into Lagos through its seaports remains on the rise.

Illicit firearms also flow into Lagos through the lagoon, which is more than 50 kilometres long and up to ten kilometres wide in some places. It connects Lagos with other coastal and riverine communities as far away as the Niger Delta. Significant logistics and operational difficulties limit surveillance along the numerous waterways, allowing fishing boats and other smaller vessels to be routinely used for a host of illicit criminal activities, including the illicit flow of weapons and ammunition into Lagos.

Although sporadic, arms trafficking also occurs through the Lagos international airport, according to aviation authorities. In February 2013, security officials from the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria arrested two passengers with firearms at Murtala Mohammed International Airport, while a traveller from Washington DC was intercepted by the NCS with a pistol and two magazines containing 26 rounds of ammunition in April 2022.

Regarding the third domain, illicit firearms also flow into Lagos through border towns and peri-urban communities, such as Ikorodu, Ojo and Badagry. The Seme axis of Lagos State is the primary route for smugglers, despite the heavily armed security personnel and checkpoints that dot the road. According to one of the smugglers, ‘here, anything goes … You can transport guns to Ghana, Togo if you work with the right person … You have to know the police, customs, army and others if you want to do the business successfully on this [Badagry/Seme border] route.”
The fourth route is through Nigeria’s inland states. Arms are trafficked into Lagos from states in Nigeria’s Niger Delta and northcentral regions through interstate highways and traded with diverse criminal networks. In June 2022, police in Lagos arrested a 29-year-old National Youth Service Corps member who was operating an underground gun-running business. The culprit, who was linked to a Cameroonian supplier, operated at the retail end of the firearms supply chain and brought seven guns into Lagos through the road transport system.

The last trafficking node is the trans-Saharan, north–south trading route. Approximately 4600 kilometres in length, the route was originally conceived as a highway to move goods from the agricultural south to food-insecure regions in North Africa. Although the project is yet to be fully developed, the large expanse of road that is expected to link Algiers and Lagos has become a notorious route for smuggling persons, minerals and arms over the years.

In May 2019, members of an international arms smuggling syndicate operating in parts of West Africa, the Sahel region and North Africa were arrested along the Nigeria–Benin border. The criminal gang was found with four AK-47 rifles, five English pistols and a total of 6000 AK-47 live ammunition rounds. The syndicate specialises in smuggling weapons and ammunition from North Africa through the Sahel region and supplying them to criminal end users – including armed robbers, political thugs and kidnappers – in West African countries, with Lagos being one of their major destinations.

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 United States (US) and Ukraine, among others.

In 2011, an Iranian businessman and his accomplices were charged with colluding to supply illegal weapons for a shipment that originated in Belgium and transited through Germany. The consignment included bulletproof jackets, pistols, military boots, ammunition and eight heavy-duty trucks painted in military camouflage bearing United Kingdom insignia. In January 2017, the NCS intercepted 661 pump-action rifles from China, which came in through Lagos port, while in August 2018, a Russian ship bound for Lagos was detained in South Africa for carrying illegal arms and explosives in 20 containers.
Different smuggling strategies and concealment methods are used by criminal firearm importers and traffickers. The smugglers falsify import papers and merchandise declarations to smuggle firearms through Lagos’ seaports. In one of such incidents 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.

The NCS at Tin Can Island Command intercepted a container laden with 440 arms and ammunition of various sizes and designs that had been declared as Plaster of Paris by the importer. Firearms have also been found hidden inside crates of wall panels and doors. They seem to come in batches of 600 to 2 000 units, some already assembled but most with enclosed pistol-only grips.

Police sources revealed that illicit rifles coming from the Sahel and coastal West Africa are commonly smuggled into the city by concealing them inside sacks of dried animal skins, usually imported from Burkina Faso. Arms, including AK-47 rifles and ammunition, are also hidden inside yam flour and bags of rice from Benin, and in large bunches of imported used clothes.

The interception and seizures of illicit weapons smuggled into Lagos demonstrate that arms trafficking is thriving, and that the government and security agencies are yet to develop effective measures to stop this influx through the ports and other entry points into the city.

**Bamako: A centre of arms trafficking in a conflict state**

Bamako, home to over 2.4 million people, is the political and economic capital of Mali. A recent World Bank review of Bamako notes that Mali’s GDP would be 40% lower without the income generated in Bamako. Located in Africa’s Sahel region, Bamako is situated along the Niger River and is considered to be one of the world’s fastest growing cities. Bamako more than doubled its size between 2000 and 2015, and the social and economic pressures on the city are anticipated to grow in the coming years.

However, the city is failing to make critical progress towards increasing its competitiveness over time or delivering on urban services for its citizens. These challenges are closely linked to Bamako’s fragmentation, both spatial and institutional, and uneven urban development. It is in this context that sprawling slums are fast emerging within the city and transforming into landscapes of protracted unrest, civil conflict, violent extremism and urban insurgency.
protracted unrest, civil conflict, violent extremism and urban insurgency. These four threats are fuelled by mass unemployment, the drug trade and arms trafficking into the city.  

How urbanisation affects arms smuggling and proliferation in Bamako

Arms trafficking in and through Bamako is closely associated with influx of people into the city from within Mali and from neighbouring states. Migration to Bamako from other regions in Mali is driven by people searching for economic opportunities and fleeing insecure rural areas.

Being landlocked and located in a region of limited wealth, Mali’s opportunities for growth and development are significantly constrained, with income per capita among the lowest in the world. Significant spatial economic inequalities exist within the country – a person born in Bamako has two and a half times the per capita consumption of a person born or living in Ségou or Sikasso and is expected to live more than six years longer.

The movement of people from rural to urban areas over the last decade has also taken place within the larger context of severe food insecurity across the Sahel region. By 2011, food insecurity had progressed into an acute crisis with pockets of famine throughout Mali. Pastoralist groups dependent on livestock and farmers impacted by recurring drought have been disproportionately affected by the food crisis, which has fostered significant rural to urban migration trends. If Mali’s socio-political and economic climate remains adverse, rural dwellers will continue to abandon those devastated regions of the country in favour of living in comparatively thriving cities such as Bamako.

Population growth in Bamako is also driven by displaced persons from neighbouring, war-torn countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry and Côte d’Ivoire. Volatility created by the rapid and often hidden influx of forcibly displaced persons to Bamako has accentuated existing fault lines and provoked the conditions that enable the trafficking of arms by different segments of the population. Bamako has gradually become characterised by a high level of human smuggling and cross-border trafficking of legal and illegal items, such as cigarettes, drugs and weapons.

The nexus between displacement and arms trafficking in Bamako can be traced to the early 2000s. The thousands of weapons circulating in and around the city originated, for the most part, in neighbouring,
conflict-ridden countries. Displaced populations fleeing into Mali crossed the border with weapons and luggage and headed for Bamako. These weapons often constituted the only means of survival for the destitute migrants, who would either sell them to third parties or use them to commit theft and other criminal acts.74

**Actors, sources of illicit arms and trafficking routes into Bamako**

The illicit economy of arms trafficking in Bamako is composed of diverse actors.75 As in Lagos, 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 the Sahelian branch of al-Qaeda, known 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 extremism groups, as well as gangs of armed robbers and unidentified armed groups.

A senior official also revealed that clan-based elites residing in Bamako traffic arms to their local communities in remote regions where insecurity is rife to assist with self-defence:

> I know that all the elites who are at the centre [Bamako] here, everyone has relations with their people on the ground … in each region there is the association of nationals who are organised here [in Bamako], who help. Within the association of nationals, there are soldiers, policemen, there are civilians, there are traders, there is everyone, everyone does what they are able to do … in our group, we do not hand out weapons, but each month we try to deal with the problems [in our towns]. It is the problem of medicines or food, we send. Nonetheless, they ask for arms, some give arms, but we have to recognise that we do not give arms. However, there is one who buys weapons here [in Bamako] and sends them to their vigilante groups to defend themselves.76

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.77

*Automatic pistols from Slovenia seized by AIRCOP Task Force at Bamako airport, in collaboration with Malian Customs*78
Arms trafficking through the Bamako airport is sporadic. In January 2022, the AIRCOP Task Force, in collaboration with Malian Customs, seized 87 weapons from Slovenia at Bamako airport as part of Operation KAFO III launched by the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL).\(^7\) The seizure included war weapons, shotguns and automatic pistols.

Arms are also trafficked along the trans-Saharan route, mainly by the Tuaregs – a nomadic people whose ancestral lands stretch across large parts of the Sahara. The route includes Libya, Algeria, Niger and the city of Menaka, from where the arms are finally moved into Bamako through organised networks.\(^8\)

A substantial number of illicit weapons in Bamako are manufactured in illegal workshops within the city itself.\(^9\) Nearly 80% of the illicit supply in Bamako districts comes from these artisanal workshops, according to an official document seen by the researchers in the course of an interview conducted in Bamako. The rugged geography of Bamako helps to conceal these factories, which are located at the bottom of caves, behind hills and in ravines.\(^10\)

In Bamako, the various actors in the illicit trading and trafficking of arms also loot armouries, as the interview respondent below points out:

... nowadays, the largest quantity of weapons on the ground are weapons from the national stockpile of weapons. Here in Bamako, every day, we learn that such and such camp has been attacked, such and such convoy has been attacked. Ultimately, when [armed groups] attack camps and convoys, it is not to kill people, it is to get weapons. They take up arms and then disappear.\(^11\)

Guinea, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Niger also serve as origin and transit countries for illicit arms bound for Mali. Libya has been a major source of trafficked weapons and ammunitions since 2011.

Malian customs officials intercepted a large supply of weapons from Guinea meant for Al Qaeda’s North African wing, including mortar bombs and a large quantity of ammunitions and machine guns. The smugglers confessed to authorities in Mali that it was the third time they had transported weapons for the same buyers. On previous occasions they had handed over the cargo to a syndicate in northern Mali, where highly organised networks of traffickers operate. The region has emerged as a lucrative trafficking route across the Sahara and is constantly used by violent extremists who have forged new arms trafficking links with criminals in Bamako.\(^12\)
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.

Some of the weapons stay in Bamako and other regions of Mali and are used for criminality. Others go to active conflicts in northern Mali, Niger, Chad and even as far as Sudan. Ammunitions manufactured in a Bamako factory have also been found throughout West Africa, suggesting that cross-border trade and smuggling supports the distribution of ammunition manufactured in the region.

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.
Convergence: Drivers and enablers of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos

While there are common drivers and enablers across the two cities, respondents also raised distinctive factors that reflected their specific areas and lived experiences.

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.88

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.89 The Lagos Police Command confirmed that these gangs procure their illicit arms through local blacksmiths and a range of other sources.90

The rising insecurity in both cities means that residents are also trying to arm themselves in order to protect their lives and property. In Mali, armed burglary has become an everyday criminal activity, particularly in urban centres such as Bamako.91 A senior public official in Bamako opined that

… the key point right now is security. Because the country is facing insecurity. The country is at war, the safety of the populations is not guaranteed in all the districts. Consequently, people are tempted to arm themselves for self-defence, to ensure their own safety. You cannot ask someone to get rid of the guns when they are not ensuring their safety. That is really the challenge right now.92

In Nigeria, some leaders and residents as well as ethnic militias have started directing people to bear arms to safeguard their lives, families and community.93 Some communities in Lagos maintain weekly security rosters, with residents coming out with weapons, including guns, to defend themselves at night. They also conduct street-to-street patrols in places such as Ikorodu, Epe, Eleko and Ibeju Lekki.

The city residents noted, ‘we understand that police are increasingly unable to respond swiftly to distress calls in many places, so landlords devise alternative arrangements for protecting themselves by buying guns for members of a vigilante group securing our community.’94 Another source revealed that these arms are procured through illicit means from criminals operating gun-running businesses in the city.95 These calls for citizens to arm themselves are a vote of no confidence in the state and its security organs.96

In Mali, the trading of SALWs is treated as a means of livelihood, particularly among displaced populations from the rural areas and pastoral communities where conflict and drought have resulted in serious economic challenges.97 Artisanal blacksmiths rely on manufacturing SALWs as a means of income, resulting in the proliferation of homemade weapons in some districts of Bamako. Although experts noted there are authorised artisanal workshops in Quartier-Mali, Bamako-Coura, Sikoroni, Magnambougou and Djicoroni, unlicensed workshops have also been identified. The black market for modern weapons is also circulated through these unlicensed, underground workshops.98
Widespread conflicts in neighbouring countries, regions and states are another major driver of arms trafficking in the cities. In Mali, past or present conflicts fuel the illicit proliferation of SALWs as warring factions race to arm themselves. Poor and deficient governance in peripheral regions and subsequent grievances against the state, among other factors, mean that indigenous populations are constantly engaged in conflict. The urban elites of such communities have assumed the role of arms suppliers to empower the ethnic militia in their hometowns. An interview respondent in Bamako noted that “… the epicentre of arms trafficking is Bamako … It is the people who are here in Bamako who are arming the people who are on the ground [in conflict-ridden towns and villages in the peripheral regions].”\(^9^9\)

In Lagos, the Odua People’s Congress (OPC), a Yoruba ethnic militia group, has been at the forefront of ensuring that the Yoruba people control all local markets and other commercial spaces.\(^1^0^0\) This stance continues to trigger episodic conflict that influences arms trafficking in the city. For instance, the Mile 12 international market located in the city attracts traders from across Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Recent clashes in the market were a spillover of conflict in the Mile 12 neighbourhood between ‘Area Boys’ (street urchins), most of whom are Yoruba, and Okada operators (commercial motorcycle riders), most of whom are Hausa.\(^1^0^1\)

Similar incidents have been noted in other places in the city.\(^1^0^2\) The Hausa youths have increased in number with rising urban unemployment and the high influx of people displaced by the Boko Haram conflict in northeast Nigeria. They are drawn to Lagos by the profitability of ‘hustling’ in the megacity.

**Enablers of arms trafficking**

The enablers include: border porosity; poor urban planning and governance; the collusion of security personnel; displacement of populations from conflict-affected areas; the accessibility to unsecure armouries; artisanal weaponry production; access to the sea/seaports and waterways; the presence of commercial hubs; inadequate surveillance and interception capacity; governance failures; and outdated legal firearms control regimes that give absolute power to the national government while constraining subnational entities.\(^1^0^3\)

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.

Border protection in Mali has been described as the country’s ‘Achilles heel’. A loosely connected network of agencies and security forces struggle to manage aggravated threats along the country’s 7 440 kilometres of borders, only two of which are officially demarcated. Multiple terror groups operating in the country’s ungoverned spaces have exploited Mali’s porous borders to stage attacks in border areas and in Bamako against civilians, UN peacekeepers and state security forces.

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.\(^1^0^4\) 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. According to the country’s national security adviser, Nigeria’s lengthy land and maritime borders are also poorly managed, placing additional burdens on border security agencies such as customs and immigration service to mount sufficient surveillance to detect and prevent the covert operations of cross-border criminals who engage in smuggling.

Widespread corruption among border officials facilitates the cross-border trafficking of contraband such as arms by networks of transnational criminal groups. For example, the Seme–Krake border, located between Benin and Nigeria, is one of Africa’s busiest land borders, and handles a large amount of transit goods. Security officials and others make huge amounts of money by extorting motorists and traders at various (mostly illegal) checkpoints mounted on both sides of the Lagos–Seme highway. An observer notes that ‘the security officials posted to mount the checkpoints do not really check anything, their interest is in collecting money from motorists and traders.’

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, five guns – including three European-made pump-action rifles and two locally made rifles – that were hidden in uncompleted and unoccupied houses and plots of land at Victory Park Estate, Osapa London, were recovered by operatives of the Lagos State Police Command’s task force.

Nine suspected terrorists, including a Chadian, were arrested in the Ijora Badia area of Lagos in an abandoned building belonging to the Bayelsa state government. Improvised explosive devices, bombs, AK-47 rifles, cartridges and daggers were recovered from the criminals. Lagos residents have appealed to the Lagos State Government to enforce a ban on the illegal occupation of abandoned buildings and properties under construction across the state.

In Bamako and Lagos, city residents also drew causal links between the proliferation of slums and the gun epidemic. Slum settlements have become a prominent feature of the urban landscape in these cities owing to uncontrolled urbanisation. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Lagos has emerged as one of the cities with the largest slum settlements.
Bamako’s inner city is dotted with slums, which have become a security concern for most residents. The slum settlements have been identified as critical arteries for the concentration and circulation of SALWs in the cities. In Lagos, slum settlements such as Agege, Ajegunle, Amukoko, Badia, Bariga, Ijesha/Iltire, Ilaje, Iwaya and Makoko are strategic outlets for arms trafficking and havens for urban criminals.

Closely linked to the challenges posed by poor urban planning is the widespread adoption of commercial motorbikes as an alternative means of transportation due to the inability of city governments to provide transportation for the ever-increasing number of residents. The Association of Commercial Motorcycle Operators has filled the void and become an urban militia using illicit weapons to foment violence. While appraising the security situation in Lagos in 2021, the Commissioner of Police disclosed that between January and May, 320 commercial motorcycle operators were arrested in connection with 218 criminal incidents and 480 guns of various calibres were seized from them.

The collusion of security personnel remains a major enabler of arms trafficking in Lagos, while armoury theft remains a major source of illicit weapons and ammunition in the city. This is partly due to poorly managed police and military stockpiles in the country. In 2015, a serving Lance Corporal in the Nigerian Army and seven others were arrested for selling ammunition to a notorious gang of armed robbers that had attacked banks in Lagos.

In May 2017, a police sergeant attached to the Ipakodo Police Division was arrested after selling police arms and ammunition to suspected militants in the city. In March 2020, a soldier was arrested in Lagos for selling arms and ammunition siphoned from counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram in Maiduguri.

Military weapons also get into the wrong hands through attacks on armed security personnel and armouries by armed groups. In Bamako and its outskirts, insurgents and military insurrectionists regularly launch deadly asymmetric attacks on security forces’ outposts, military installations, security convoys and checkpoints to loot weapons.

In July 2022, Katiba Macina, a group affiliated with the al-Qaeda and Daesh/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terror organisations, attacked the Kati military barracks near Bamako, killing one soldier and injuring six people. This attack followed a coordinated series of insurgent attacks. A senior public official asserted, ‘here in Bamako, every day, we learn that such and such camp has been attacked, such and such convoy has been attacked. Ultimately, when they attack camps and convoys, it is not to kill people, it is to get weapons. They take up arms and then disappear.’

Another critical enabler of arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos is access to the sea, ports and waterways. Bamako is located on both sides of the Niger River, which flows from west to east. The river has remained a major transport channel for centuries, serving the cross-border communities in the region. Highly organised trafficking networks move sizable quantities of arms across large areas of the land north of the Niger River. Arms trafficking south of the river is characterised by lower-level arms flows and local intermediaries engaging in arms trading.

Lagos sprawls inland from the Gulf of Guinea across the Lagos Lagoon. While seaports play an important role in urban development, they also serve as trafficking hubs. A recent study by the Institute for Security Studies highlights key factors that make seaports a popular choice for smugglers.

Cargo ships not only provide the safest options for smugglers, but they are the cheapest mode of transport, with 90% of global trade being seaborne. Traffickers conceal the contraband among other products, making it almost impossible to detect – a popular tactic is to hide contraband inside fruit and vegetable...
shipments as these are handled faster due to spoilage risks. The likelihood that a container will be searched is low – on average, around one in 10 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. Increasing the number of containers checked before loading seems like an obvious solution that would increase the risk for traffickers or smugglers. However, this would slow down shipping operations, resulting in higher costs that most operators try to avoid. Dwell-time in African ports is already longer than two weeks, on average. Inefficiencies and high logistical costs from a further slowdown would negatively affect supply chains and, in turn, economies. These factors present a security versus efficiency dilemma for law enforcement and port operators alike.\textsuperscript{124}

When the potential layers of complicity by port officials are added to this dilemma, preventing the illicit flow of arms into Lagos via the seaports becomes more daunting and complicated. In 2017, the NCS declared that two senior officers were wanted for colluding with import, port clearing and forwarding agents to illegally import 661 pump-action rifles into the country. The arms, which were intercepted at the Lagos port, were concealed within steel doors and other merchandise goods.\textsuperscript{125} This contravention of the law by security officials exacerbates the rising criminality in Lagos and the fragile security situation in some parts of Nigeria.

\textcolor{red}{A popular tactic is to hide contraband inside fruit and vegetable shipments as these are handled faster due to spoilage risks}
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.

The rise of violent extremism groups and their sustained access to illicit weapons have destabilised southern Mali and Bamako in particular. The nexus of violent extremism and arms trafficking, along with the continued expansion of conflict zones, has weakened state authority and represents a major risk to the medium-term economic outlook of the country. Armed attacks and intercommunal conflicts will further hamper agricultural and pastoral activities, leading to further food insecurity in the country. If unaddressed, these crises will continue to fuel uncertainty and negatively impact on private and public investments.

According to data collected by ACLED, there have been 34 separate attacks in Bamako and its peri-urban areas since 2011. These attacks have been attributed to armed criminals (62%) and terrorist groups (21%). In 2015 alone, there were seven such incidents, most of which were carried out by violent extremist groups such as Al Mourabitoune Battalion and unidentified armed groups. These incidents should be seen in the context of a general upturn in arms trafficking and illicit possession of firearms during this period.

High-profile incidents illustrate the nexus between the illicit possession of firearms and violent crime in Bamako. On 13 April 2021, unknown gunmen killed the Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (MAA) secretary general, who was also the president of the ex-rebel bloc Coalition des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA), and wounded his driver in the Sirakoro quarter in Bamako. On 29 November 2021, students exchanged gunfire at the Faculty of Science in the Baladabougou quarter in Bamako. The police arrested two students and seized firearms and other weapons from the suspects.

According to ACLED data, there were 20 attacks linked to armed groups in Lagos in 2020, 18 in 2021 and already 25 up to June 2022. 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%),

Chart 11: Trends of armed attacks in Bamako (2011–2021)
cultists (7%) and communal militias (9%). ACLED data show that 241 people have died in targeted attacks by various armed groups in Lagos since 2012.

Attacks carried out by various armed groups in Lagos recently include members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers clashing in Abule Egba using guns and other weapons in April 2022, and two groups of...
armed political supporters clashing at the venue of the house of assembly election in Mosun-Okunola, Alimosho, on 26 May 2022.

Typologies of illicit firearms in Bamako and Lagos

A range of illicit firearms are in circulation in both Bamako and Lagos. These include SALWs, locally fabricated guns, smuggled arms and ammunitions, looted weapons, converted and recycled weapons, diverted ex-military supplies and illegally manufactured arms.

The UN Firearms Protocol considers a firearm to be illicit when manufactured without a licence or authorisation from a competent authority of the state or without a marking compliant with the Protocol’s requirements. Firearms manufactured from illicitly trafficked parts and components are also illegal and subject to criminal sanction. The illicit manufacture of firearms in small-scale craft workshops persists in some parts of West Africa and has been used by armed groups in Bamako and Lagos.

AK-47

The AK-47 rifle is perhaps the most widely used firearm in the world, with an estimated 100 million currently in circulation. It is the standard infantry weapon for 106 countries. According to a military source, the AK-47 is the deadliest weapon ever built. The weapon uses a 7.62mm, high-velocity round that can destroy whole areas of a body. It is a popular weapon among sophisticated armed groups and terrorists, and one of the most trafficked weapons in the Sahel and the coastal West Africa. The AK-47 has been a permanent feature of violent crime in Bamako and Lagos for many years.
Pump-action rifle
The pump- or slide-action guns feature a mechanism where the shooter pulls back a grip on the gun’s forearm and then pushes it forward to eject the empty shell and reload the gun with a new shell. It uses a pellet, which is more dangerous than a standard bullet because it can scatter and kill many people at once. The pump-action is frequently used by armed groups and routinely seized from criminal importers in Lagos. The Nigerian government has prohibited the licensing and importation of pump-action rifles because of the security situation in the country.

Shotgun
A common illicit firearm in circulation in the cities is the shotgun. A shotgun typically has a long arm that is fired from the shoulder. Instead of a single bullet, it fires a number of smaller pellets. It is highly modifiable and built with the capacity to project a devastating pattern at short range. Shotguns are chiefly sporting weapons, used for hunting birds or other small, fast-moving game. But they also have military and civilian self-defence uses.

Machine guns
Machine guns and sub-machine guns are routinely used by sophisticated armed groups and organised criminals in Bamako and Lagos. The machine gun is capable of fully automatic firing (more than one shot without manual reloading by a single function of the trigger) and fires rifle ammunition. A ‘heavy machine gun’ is generally crew-operated but a ‘light machine gun’ can be fired by an individual. Most machine guns are fed by ammunition belts, although some use magazines. A sub-machine gun is a hand-held, lightweight short-barrel machine gun consisting of relatively low-energy handgun-type cartridges and fired from the hand, hip or shoulder.

Pistols and others
The pistol, a short or hand-held firearm designed for semi-automatic operation, is a common illicit firearm traded in the criminal economy of arms trafficking in the cities. Other notable illicit arms and military gear in circulation include: bulletproof jackets; military boots; small-calibre weapons; mortar bombs; locally made double-barrel and single-barrel rifles; ammunition; and the Chinese Type 56 assault rifle, which is a copy of the Soviet AK-47 assault rifle.

State and institutional responses to trafficking and the proliferation of firearms in cities
The state response to illicit trafficking and proliferation of arms in Bamako and Lagos is largely driven by the organs of the central governments, including the military and various law enforcement agencies. Legislation enacted by the central government is also implemented generally and without any special considerations for city and municipal governments to domesticate such laws for contextual considerations. This disjointed approach to security is partly explained by the central government’s constitutional control of security in both Mali and Nigeria.

In Mali, law enforcement is the responsibility of the National Police Force (Police Nationale du Mali), which is subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Security and Civil Protection. The National Police Force shares responsibility for internal security with the gendarmerie, a paramilitary organisation. The police are responsible exclusively for urban areas with respect to intelligence gathering, arrest and prosecution of firearm traffickers, while the gendarmerie’s primary responsibility is for rural areas, though it may also reinforce the police when needed.
The Commission Nationale de Lutte contre la Prolifération des Armes Légères (CNLPAL) was established in 1996 and mandated to assist the president of Mali in developing, implementing and coordinating a national policy for combating SALWs proliferation. The CNLPAL is pivotal because it advocates for a variety of actors – such as state agencies, ministries, craft manufacturers and civil society (hunters, non-governmental organisations, journalists, etc.) – to support the strategic objective of detecting and preventing arms trafficking.

The CNLPAL is mandated to undertake a broad range of activities to prevent and fight SALWs proliferation such as coordinating and providing expertise on legal reviews, raising awareness on legislation and organising training workshops for law enforcement agencies. It also contributes to the elaboration of policies, strategies and action plans, and had been coordinating the process of reviewing the 2004 Law on Weapons. Finally, it is the national focal point for the implementation of international instruments on SALWs, such as the UN Programme of Action on SALWs and its International Tracing Instrument.\(^{134}\)

In Nigeria, all the frontline security and law enforcement agencies mandated with responsibility to detect and prevent the trafficking and proliferation of arms are controlled by the federal government. They are the armed forces, Nigeria Police Force, NCS, Nigeria Immigration Service and National Drug Law Enforcement Agency. Lately, due to the increasing proliferation of SALWs in the country, President Muhammadu Buhari has approved the establishment of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) to be domiciled in the Office of the National Security Adviser. The NCCSALW replaced the defunct Presidential Committee on SALWs and serves as an institutional mechanism for policy guidance, research and monitoring of all aspects of SALWs in Nigeria.\(^{135}\)

At the regional and international levels, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and INTERPOL are the foremost multilateral agencies supporting national efforts towards combating arms trafficking and proliferation in West Africa. For instance, through its Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, adopted on 14 June 2006, ECOWAS seeks to control, prevent and combat the excessive and destabilising accumulation of SALWs within the region, among other strategic objectives.\(^{136}\)

UNODC, through its Global Firearms Programme, continues its series of training to strengthen the criminal justice response of West African law enforcement and criminal justice officers to firearms trafficking and other firearms-related crimes.\(^{137}\) UNODC has also worked closely with authorities in Sahel countries to increase the exchange of information among prosecutors, and has assisted Burkina Faso and Mali to mark over 1 100 firearms.\(^{138}\)

As part of ongoing efforts to raise awareness of the INTERPOL Firearms Programme in West Africa, Operation Kafo II saw arrests and seizures in Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Mali. Over seven days, 110 officers from police, customs, border and prosecution services intercepted illicit firearms and made connections with associated criminal activity, including terrorism.\(^{139}\) Operation Trigger VIII also involved some 520 law enforcement officials targeting 35 hotspots across eight African countries, including Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, Mauritania and Mali. Some 480 weapons and 6 000 firearms parts, components, ammunition and explosives were seized during the operations, including in Mali.\(^{140}\)

Generally, law enforcement and security operations in Mali and Nigeria targeting firearms trafficking across the countries have seen thousands of illicit firearms seized, hundreds of arrests made, and investigative leads generated on crime networks and smuggling routes, including in Bamako and Lagos as frontier cities. Coordinated efforts by INTERPOL and UNODC have also enabled police, customs, border and prosecution services to work together to track illegal firearms and identify potential links with organised crime.
In spite of these efforts, arms trafficking continues seemingly unabated. More importantly, the role of arms manufacturing nations must be clearly highlighted. The point remains that these arms manufacturers are driven by private profit or national interests. Thus, they encourage hawkish foreign policies that cause conflicts and instability in some developing countries to create export markets for their products.

This possibly explains why arms manufacturing nations such as the USA and Russia have not ratified the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Yet, the two countries have remained major arms exporters over the years. The structure of inequality and power relations is also a factor. The powerful states are dominant SALWs manufacturers and exporters while the weak developing states are the dominant recipients of these weapons. The result is that weak governance structures of the developing countries, including limited capacity to police their borders, ensure ongoing demands and relatively easy sites of illicit weapons trade. For instance, France conceded French missiles were found at a base used by strongman Khalifa Haftar during the war to take over Tripoli.

**Drawbacks of state response to arms trafficking in Bamako and Lagos**

Since the beginning of the present conflict in Mali, the country has been in the grip of an escalating chain of violent conflicts. ACLED data show that violent attacks in Mali increased by 230.3% between March 2012 and March 2022, with a 1 058.1% rise in deaths. Nigeria also continues to confront multiple security threats across its territory, with insecurity deepening in the northern and southern parts of the country. While long-running insurgency and ongoing militia activity, often labelled as ‘banditry’, continue to impact the northern region, the Biafran separatist rebellion has been a cause of unrest in the south.

During 2021, ACLED records a 22% increase in the number of organised violence events in Nigeria. This violence resulted in over 9 900 reported fatalities, a nearly 30% increase compared to 2020. The trafficking of illicit firearms through Bamako and Lagos has contributed significantly to enabling the conflicts in both Mali and Nigeria.

This is compounded by the inadequate capacity of Mali and Nigeria to detect and intercept illicit firearms flowing into and circulating in the countries. For instance, as of 2017 (and possibly beyond), most of the scanners for detecting weapons and hard drugs at Nigeria’s seaports were faulty or inadequate, according to the Nigeria Comptroller General of the NCS. As such, safety frameworks recommended by the International Maritime Organisation are ignored and cargo inspections are random. Criminal networks exploit this lacuna to import weapons. This has made Nigeria a lucrative destination for illegal arms and ammunition traffickers.

Although the ports authority procured scanners in September 2021, the scanners were yet to commence operations as of September 2022, even as over 6 000 containers littered the ports due to the slow cargo examination processes of the NCS. The corollary of such a delay in adopting integrated technology in the ports is accentuated inflow of illicit arms into the country.

Outdated legislative frameworks on firearms control are a major constraint in combating the proliferation of illicit firearms in both cities and in the countries at large. In Mali, the 2004 Loi n°04-050 sur les Armes et Munitions en République du Mali regulates civilian firearms ownership and strictly prohibits certain categories of arms. However, the current framework is no longer adequate for the current challenges of SALWs proliferation.

First, the law does not apply to SALWs held by armed and security forces, even though these war weapons regularly end up in civilian hands illegally. Second, the manufacture of craft firearms, which are frequently used in armed robberies and banditry, remains loosely regulated. Third, the law does not address the issue of record-keeping and information exchange about national stockpiles, which has been identified as a
significant driver of diversion. Lastly, the legal framework gives no power to subnational government to arrest and prosecute firearms traffickers.

In Nigeria, the legal and executive framework for combating firearms proliferation is overtly concentrated in the office of the National Security Adviser and cedes no power to subnational governments. Furthermore, the capacity of the national and subnational governments to combat firearms trafficking has been limited by prolonged delays in establishing a coordinating agency.

The Member States of the Organization of African Unity met in Bamako in 2000 to develop an African common position on the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of SALWs. In pursuance of this multilateral mission, it was recommended that, at the national level, each state must put in place, where they do not exist, national coordination agencies or bodies and the appropriate institutional infrastructure responsible for policy guidance, research and monitoring on all aspects of SALWs proliferation, control, circulation, trafficking and reduction.

The 2006 ECOWAS Convention seeks to promote the establishment of a regional database of arms, enhance weapons’ control at border posts, review and harmonise legislation and administrative procedures governing small arms, as well as destroy surplus and unauthorised weapons. It also seeks to promote a culture of peace and facilitate education and public awareness on the issue of SALWs.

More than two decades after the adoption of the Bamako Declaration and 16 years after the ECOWAS Convention, Nigeria established the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons in 2021, and the Senate passed a bill for the establishment of a National Commission for the Coordination and Control of SALWs. This slow pace gives a clear indication of the low responsiveness of the Nigerian government to combating the trafficking of firearms in the country, with cities like Lagos as the epicentre.

Although subnational governments are excluded from efforts to eliminate, neutralise and disrupt arms trafficking in the cities, they can play crucial roles in combating illicit activities through cohesive strategies that entail information exchange, cooperation in law enforcement and security matters, institutional capacity building, training and subnational cooperation on specific crimes, including arms trafficking in cities.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence on firearms trafficking in the major West African cities of Bamako and Lagos. It identifies the drivers and enablers of arms trafficking and the networks of actors engaged in the criminal economy. Bamako and Lagos share significant boundaries with peripheral spaces with very limited or no state presence. Leaving these spaces ungoverned poses security challenges and accentuates the illicit flow of arms into the cities. In the inner cities, the sustained presence of various criminal actors, lingering urban conflict and elite support to their ethnic militias in the remote towns continue to drive private armament outside of state control. These issues are partly compounded by the inefficiency of state security forces at the ports of entry and their collusion in some instances.

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

- The Lagos state government can set up a special task force within the state-funded Rapid Response Squad as a dedicated unit for monitoring arms trafficking in the city.

- Conduct a city-wide survey on firearms ownership to provide a comprehensive assessment of types, usage, patterns and sources in Bamako and Lagos. The findings can help to unearth the motivations for gun ownership among the city residents, and provide the basis for a disarmament programme by the government.

- Proactive policing of urban gangs and other local crime groups that drive local arms production and usage. This refers to policing strategies that police organisations develop and implement with the intent to prevent and reduce crime in hotspot areas infested with urban gangs.

- Strengthen collaboration with commercial transport associations to institute and improve content screening of luggage and waybilled items. The private sector stakeholders can play a role here, especially since this sector is key in providing technological solutions.

- 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 periodically 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 tide of arms into the cities.

- Provide drone technology for border agencies to enhance real-time awareness of and close monitoring of smuggling hotspots. This will contribute to enhancing rapid incident response and deployment of security forces.

- 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 CNLPAL should lead on this recommendation in Nigeria and Mali respectively.

- In Nigeria, an extensive review and amendment of section 214 of the 1999 constitution that centralises policing power within the federal government should take place. Decentralised policing can create a system of localised and community-focused policing that inputs organisational, operational and human resources into the policing outfits that provide security for civilians and increase local surveillance on arms trafficking in the cities.
• Facilitate the appropriate cooperation of civil society, including non-governmental organisations, in activities related to the prevention, combating and eradication of the illicit trade in SALWs in all its aspects.

**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.

• Promote awareness of and support the domestication and regularisation of the provisions of the ATT that are not in congruence with existing national legislation in Mali.

**Law enforcement agencies**

• Improve infrastructure and deploy extensive contraband-detecting technologies at authorised ports of entry.

• Custom services in Bamako and Lagos should deploy fully integrated scanners in the ports.

• Deploy electronic border surveillance systems to strengthen existing immigration checks and enhance security at unmanned border corridors.

• Strengthen border security through enhanced multi-agency collaboration.

**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.

• Promote and facilitate information sharing and cooperation between governments and the people in all matters relating to the illicit trafficking and proliferation of SALWs in the cities.
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Organised Crime: West African Response to Trafficking

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